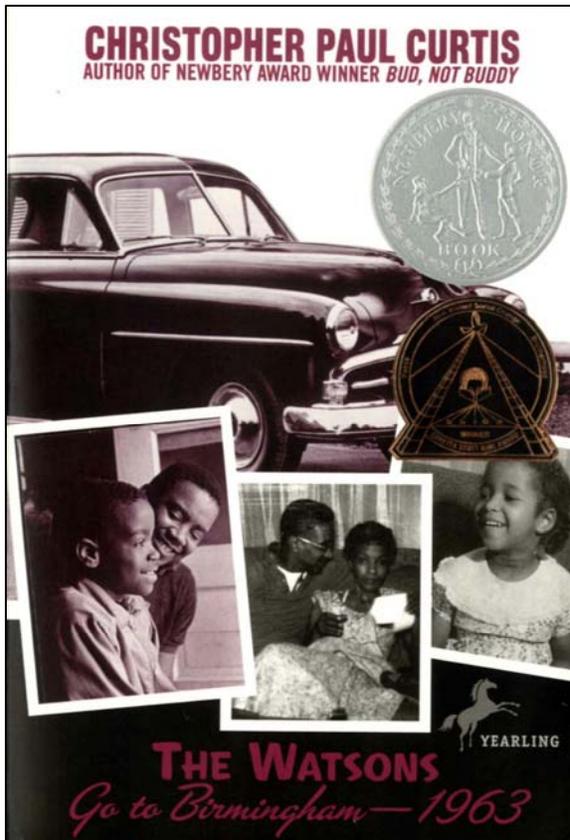


# Newspaper In Education (NIE) Teachers' Guide to **The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963** by Christopher Paul Curtis



This guide is designed as a teaching tool to support the reading and understanding of, “*The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963*” by award-winning author Christopher Paul Curtis.

It was created for use with the Robert H. Jackson Center and New York State Bar Association’s Law, Youth and Citizenship Program’s statewide book review contest for 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> graders. (2007). However, as the book and its lessons are ageless, so is this guide. It offers teachers several activities called “Newspaper Tie-ins.” These activities are suggestions on how to bring the lessons of these literary characters and the issues they faced into the present and make them relevant to our lives today. Each activity can be narrowed or expanded to accommodate the needs of each instructor’s class. Feel free to modify these activities or to create your own. This version was updated in March 2014.

#### Materials needed:

- “*The Watsons Go to Birmingham*” by Christopher Paul Curtis
- Newspapers – printed copies, Electronic (E-editions), newspaper websites or mobile apps or any available combination
- Internet access for some learning extensions

*Contact your local newspaper to order classroom sets of newspapers or access to the newspaper’s E-edition to complete these activities.*

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## Pre-reading Newspaper In Education Exercise

# A Tale of Two Cities – *Flint vs. Birmingham*

The setting for the book “*The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963*” is divided between the Watson family’s hometown of Flint and Grandma Sands’ hometown of Birmingham. Before your class starts reading this book, why not have your students discover a bit more about these two locations so they can better understand the story? A lot of details about any location can be discovered by reading, and studying its local, hometown newspaper or by visiting the newspaper’s website.

If possible write a letter to each newspaper requesting a printed copy of their newspaper – allow at least 3 weeks for delivery. There may be a fee to obtain a mailed copy.

*The Flint Journal*, 540 S. Saginaw Street #101 Flint MI 48502 - phone: (810) 893-6150,  
[www.mlive.com/flint/](http://www.mlive.com/flint/)

The Birmingham News, 2201 4th Avenue, North Birmingham, AL 35203 - phone: (205) 325-4444,  
[www.al.com/birmingham/](http://www.al.com/birmingham/)

### Materials needed:

- Copies of *The Flint Journal*, *The Birmingham News* and your local newspaper or access to newspaper websites
- Flint vs. Birmingham Student Worksheet

### General Goals:

- Establish an understanding of the main settings for the story.
  - Identify the locations of Flint, Michigan and Birmingham, Alabama.
  - Select and chart information from newspapers/other sources concerning each location.
- Establish a connection/relationship to the story by comparing and contrasting Flint and Birmingham to the students’ hometown or city.
  - Begin to establish an entry for students to see themselves in the story.

### Time required:

- 2 to 3 hours of class time

## Student Worksheet 1

# A Tale of Two Cities – *Flint vs. Birmingham*

The setting for the book “*The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963*” is divided between the Watson family’s hometown in the city of Flint and Grandma Sands’ hometown of Birmingham. As a group, look through a newspaper or newspaper website from each city and fill in the chart below.

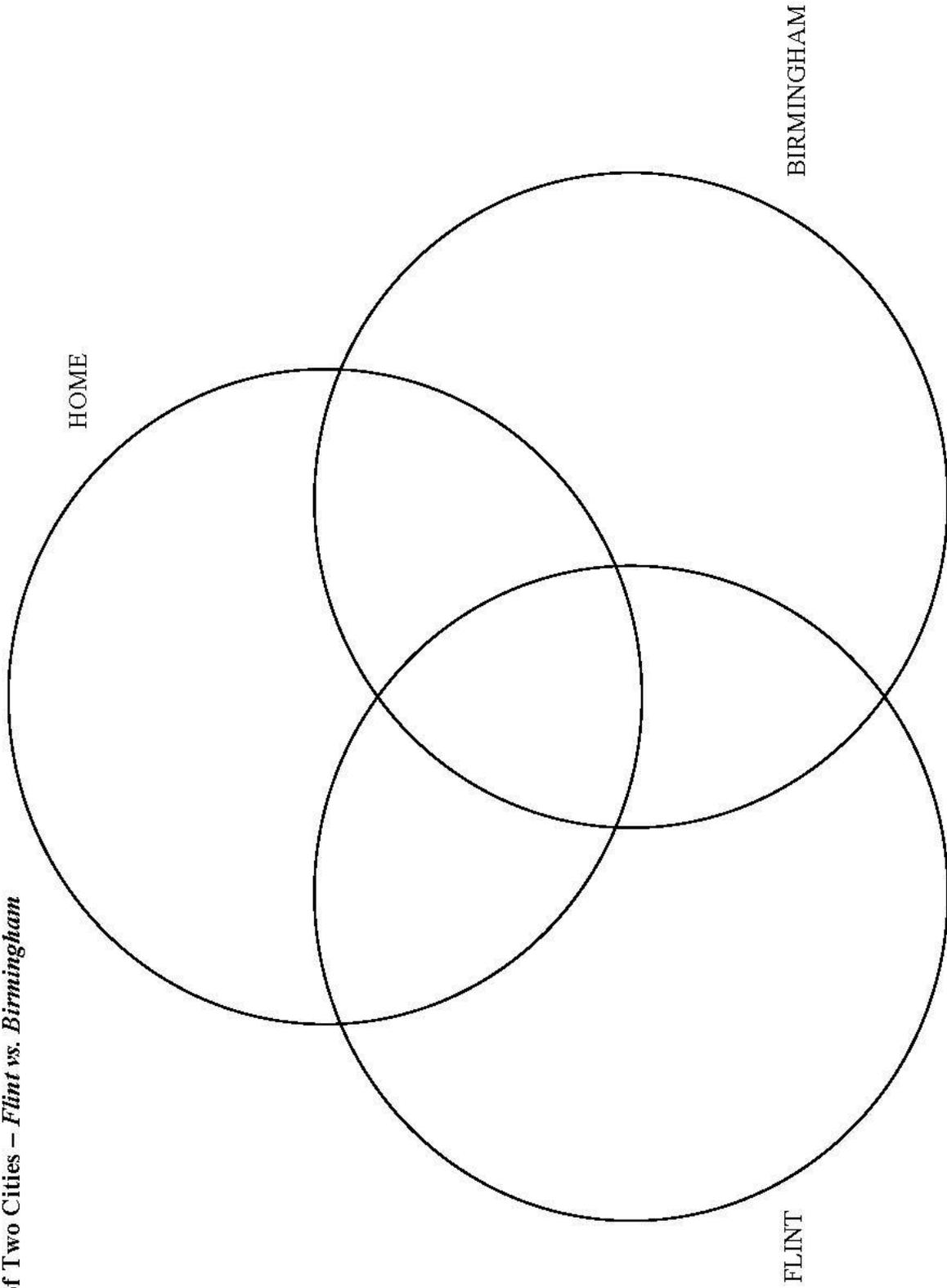
	FLINT	BIRMINGHAM
<b>Location:</b> What state is it in?  Geographic features: (ie: river, lake, hills)		
<b>Climate/Weather:</b> Average Hi/Low temp  Normal Precipitation		
<b>Types of Jobs:</b> Listings in Classifieds:  # of Professional # of Full-time # of part-time		
<b>Housing:</b> Average cost for home  Average monthly cost of an apartment		
<b>Children:</b> Find a story about children – give 3 main points of the story.		
<b>Local Issues:</b> What local issues are people most concerned about?		

If you need more information to complete the grid and have access to the internet, go to each newspaper’s website to do more research. For Flint go to– [www.mlive.com/fljournal](http://www.mlive.com/fljournal)  
 For Birmingham go to – [www.al.com/birminghamnews](http://www.al.com/birminghamnews)

Using the Venn Diagram on the next page, compare and contrast these two cities. What seems to be similar and what seems to be different?

If time permits, compare these two places with your hometown.

**Student Worksheet 2**  
***A Tale of Two Cities – Flint vs. Birmingham***



**While You Read Newspaper In Education Exercise  
Student Worksheet 3**

**Family Relationships – *How “weird” are the Watsons?***

Relationships within families can be very complex. Select any two members of the Watson family and, as you read, write down their interactions, including their feelings and motivations. Plotting these key points will help you organize your thoughts to write an essay about these characters and their relationships. In the book, Kenny often refers to the Watson family as weird. The theme of the essay is Family Relationships; be sure to answer the question: *Do you think the Watsons are weird?*

<b>Action</b>	<b>Character 1:</b>	<b>Character 2:</b>

An assessment rubric is on the following page.

## Assessment Rubric

For each criterion listed, score the essay on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the best score. Use a separate form for each essay. Do not score in decimals or fractions – whole numbers only.  
 5=Excellent 4=Above Average 3=Average 2=Below Average 1=Poor/Incomplete

Criteria	5 Excellent	4 Above average	3 Average	2 Below average	1 Poor	Score
<b>Understanding of the question and the characters:</b> To what extent did the writer demonstrate a clear understanding of the question “Do you think the Watsons are weird” and how appropriate were the selections of characters/actions to support his/her point of view?	In-depth understanding: key concepts related to theme, relationships are identified and fully defined; excellent use of literary techniques such as comparison and contrast to describe viewpoints	Key concepts related to theme, relationships are adequately identified and defined; average use of literary techniques to describe viewpoints	Key concepts are partially identified and defined; statement that viewpoints exist but little use of supporting details	Some concepts are identified but not defined; lack of reference to opposing viewpoints	Complete lack of reference to the question, concepts are undefined; irrelevant information; unsupported statements, incomplete details	
<b>Original thinking relative to the subject:</b> To what extent was the original thinking relative to the subject?	Fully, relative to the subject	Mostly relative to the subject without errors	Partially relative with minor errors	Somewhat relative with significant errors	Not relative to the subject at all	
<b>Effectiveness in presenting a point-of-view:</b> To what extent did the writer present his/her point of view?	Point-of-view fully presented and supported by many facts	Point-of-view presented and supported with some facts	Point-of-view expressed but limited use of factual information	Point-of-view presented without use of supporting facts/opinion only	Facts are inaccurate Point of view not present	
<b>Literary style, grammar and spelling</b>	Literary style completely clear and effective, excellent grammar and spelling Varied sentence structure, essay well developed and cohesive	Literary style partially clear and effective, good grammar & spelling Sentence structure somewhat varied; essay well developed and cohesive	Use of literary technique to convey main ideas but lacking clarity Sentence structure lacks variety but essay mostly developed	Lacks use of literary technique Many errors in grammar and spelling	Irrelevant and/or erroneous information, main ideas unclear, illegible, grammar and spelling errors consistent throughout essay	

Total Score: \_\_\_\_\_

## Mini Newspaper In Education Exercises by Chapter

### Chapter 1 – And You Wonder Why We Get Called the Weird Watsons

- The story begins with the Watson family trying to keep warm on a severely cold winter day. Using the newspaper (print or online) and other sources, have students locate articles related to different climates around the country and world. Have them identify the effect climate has on the way people live.
- In the story, while admiring his own image, Byron’s tongue gets stuck to the rearview mirror. Image, especially body image is important in our culture. Look through the newspaper for advertisements that use body image(s) to sell a product. What do think about the images you found? Do you think the images are negative or positive? Why?

### Chapter 2 – Give My Regards to Clark, Poindexter

- Kenny was an excellent reader. He was proud of his ability but didn’t want the other kids to know about it because he also wants to be accepted. Look through editions of the newspaper for stories that celebrate someone’s outstanding ability or talent. How do you think the person feels about this attention? Why?
- Kenny is also teased because of his lazy eye. It’s easy to find something different or wrong with other people, and it can be more challenging to find the good. Team up with someone else in the class, and look through the newspaper (print or online) and find 10 positive words to describe your partner. Glue them on one sheet of paper and display them on a bulletin board. Have the rest of the class try to identify who the words describe.

### Chapter 3 – The World’s Greatest Dinosaur War Ever

- Look through the newspaper for photos, articles and words that describe the qualities of a good friend. Which character is a good friend to Kenny Watson? Explain your answer. Is Kenny a good friend? Why or why not?
- Showing respect involves being courteous and considerate to others. Putting down or making fun of or standing by and allowing others to treat someone badly are examples of disrespectful behavior. Using the newspaper, find articles that show examples of disrespectful behavior. What was the result of these acts? Thinking about the individual or group who was treating someone badly, explain a possible reason for their actions. As a class brainstorm another way this situation could have been handled respectfully and show how this idea would have changed the outcome.

### Chapter 4 – Froze-Up Southern Folks

- In this chapter, Kenny shares his gloves with Rufus. Look through the newspaper for examples of people helping others in need. How could you help people in your community?
- Kenny is bullied by Larry Dunn and then Byron bullies Larry. Look through the newspaper for other examples of conflict. It can be between two individuals, groups or even countries. Among the examples you have found, do any involve a third party that tries to resolve the differences? If so, is the third party working peacefully or have they added to the conflict?

## **Chapter 5 – Nazi Parachutes Attack America and Get Shot Down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and His Flamethrower of Death**

- Whether at home, school or in our community rules are established for our safety and well-being. Look through the newspaper for examples of someone breaking the rules. What are the consequences for breaking the rules? Do you think the consequences are fair? Why or why not?

## **Chapter 6 – Swedish Cremes and Welfare Cheese**

- Kenny and Byron were sent to the market to sign for a few food items their Mom needed. Their Dad would pay for the items later. Byron tried to fool his mother by signing for his favorite cookies as well. Select three items from the newspaper that might be used for dinner. Add the costs together. Now add two boxes cookies to your total. Find the difference between the two totals. Relate your findings to Kenny and Byron's situation at the store, and tell why you think Byron's parents will or will not find out about the Swedish Cremes.
- Look for examples in the newspaper when someone's action caused another person or group harm. Describe your reaction to the article. Describe your reaction to Byron's hitting and killing the bird. Were your reactions similar or different? Explain.

## **Chapter 7 – Every Chihuahua in America Lines Up to Take a Bite out of Byron**

- Byron made a choice his parents did not agree with and the end result was very different from what he expected or imagined. In groups of two, find an article or story in the newspaper about someone who makes a choice to act in a certain way. Put yourself in that person's shoes and imagine the future. Would you make the same or a similar decision? Has the choice you made had a positive or negative affect on your life? Write a brief summary of the newspaper article and your imagined future. Compare and contrast your future with your partners.

## **Chapter 8 – The Ultra-Glide!**

- The Watsons fix up their car to prepare for the long drive to Birmingham. Look through several editions of the newspaper or other sources for car parts. In today's dollars, about how much money would the Watsons need to buy new tires, a new sound system, the supplies to thoroughly clean inside and out and an air freshener?
- The Ultra-Glide was new technology in the 1960s. Keeping in mind how fast technology changes, imagine a mode of transportation in the year 2040. Create a promotional advertisement or news brief describing the new technology. Be sure to give details about the product's features and benefits. Don't forget to establish a price.

## **Chapter 9 – The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963**

- Mr. Watson talks to Kenny a little about growing up and facing a world where some people hate other people or groups of people. Find current examples in the newspaper of one or more groups of people hating another group. Use the newspaper and other sources to research the history behind these strong feelings.

## Mini Newspaper In Education Exercises by Chapter - *continued*

### Chapter 10 – Tangled Up in God’s Beard

- The Watson boys are afraid of the rural rest stops and the dark skies. This may seem humorous, because country kids might feel just as spooked about a trip into the big city. Read an article in the newspaper and think about its point of view. How would this same story be written in another part of the country or world? How might the point of view change and why?
- At the end of the chapter, the Watson car is described as looking like a bug on its back. Look through the newspaper for a story that uses good imagery or visualization. Draw a picture of what the article describes.

### Chapter 11 – Bobo Brazil meets the Sheik

- When the Watson family arrives in Birmingham, the kids are surprised: Grandma Sands is not like what they expected. Find an interesting headline or photograph in the newspaper. Without reading the article, predict what the story is about. Then read the complete story to see whose predictions were most accurate.

### Chapter 12 – That Dog Won’t Hunt No More

- Wilona discovers a lot of changes on this trip back to her hometown. Imagine your hometown 10 years from now. Create a rough draft of the newspaper’s future front page. How will the newspaper be delivered? What will be different about it? What will be the same?
- Kenny is surprised that Grandma Sands can say so much with so few words. An effective newspaper headline does just that. Find a newspaper article and cut off the original headline. Exchange articles with another classmate and write a headline for his/her article. This headline should be no more than 25 characters (including spaces between words and punctuation). Remember the headline generally summarizes the article.

### Chapter 13 – I Meet Winnie’s Evil Twin Brother, the Wool Pooh

- Because of Grandma Sand’s southern accent, “Whirl Pool” sounded like “Wool Pooh.” This example of dialect is similar to some English words known as homophones. Homophones words sound the same but are spelled differently and have different meanings. (For example: sea, see) As a class look through the newspaper and try to find other examples of homophones.
- Kenny nearly drowns because he doesn’t pay attention to warning signs. Look through the newspaper for an example of someone else who made a bad choice by not paying attention or deliberately breaking the rules. Compare the two outcomes. What good can be found in each situation?

### Chapter 14 – Every Bird and Bug in Birmingham Stops and Wonders

- Everyone witnesses and reacts differently to the tragic bombing of the church in Birmingham. Working in small groups, find a newspaper article about a traumatic event and retell the story from one person’s point of view. Each student should select a different person involved in or affected by the story.

## **Chapter 15 – The World Famous Watson Pet Hospital**

- Kenny spent time behind the couch to find comfort and safety. That was his way to cope with the bombing and his feelings about it. Look through editions of the newspaper for articles or advertisements of products that help people cope, perhaps not with tragic events, but with issues in our day-to-day lives.
- Find and read the advice column in your newspaper. Now imagine you are an advice columnist, and write advice to Mr. and Mrs. Watson about their son’s staying behind the couch.

## **Additional Newspaper Related Extension Activities**

- Find newspaper articles relating to the violation of human rights. Compare the plight of the individual/group to the plight faced by African-Americans during the Civil Rights Movement.
- Look through several newspapers and examine any political cartoons you find. Based on Kenny’s story in “The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963” create a political cartoon showing any significant scene from the book.
- Imagine you’re a reporter in Birmingham at the time of the bombing. Write a news brief that summarizes what happened. Include at least three key facts either from details included in the book or other sources. Be sure to tell the story objectively in your own words.
- Look through the newspaper and find a social injustice that you’d like to change. Write a letter to the editor expressing your views on the topic. Support your opinion with facts. Offer possible solutions to correct the injustice.
- Look through recent editions of the newspaper for examples of hate crimes. Choose one example and write a brief summary of the public and legal response to it. Analyze the response and tell why you think this response was appropriate or inappropriate. Be sure to support your opinion with facts.
- Look through recent editions of the newspaper for a story of a group of people or an individual that dealt with a tragic event. Organize these modern examples of tragic events into 3 categories: “Somewhat Tragic,” “Tragic” and “Most Tragic.” Identify the criteria for each category. Now, place some of the events experienced by members of the Watson family in these categories. Explain the reason for your choices.
- Keeping the children of the book in mind, look through the newspaper for stories about children. In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different? Give three examples of each.
- Look through several editions of the newspaper for book reviews. Note how they are written and what key facts of the story are included without giving the whole story away. Now write a book review for the book “The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963” by Christopher Paul Curtis.

**Additional references:**

**Websites:**

Teachers' guide by Random House including a message from the Author -

[www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780385321754&view=tg](http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780385321754&view=tg)

**The 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing: The Response from the White House** - In this lesson plan, students act as civil rights advisors to the president. They examine a variety of responses to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church and assess what different groups believed should be done to address the situation. - <http://civilrights.jfklibrary.org/Lesson-Plans/The-response-from-the-white-house>

NPR - a written summary of events and sound clips of reports about the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church Bombing - [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1431932](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1431932)

**Books:**

***“Abby Takes a Stand”*** by Patricia C. McKissack, Gordon C. James (Illustrator). Viking Penguin, 2005. Nashville sit-in movement as seen by a 10-year old girl. Grades 3-5.

***“Circle of Fire”*** by Evelyn Coleman. Pleasant Company Publications, 2001. 12 year old girl foils plot by KKK to firebomb Highlander Folk School and assassinate Eleanor Roosevelt. Grades 3-6.

***“Freedom Summer”*** by Deborah Wiles, Jerome Lagarrigue. Atheneum, 2001). Freedom Summer as seen through the eyes of two children, one Black, one white. Grades K-3.

***“Just Like Martin”*** by Ossie Davis. In 1963 Alabama, Stone has met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and wants to be a preacher, but his father sees nonviolence as cowardly and refuses to embrace it. Simon & Schuster. 1992. Grades 4 and up.

***“Let It Shine: Stories of Black Women Freedom Fighters”*** by Andrea Davis Pinkney, Stephen Alcorn (Illustrator). Gulliver Books, 2000. Bios of ten heroic Black women from Sojourner Truth to Shirley Chisholm struggle for causes from abolition, to women's rights and civil rights. Grades 4-7.

***“Oh, Freedom! Kids Talk about the Civil Rights Movement with the People Who Made It Happen”*** by Casey King and Linda Barrett Osborne. Econo-Clad Books, 1997. Elementary school children interview Movement participants. Grades 4-8.

***“Stand up For Your Rights”*** by Children from all over the World. Two-Can Publishers, 2000. Children from many countries describe in their own words and pictures the importance to them of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Grade 9-12.

***“Witnesses to Freedom, Young People Who Fought for Civil Rights”*** by Belinda Rochelle. Dutton, 1993. Stories of young people who made a difference, Central High in Little Rock, Montgomery Bus Boycott, Sit-ins, etc. Grades 5-8.