

### **Exposure: Middle Grade and *The Watsons***

When students are able to put their present reality in juxtaposition with the realities of people in the past, it can allow for a deeper sense of the larger ideas at work. Through exposure to events in historical fiction and historically linked fictional personal stories of struggle, a space for the child readers to explore and connect to those affected is opened while also providing space to engage in an experience of learning about history outside of the traditional history books. These spaces are thoughtfully created and crafted by those who write historical fiction. For authors specifically writing to middle grade audiences, finding a balance of what type of, and how much, exposure can be used is exceptionally important and can be precarious. Middle grade classrooms are spaces of significant physical, mental, emotional, and relational change as well as spaces where boundaries are tested, challenged, and crossed. As such, an understanding of exposure in and to books for middle grade students is exceptionally pedagogically important.

Created for a middle grade audience, Christopher Paul Curtis' historical fiction novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham 1963* (1995), exposes readers to racism, violence, and trauma. However, the historical piece of this middle grade classroom staple wasn't initially included. Through his son's classroom assignment of Dudley Randall's, *The Ballad of Birmingham*, Curtis was convinced to take his vacation story about the Watsons in a very poignant historical direction, which has catapulted it onto classroom reading lists across the nation. This paper seeks to examine *The Watsons* for moments of exposure as authorial choice. Through this lens, I will look at the specific, controlled ways in which Curtis spotlights racism, the Civil Rights movement, activism, the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, violence and the trauma and tragedy of murder, and how, pedagogically, understanding this type of exposure can help educators in book choice for the classroom.