



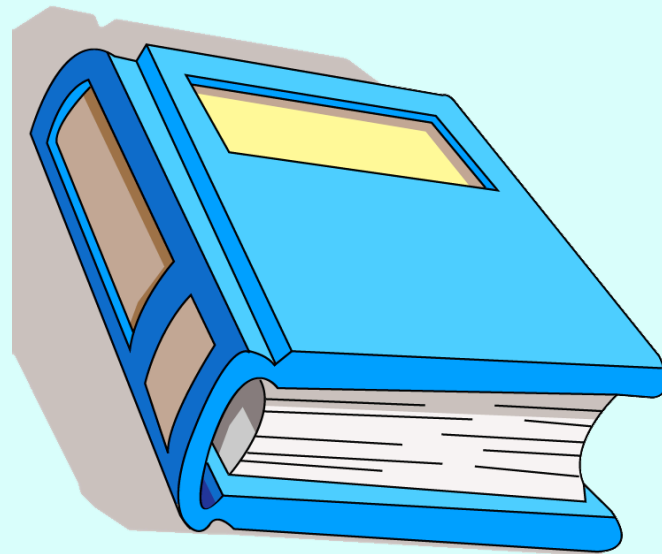
Finding Themes in Literature

Definition: A theme is a main idea, moral, or message, of an essay, paragraph, movie or video game. THE MESSAGE may be about life, society, or human nature. Themes often explore timeless and universal ideas and are almost always implied rather than stated explicitly.

-en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theme_(literature)



THEME TOPIC: FRIENDSHIP

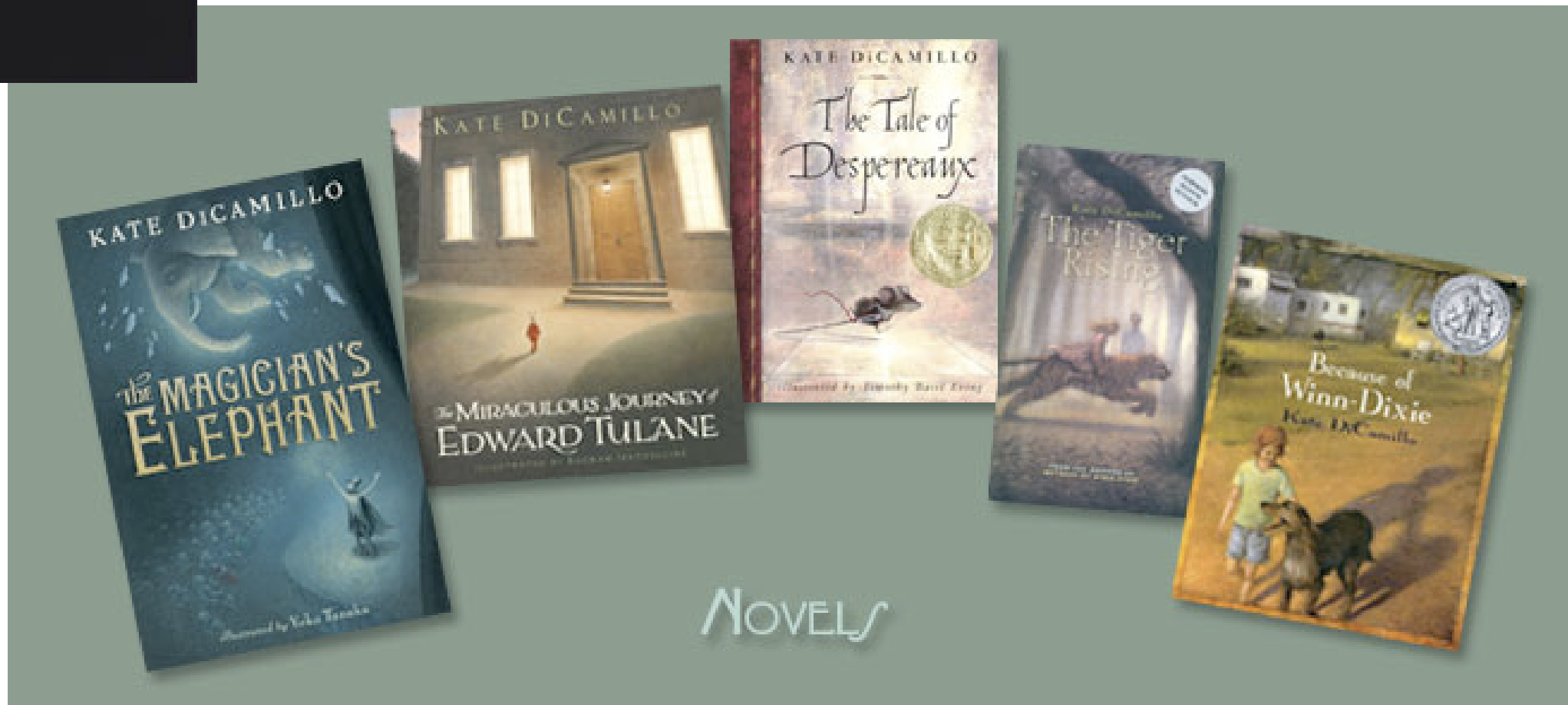


True friendship does not judge. This includes accepting differences and sticking up for each other through thick and thin.

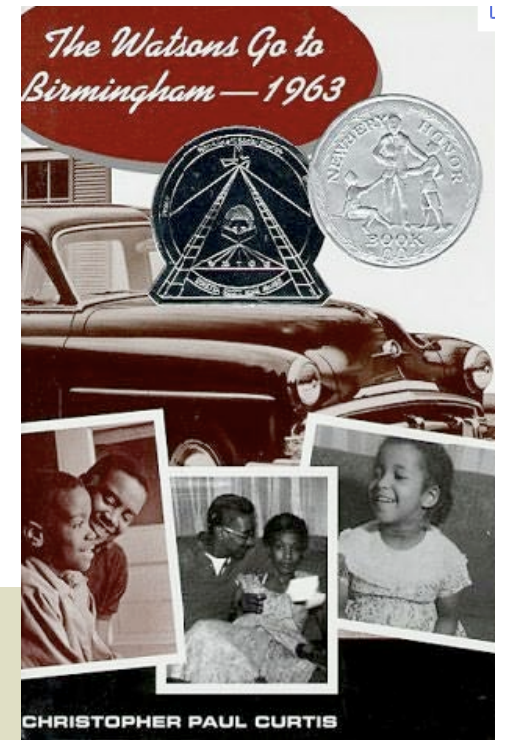
THE MESSAGE the reader applies to their life.



If you want to dig deep with the concept of theme, it helps to conduct an author study. Are there common themes? Common messages that you take away when you read the author's work?



REOCCURRING THEME CONCEPTS: friendship~ acceptance~ redemption~ discovery~ family relationships (abandonment)



A Newbery Honor Book
The Coretta Scott King Award

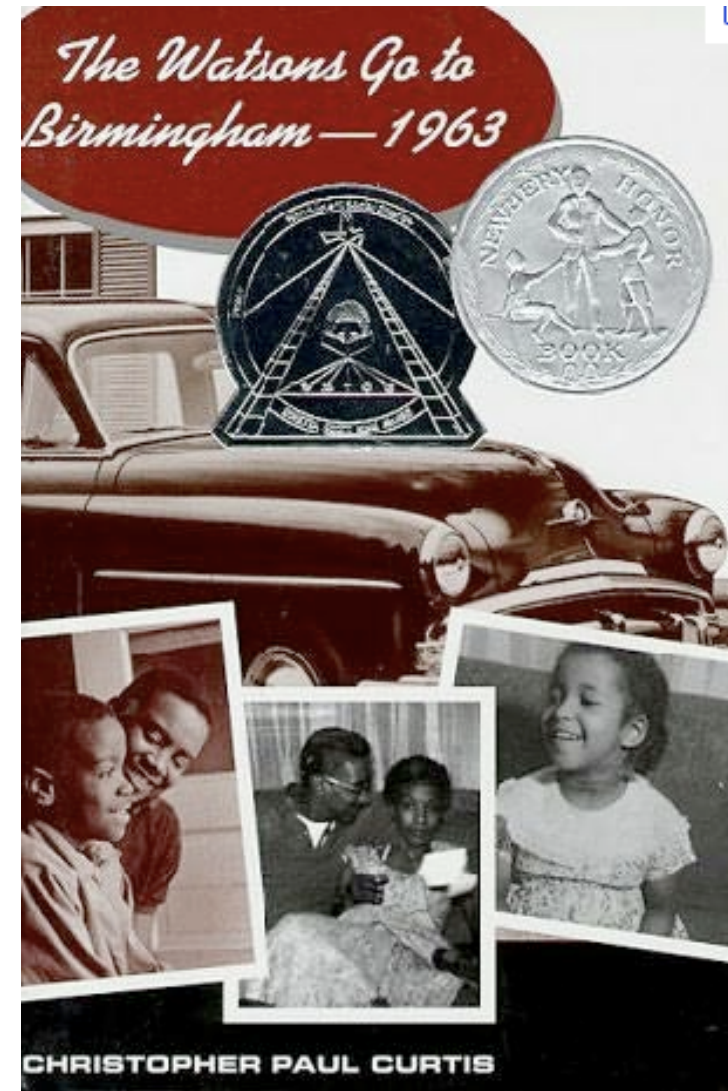
A wonderful middle-grade novel narrated by Kenny, 9, about his middle-class black family, the Weird Watsons of Flint, Michigan. When Kenny's 13-year-old brother, Byron, gets to be too much trouble, they head South to Birmingham to visit Grandma, the one person who can shape him up. And they happen to be in Birmingham when Grandma's church is blown up.

Here is a *summary* of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. A summary is different from discussing a theme of a story.

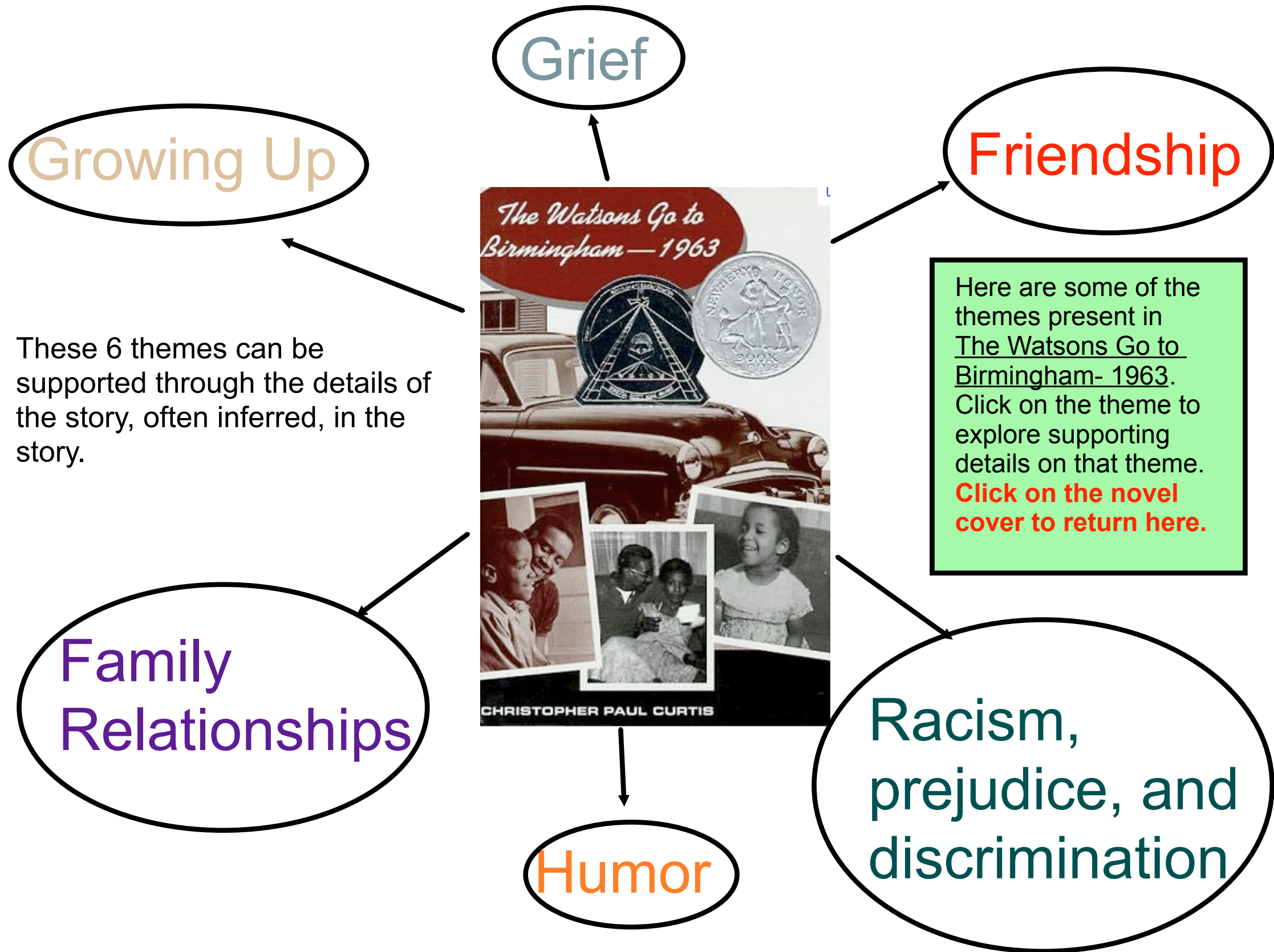


12 Common Themes in Literature

- ~ Man Struggles Against Nature
- ~ Man Struggles Against Societal Pressure
- ~ Man Struggles to Understand Spirituality
- ~ Crime Does Not Pay (A famous example is "The Tale Tell Heart"- Edgar Allen Poe)
- ~ Overcoming Adversity
- ~ Friendship is Dependent on Sacrifice
- ~ The importance of Family
- ~ Yin and Yang: Just when you think you have things figured out, a challenge arises and we have to balance it al out.
- ~ Love is the Worthiest of Pursuits
- ~ Death is Part of the Life Cycle
- ~ Sacrifices Bring Reward
- ~ Human Beings All Have the Same Needs (ex-good, bad, rich, or poor, we all need love)



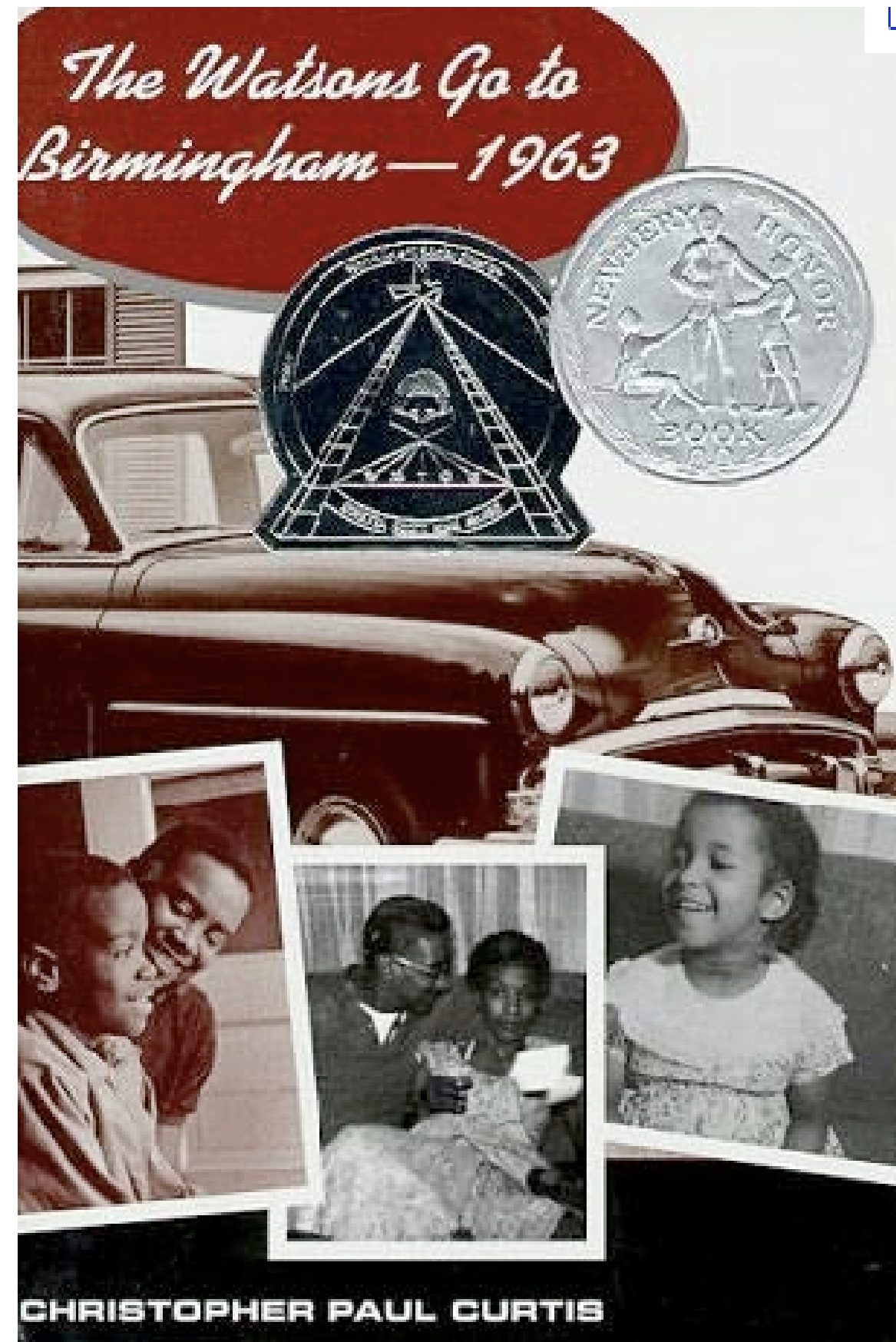
What themes are present in The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963?



Friendship

To Kenny's surprise, he and Rufus Fry become close friends. Rufus is a much better friend to Kenny than LJ Jones, who is always trying to trick Kenny. But one day on the bus Kenny makes a terrible mistake; everyone is laughing because Rufus and his little brother, Cody, share clothes. Kenny starts laughing, too, in front of Rufus. "Rufus shot a look at me. His face never changed but I knew right away I'd done something wrong. I tried to squeeze the rest of my laugh down." After a few days, Kenny goes to Rufus's house and asks him to play dinosaurs. But Rufus refuses and tells Kenny, "I thought you was my friend. I didn't think you was like all them other people." Only after Momma gets involved are the problems smoothed over and Rufus and Kenny get back to being friends. During the course of the book, Kenny learns what friendship really means, and how to be a better friend to Rufus. He comes to understand that what he had with LJ was not really friendship after all.

THE MESSAGE: Kenny learns what friendship REALLY means, and how to be a better friend...he comes to understand that what he considered previously as friendship was not really friendship at all.

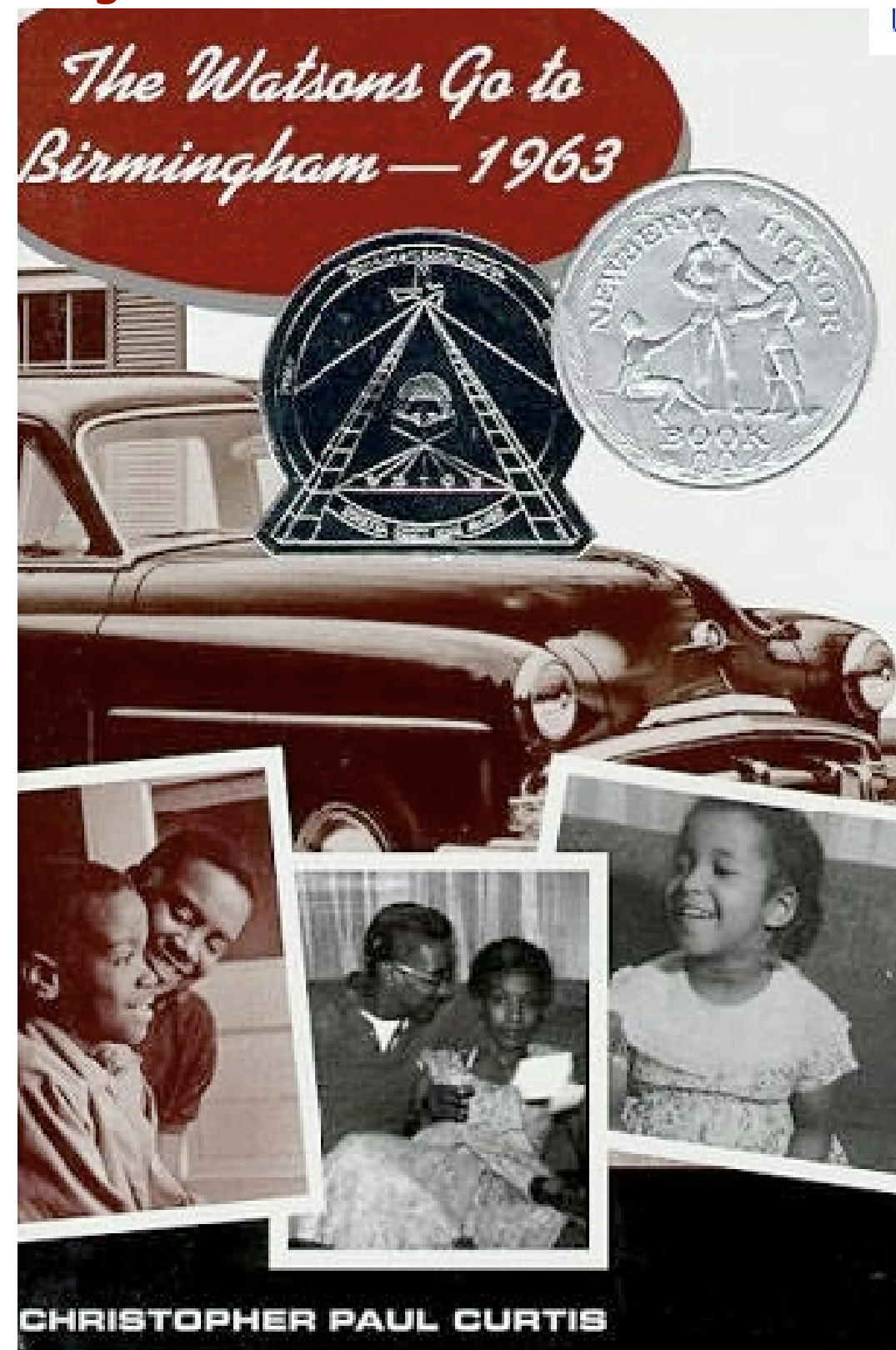


Grief

When the family returns home to Flint after the bombing at the Birmingham church, Kenny takes to sitting behind the couch in the Watsons' living room, a place that Byron calls the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital. "He started calling it the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital after we noticed that if something bad happened to one of our dogs or cats they just automatically knew they had to crawl in that space and wait to see if they were going to get better." Kenny spends his time there because he is expecting that the "magic powers" that often make his dogs and cats feel better will work on him, too. Kenny feels guilty because after he knew about the church bombing, he went home rather than trying to find Joetta. But Joetta hadn't even been inside the church when the bomb went off because she'd followed a stranger who she thought was Kenny away from the church. The time Kenny spends alone behind the couch allows him to grieve about the bombing and also to work through the guilt that he feels about his actions that day.

Momma and Dad deal with their own grief as well. "Some of the time they were mad, some of the time they were calm and some of the time they just sat on the couch and cried." But along with having to face their own feelings about the church bombing, Mr. and Mrs. Watson have to think about how to help their children grieve. They encourage Kenny to spend more time with Rufus and ask Byron and Buphead to take Kenny with them when they play basketball. What we learn is that grief is an emotion that everyone deals with differently; each of the Watson characters reacts in a specific way to their experience with the church bombing.

Supporting details that demonstrate grief in the novel.

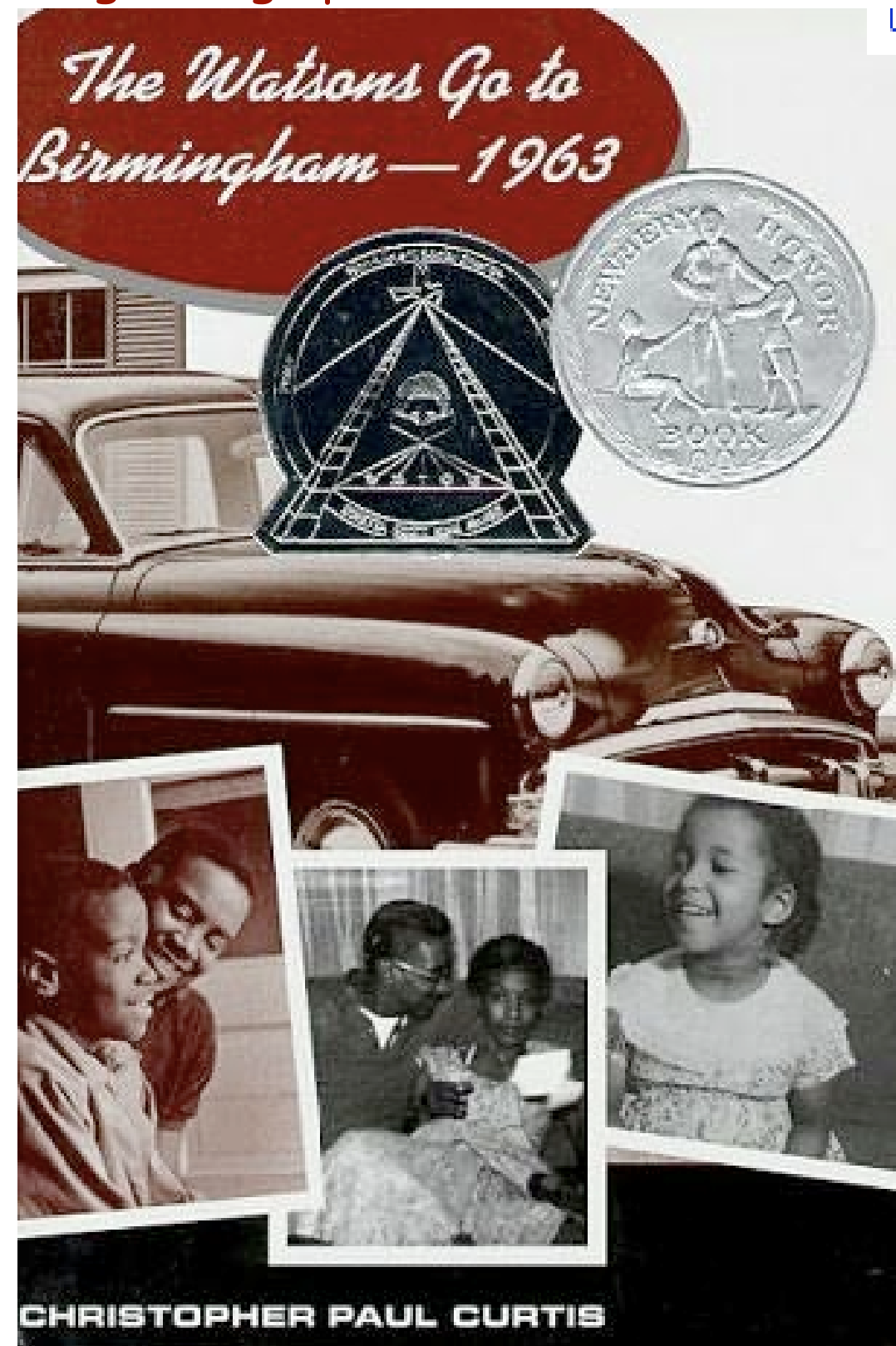


Growing up

From the very beginning of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*—1963, it seems clear to the reader that Kenny is the “good boy” in the family and Byron is the “bad boy.” Byron often threatens Kenny and joins forces with his best friend Buphead to bully Kenny. Kenny, of course, has little defense against his older brother. As the good one, he helps his mother and does well in school.

But as the story progresses, we see that perhaps Byron isn’t such a bad boy and that Kenny isn’t all good. When Kenny reads from a book in front of Byron’s class, he is convinced that Byron will beat him up or hurt him in some way; instead, Byron is proud. And at the end of the story, Byron takes the role of comforting Kenny through his grief. For his part, Kenny also disobeys his parents when he decides to swim at Collier’s Landing. In that scene, Byron protects Joetta by taking her to another part of the river to swim. “Here was a chance for another Fantastic Adventure and [Byron] was going in the wrong direction . . . He was acting real dull and square,” Kenny says. “Maybe Byron was getting sick of having more Fantastic Adventures, but I figured I was getting old enough to have some myself.” Ironically, once the Watsons arrive in Birmingham, it is Kenny who disobeys, rather than Byron. Kenny, the good boy, has decided that now that he’s getting older, perhaps he wants to break the rules, just as Byron had earlier in the story.

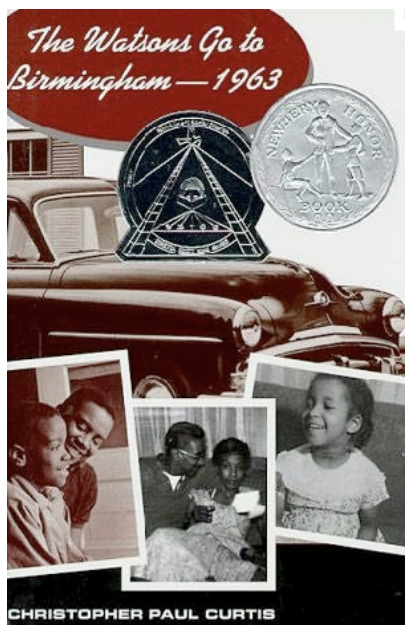
Supporting details that demonstrate growing up in the novel.



Family relationships

The Watsons are an unusually close family, with strong emotional connections. The relationship between Byron and Kenny goes through a surprising change in the novel. At the beginning, Byron seems to dislike Kenny and often tries to use his position as older brother to get out of doing things that are his responsibility. When the boys are supposed to share the job of scraping ice off the Brown Bomber's windows, Kenny says, "I'm not going to do your part, Byron, you'd better do it and I'm not playing either." Byron's response is, "Shut up, punk." Clearly Byron feels superior to his little brother, and is planning to get out of his responsibility knowing that Kenny will eventually give in, as he has in the past. But this time, Byron ends up in a difficult position; Byron's lips become stuck to the Brown Bomber's side mirror and the only one who can help him is Kenny. Rather than using this situation to his advantage, Kenny quickly comes to his brother's aid. "I could have done a lot of stuff to him. If it had been me with my lips stuck on something like this he'd have tortured me for a couple of days before he got help. Not me, though," Kenny says, "I nearly broke my neck trying to get into the house to rescue Byron."

Supporting details that demonstrate family in the novel.



Throughout the book, there are many instances in which the reader glimpses Byron's true feelings about Kenny. It is only at the end of the story, when Byron helps Kenny through his grief about the Birmingham church bombing, that we see real evidence of just how much he loves his little brother. When Kenny truly needs Byron's support, Byron is there for him.

Byron and Momma also share an important relationship. One of the most intense scenes in the book is after Momma discovers that Byron has been caught playing with fire after being told again and again not to. For his punishment, she plans to burn his fingers.

We all nearly jumped through the roof when the snake-woman voice came back into the room and said, "Joetta, move away from him." Momma was carrying a piece of paper towel, a jar of Vaseline and a Band-Aid in one hand and a fresh, dry book of matches in the other. She wasn't even going to take him to the hospital! She was going to set him on fire, then patch him up right at home!

This harsh punishment is the high point in their constant struggle for power.

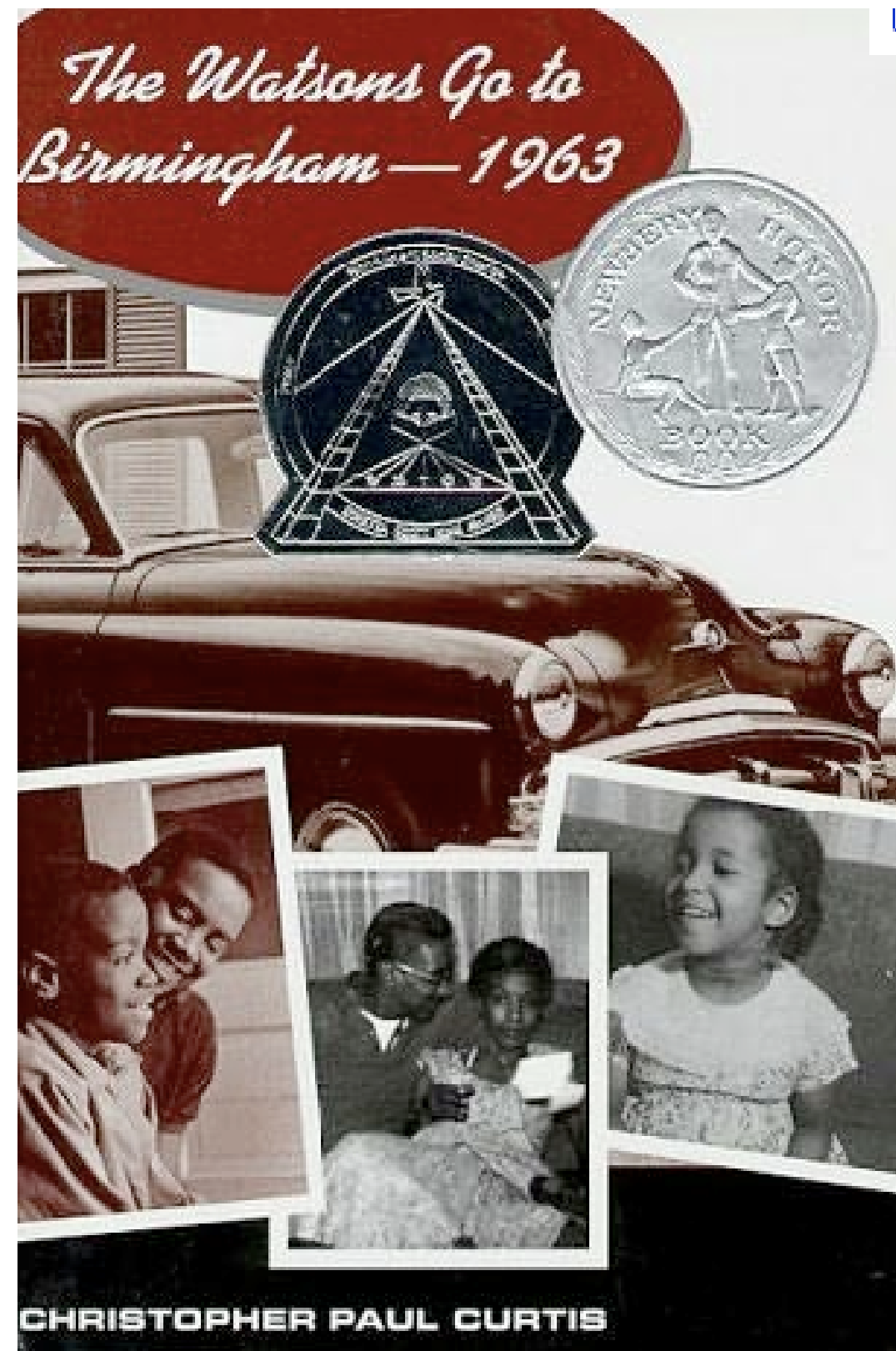
Finally, Momma and Dad decide to make a huge financial sacrifice that they feel is necessary for the good of the family: They take Byron to Birmingham, where he immediately starts to behave better and obey his parents. Wilona Watson's relationship with her mother, Grandma Sands, is very close. "Grandma Sands and Momma would get yakking to each other and we could only understand half of the things that they said." These close family relationships help the Watson family overcome the difficult obstacles they face during the course of the book.

Humor

Humor plays a significant role in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*—1963. Curtis uses humor to help the characters get through the many difficult situations in the book, be it the possibly dangerous trip to Birmingham or Byron's punishment for getting a conk hairstyle. But sometimes the humor is there purely for fun, like when Byron's lips get stuck after he kisses himself in the frozen car mirror, or in Byron's story about frozen Southerners, which he tells in order to convince Joey that she needs to wear many layers of winter clothes. "[T]here ain't nothin' more horrible than seein' hundreds of dead, froze-up Southern folks crammed up inside a garbage truck. . . . So Joey, don't be cryin' and whinin' when you put all them clothes on, it would break my heart to see my own family froze solid so's they got throwed in one them fake garbage trucks." Of course, Joey doesn't think this story is at all funny, and Kenny is not sure sure about it either, but the reader understands that Byron is just making it up to get Joey to cooperate.

Dad uses humor at the very beginning of the story when the family's heater is broken. He tells the kids about "Hambone" Henderson, Wilona Watson's old boyfriend. "Me and your granddaddy called him [Hambone] because the boy had a head shaped just like a hambone, had more knots and bumps on his head than a dinosaur. So as you guys sit there giving me these dirty looks because it's a little chilly outside ask yourselves if you'd rather be a little cool or go through life being known as the Hambonettes." The story makes everyone laugh and forget for a while just how cold their house is.

Supporting details that demonstrate humor in the novel.



Racism, prejudice, and discrimination

Very early in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, it is clear to the reader that racism and prejudice are major themes of the book. Certainly the quotation that opens this chapter is a tip-off that, even in 1963—about one hundred years after the Civil War and the end of slavery—the South was still a place where African Americans experienced a great deal of discrimination.

In the middle of the night during their trip to Birmingham, the family pulls over at a rest stop in Tennessee. It's very dark because they are in the mountains, far away from any city, but the Watsons are more scared of the people they might come across in this part of the country than they are of the dark. Kenny and Byron decide to go to the bathroom in the woods. Byron tells Kenny, "Man, they got crackers and rednecks up here that ain't never seen no Negroes before. If they caught [you] out here like this they'd hang you now, then eat you later." When he says that the people would eat Kenny, Byron is exaggerating, of course, but at this time in the 1960s, the threat of violence against African Americans was very real.

The Watsons arrive in Birmingham right before the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, one of many bombings of churches attended by African Americans that took place in the South during this period. Kenny goes to the church to try to find Joetta, who went there for Sunday school. He says, "I looked into the church and saw smoke and dust flying around like a tornado was in there. . . . I could see Bibles and coloring books thrown all over the place. . . . I could see a shiny, shiny black shoe lying halfway underneath some concrete." Kenny thinks that the shoe is Joetta's because she'd worn shiny black shoes to church that morning. When Kenny leaves to walk back home, he says, "I walked past people lying around in little balls on the grass crying and twitching, I walked past people squeezing each other and

shaking, I walked past people hugging trees and telephone poles, looking like they were afraid they might fly off the earth if they let go. I walked past a million people with their mouths wide-opened and no sounds coming out." By placing his fictional family in the midst of something that really happened, Curtis helps the reader to understand what it was like for the people who were actually there.

Supporting details that demonstrate race, prejudice, and discrimination in the novel.

