

Teacher Quick Reference Guide

06/07 Children's Theatre Company Season

The Play

The Watsons Go To Birmingham – 1963

Based on the book by Christopher Paul Curtis • Adapted for the Stage by Kevin Willmott
Most enjoyed by ages 8+



Synopsis

In the opening scene of this moving and often hilarious play, Kenny Watson and his family are enduring a common Midwestern experience—below zero winter temperatures—in their comfortable home in Flint, Michigan. The Watsons are a typical American family similar to the ones reflected back to them on their favorite television shows, except that they happen to be African American. The year is 1963. The South is simmering with racial tension and violence, as well as a fervent striving for justice and change. The turbulence in the country is mirrored in the rocky coming of age of Kenny's brother, Byron, an “official juvenile delinquent”, whose rebellious behavior escalates until Dad and Momma decide the only way to help him is to spend the summer with Grandma Sands in Birmingham, Alabama. It is there where the fate of the Watson family collides with the fate of the country, and neither will ever be the same.

The Big Ideas

- The History of the American Civil Rights Movement, including the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in September, 1963
- African American History, including Jim Crow laws and Northern migration
- Coming of age in an era of conflict

Examples of Activities and Standards Connections

Activity: Read the book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963*.

Standard (Grade 6) Reading and Literature: The student will actively engage in the reading process and read, understand, respond to, analyze, interpret, evaluate and appreciate a wide variety of fiction, poetic and nonfiction texts.

Have students respond to the book in a variety of ways: in journal entries and small and large group discussions.

The following activities are perfect tie-ins for the book, but are also great if you choose to see the play only:

Activity: Write from different characters' points of view.

Standard (Grade 6) Writing: Types of Writing: The student will create informative, expressive and persuasive writing. The student will write frequently in a variety of forms, including but not limited to essays, journals, letters, etc.

Imagine that you are Byron five years after the end of the book and play. Where are you? Are you in college? Are you working full time? **Write a letter** to your little brother, Kenny, about what you learned

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from the events of that fateful summer of 1963. What advice would you give him?

Imagine that you are Kenny at the end of the play. In the play, Kenny often speaks directly to the audience about how he feels. These short passages are called **monologues**, and they are similar to how the lead character speaks to the audience on the popular show *Malcolm in the Middle*. Kenny's last monologue in the play goes like this:

"By[ron] came into his own and showed me what it was to be a man. And more importantly a human being. The four little girls made people get behind Dr. King like never before, just like Grandma Sands brought us together that summer and made us all come into our own."



What might Kenny say next about what happened that summer? **Continue writing this monologue** from his point of view. Describe how he feels about his family now. How does he feel about what's happening in the country? How did the events affect him?

Activity: Research life in the United States during the 1960s, especially 1963.

Standard (Grades 4-8) Historical Skills: Inquiry: The student will apply research skills by investigating a topic in U.S. history. The student will analyze historical evidence and draw conclusions.

Utilize not only the Internet and reference materials such as encyclopedias, but also texts containing **first-hand accounts of historical events**. They may also interview family members, friends, and community elders who lived through that time for their perspectives. Perhaps visit a local nursing home. Try to get perspectives of people who were different ages in 1963, as well as people from different cultural and economic backgrounds. Compare perspectives. Are there differences? How does the perspective of the person who was 10 in 1963 differ from the person who was 20? How does personal perspective shape one's view of historical events?

Activity: Create a news broadcast about the Alabama church bombing of 1963.

Standard (Grades 4-8) Historical Skills: Inquiry: The student will apply research skills by investigating a topic in U.S. history. The student will analyze historical evidence and draw conclusions.

Research the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in September, 1963. You are an **investigative reporter**, covering the event as it happens. Create a live news broadcast. Have different students act out various "witnesses" and give first-hand accounts of specific events. Be sure to give in-depth analysis of the event, including opinions of why it happened as well as how it affects the community in which it happened.

Activity: Map the journey of the Watsons from Flint, Michigan to Birmingham, Alabama.

Standard (Grades 4-8) Geography: Maps and Globes: The students will use and create maps and globes to locate people, places and things.

Using a map of the United States as a guide, **create a map** that shows the journey of the Watsons. Be sure to indicate on your map elements such as title, direction, symbols, and a map key or legend. You may also create your map to scale in order to calculate the distance between major cities on the Watsons' route. How many miles total do they travel? What is that distance in kilometers?

In planning the journey, Momma had to pay very specific attention to details like where the family could stop to rest and eat. Discuss as a class some of the challenges that an African American family would face while traveling through the U.S., especially the South. Why did Momma need to be so exact in her planning? Look at your map again. Which cities do you think Momma would have stopped in, and which cities do you think she would have driven straight through, based on your research of the 1960s?

Pre- and Post-Show Discussion Questions

Use these questions as jumping off points for deeper exploration after the show.

- 1) Why did Kenny's Dad want to move his family to the North?
- 2) Is life different now for African Americans than in 1963?
- 3) What is racism? Have you ever seen or experienced racism? How did it make you feel?
- 4) What can we do to fight racism and other forms of hatred?