



TELLING STORIES:

CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

11 a.m.-12 p.m. ET

Grades 5-8

When viewing *Telling Stories: Christopher Paul Curtis* and participating in this guide's suggested activities, the following language arts standards sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association will be addressed: 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9, 11.

Program Notes

Born to Write

Christopher Paul Curtis was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, an area known for auto manufacturing. In fact, for thirteen years after high school, Curtis worked there on an assembly line at the Fisher Body Plant in a job that entailed hanging doors on large automobiles. Though Curtis was an avid reader, he often did not see himself, an African American, represented in the books he read. Children of color were rarely included in books for young readers until an article appeared in the *Saturday Review* in 1965. Nancy Larrick, former president of the International Reading Association, reported the findings of her research in an article entitled "The All White World of Children's Books."

Curtis was going to help change that world in a positive and lasting way. Around this time, he met a young nursing student from Trinidad, Kaysandra Sookam, who recognized his talent as a writer during their correspondence. They later married. While working at Fisher Body, Curtis started writing to ease the boredom. He also began attending classes at the University of Michigan-Flint and started working on his first novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. The novel was finished only when he took a year off from work with Kay's full support. Curtis has said that Kay had more confidence in his ability to write than he did.

The Watsons... was well received by young readers as well as critics. It was awarded several prestigious awards including a Newbery Honor and also a Coretta Scott King Honor. With his writing career successfully launched, Curtis began to write his second novel, *Bud, Not Buddy*. This book also was awarded the Newbery Medal and Coretta Scott King Award.

Curtis not only sees himself reflected in his books, but also his family and where he grew up. He draws from his family, past and present, for characters and characterization. For example, his grandfathers (who make appearances in Curtis's books) were particularly interesting men: Earl "Lefty" Lewis was a pitcher in the Negro Baseball League; Herman Curtis, Sr. was a bandleader in the 1930s. Curtis's daughter Cydney wrote the song that appears on page 124 in *Bud, Not Buddy* called "Mommy Said No."

For Curtis, writing "has always been a sanctuary or a refuge for me. Any time I'm stressed or anxious or worried, I find that a couple of hours expressing myself by writing always seems to have a calming effect on me." Now able to be a writer full-time, Curtis continues to write daily. He lives with his family in Windsor, Ontario, Canada, not far from Flint, Michigan.

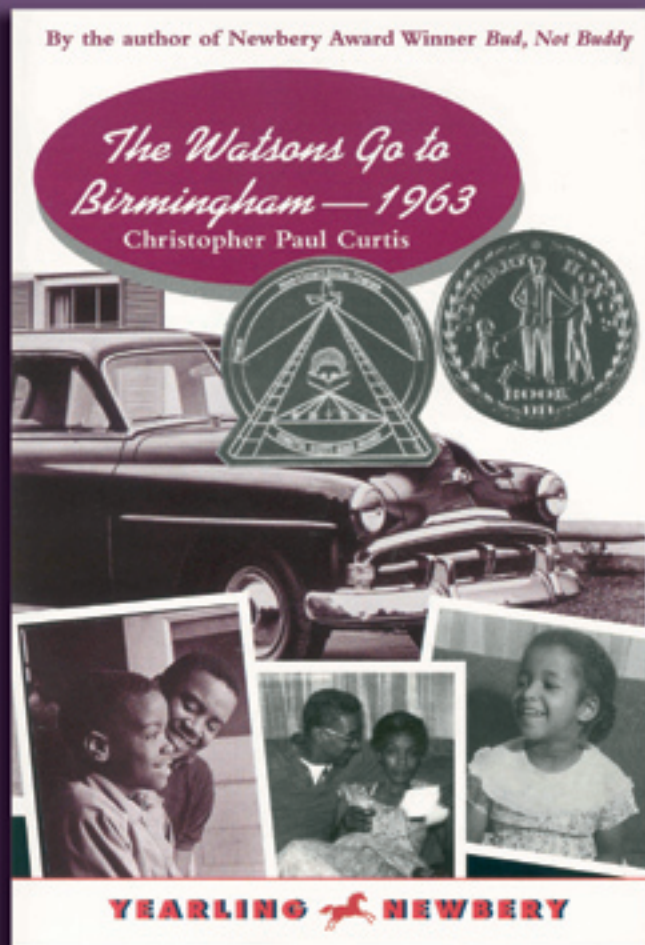
Christopher Paul Curtis's Books

All of Curtis's books involve family and family relationships within the context of the times and places in which they live. His writing reveals clever humor to introduce sometimes achingly honest revelations about people, their world, and how they interact and shape that world. Difficult themes such as racism, relations between family members, the meaning of friendship, and the indomitable nature of the human spirit are played out in great detail.

In *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, an African American family and their trip back "home" to the South is seen through the eyes of the middle child, Kenny, and is defined by the harsh realities of the Civil Rights era.

Bud Caldwell narrates his story in *Bud, Not Buddy*, set during the Depression in Michigan. Bud, a gutsy orphan runs away from his latest (and nastiest) foster home in search of his musician father and discovers a world of jazz.

Family relations are explored in a contemporary setting for more sophisticated readers in *Bucking the Sarge*. Luther T. Farrell's life is intertwined with that of the Sarge, his shrewd, unethical, and materialistic mother who works the welfare system for her own benefit.



About the Program

Christopher Paul Curtis will talk about his work in a discussion moderated by Maria Salvadore, a professor of children's literature. In addition to discussing *Bud Not Buddy*, the discussion of recent work will include the importance of humor in telling stories, the ways literature influences readers, and Curtis's process of writing.

Instructional Activities

Reading

Read *Watsons...* and *Bud, Not Buddy*. Compare the styles used. Are they similar or different? How does the author use humor in each? What effect does the tone of the book have on the reader?

Writing

Create a family tree of either your own family or an imaginary (but possible) family. Write a story yourself or choose a family member and recount a story from his/her point of view.

Imagine yourself as one of Curtis's characters. Write a letter to a friend about what is happening to you in that character's voice. Try to find the humor in the situation, regardless of how serious it may be.

History

Find out more about the major events of the early 1960s. Create a timeline about those events. Research the period of the Great Depression (1930s); make a timeline of its major events.

Music

Find out about the music that Bud found as he looked for his father. Who were the major jazz musicians during the Great Depression? Why was the music so important? What made it different than the music that preceded it?

Internet Resources

For more information, visit:

memory.loc.gov/ammem/
christopherpaulcurtis.com
allaboutjazz.com
michigan.gov/hal

Additional resources related to *Telling Stories: Christopher Paul Curtis* can be found on pages 28-29