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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



*The Watsons Go to
Birmingham - 1963*
Christopher Paul Curtis



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

And You Wonder Why We Get Called the Weird Watsons

1. This chapter introduces all the members of the Watson family in their freezing-cold living room in Flint, Michigan. Daniel and Wilona Watson are the parents of thirteen year old Byron, ten year old Kenny, and their little sister, Joetta. As they try to keep warm, their father entertains them with his family stories. The Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, has written that, “All happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Do you think the Watson family is a happy or an unhappy one? Choose and write six sentences from this chapter to prove your opinion. Be sure to put quotation marks when you begin and end the sentences you quote from in the chapter.
2. Usually authors choose to write their novels from the point of view of one character. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* is written in the first person, from Kenny’s point of view. All that happens, and all the behavior of the characters is seen and judged through Kenny’s eyes. Write the last paragraph of the chapter as if were written from the point of view of Mrs. Watson instead of Kenny’s.
3. Kenny’s relationship to his brother Byron comes across clearly in this chapter. Suppose you have a best friend who does not have a brother. Write an imaginary conversation you might have with him about the good and bad points of having a brother. You may use Kenny and Byron’s relationship, one from real life, or one from a television series as the basis for your opinion.

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7. In this chapter Kenny tells about a time he read from the works of Langston Hughes, the very fine African-American poet, to Mr. Alums's fifth grade class. Here is a poem which Langston Hughes wrote which might describe the feelings of Kenny and many others. Write what you think the meaning of it is.

Still Here
I been scared and battered.
My hopes the wind done scattered.
Snow has friz me,
Sun has baked me,
Looks like between 'em they done
Tried to make me
Stop laughin', stop lovin', 'stop livin'—
But I don't care!
I'm still here!

8. Kenny loves to read and is very good at it. He is singled out to read to Mr. Alums' class even though at the time he is only a second grader, which embarrasses Kenny. He felt that being able to read so well "...made me enemies with some of the other kids..." Why do you suppose Kenny is made to feel that there is something wrong with being smart and being able to read so well? Include in your answer whether, in your opinion, that is true in your school.
9. The new boy and his brother are picked on as soon as they get on the school bus. This is because of their "real down-South accent" and their raggedy clothes. This leads to Kenny thinking a miracle is happening to him. Write a diary entry that Kenny might have written which would explain his feeling about this, and also why the arrival of the new boys means he is "saved."

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33. Imagine you are Byron with your newly shaved head. You have to face going to school the next day. What things do you think you could do to avoid having everyone laughing at you and teasing you? Write your options in a paragraph in complete sentences.
34. Byron's continuously escalating rebellious behavior has now gotten to a crisis point. Mr. and Mrs. Watson are unified in their plan to get their son back on the right track. Everyone knows of a family who has had an experience where one of the children of the family is getting out of hand. Choose someone you know of from real life or someone you've seen on television who has had this experience. Relate as vividly as you can what the experience was and how it was resolved.

The Ultra-Glide!

35. This novel takes place in 1963, at a time of racial unrest in the South, and in particular in Birmingham, Alabama, Mrs. Watson's birthplace. Up to that year, none of the things we take for granted in our day, like automobile tape decks and compact disks had yet been invented. So the Ultra-Glide! record player installation in the Brown Bomber is a wonder to the Watson children. Write about a similar experience you have had when you or your family have gotten a new piece of technical equipment. Discuss your feelings of excitement and what difference, if any, the addition made to your or your family's life.
36. Byron's sentence for his many misbehaviors has been handed down. He had been threatened with being sent to his Grandma Sands' home in Birmingham before, but was not worried that the punishment would ever come to pass. The author of this novel does not write the scene describing Byron's behavior and thoughts when he is alone in his room and furious after learning his fate. Imagine you are the author. Write the scene you think would be taking place in Byron's bedroom.

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46. Keeping in mind that Kenny is a boy who has never known life out of the city, imagine what he must think of the family's drive South so far. Write the dialogue he would have with his friend Rufus when he returns to Flint and tells about the first night of the family's trip to Birmingham.

Kenny: So tell me, Rufus, did you ever see one of those places to go to the bathroom that doesn't even have a seat or a flusher?

Rufus: Aw, shucks, Kenny..

47. Toward the end of this chapter we learn that Mr. Watson did not tell Mrs. Watson of his plan to drive straight through to Birmingham. We find out what Mrs. Watson's reaction to her husband's deception is. Suppose someone had deceived you in a way which made all your work in planning something seem not to count at all. What would you do?

Bobo Brazil Meets the Sheik

48. There are lots of surprises for Kenny when the Watson family finally arrives at Grandma Sands' home in Birmingham. He is surprised that there were houses just like in Flint. He is very surprised that Grandma Sands does not at all look like what he expected. The biggest surprise of all, though, is how Byron is acting toward Grandma Sands. Kenny had expected that it would be like wrestlers. Kenny describes what he thinks the meeting of Grandma Sands and Byron is instead. Make a list of all the names Kenny compared them to. Beside each tell who those characters are. Be sure to write your answers in complete sentences.
49. People can frequently surprise us when we finally meet them, which happens to the three Watson children upon meeting their grandmother. Recall a time you met a person you had heard about and finally met for the first time. Write about the differences you found from how you imagined that person and what they were like in reality.