Souders’ Log, Chapter 2

***The Watsons go to Birmingham-1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis**

**My impression of the text and my experiences interacting with it:**

This book so reminded me of family. Brother and sister and a strong protective mother plus a hard working father a more normal middle class American family would be hard to find. My first thought was I wish this book had been available in 1964. I remember the year well and the social upheavals connected to it. I think if this book was available in 1964 it would have created more understanding in the white race that the black race was entirely like them. I was raised in an integrated community and school, right here in good old Oklahoma. I knew black families that had working parents and sibling rivalry and dreams of a better future. I was amazed, as a fourteen year old, by the hate and prejudices that were being shown on the national news. I so much wanted to march and declare myself a human being and not one of those angry white folks screaming their horrible epitaphs at the blacks and having them recorded by the reporters on the scene. I re-experienced my early adolescent years through the reading of this funny yet tragic story.

Langston Hughes wrote a poem about the horrible bombing and Mrs. Permitter, the cook at my high school, whom we all loved as a second Mother brought the poem to school and it wound up being posted on the bulletin board in the school cafeteria. I am not sure of the date of the posting of the poem but it was sometime in the fall of my junior year. When Kenny found the little shoe just like his sister’s shoe I knew what he felt for I felt nearly the same emotion when I read Langston Hughes’ poem. Mrs. Permitter was a black woman with several little daughters of her own and not once did she display any anger towards her white children that she fed every school day.

**Birmingham Sunday**

**By: Langston Hughes**

(September 15, 1963)

Four little girls  
Who went to Sunday School that day  
And never came back home at all--  
     But left instead  
     Their blood upon the wall  
     With spattered flesh  
     And bloodied Sunday dresses  
     Scorched by dynamite that  
     China made aeons ago  
     Did not know what China made  
     Before China was ever Red at all  
     Would ever redden with their blood  
     This Birmingham-on-Sunday wall.  
Four tiny little girls  
Who left their blood upon that wall,  
In little graves today await:  
     The dynamite that might ignite  
     The ancient fuse of Dragon Kings  
     Whose tomorrow sings a hymn  
     The missionaries never taught  
     In Christian Sunday School  
     To implement the Golden Rule.  
Four little girls  
Might be awakened someday soon  
By songs upon the breeze  
     As yet unfelt among  
     Magnolia trees.

This poem can be found at <http://www.kosmicki.com/234/LHpoetry.htm>

**Synopsis**

***The Watsons go to Birmingham-1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis**

This is an exciting and humorous story full of family challenges and fun. The Watson family is taking a vacation trip to Birmingham, Alabama to see Grandmother Sands. The trip is full of excitement and the preparation is well laid out. The Watsons are a Michigan family used to the cold and snow but the mother of this family is an Alabama native and is looking forward to a visit to the warmer climate.

The story moves at a rapid pace. Kenny the middle child and youngest son is the protagonist extraordinaire, a studious young man of ten years who was an accomplished reader and little brother to the 13 year Byron who was king of the sixth grade school they both attended. Little sister, Joetta, plays a small roll in the beginning of the story but becomes the focal point at the end.

Dad Watson works in the automobile industry and makes a good living. He loves his family but is concerned about his oldest son’s lack of motivation and choice of friends. Dad and Mother Watson decide that a trip to Grandmother Sands might be an opportunity to have Byron stay and do the next year of school in Alabama and separate him from what they fear are bad influences.

Alabama is hot! Grandmother is sweet yet quick to speak her mind. A trip to the swimming hole reveals the Wool Pooh. Kenny discovers that some things are worse monsters than his brother. In fact, Kenny discovers that his brother isn’t such a bad guy after all. The Wool Pooh is discovered and revealed but Kenny isn’t convinced.

The ending explodes the reader’s heart. The Wool Pooh is a monster beyond description. Kenny sees into the monster’s being and big brother Byron gentle guides him out of the womb behind the couch into a rebirth of life. Read this wonderful adventure and discover who the Wool Pooh is in your life.

**Critical Response**

In Wolf’s taxonomy table 2.1 on page fifty of our text under the classification Theme I decided to use the Sociocultural aspects for my critical response.

Curtis in his book, *The Watsons go to Birmingham-1963,* reveals two different cultures within the black race and how these two cultures collide with each other and their interactions with the white culture of the time period. The use of the year 1963 in the title draws us back to the tumultuous era of the race conflict sweeping across America.

The beginning of the story reveals to the reader the conflict that was taking place within the Watson family. The Watsons were a working class family full of pride in their children and their rise in social standing due to the father’s job in the automotive industry. Their conflict was with their oldest son’s behavior as he entered puberty. Not only was he manifesting the usual teenage rebellion he was running with what his parents believed to be a bad crowd. Mother Watson reached the decision that Byron the older son might need to be removed from the peer group he had attached himself to.

Mrs. Watson talked about the warm pleasant climate of her hometown Birmingham in Alabama. She also talked about the cold chilling weather of Flint, Michigan. She had warm memories of her childhood and this warmth revealed how comfortable she was in her memories. The cold in Flint she speaks of gives a clue that she is uncomfortable in dealing with Byron’s cold misbehavior.

The family’s journey to Birmingham is planned by the mother, but once she goes to sleep in the car Father Watson decides to drive straight through. Once again we see the difference between the comfortable plans of the journey to the south and the ambitious plans of the northern father to complete the trip ahead of schedule. The warm comfortable dreams of mother are shattered in Birmingham by the horrible church bombing which took the lives of four girls on a Sunday morning.

The warmth of Mother Watsons’ memories, are shattered by the bombing. The heat of racial passion burst into the picture. The hateful anger of a few southern whites destroyed the feeling of warmth at home and suddenly the cold of Flint wasn’t as cold as it once was. The Watsons return to Flint and the events that took place in Birmingham seemed to temper the older son’s rebellion against his family.

The story in the voice of the younger son Kenny gives us a look inside a black family trying to both cope with their own life’s experience and at the same time cope with a changing American view of racial inequalities. This is historical fiction at its finest as well as a great family story that most readers will find highly entertaining.

**Book 2 – *Elijah of Buxton* by Christopher Paul Curtis**

**Synopsis**

Buxton, Canada is a place constructed for freedom. Reverend William King founded Buxton as a place for slaves to live life as freemen and Canadian Citizens in 1849. In this story we find John Brown and Fredrick Douglas. They are held in honor and their actions are revered.

This story is told to us by the protagonist Elijah, an eleven year old child and the first black born free in Buxton. He is adventurous, pleasant, hard working and fun loving.

He is quick to help others but naïve in his judgments and is fooled often by the Preacher. The Preacher is a shady character and not trusted by the citizens of Buxton. Elijah was taught to respect his elders and is prone to not delve deep into the Preachers character.

There is much humor in this story from Elijah’s Pa’s secret distaste of his wife’s pie and the hoop snake incident. Elijah’s rock throwing ability is revealed in his knack at fishing by throwing rocks. Elijah’s ability to converse with the elders is based on his schooling and his never being a slave.

The adults, all former slaves, revere the children of the community that were born free people. Elijah has another adult friend, Mr. Leroy who is opposite of the Preacher in every way. Mr. Leroy is a hard working man who is working to earn and save enough money to buy his wife and children out of slavery down in the USA.

Mr. Leroy’s money is stolen and Elijah’s pursuit of the thief into America is fraught with dangers from all sides. This story has a powerful bell ringing ending and should be a must read in every school in this nation.

**My impression of the text and my experiences interacting with it:**

I am ashamed of my past ignorance of Buxton, Canada. Why it was never presented to me and my classmates in school is beyond my ken. What an uplifting, encouraging, and delightful story. I laughed with joy throughout the reading. It made me feel the conquering joy of freedom. It refreshed my spirit and cemented within me the old adage, “Give me liberty or give me death.”

I know that the Pulitzer is not awarded to children’s literature, yet here is a book that deserves that award. It reveals the power hidden within all of us if we but remember that we are individuals and as individuals are capable of risking all when we make the decision to act from our deepest morality. Morality for the sheer empowerment of morality has never been displayed any better than in this great book.

**Critical response, text to poem.**

When a slave made his or her way to Buxton the bell in the church steeple was rang. This bell was no ordinary bell it was called the Liberty Bell. It was a five hundred pound bell made exclusively for Buxton and paid for by donations from poor freedman who lived in America and wanted to bless Buxton. The Liberty Bell was rung twenty times for each slave who found their way to Buxton. One day Elijah and his friend Cooter got to ring the bell 100 times because five escaped slaves made their way to Buxton. The poem that I feel conveys the power of this bell and the desire to be free is;

**The Freedom Bell**

A poem by Gerhard A. Fuerst

The Freedom-bell rang two centuries past

And a freed people vowed that Freedom would last.

The Bell is a symbol yet Freedom is real.

The Bell can be heard but Freedom can feel.

The Bell's peal recalls Freedom's long fight,

Against merciless kings and Tyranny's might.

Freedom is deliverance from oppression and need,

Freedom is the Right to thought, word and deed!

Freedom is Liberty! Freedom is choice!

The expression of Justice is Freedom's voice!

Freedom is precious and must be protected

By Laws made by those who are freely elected!

Freedom is fragile, so treasure it well!

Do not abuse Freedom is the plea of the Bell!

For Freedom's strength to grow and endure,

Combat sinister Forces and evil's allure.

Eternal vigilance will not be in vain

To prevent the Loss of Freedom's Gain.

Maintain your Freedom as just recompense.

Yet do not enjoy it at others’ expense!

Free all mankind of contempt and disdain!

Shatter all shackles! Break slavery's chain!

No one is assured of Freedom's guarantee

And no one is safe until All are set free!

Be a Guardian of Freedom, be alert and stand fast!

All mankind yearns for "Freedom at last!"

Let Centuries more the Freedom-bell ring!

Of blessed Freedom let free people sing!

Join in the chorus, add freely your voices,

As in praise of Freedom all Mankind rejoices:

Freedom! FREEDOM! Freedom!

Oh glorious, GLORIOUS Freedom!

by Gerhard A. Fuerst

(composed 1990)

Note: Mr. Fuerst—a retired adjunct professor of social science at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, and secondary school teacher in the Kalamazoo Central High School—is a poet and a regular scholarly and conscientious afflictor of the powerful. The Freedom Bell is a poem he wrote as a heartfelt tribute to what too many in our country take for granted. For a beautiful calligraphic copy of The Freedom Bell, please contact Gerhard via email at [G1st@aol.com](mailto:G1st@aol.com)

Professor Fuerst’s powerful poem points directly the powerful symbol the ringing bell of liberty should mean to a free people. The pealing of the liberty bell at Buxton gives hope to those still imprisoned by slavery and joy to those who have escaped the shackles and broken the chains of slavery.

In the stanza:

Freedom is precious and must be protected

By Laws made by those who are freely elected!

We know any country or government to rules human beings who have no right to vote or speak concerning the laws of the land in which they live are slaves to tyranny,

Elijah takes a slave born child being held by slavers, takes this child at the request of its chained mother and under the very possible risk of being captured himself. He takes this child and escapes back into Canada to his refuge at Buxton. On his ride home with this precious baby he hears in his heart and feels in his soul the ringing of the Liberty bell twenty times loud and strong.