

Christopher Paul Curtis Interview

Excerpts from Powells.com

<http://www.powells.com/authors/curtis.html>

Dave: How long had you been working on *The Watsons* when you submitted it to the contest?

Curtis: A year. My wife, Kay, had more faith in my writing than I did, and she said, "Take a year off work." So I did. I worked on it for that year.

Flint is an unusual city because a lot of the people there are from the South. Whenever they'd get breaks in the factory, they'd drive back home. When I'd see them again, they'd say, "I drove twenty-four hours straight," and I always wondered if I could do it.

Kay's sister had moved to Florida, and we decided to drive there. Just like in *The Watsons*, she had a plan, every step of the way, and I thought, "No, no, I want to see if I can drive twenty-four hours in a row."

That's how the story got started. It was about a family taking a trip and the year was 1963, but the story was called *The Watsons Go to Florida* at the time. Then I went back and worked on it, but once I got the family to Florida, nothing happened. So I set it aside for a while, until my son brought home a poem by [Dudley Randall](#) called "Ballad of Birmingham" about the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. As soon as I heard it, I said, "Ah! The Watsons want to go to *Birmingham!*" and I wrote the rest of the story.

Dave: After you finished high school, you went to work at the factory...

Curtis: Fisher Body, in Flint.

Dave: One of my favorite details in *The Watsons* is that the father buys a record player for the car because the family is taking a long drive south from Michigan and he's afraid of starting to like country music.

Curtis: I think that's how you like music - it's whatever you're exposed to. That's one of my fears, really, that all of a sudden I'll be listening to Country and Western. That will be what I like!

Dave: Are you working on something now?

Curtis: The third book is very different. It's back in Flint again, but the narrator is fifteen and the setting is contemporary. His mother owns rental properties and group homes. She's scamming the state and the insurance companies, trying to break this boy into the business, but he'd rather not.

He'd rather be a philosopher. It's a completely different kind of story. A male narrator again, but that's about the only similarity.

Dave: Is it any different for you, writing about a child in a contemporary setting?

Curtis: No, not really. Once I get the character, everything seems to be okay. It's a mental trick: you actually feel like there's someone talking to you. I just write down what they say. It's very inefficient. I write reams of stuff that I can never use.

With *The Watsons*, I didn't have to do a lot of research because I was around that age in 1963. With *Bud*, I had the research from the sit-down strike book I'd been working on. In this book, I don't really have to do a lot of research.



Interview With Christopher Paul Curtis on Kidsread.com

<http://kidsreads.com/authors/au-curtis-christopher-paul.asp>

BIO

Christopher Paul Curtis grew up in Flint, Michigan. After high school, he worked for thirteen years on the assembly line at the Fisher Body Plant. It was during this time that he began drafting his first novel THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM-1963. With his wife's encouragement, Curtis took a year off to finish the book and was eventually able to leave his job at the plant for good. Soon after THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM-1963 was published in 1995, it won two of the most prestigious awards in children's literature - a Newbery Honor and a Coretta Scott King Honor.

Curtis's second novel, BUD, NOT BUDDY was published in 1999, and won the 2000 Newbery Medal. Like THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM-1963, BUD, NOT BUDDY combines elements of the author's own family heritage with important threads in recent American history.

"This heartfelt novel resonates with both zest and tenderness as it entertains questions about racism, belonging, love, and hope. Bud's fast-paced first-person account moves with the rhythms of jazz and celebrates life, family, and a child's indomitable spirit" said Carolyn S. Brodie, chair of the Newbery Award Selection Committee.

Today Curtis is a full-time writer. He and his wife, Kay, have two children, Steven and Cydney. The Curtis family lives in Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

Kids Reads: Where do you find the ideas for your books?

Christopher Paul Curtis: The idea for THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM --- 1963 came from a trip I took with my own family several years ago. We were driving from Michigan to Florida and I wanted to do it in 24 hours. I just said "I'm not stopping!" To keep myself awake, I started thinking about this family [who later became the Weird Watsons of Flint].

Once I got back home from the Florida trip, I wrote a story about the Watsons driving to Florida. But once I got the characters to Florida, the story just kind of died. I got some fresh inspiration when my son brought home a school assignment to read the poem "The Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley

Randall, about the church bombing in that city during the civil rights movement. After that I knew the Watsons wanted to go to Birmingham instead.

Writers have to have really good ears and really good eyes. Ideas come from everywhere --- sometimes from everyday conversations. They start really small and they grow, like planting a seed.

Kids Reads: Have you used experiences from your own life in your novels?

Christopher Paul Curtis: Yes. For me it's an important part of writing. I think it makes your writing more immediate and more believable. There's a truth in it. When you have autobiographical touches in the story it's just more interesting to read.

Kids Reads NOTE: In BUD, NOT BUDDY, you'll find a really terrific afterword (with photos) from the author about his real-life grandfathers --- orchestra leader Herman F. Curtis, Sr., and railroad redcap and Negro League pitcher Earl "Lefty" Lewis --- who inspired the characters in the book.

Kids Reads: Both of your books are set in the past. What kind of research did you do before writing them?

Christopher Paul Curtis: For THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM, I relied on my memories. I was around Kenny's age in 1963 and I had an idea of what was going on then and how people were feeling. But my first-ever trip south was the drive to Florida.

The setting for BUD, NOT BUDDY was well before I was born. I did research on how kids spoke then, what life was like during the Depression. I read tons of old books, magazines and newspapers in the library.

Each different era has a feel to it and you just have to find it. I try to imagine what other people's lives were like. It's been fun to imagine what my grandparents were like back then. When I was a kid, I didn't want to listen to their stories, which is a shame.

I have a riot when I write. I laugh. If I knew it was this much fun, I would have started when I was four. I love it.