Christopher Paul Curtis

BY WENDY LAMB

Photo James Keyser

One morning in January 1994, I stood in a small office at Delacorte Press, surrounded by hundreds of manila envelopes and boxes, opening and logging in submissions to that year's Delacorte Press Prize for a First Young Adult Novel Contest. Gray fuzz from the innards of exploding jiffy bags drifted onto everything, including me.

I opened yet another envelope and pulled out yet another manuscript and looked at the title: *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, words that filled me with curiosity and dread; words that instantly evoked the church bombing where young girls died in Sunday school. Well, I thought, this person was ambitious, trying to write about something terrible, something important. I logged it in as a "hold" for a special look later.

One Saturday in February, I pulled the envelope out of a box I'd sent to my home in New Hampshire. It was a bright morning, about twenty below, and I laughed when I read the first words, "It was one of those super-duper cold Saturdays." I kept laughing, chapter after chapter. As I read I thought, "This novel is too funny—no one's going to *die*, are they?"

I was amazed by many wonderful details, one of them a moment when Kenny looks inside Joetta's shoe as she sleeps on the drive South and sees Buster Brown's face printed on the heel. After the bombing, Kenny looks inside the shoe he finds at the church and sees Buster Brown. I stopped reading. Not Joetta! I turned the page face down. I thought, "Wow. Look what he did with a *shoe*. Who is this guy?"

When I got to know Christopher, it became clear that not only could he *write* a great story, but his *life* was a great story.

He was born in Flint, Michigan, in 1953, the second of five children. His father, Herman E. Curtis, was a chiropodist, and his mother, Leslie, who attended Michigan State, was a homemaker. Both of his parents were great readers, and so was Christopher. But he didn't find books "that were about me."

When poor patients could not pay, Dr. Curtis went to work at the Fisher Body plant. Christopher graduated from high school in 1971 and went to work on the assembly line with his father. He'd been accepted at the University of Michigan-Flint, so it was supposed to be just a summer job, but the money was too good. Christopher spent thirteen years on the assembly line, hanging eighty-pound car doors on Buicks, going to school at night and working toward his degree part time.

He met Kaysandra Sookram, a nursing student from Trinidad, at a sports event in Hamilton, Ontario, Flint's "sister city." During their courtship, Christopher wrote her letters about his job, family, and friends, and Kay said, "You're *good* at this. You could be a writer." At Fisher Body, Christopher and his partner worked out a plan: instead of taking turns, so that each of them would hang every other door, instead each man would hang every door for half an hour while the other took a half-hour break. Christopher used this time to write, as a way to escape the noise and boredom.

Christopher left Fisher Body and worked at many other jobs while continuing school. Meanwhile, Kay and Christopher had married and had two children, Steven, now twenty-one, and Cydney, eight. In 1993 Kay, an intensive-care nurse, offered to support the family while Christopher took a year off to write *The Watsons*. "She had more faith in my writing than I did," he says. (Christopher's sister, also named Cydney, "knew by his fibs" that he could be a great writer.) He sat in the children's room of the Windsor Public Library and wrote in longhand. Steven typed his father's drafts into their computer and served as first reader.

Clearly, family is a rich source for Christopher. Kenny Watson is a combination of Christopher and his brother David, and one incident—when Momma tries to cure Byron of setting fires by threatening to burn his fingertips—really happened. Luckily, sister Cydney rescued Christopher. One of the photos on the cover of *The Watsons* is of Cydney; another is of their parents. The story in *Bud, Not Buddy* is an invention, but it was inspired by his two

grandfathers, Earl "Lefty" Lewis and Herman E. Curtis, and by Herman's band, The Dusky Devastators of the Depression. And Christopher's daughter Cydney contributed the unforgettable lyrics to the song "Mommy Says No" in *Bud, Not Buddy*.

Since Christopher is so big on family, he treats me like family, too. This means I get teased. *All the time.* My birthday is fourteen months ahead of his and he scrupulously defers to me because he is so much younger. In May 1994 he wrote: "Richard Peck told me you were a real toughie, are you wimping out as you get older?" Working with him is like working with a brother—but without the punching.

Early on, I told him that I hate it when people use the verb "to pen." I received a fax:

> Here is the essay I promised, it was penned two years ago. I've also included the first short story I ever penned. Hope you enjoy them. I really enjoyed penning them.
> Unre-pen-tantly yours,
> Christopher.

Working with Christopher means I laugh a lot—I have to, when we're having yet another discussion of how many times Bud should mention snot, boogers, and "vomick."

Christopher's second novel was going to be about the sit-down strike of 1937 in Flint. In the first draft of *Bud, Not Buddy* Bud had a glimpse of tanks and strikers in the street, but that story will have to wait for another book; in this one, the strike boiled down to the box of flyers in Lefty's car. Bud had amazing adventures that also wait for other books, as do some terrific characters. Stories leak out of Christopher like laughter, along with hilarious asides, dialogue, and wonderful details. Most of the editorial process (i.e., struggle) is about trying to control these elements so that the story doesn't lose momentum or tension.

I marvel at his use of slapstick, humor, and "gross" things kids love, like backwash in a bottle of pop. Or his shorthand with the details: Bud's first meal in a restaurant, or Kenny's description of breathing in the pomade on his little sister's hair, or that moment, after the bombing, when Kenny looks at the shoe.

Each book is carried along by the exaggerated tone and the heightened childlike energy of the voice, and by the tension created when Christopher sets each boy up against a great, dark force: the bombing; the Depression; racism. In *Bud, Not Buddy* the rules are funny and to the point, but they also show us what inspired

them—Bud's hard, hard life in the hands of strangers.

Christopher's readers learn how history affects ordinary people like the Watsons and Bud—and about other ideas, such as the importance of music, whether it's *Yakkity Yak* on the Ultra Glide or the subtle "vocal stylings" of Miss Thomas in 1930s Grand Rapids. And they learn about family: family is the goal; family is the salvation; family is Bud's right and he must demand it from the world.

Publishing *The Watsons* changed Christopher's life, and certainly winning the Newbery has set him and his family upon another new course. But one of the first great changes in his life is related in the following excerpt from the essay mentioned earlier, which he faxed me soon after we met; an essay which brought him his first recognition as a writer, a Hopwood award at the University of Michigan in 1993. It's about the day, after thirteen years on the job, that he walked out of the factory and just stopped, "amazed into nothingness."

The light changed to green, the herd bolted, and I stood there, staring at the backs of the other workers, watching the swinging lunch pails, the work boots being lifted and put back down, seeing the gray pinstripe coveralls running toward the bars and cars that waited to take them to whatever would carry them away. I felt that every dream, every hope, every talent I ever had was being melted away by the numbing horror, the endless repetition, the daily grind of that factory.

I had been suddenly and unexpected amazed. I was amazed that I had hated crossing this street for thirteen years, amazed that I was no closer to getting out of it than I had ever been, amazed that I was so unhappy and wasn't crying.

Red . . . green . . . red . . . green . . .

I stood there getting brushed now and again by other members of the herd who didn't expect or understand my reluctance to step into Saginaw Street.

The light changed to red, the herd filled up around and beside me again, jostling and laughing, paying careful attention to the crossing signal. It was one thing to get hit by a car and killed coming into work; it was a whole different level of tragedy to get nailed on the way out after having given your last nine-and-a half hours to General Motors.

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The first time I'd felt this way was soon after I hired in and had to start working in the Jungle. The Jungle is where the whole body of the car gets started, it's where they take a couple of sheets of steel and coerce them into the beginnings of a twenty-thousand-dollar Buick. To do this they use spot welding guns that look like two giant, black fingers that end in long, thin copper fingernails. The guns are about four feet long and hang off ceiling-high beams on heavy cables and balancers.

There must be several hundred of these guns hanging along the assembly line, and when you see all of those cables and balancers and fixtures

hanging down looking like vines, and when you see all of the smoke hugging the ground looking like a dirty mist or fog, and when you see all of the welders in their dingy gray coveralls walking around like some type of ghost in a forest, making all of those quick moves as they dance from one welding gun to the next, and you hear all of that noise, all of the screaming that the metal makes when the guns melt the pieces together sounding like some gigantic animal is down there being ripped apart and dying hard, and when you hear all the squeals and groans the line makes as it drags the car through the workers and you hear the workers hollering above the noise trying to talk to the person next to them and you hear the KERCHUNKA-KERCHUNKA-KERCHUNKA sound of all the welders pounding their guns into the steel sounding like the largest elephant ever born is crashing through the bushes and stomping the hell out of anything in the way or sounding like drums pounding out some message that you don't get, then you can understand how the name Jungle fits so well.

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Saginaw Street yawned in front of me like a grand canyon, I felt as if one step into it would be the end.

I felt an arm go 'round my waist, it was Muley, the man who hung deck lids one place up the line from me.

"Christopher, you all right? Need some help to your car?"

Muley was taking me across the street, he'd picked up my jacket and the book I'd been reading and tucked them under one huge arm and me under the other, we floated across Saginaw and down to the lot where my car was parked.

Muley looked at me and said, "If I was you I wouldn't come in tomorrow, I know how you feel, some of the time it's just too much, isn't it?"

I had to agree, it had become too much, but more importantly it had become too little, it had become nothing.

I am fervently glad that this man has found the right work.

And grateful, always, that Delacorte Press became part of Christopher Curtis's story on the day his manila envelope landed in our contest.

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