

# Workshop 5

## Historical and Cultural Context: Christopher Paul Curtis

### Video Program Overview

Laina Jones and her sixth-grade students in Dorchester, Massachusetts explore *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis. Jones uses nonfiction, documentary film, and historical photographs to contextualize the events in the novel and the civil rights movement. The students make deep connections to the literature through drama, poetry, and creative writing activities. Curtis visits the classroom, addresses questions, and leads the students in a writing workshop. The unit culminates with a service learning project in which the students create children's books about the civil rights movement and share them with elementary school children.

### Workshop 5 Reading List

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. New York: Delacorte, 1995. ISBN 0385321759

# Workshop Session (On-Site)

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## Getting Ready (30 minutes)

- **Discuss** the following questions.
  - What are the themes of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*?
  - In what ways does Christopher Paul Curtis infuse history throughout the novel?
  - What questions do you have about the historical and cultural context of this novel?
- Divide into small groups of three or four people.
- **Brainstorm** some of the landmark events in the civil rights movement. (The list may include Supreme Court decisions, examples of peaceful mass demonstrations, and examples of courage on the part of individuals or small groups of people.)
- **Discuss** some ways *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* might be used to engage students in learning about the civil rights movement. What other sources, including fiction and nonfiction works, primary sources, and video documentaries, might you use to steep your students in the context of that era?
- **Share** your group's thoughts with the rest of the participants.

## Watch the Workshop Video (approximately 60 minutes)

## Going Further (30 minutes)

- **Discuss** as many questions as time permits.
  - How did the combination of strategies and activities help the students understand the literature?
  - Which activities/strategies are you most interested in trying in your own class? What modifications would you make?
  - How did the teacher create a learning environment that promotes collaboration and respect for others' ideas?
  - How did the strategies help build students' language arts skills?
  - If you were to teach *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, what resources, authors, and/or experts from your community might you use to help build students' background knowledge and contextualize the work?
- You may want to continue to explore these questions further in your journal and to share your ideas on Channel-Talk.

# Between Sessions (On Your Own)

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## Homework Assignment

- **Go to the Web site** at [www.learner.org/channel/workshops/tml](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/tml) and:
- **Review Workshop 5** (overview, information about the authors and literature, teaching strategies, video summaries, commentary, student work, and resources).
- **Prepare for Workshop 6** (preview the overview and information about the authors and literature).
  - **Read** selected poems by Langston Hughes (available online; see Support Materials, Workshop 6 Readings) and *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African Burial Ground* by Joyce Hansen and Gary McGowan.
  - **As you read**, note your impressions of the Hughes poems.
  - Use *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence* to **describe** the everyday lives of Africans in early New York. What were their spiritual beliefs? What was the physical reality of life for the men, women, and children?
- **Bring your notes, questions, and texts** to the next workshop session.

### Workshop 6 Reading List

(Works marked with an \* are sources for materials available online at [www.learner.org/channel/workshops/tml](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/tml); see Support Materials, Workshop 6 Readings.)

Hansen, Joyce and Gary McGowan. *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York's African Burial Ground*. New York: Henry Holt, 1998. ISBN 0805050124

\*Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Poems: 1921–1940, Volume 1*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001. ISBN 0826213391

## Ongoing Activities

- **In your journal**, include thoughts, ideas, or questions you have as you review the online materials and reflect on the workshop. Note how your participation in the workshop session influenced you as a learner and as a teacher.
- **Online**, click on the Interactive Strategy Workbook. In this activity, you can read two poems and reflect on the teaching strategies featured in this workshop.
- **Share ideas** on Channel-Talk.

# Notes

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