

# Christopher Paul Curtis

Writer

**Born:** May 10, 1953

**Birthplace:** Flint, Michigan

**Also known as:** Christopher Curtis; Chris Curtis

**Education:** University of Michigan, Flint

**Significance:** Christopher Paul Curtis is a Newbery Medal-winning author of books for middle-school readers.

## Background

Christopher Paul Curtis was born on May 10, 1953, in Flint, Michigan, where his parents, Leslie J. Lewis Curtis and Herman E. Curtis Jr., raised him and his four siblings. After graduating from Southwestern High School (now Southwestern Classical Academy) in 1972, Curtis enrolled at the University of Michigan, Flint, and began working at a local General Motors assembly facility, Fisher Body Plant No. 1. His plan was to earn money for tuition and to study political science and perhaps go into law or politics. The work was grueling and involved installing doors onto car frames. Curtis hated it, but the pay was good and he stayed at the plant for thirteen years. His college education was sporadic, and it was not until 2000 that he earned his bachelor's degree.

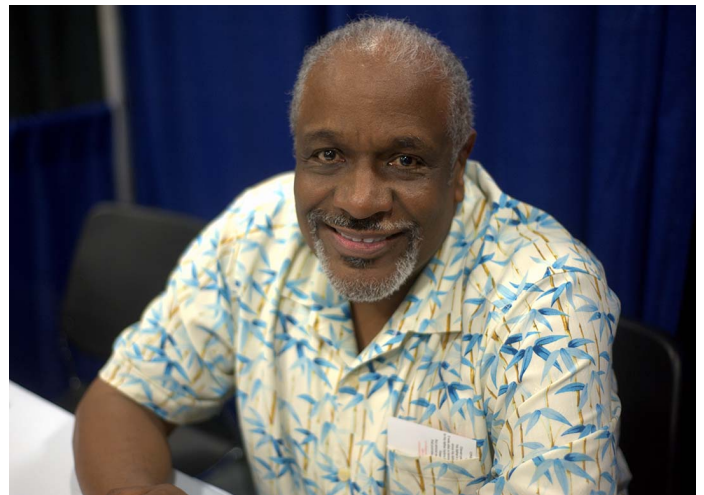
Curtis began writing while at the Fisher Body Plant. He and a coworker devised a system where they could work for thirty minutes and then take a break before the next vehicle. During his breaks, Curtis typically read or wrote. He wrote letters and short story drafts but mostly wrote about his life. In 1985 he quit his assembly-line job and did odd jobs, which included working on a loading dock and for the US Census Bureau. He also managed the regional re-election campaign of Democratic senator Don Riegle, who was implicated in the savings-and-loan scandal and, in 1994, decided not to run for a third term. The latter caused Curtis to lose his interest in political work.

## Writing Career

In 1993 Curtis left the workforce to focus on his writing. He submitted a draft of a children's novel to a University of Michigan writing contest in 1994, where it won a Jules Hopwood Prize. He entered the final version in two more contests. It did not win either contest, but an editor wanted to publish it. Published in 1996, *The Watsons Go Birmingham—1963* is narrated by an African American boy living in Flint, Michigan. The first part of the novel describes his daily life and the struggles that accompany it—an

overbearing brother, a bully, and parents who disapprove of his attempts to assert his independence. The second half of the novel melds his personal story in Birmingham, where he is spending the summer at his grandmother's, with an historical event, the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963, which killed four African American girls and injured more than a dozen people. Curtis's published novel was named a 1996 Newbery Honor Book by the American Library Association (ALA).

**Christopher Paul Curtis, 2018.**



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Curtis's second novel, *Bud, Not Buddy* (1999), is set in the Great Depression and describes the adventures of a ten-year-old motherless boy who flees a series of abusive foster homes in an attempt to find his father. It won two distinguished awards from the ALA in 2000 and was the first book to win both awards: the Newbery Medal, given for the best US work of children's literature published the previous year, and the Coretta Scott King Award, given to an African American author or illustrator whose work shows an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values. *Bud, Not Buddy* was followed by *Bucking the Sarge* (2004), *Mr. Chickee's Funny Money* (2005), and *Mr. Chickee's Messy Mission* (2007).

The first of Curtis's Buxton Chronicles, *Elijah of Buxton* (2007), is set in Buxton, Ontario, a settlement for runaway slaves, in the 1850s. Elijah Freeman is the first child born into freedom in Buxton. He lacks firsthand knowledge of slavery but learns

to appreciate his freedom when he travels from Canada to the United States to help his friend Mr. Leroy search for another Buxton man who stole the money Mr. Leroy had been saving to buy his family's freedom. *Elijah* won multiple awards in 2008, including a Newbery Honor Book designation, the Coretta Scott King Award, the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, and the TD Canadian Children's Literature Award.

*The Madman of Piney Woods* (2014) is the second book in the Buxton Chronicles. Narrated in alternating chapters by a young black boy and a white boy of Irish ancestry, the novel tells the stories of a group of young boys in early 1900s Buxton who play Civil War in the woods only to meet an actual war survivor who has been living there as a hermit. The third book in the Buxton Chronicles is *The Journey of Little Charlie* (2017). Set in South Carolina in 1858, the novel portrays the inner struggles of Charlie, a twelve-year-old white boy whose father, a sharecropper, has died in debt. Charlie makes a deal to repay his father's debt by traveling to Canada to find fugitives accused of stealing but is torn between survival and guilt when he discovers that the fugitives are not simply thieves but escaped slaves.

## Impact

Curtis's novels are told from a child's perspective and meld significant historical events with the stories of children navigating their daily lives. The books juxtapose the serious with the humorous, seamlessly interweaving dark moments from the civil rights era, the Great Depression, and other periods with stories about families, school, and friendships. The books raise questions about social justice, courage, and personal values without didacticism. Instead, they are interspersed with humorous anecdotes children can relate to, such as a young boy vomiting on the shoes of an important visitor.

Popular with young readers, their parents, and educators, Curtis's novels are used in classrooms to explore thematic issues, as well as historical events. They have also been adapted for the stage and screen. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* was adapted to a film on the Hallmark network, while *Bud, Not Buddy* was adapted to a play and *Mr. Chickee's Funny Money* was adapted to a musical.

## Personal Life

Curtis is married to Habon Aden Curtis. They have two daughters, Ayaan and Ebyaan, and a son, Libaan. Curtis has two other children, daughter Cydney and son Steven, from a previous marriage.

## Principal Works

*The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, 1996

*Bud, Not Buddy*, 1999

*Bucking the Sarge*, 2004

*Mr. Chickee's Funny Money*, 2005

The Buxton Chronicles, 2007–17

*The Mighty Miss Malone*, 2012

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*Barb Lightner*