

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

Grownup Guide

WELCOME to *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, a new play commissioned by the Kennedy Center about a family's road trip to Birmingham during a tumultuous time of the civil rights movement. Here are some ideas for extending your young theatergoers' experience at home or in the classroom. We've included a variety of questions and activities so you can pick and choose what fits your schedule, goals, theatergoers' maturity, and learning situation.



Before the Show

If you have 5 to 30 minutes:

- **Use the Cuesheet!** *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* Cuesheet performance guide artsedge.kennedy-center.org/students/kc-connections is written to help audiences learn about and enjoy the performance. Please review it together to make sure your theatergoers understand the play. Discuss some of the questions throughout the guide (and be sure to return to them after the show). If time is short, **review pages 2–3 first**. Since young people will better appreciate the play if they have some awareness of civil rights history, also **read pages 6–7**.
- **Discuss visiting the Kennedy Center.** Point out this performance takes place in the Eisenhower Theater, a large venue comparable to a Broadway theater house. Young people can get a 360-degree preview (plus find links to maps and a full Center virtual tour): [kennedy-center.org/Pages/VirtualTour/Ike](https://www.kennedy-center.org/Pages/VirtualTour/Ike)
- **Review seeing a “staged concert adaptation” style of performance** (page 5 of the *Cuesheet* offers a few tips). The performance will include sets, costumes, projections, and lighting effects plus music from a live band. The actors will be standing or sitting in front of music stands, and at times, might refer to their scripts. This type of performance, compared with a fully staged play, engages audiences in different but equally exciting ways and invites you to use your imagination.

If you have more time, you could also:

- **Focus on family**, a major theme of the story, by discussing Daddy’s comment: “There’s a magic that happens within a family.” What might he mean by that?
- **Discuss the Flint water crisis** mentioned in the play. Some quick facts: In 2014, Flint government officials began temporarily supplying the majority-black city with water from the Flint River without treating it to prevent corrosion. Residents soon noticed discolored and smelly water. While officials repeatedly declared the water was safe, independent testing showed alarmingly unsafe levels of lead in the water. High levels of lead are especially harmful to pregnant women and young children.

Persistent activism from residents, environmental groups, and others finally forced officials to declare an emergency by early 2016. Some people believe this crisis wouldn’t have happened were the city not poor and mostly black. Do more research together on Flint and this massive public health emergency. After the show, discuss how themes and issues raised in the play relate to the water crisis.

- **Explore a little more about the civil rights movement.** Create a list of what theatergoers know and think of this period in history. Some questions to consider in brainstorming: Why did the civil rights movement happen? Was it successful? What might it have been like to be a black family during this time? What challenges might black families have faced in trying to raise children? When and how do you think grownups should help young children understand discrimination? Save these ideas and update them after the performance and after having young people do more research on the civil rights era (some resources are included at the end of this guide).

One visual way for organizing and assessing theatergoers' thinking is a "Know-Wonder-Learn" chart, on which they note what they know and wonder about before the show and, afterward, what they have learned. See next page for printable chart.

“Get up,
stand up,
and stay up.
Hear me?”
—Byron

- **Consider the above quote from Byron.** What do you think it means? Who in your life might you say this to, and why?

The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963

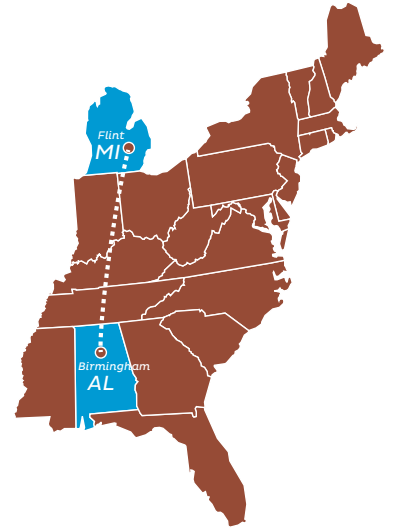
Kennedy Center Performance

March 2019

Know	Wonder	Learned

■ **Locate Birmingham, Alabama**, on a map, and determine how far it is from Flint.* Discuss a few facts about Birmingham:

- The city was founded after the Civil War.
- Thanks to iron and other mineral deposits as well as access to railroad lines, the city became a center of the iron and steel industries.
- Industrialists capitalized on the cheap labor of white and black farm workers who flocked from rural areas to the city for work.
- Early on, the city's economic growth was so impressive, it became known as the "Magic City."
- Southern segregation policies and attitudes took a particularly strong hold in Alabama and Birmingham in particular, which became known as one of the most segregated cities.
- Dozens of racially motivated bombings of neighborhoods and institutions in the 1950s and 60s earned the city another nickname: "Bombingham."
- The Ku Klux Klan maintained an ongoing menacing presence, and FBI investigators deemed four members responsible for the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963.



Now think about your hometown. Find it on a map. Draw an illustration of your town and state, research three or four new facts about your town, and give it a nickname that reflects something about its history. Compare your town with your friends' hometowns—does growing up in different places affect the person you are? Why or why not?

* To think more about the Watson family's experience, help young people do some calculations. First determine the total miles (either by measuring on a printed map or using a mapping app—or doing both and comparing them). Then figure out: How many hours of driving would the Watsons's trip take at 55 mph? How many days would it take if the family drove 8 hours a day? *Standard: Mathematics—Operations & Algebraic Thinking (3.OA)*

After the Show

As you leave the theater, explore theatergoers' first impressions of the show with these questions to discuss on the ride back.

- What surprised you the most about the performance? Why?
- What are some moments from the play you are still thinking about? Were there times when the story made you laugh? Worry? Or feel sad? When, and why?
- What do you think Joey, Kenny, and Byron learned in Birmingham? How do you think they changed?
- What did you learn about civil rights history? What would you like to learn more about?
- What did you notice about this style of performance? What did you like about it? How did it affect the storytelling?

- How were characters and citizens “changemakers” in the story? How can you be a changemaker today?
- How did you feel watching the Watsons’s experience in Birmingham? What has changed since the 1960s?
- What role did young people play in the civil rights movement, and what role do they play today in responding to and combating discrimination?

In the days afterward, as time allows, here are some other questions and extended activities you might explore together; please adapt them as you see fit.



College students at a lunch-counter “sit-in” in 1960. COURTESY OF WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

The Story and Storytelling

Questions:

How did each family member’s unique reaction to Byron getting stuck to the frozen car help you learn more about their character? Why did Mama and Daddy decide they had to go to Birmingham? Why do you think Daddy said “At 13, there’s only two things that’ll happen to a Negro boy in this city—either he ends up in jail or dead”? How did Kenny and Byron feel when they realized that some people would kill them simply because of their skin color? What would you have done about Byron’s behavior?

Go Deeper:

- Join young theatergoers in reacting to events in the story in a writing exercise. If you need help starting, here are some phrases to build off of:
 - If _____ happened to me...
 - I don’t understand why...
 - I was surprised by...
 - This reminds me of...
 Encourage them to share their responses with you, a friend, or small groups.
- Work together with your theatergoers to summarize the story, its characters, and the main ideas as accurately as possible. Then have them write a short review of the play, describing the story, themes, performances, and music. What worked and what didn’t? How are these events still relevant today? *Standard: English Language Arts—Reading: Literature (RL.6, RL.9)*
- Book author Christopher Paul Curtis once said, “One of the most enjoyable parts of writing is that an author can combine his or her imagination with the traits of real people to build new characters,” and he said that Kenny combines aspects of his brother and himself. Try building your own new character. Imagine you could add another character to the Watsons’s story (such as a family member or friend). Think of two real people who would be good models for this character and choose character traits for him or her. Describe the new character and what she or he does in the story. How does the story change with the addition of your new character?

- Read the book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. Compare the strengths of the book with the stage version. Notice how the play omits some elements (like the “Wool Pooh” and Kenny’s friendships with Rufus and Cody) and adds others, like the experience of getting caught up in a civil rights event. What ideas and themes came through stronger in the book? On stage? To help theatergoers visualize their comparisons, consider helping them create a chart or Venn diagram. *Standard: English Language Arts—Reading: Literature (RL.6, RL.9)*
- Think about the role of narration in telling the story. How does Kenny’s perspective—as both an adult and as a 10-year-old child—shape the story? (Note that Kenny’s perspective is also explored from the angle of historical fiction in the next section.) How might the story have been different if it had been written from the perspective of another character, such as Byron or Mama? Try writing a short description of one event, such as Byron’s playing with matches or the scene in the park, from the first person point of view of someone other than Kenny.

Historical Fiction

Questions:

What was it like seeing the times through the eyes of a 10-year-old black boy? Why do you think the author, Christopher Paul Curtis, wanted to tell his story against the backdrop of the civil rights movement? Curtis has said, “I think fiction can make history more immediate, more personal”—how do you think the story did that?

Go Deeper:

- Explore the idea of historical fiction. Point out that sometimes authors take artistic license, such as slightly changing the times and places of events—and that is acceptable in a work of fiction. Encourage young people to find nonfiction accounts of events in Birmingham in 1963 and compare and contrast them to the play’s story. One thing they might notice is that the Children’s Crusade actually took place in early summer and the church bombing in September, but the play suggests they happened closer together. Discuss why authors might make such changes and the responsibilities of audiences to know that historical fiction is different from an historical account.
- Try creating your own historical fiction. Choose an event and outline a story—and put yourself in it. Then have the story explore how your life would intersect with events of the time and how those events might change you. Be sure to add details about the “historical” you, such as how you would talk and what music, foods, and clothes you would like.



Denise
McNair



Carole
Robertson



Addie Mae
Collins



Cynthia D.
Morris Wesley

History and the Civil Rights Movement

Questions:

Why do you think book author Curtis chose the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church instead of other events during the civil rights movement as a focal point for the Watsons's experience in Birmingham? What can art (plays, novels, music, statues, paintings, and so forth) help us see in history, and why is that important for understanding the past? *Standard: Social Studies—US History and Culture*

Go Deeper:

- Develop a broader perspective on the civil rights movement. Help young people find a variety of resources to create a timeline of major turning points and milestones including Supreme Court decisions, new laws, influential events, and so forth. The timeline could take any form they'd like including paper, photo slideshow, or wall display featuring art and news clips.
- In April 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spent eight days in Birmingham's city jail, and while there, he responded to a "call for unity" by local white ministers, who advocated ending civil rights protests and demonstrations in the city. His letter, which outlined why he believed nonviolent protests were important and necessary, is considered a significant primary source document of the civil rights movement. Have theatergoers read the letter: kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail and summarize its main ideas. What do they think was Dr. King's most convincing argument? Why? *Standard: English Language Arts—Literacy in History/Social Studies (RH.9)*
- Besides written documents, interviews and oral histories from ordinary people who lived through events during the civil rights movement offer a window into what life was really like. Theatergoers can explore oral histories in the Library of Congress collection: loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/about-this-collection/. Discuss three surprising things they learned, and why oral histories form an important part of the historical record.
- Next, have young people capture oral history themselves by interviewing grandparents, family friends, or others they know who experienced the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. They can record audio or video of their conversations. Help them develop questions to ask about the interviewees' lives at the time, how they responded to events, and how they felt. For some ideas of general interview questions, see storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/. Another way to capture oral histories is through the free Story Corps app that walks users through the process of developing interview questions and conducting the interview. It even allows uploading interviews to an archive. See storycorps.org/participate/storycorps-app/
- Notice that there are several examples of activism in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. What can people do when they see things that aren't right with the world? How can you be a changemaker? Identify one issue in your community, city, or state that you believe requires change. Brainstorm ways you can help make that change and share your ideas with others.

- If you have the opportunity, visiting the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture in Washington, D.C., could extend the theater experience and help put the civil rights period within the larger context of African American history in the United States. If you can't visit NMAAHC in person, you can see a growing collection of 3D images of some of the museum's objects online (nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/explore-our-collection-3d). Also check around to see whether other cultural institutions near you offer exhibits, performances, or other resources for learning more.

Theater

Questions:

How did the sets, costumes, and projections help tell the story? What choices did you notice the actors making? How do you think the live music helped you understand the characters and story? How did experiencing this story told on stage affect your view of civil rights history?

Go Deeper:

- The staged concert adaptation features costumes, sets, projections, and lighting effects that helped show the story's time and place. What kind of sets, costumes, and lighting would you plan for this performance? Choose one setting, such as the family riding in the car, Grandma Sands's house, or Kenny in the church after the bombing, and sketch your designs for the sets, costumes, and lighting.
- Assemble a small group to perform this short dialogue (see next page) from the story. Before beginning, read the scene and analyze the details. Where does it take place? How does each character feel about what is happening? As an actor playing the character, how might you express those feelings and thoughts? Remember the actor's tools for expression—voice (such as the tone and speed of your speech), body (movements, posture, and facial expressions that express actions and feelings), and mind (imagining and focusing on your character's emotions, interactions, and goals in that time and place). Be sure to use all three as you perform. Try the scene a few times, exchanging roles and discussing what worked best and why. *Standard: Theater: TH:Pr4.1.4*



When the set designer started to plan the set for this show, he captured his first ideas in this sketch. See how it compares to the set you see on stage. Set design by Daniel Conway.

Scene from *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963*

by Christina Ham

DANIEL

Wilona, what's going on?!

JOEY

Daddy...daddy. Thank God you're home! Mama's about to sacrifice Byron.

DANIEL

What he do now?

WILONA

This boy's about to set this house on fire. You know how many times I done told him about playing with matches and his hard-as-a-rock head still won't listen.

DANIEL

Boy, how many times your mama got to tell you?

BYRON

I was just playing, daddy.

DANIEL

That's your problem—you play too much. Why can't you be more like your brother? Hitting them books instead of the streets.

BYRON

'cause I ain't no lil' punk.

WILONA

Byron, we've tried every kind of way to talk to you. You in them streets more than you're in school. We know the kids at school are about as scared of you as Kenny is.

KENNY

(not convincing)

I'm not scared of Byron.

BYRON

You should be.

[End of scene]

- *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* tells the personal story of one family’s journey. What stories do your family members tell about experiences you’ve had together? What are some memorable times in your family’s history? Write a short scene or monologue about one of those times. Note or sketch some ideas for the sets, costumes, lighting, image projections, and props that would show the time and place. Share your ideas with friends and perform your scene.

The Human Journey

Questions:

The Kennedy Center’s 2018–19 programming is exploring the theme of *The Human Journey*, including ideas such as identity (the qualities, beliefs, and expressions that make people who they are) and resilience (the ability to recover from or adjust easily to change or bad events).

How does the story of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* represent those ideas? How does the civil rights history behind the story also represent those ideas? What happened when people were resilient? How would you describe your identity? What times in your life have you been resilient?

Go Deeper:

- Discuss how visual arts, performing arts, and science can tell all sorts of stories of journeys, migrations, and individual or community growth through a personal lens. Encourage and help young people examine other artistic explorations of these ideas. Check out kennedy-center.org/humanjourney.
- Working together, brainstorm a list of the types of human journeys represented in the play. Discuss what was learned, gained, or lost on each type of journey. How did the “travelers” show resilience? What journeys have you taken or experienced in your own lives? How have those journeys changed you?

More Resources

These resources may help in creating your own lessons or activities or compiling more information to share, explore, and discuss with your young theatergoers.

Web Resources

From the Library of Congress

The Civil Rights History Project (including oral histories, articles, and essays): loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/about-this-collection/

The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom: loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/

A Day Like No Other: Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington:
loc.gov/exhibits/march-on-washington

Classroom Resources on Civil Rights (including links to primary source sets, lesson plans, student activities, and more): loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/themes/civil-rights/search-terms.html

Music in the Civil Rights Movement: loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/music-in-the-civil-rights-movement/

From the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture

Explore Exhibitions (including online overviews offering snapshots of periods of African American history and also key messages to discuss or explore further): nmaahc.si.edu/explore/exhibitions

Books

The King Years: Historic Moments in the Civil Rights Movement (a book offering a brief narrative history of key civil rights events by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Taylor Branch): amazon.com/King-Years-Historic-Moments-Movement/dp/1451662467/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1547168159&sr=8-1

Articles and Other Resources

“The Civil Rights Movement: An Overview” (a look at civil rights efforts from the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to the movement’s legacies): scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/civil-rights-movement-overview/

“The Green Book: The Black Travelers’ Guide to Jim Crow America” (a look at *The Negro Motorist Green-Book*, which Mama consulted in planning the Watsons’s road trip): history.com/news/the-green-book-the-black-travelers-guide-to-jim-crow-america

“Birmingham Children’s Crusade of 1963” (an overview of the children’s demonstrations): biography.com/news/black-history-birmingham-childrens-crusade-1963-video

“50 Years After the Bombing, Birmingham Still Subtly Divided” (delving into how Birmingham became a hotbed of conflict and what happened after the bombing): npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/09/18/221790880/50-years-later-birmingham-is-still-subtly-divided

“Flint Water Crisis Fast Facts” (a CNN timeline of the crisis): <https://cnn.it/2nGbefF>

“Birmingham Sunday” (song performed by Joan Baez, written about the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing): youtube.com/watch?v=WQ0y-vO9QLE

“Ballad of Birmingham” (poem by Dudley Randall, written about the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing): poetryfoundation.org/poems/46562/ballad-of-birmingham

“The Story Behind the Song: We Shall Overcome” (a Kennedy Center Education Digital Learning look at how the song became an anthem of the civil rights movement): <https://bit.ly/2GCHuM2>

Videos

“Telling Stories: A Conversation with Author Christopher Paul Curtis,” from Kennedy Center Education Digital Learning, a one-hour interview with Curtis moderated by professor Maria Salvadore and co-hosted by two high school students in which Curtis discusses his work, process of writing, and more. [youtube.com/watch?v=0kdJBxSshFI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kdJBxSshFI)

“Birmingham and the Children’s March,” from the Religion & Ethics Newsweekly series, a 10-minute video exploring the history and legacy of the march, with interviews with some of the people who participated as children. [pbs.org/video/religion-and-ethics-newsweekly-childrens-march-50th-anniversary/](https://www.pbs.org/video/religion-and-ethics-newsweekly-childrens-march-50th-anniversary/)

4 Little Girls, a 1997 documentary (1 hour, 42 minutes) by Spike Lee that recounts the story of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing on September 15, 1963. Available for streaming on HBO and rent/purchase from Amazon. [amazon.com/4-Little-Girls-Spike-Lee/dp/B00KG2RCS0](https://www.amazon.com/4-Little-Girls-Spike-Lee/dp/B00KG2RCS0)

Quiz

“The Year 1963,” an interactive quiz hosted by PBS’s Black Culture Connection that tests your knowledge of this key year in the civil rights movement. [pbs.org/black-culture/connect/quizzes/1963-civil-rights-movement-events/](https://www.pbs.org/black-culture/connect/quizzes/1963-civil-rights-movement-events/)

The Kennedy Center

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