Christopher Paul Curtis

The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963

Exploring Expository Writing: Author Biography

Christopher Paul Curtis was born in Flint, Michigan, on May 10, 1953. He was the second oldest of five children born to Dr. Herman Elder Curtis, a foot doctor, and Leslie Jane Curtis, a teacher. Curtis grew up in Flint, Michigan, and remained there until 2009. He had always loved to read, but lamented that while growing up he had difficulty finding books with African-American characters similar to him.

After graduating from Flint Southwestern High School, Curtis remained in Flint where he went to work at a General Motors car factory and also enrolled in the Flint branch of the University of Michigan. While completing his college degree, the author worked for 13 years in “the jungle” at the Fisher Body Flint Plant No. 1. “The jungle” refers to the area of a plant where large pieces of sheet metal are welded together to form the body of a car. While working in the factory proved physically difficult, it did offer Christopher Paul Curtis time to read and write. The car assembly line was designed for two men to alternate installing doors on every other car for about 60 cars an hour for eight hours. Instead of maintaining this pattern, Curtis and his coworker decided that they would alternate working 30-minute increments, with each of them welding every car in that time period. Then, each of them had half of every hour free for leisure time. With his time, Curtis read and began writing.

When he began writing seriously, Curtis took a year off from his job at the factory to create The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963. During this time, the author spent his days in the Children’s Room of the Windsor Public Library writing the book by hand and having his son, Steven, type the drafts into a computer at night. When Curtis’s debut novel was published in 1995, it was named a Newbery Honor Book, Coretta Scott King Honor Book, and an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, among other awards.

Christopher Paul Curtis enjoys modeling his characters after people he knows. Characters in Curtis’s Bud, not Buddy sprang from his grandfathers Earl “Lefty” Lewis, a pitcher in the baseball Negro leagues, and Herman E. Curtis, Sr., a big band leader during the Depression. With this book, the author won the Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Author Award, the first book to win both prestigious awards.

In addition to these two novels, Christopher Paul Curtis has also published Bucking the Sarge (2004), Mr. Chickee’s Funny Money (2005), Mr. Chickee’s Messy Mission (2007), Elijah of Buxton (2007), and The Mighty Miss Malone (2012). Today, Mr. Curtis has three children and lives in Detroit, Michigan. In his free time, he enjoys reading, playing basketball, and collecting old record albums.

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Questions

1. Name four books that Christopher Paul Curtis has written.

a.

b.

c.

d.

2. How did Christopher Paul Curtis’ family and background inspire his writing?

3. Name the awards that Christopher Paul Curtis has won for his amazing books.

a.

b.

c.

d.