

The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963

By Christopher Paul Curtis



Best for Cadettes

Book Summary – Enter into the hilarious world of ten year old Kenny and his family, the Weird Watsons of Flint, Michigan. There is Momma, Dad, little sister Joetta, Kenny, and Byron, who is thirteen and an “official juvenile delinquent.” When Momma and Dad decide it is time for a visit to Grandma, the Watsons set out on a trip like no other. They’re heading South to Birmingham, Alabama, toward one of the darkest moments in America’s history.

Meeting 1: Setting up your Book Club

This meeting guide provides a basic outline for hosting three or four 60-minute Book Club meetings. Details for discussion questions, activities, and field trips can be found in the individual Book Club Meeting Guide for each book. You are welcome to incorporate as much or as little of this meeting guide into your meetings. This guide can also be used as the basis for a sampler troop. Consider asking a local book club to host the meetings!

10 minutes: Welcome and troop business. If you are a Sampler Troop, do a short intro to Girl Scouts.

10 minutes: Talk with the girls about the purpose of a book club. Ask them discussion questions such as: Why do you want to make a book club? What do you expect to get out of it?

30 minutes: Have the girls decide the rules of their book club. You may want to have poster board to write up the guidelines the girls decide on so they can be posted at your next book club meeting. Some important things to think about are:

1. How are you going to choose the books?

Some book clubs only read one kind of book (like mysteries or fantasy), while others like to read a variety of genres. GSCNC has a selection of book meeting guides online, but troops are free to choose their own books.

2. How will girls get the book?

Will girls be required to buy the book? Will troop funds pay for them? Can girls borrow the book from the library? Many libraries will order multiple copies of a book for a book club. If the girls need to purchase the book, is there a cost limit?

3. What if a girl does not finish reading the book?

Make sure girls are enthusiastic about reading the book so that they follow through and finish. If a girl is unable to finish reading the assigned section for a book, decide on guidelines for her participation. You want to make sure that she is included, but do not want her to steer the discussion off-track or be confused about what is being discussed.

4. Who will lead book discussions?

An important part of any book club is how the discussion is led. It might be helpful to have one person lead the discussion, either a troop leader or a

girl. This will differ depending on the age and program level of your troop. You can also have each girl come up with her own questions and go around the group.

5. How will girls participate?

Will everyone *have* to talk about the book? Will girls have specific turns to talk (i.e. going around in a circle)? Do girls need to raise their hands? In most troops there are both quiet and talkative girls. You might have some girls who add a lot to say and some who rarely speak up. Have girls come up with a fair balance so that everyone contributes in some way.

6. Are book club discussions confidential?

Sometimes girls will share opinions or thoughts about certain subjects that they might not wish to have discussed outside of the troop. Talk to the girls about why this is important and remind them that they have an obligation to be respectful about other's opinions and to not repeat what was said outside of the troop.

7. What to Bring

Do girls need to bring their book with them to the meeting? Can they also bring show-and-tell items that have to do with what they read?

5 minutes: Overview of book to read for the next meeting.

5 minutes: Closing comments/questions.

Meeting 2

Discussion Questions (Chapters 1-8)

Discover

Life in 1963 was quite different than it is today. What are some of the major differences? Why was life different? What is similar?

Connect

Kenny does not have very many friends. Why you think it is so hard for him to make friends? Kenny and Rufus become good friends. However, Kenny hurts their relationship when he joins in laughing at Rufus on the bus. How would you feel if you were Rufus? How does Kenny fix his mistake? What does Kenny learn from this experience? What are some important things to remember about friendship?

Take Action

Re-read Kenny's passage about bullying (pages 58-63). What does Larry Dunn do that makes him a bully? Why does he act this way? Why did no one stand up to him or tell an adult what was happening? How do you avoid such situations? Discuss alternatives to bullying.

Activity: Bullying Quiz (adapted from www.safeyouth.org)

Bully Quiz

Directions: Have each girl answer these true and false questions.

1. Nearly one-third of American teens are involved in bullying.
(True) (False)
2. Less than 10% of American teens admit to bullying others.
(True) (False)
3. Students who are bullied in school are usually attentive students with good attendance.
(True) (False)
4. Most students who bully are insecure.
(True) (False)
5. Contrary to stereotypes, male bullies are not usually bigger and physically stronger than their peers
(True) (False)
6. Students who witness bullying often refuse to remain friends with the victim and feel guilty for not reporting the incident.
(True) (False)
7. Bullies have trouble making friends.
(True) (False)
8. Bullies do poorly in school compared to others who do not bully.
(True) (False)
9. Most bullies discontinue violent or aggressive behavior in adulthood.
(True) (False)
10. If you are being bullied it's best to handle it alone.
(True) (False)

Answer Key

1. **True:** In a recent survey, 13% admit to bullying, 11% admit to being bullied, and 6% have been bullied and also bully others.
2. **False:** See above
3. **False:** Students targeted by bullies sometimes avoid school or have trouble concentrating. They can also develop personality disorders like depression and anxiety.
4. **False:** Studies show that most bullies have confidence and high self-esteem.
5. **False:** Male bullies are usually bigger and stronger than their victims.
6. **True:** Witnessing an act of bullying has negative consequences even if you are not directly involved.
7. **False:** Bullies seem to make friends easily, particularly with other students who are aggressive and may join them in bullying.
8. **True:** The problem behaviors associated with bullying include impulsiveness, disliking school and getting in trouble often.
9. **False:** 60% of bullies have at least one criminal conviction because the behavior carries over into adulthood.
10. **False:** Putting an end to bullying requires a commitment from everyone in a school, including teachers, custodians, students, administrators, cafeteria workers and crossing guards. You should seek adult intervention and try to stay among friends if you are being bullied.

Post Activity Discussion: Where have you seen bullying in your daily life? What did you do? What are some safe actions you can take to help stop bullying?

Closing

Ask girls to consider choices for their final activity (see Meeting 4 suggestions). Remind girls to read the second half of the book for the next meeting.

Meeting 3

Discussion Questions (Chapters 9-End)

Discover

Why did Byron's parents send him to live in Alabama? How was life different between the North and the South in the 1960s? Byron seemed to like living in Alabama even though it was supposed to be like a punishment. Why do you think he enjoyed it?

Connect

Why is the family known as the Weird Watsons? Do you think they are weird? What are the greatest strengths of the Watson family? What are their weaknesses? How is their family similar to families today?

Take Action

The church bombing was just one act of discrimination in this book. What is discrimination? Why is it bad? What are some different types of discrimination? Where have you seen discrimination in your community? What are some safe ways you can help stop it?

Activity: Create a Journal

Supplies

- Fabric pieces 14" x 11" (scrap fabric, old curtains, etc.)
- Cardboard 12" x 9" (old manila folders, cardstock paper, etc.)
- Spray Fabric Glue
- Ribbon, yarn, glitter, buttons, etc.
- White copier paper 8.5" x 11"
- Hole Punch

Each girl will get one piece of cardboard and one piece of fabric. Spread the fabric flat so that the front of the fabric is facing down. Spray the fabric glue over the entire fabric piece. Lay the cardboard in the very center of the fabric. There should be about 1" of extra fabric on each end.

Fold the extra fabric over so that it covers the inside edges of the cardboard. Spray with extra fabric glue if necessary to keep the edges in place. Fold the fabric covered cardboard in half so that the fabric side is on the outside. Use the hole punch to make two holes in the crease of the cardboard book cover. The holes should be 2 ½" from the top and 2 ½" from the bottom (and 4 inches apart from one another).

Give each girl get 10 pieces of white copier paper. Fold the 10 sheets together in half. Punch 2 holes in the crease of the white paper. The holes should measure 2 ¼" from each

end (and 4 inches apart from one another). The holes in the paper should match up with the holes in the cardboard when you place them inside of the folded piece of cardboard.

Thread a piece of ribbon from inside of the book's middle and tie a tight bow on the outside. Carefully use spray glue to glue very first sheet of paper to the cardboard cover. This will cover the edges of the fabric and the cardboard to make the book look complete. Do the same with the very last sheet of paper and the back cover.

Allow girls to finish decorating the cover as they wish. On the first page have the girls create a title for their Journal.

Closing

Why is it important to record one's memories? Why is it important for people today to remember what happened during the Civil Rights movement? What could happen if we forget what took place?

Meeting 4

Extension activities

Field Trips (can be virtual or actual)

- Decatur House Slave Quarters, Washington, DC (www.decaurhouse.org): What is a slave? How were their lives different than those that were free? Look at how slaves lived. Why did they feel it was important to be freed?
- African American Civil War Memorial Freedom Foundation and Museum, Washington, DC (www.afroamcivilwar.org): What does freedom mean? Does freedom mean the same thing to everyone? Why was the Civil War an important time in American history?
- Civil War to Civil Rights Downtown Heritage Trail, Cultural Tourism DC, Washington DC (www.culturaltourismdc.org): African Americans have been a significant part of Washington, DC life since the city was declared the national capital in 1791. How did life change for African Americans over time? Why were colleges so important for African Americans? How did laws effect how African Americans lived?
- Alexandria Black History Museum, Alexandria, VA (www.oha.alexandriava.gov/bhrc/): Who were some important people in the fight for civil rights? Many people, of all difference races, joined in the fight for equality. Did equality mean the same thing to everyone? What are different types of inequalities?
- The Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, Washington, DC (www.nps.gov/mamc): Who was Mary McLeod Bethune? What was the National Council of Negro Women (www.ncnw.org)? What does this council do you help improve African American women's lives today? What can you do to help?

Additional Activities

Activities

- Increase the Peace Patch (<http://www.gscnc.org/pdf/patches/peace1.pdf>)
- Zink the Zebra Kit (www.gscnc.org/program/zink/)

Other Resources

- http://www.tolerance.org/teach/resources/childrens_march.jsp
- <http://www.teachingforchange.org/>
- <http://www.pbs.org/teachers/thismonth/civilrights/index1.html>