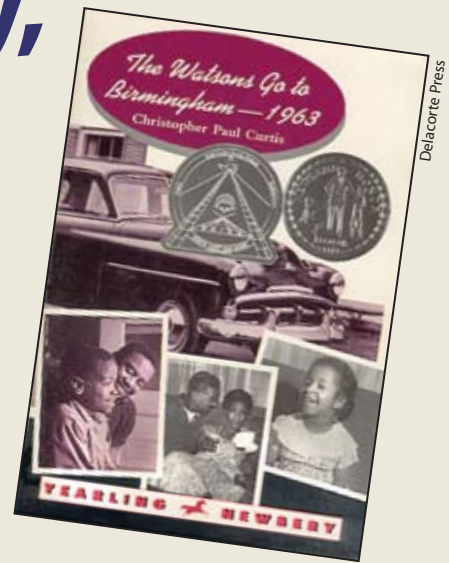


Literature, Literacy, and Legacy: Teaching about the Civil Rights Movement

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On May 22, 2002, Bobby Frank Cherry, the last suspect in the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. The church bombing, which killed Denise McNair, 11, and three 14-year-olds, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, on Sunday, September 15, had been left unresolved for nearly 40 years. Cherry's conviction brought some closure for the families of the victims, for Alabamians, and for many others who had been shocked by this dreadful crime. Just two years after his conviction, Cherry died of cancer in an Alabama prison.

Author Christopher Paul Curtis explores the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in his book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* (Delacorte Books for Young Readers, 1995). Curtis's novel, set in 1963, follows a fictional African American family who travel from Flint, Michigan, to Alabama to visit relatives. Told through the eyes of 10-year-old Kenny Watson, readers follow along on the journey South, a journey in which the characters confront racism and discrimination, as well as trauma and loss with the bombing of the Birmingham church. This book, which provides a poignant entrance for young people into the civil rights era, is exceptionally useful for educators teaching about the civil rights movement.

Background

A teaching team of educators both from The University of Alabama and from Holt High School, a secondary professional development school, decided to implement a unit on the civil rights movement using literature as the medium.¹ As part of this effort, the university methods block courses in language arts, social studies, and content area literacy were taught on-site at the high school. In preparation for this, the teaching team met each semester to plan the curriculum. The team wanted to select a piece of literature that had relevance to the community of learners (middle school students, high school students, preservice teachers, and faculty).

One goal in selecting literature was to find a book or books that would help students see their realities reflected in the text(s).² When students can make personal connections, learning becomes much more authentic, engaging, and meaningful.³ Literature also helps students make connections with the facts contained in textbooks. The teaching team chose *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* because they felt that the book would challenge the students' ideas about the civil rights movement, promote opportunities for discussion, and stimulate the study of local and family history.⁵

Holt High School, a Title I school, houses approximately 850 students from its nearby iron and steel producing community. Approximately half of the students receive free or reduced lunch, indicating low family incomes. Sixty-five percent of the students are Caucasian, 33 percent are African American, and 2 percent are Hispanic. Holt High School is also located near the site where former Alabama governor George C. Wallace made the infamous "stand in the schoolhouse door" speech, in which he pledged to block the integration of Alabama's public schools. The high school is also just an hour away from the bombed Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Although Alabama was a focus of activism during the civil rights movement, many students in the area are not informed of the events that are part of their community's legacy. As a result, the teaching team hoped the study of the novel would engage all participants in an active process of reading, responding, and sharing, as they studied this era.

Using Literature to Teach Content

The teaching team implemented one of their units in Melinda Lake's world affairs class (grades 9-12). Ms. Lake, with the team's collaboration, decided to incorporate *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* into her class to illustrate racism and discrimination. Prior to teaching their own lessons, the preservice teachers and their professor worked with Ms. Lake, observed lessons, viewed historical documentaries on the civil rights movement

with the class, and facilitated activities related to the book.

To introduce the book, the class viewed the documentary *4 Little Girls*, about the Birmingham church bombing, directed by Spike Lee (Home Box Office). The class discussed what they had known about the church bombing prior to viewing the film. Some students were completely unaware of the event that had taken place so close to their own homes. Ms. Lake then used a variety of strategies as students read the book (e.g., student and teacher reading aloud and audio taped readings).

The preservice teachers decided to focus their efforts on strengthening the students' literacy processes. In addition,

the teachers believed it was important to develop activities that emphasized the emotional aspects of discrimination and racist violence as depicted in the novel with the bombing. The teachers also chose to use the writing roulette and biopoem strategies. The writing roulette allowed the students to express their thoughts about the church bombing in a creative manner. The biopoem served as a way to examine the feelings and emotions of the novel's characters.

Writing Roulette

As mentioned above, the preservice teachers hoped the writing roulette would stimulate critical thinking as well as empathy and emotion while

students engaged in a creative writing activity. In addition, this writing strategy can also serve as reinforcement for new vocabulary.⁶ Once students completed the book, the class was divided into groups of three. The preservice teachers gave each student a story structure that included: (a) a setting and characters, (b) a problem or goal, and (c) space provided for a resolution as well as a word bank of vocabulary words (See Figure 1 for the story structure used for the final chapter of the novel).

To begin, students were asked to start a narrative focusing on the settings and characters in the book, making sure to use at least two words from the word bank and to underline these words. After an allotted amount of time (approximately three to five minutes), students were asked to stop writing and to pass their papers to the group member on their right. Each person was then asked to read what the previous author had written and to write about the problem or goal. At the end of this round, each student passed the story to the right and the receiving student concluded the story. By the end of this round, each group member had contributed to all three stories. In most cases, students discovered that they had written very different stories or used different formats (e.g., letters or editorials). After the final step, each group was asked to select one story to read to the entire class. The teacher later posted all of the finished stories for students to read.

In Figures 2 and 3, the writing roulette activity allowed four different writers (Since the class was not evenly

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Figure 1. Writing Roulette

Word Bank:			
forgiveness	chaos	prejudice	segregation
confession	upset	families	discrimination
anger	shell-shocked	racism	love

Setting: Birmingham, 1963

Character: You

Problem: You have just witnessed the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. After witnessing this, how would you react? What would you do? How would you feel?

Resolution: _____

Figure 2. Writing Roulette Example

Student 1: In 1963, I was about to go to church on a Sunday afternoon. As I walked up to the church, chaos struck. Many families were running from the sanctuary screaming. The confusion of the people both in and out of the church was so high, because they did not know what had happened. I cannot describe the anger that I felt.

Student 2: I immediately felt the extreme racism and prejudice of the people in Birmingham. As I stood there at the church, I was shell-shocked and didn't know what I could do to help. I had no idea that such discrimination would lead to such a disastrous [*sic*] bombing.

Student 3: Although this was an [*sic*] terrible act of segregation and everyone was upset about the loved ones they lost and asked for forgiveness from the Lord.

Student 4: We have to do right for ourselves because, if we don't, it wouldn't [*sic*] ever be right around here.

divided into groups of three, one group was comprised of four students) to create one story using a prompt that placed the writer at the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and using a word bank. The examples presented demonstrate: (a) the different academic levels present in each group, (b) the emotional effect of the book on the students, and (c) the students' perceptions of racial discrimination.

Figure 3.
Writing Roulette Example

Student 1: I have just witnessed the 16th Street bombing. There is a lot of chaos and confusion at the moment. Families have been torn apart; there *[sic]* loved ones have been killed. The 16th Street bombing happened because of segregation.

Student 2: There were four little girls that have been killed. I saw two of them standing outside and the other one in the church underneath a lot of the churches *[sic]* belongings. The ceiling *[sic]* was 1/2 torn off, the floors were gone, and the glass was broken.

Student 3: It was really a mess and everyone was angry *[sic]* cause they knew who had done this to us. It was the whites the ones that hate us more than any other people on the face of the earth just cause we are a little different. I think it is stupid cause everyone has so much hate in their hearts just because the of their skin.

Student 4: The men that committed *[sic]* the bombing asked the church family for forgiveness. They told the church that it was because they were prejudice *[sic]* and racist. There were other bombings like this in B'ham and blacks were always being segregated in the 1960's.

Biopoem

The biopoem is a writing strategy that can be used to stimulate thinking about historical figures, literary characters, or concepts. Students can use the format in Figure 4 or teachers can adapt the format to suit the concepts selected.

For this activity, the teaching team divided the students in Ms. Lake's class again into small groups and assigned each group a character from the novel.

Each group projected their biopoems onto a screen from overhead transparencies. The presenters covered lines 1 and 12 and the other students in the class were asked to identify the characters. Since this activity was presented at the conclusion of the book, the students were able to review aspects of each character as depicted throughout the events of the book (See Figures 5 and 6 for examples).

Figure 4. Biopoem format

Line 1	First name of person assigned
Line 2	Three or more characteristics of this person
Line 3	A relative of _____ (mother, husband, etc.)
Line 4	Lover of _____ (people or things)
Line 5	Who felt _____ (3 items)
Line 6	Who needed _____ (3 items)
Line 7	Who feared _____ (3 items)
Line 8	Who gave _____ (3 items)
Line 9	Who worked to change _____
Line 10	Who hoped _____
Line 11	Who lived _____
Line 12	Last name of person assigned

Figure 5.
Kenny

Curious, loyal, naïve
A relative of Wilona,
Who loves dinosaurs, By, and Joey
Who feels shy, young and helpless
Who needs protection, love, and self-confidence,
Who fears By, Larry Dunn, and grandmother,
Who give his story peanut butter sandwiches, and real leather gloves with rabbit fur inside,
Who wants to change his lazy eye, By's slyness, and his friend's dishonesty,
Who hopes to understand his parents' reason for sending By to Birmingham,
Who lives in Flint, Michigan

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Figure 6.
Wilona

Southern, over-protective, organized,
A relative of Grandma Sands
Who loves her kids, her husband, and she loved warmer climate,
Who feels angry, concerned, scared,
Who needs family, support, and mother,
Who fears losing her family in a fire, getting off schedule, and kids freezing to death,
Who gives love to her kids, time to her family, and punishment,
Who wants to change Byron from his ways, racial tensions, nothing,
Who hopes that Byron would learn his lessons,
Who lives in Flint, Michigan

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Conclusion

The teaching team felt that the unit on *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* had been a success in that they were able to involve students in the history of the civil rights movement on a more personal level. The students were able to relate to the characters and events in the novel and, by extension, people affected by racist violence such as in the bombing of the Birmingham church. For example, one student wrote: “I’m glad I got to learn more about my ancestors. I may not have experienced many of the racist acts back then, but I’m glad that I have had a chance to see pictures and structures and hear stories from ... the civil rights movement.” Another student wrote: “I learned about my culture. I heard the speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., all of it.”

Bean, Valerio, Mallette, and Readence advise educators to find ways to extend students’ perspectives of multicultural literature.⁷ The teachers involved in the above project agree. Their experience also showed them the power of literature for developing student motivation and learning.⁸

Notes

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