



Unit Plan
for *The Watsons*



Mr. Robert (David Alan Grier, left) meets the Watsons (left to right: Anika Noni Rose, Skai Jackson, Harrison Knight, Bryce Clyde Jenkins, Wood Harris) after they arrive in Birmingham.

Lesson #1

Family Relationships

Lesson 1
Academic
Language

delinquent
hilarious
automatically

READ

Introduce the Central Theme

There's a strength in all of us that gives us the courage to deal with our problems.

Write the Central Theme on the board. Explain that you will be exploring this statement as you read and discuss the book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*. Tell the students that the story is told through the eyes of the main character, a ten-year-old boy named Kenny Watson, who faces several problems in his life that he has a very hard time dealing with.

Read Chapter 1, pages 1 – 19

Students should read Chapter 1 of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*. It is up to the educator to determine the most appropriate reading format for the students. (Please refer to Appendix A for a list of possible reading formats and their respective literacy benefits.)

Overview of Chapter 1

In Chapter 1 we are introduced to the main characters in the book, the Watson family: Momma, Dad, little sister Joetta, ten-year-old Kenny, and thirteen-year old Byron. The family is bundled up together trying to stay warm because of a faulty furnace. When they decide to spend the night at a relative's house, Byron and Kenny are elected to scrape off the ice from the Brown Bomber, the family car. Admiring and kissing his reflection, Byron manages to get his lips stuck to the mirror of the car. After considerable antics, Momma finally pulls Byron free and the family piles in the car headed to Aunt Cydney's house, where Kenny takes advantage of the opportunity to risk teasing his older brother.

Journaling

In just a few sentences, pretend you are Kenny and summarize what happened in Chapter 1. Focus on the main parts of this chapter.

(Sample response: The Watson family lives in a very cold town. Big brother Byron, who is at risk of becoming a juvenile delinquent, gets his lips stuck to the car when he kisses it. The family nicknames Byron the "Lipless Wonder.")



Instead of cleaning the car, Byron (Harrison Knight) kisses his reflection in the window, only to get his lips frozen to the glass. (In the novel, Byron kisses the rear-view mirror.) His father says, "This little knucklehead was kissing his reflection in the window and his lips got stuck!"

DISCUSS

Check for Comprehension

After reading Chapter 1, reinforce students' comprehension by asking these questions:

Identify Details

How does Byron earn the nickname "The Lipless Wonder?"

(Sample response: Because Byron got his mouth stuck to the frozen window.)

Characters' Perspectives

How does Momma feel about living in Flint, Michigan?

(Sample response: She doesn't like the cold. She would prefer the warm weather in Alabama.)

When Momma tells Dad that the people in Birmingham are friendlier than they are in Flint, Dad laughs and says, "Oh yeah, they're a laugh a minute down there. Let's see, where was that 'Coloreds Only' bathroom downtown?" What does Dad mean by this? What is the point he is trying to make?

(Sample response: Some people in Birmingham are not so nice. There are places that separate blacks and whites, and as a black woman, Momma would have been treated badly by some folks.)

Make Inferences

Hambone scared Momma into thinking there were no black people in Michigan. Why would this bother Momma?

(Sample response: Momma wanted to live near people that made her feel included and accepted. Maybe white folks did not always make her feel this way.)

Context Clues

When students do not know the meaning of a word in a sentence, they can use other words to find its meaning. Consider the following passage from Chapter 1 of *The Watsons* (p. 1 – 2):

*All of my family sat real close to each other on the couch under a blanket. Dad said this would **generate** a little heat but he didn't have to tell us this, it seemed like the cold **automatically** made us want to get together and huddle up.*

Ask students if they can use context clues to determine the meaning of the words *generate* and *automatically*. Tell them to first think about what is happening in the sentence, and then to find other words that may explain the meaning of these unfamiliar words.

Deepen Comprehension

Think-Pair-Share

In order to deepen students' comprehension, they need to discuss the book. Ask students to partner with a classmate sitting next to them to *discuss* the following questions:

In Chapter 1, Kenny plays along with Byron and Buphead's Surviving the Blizzard test. On page 11 he says, "I made up my mind that no matter how hard they threw me in that snow I was going to get up laughing." Why would Kenny do this? Do you agree with his choice?

Allow students 3-5 minutes to talk about these questions with their partner. Encourage them to take turns listening, and then sharing out their ideas. After the pairs have had a few minutes to talk, return to the whole group and ask for a few volunteers to share *their partner's* ideas. Ask if others in the room had similar thoughts or if they have different points of view.

WRITE

Have students respond to this prompt:

If you were Kenny Watson, how would you feel about your brother Byron's behavior? If you were Joetta, what would it mean to have your big brother be called a juvenile delinquent?

REFLECT

In this chapter, there are themes of peer pressure. Ask students to share their thoughts about this question:

Have you ever been in an uncomfortable situation where you felt pressured to act a certain way? Tell about a time that you went along with the crowd, despite feelings that you shouldn't.



Kenny (Bryce Clyde Jenkins, left) and Byron (Harrison Knight, right) are sent outside in the bitter cold of Flint, Michigan to brush off the Brown Bomber. Kenny yells over to Byron, "I'm telling you now, Byron, I'm not doing your part."

Lesson #2

Accepting Differences

Lesson 2
Academic
Language

numb
nervous
punctual

READ

Read Chapter 2, pages 20-31

It is up to the educator's discretion to determine the most appropriate reading strategy for the students. (Please refer to Appendix A for a list of possible reading formats and their respective literacy benefits.)

Overview of Chapter 2

In Chapter 2 Kenny explains how if it weren't for his big brother Byron, the "god" of Clark Elementary, he would have gotten picked on a lot more because basically he had two major things wrong with him. The first was that he was smart - he could even read upside down. The second was that he had a lazy eye. Byron showed Kenny how to squint and then look at people sideways so that the lazy eye wasn't so noticeable. He didn't get called Cockeye Kenny nearly as much after that. This chapter also introduces two new kids from down South - Rufus and Cody Fry. Kenny is really excited because he believes that Larry Dunn and the other bullies will have someone new to pick on and just may leave him alone!

Journaling

In just a few sentences, pretend you are Kenny and summarize what happened in Chapter 2. Focus on the main parts of this chapter.

(Sample response: Larry Dunn is a bully at the school who picks on Kenny when Byron is not around. Kenny was asked to show off his reading skills to a class of fifth graders. Byron taught Kenny how to make his eyes look straight. Kenny is thankful because a new student might take his place as the underdog.)



Bio.com's Langston Hughes Biography:

<http://www.biography.com/people/langston-hughes-9346313>

Children's Rhymes Penned by Langston Hughes:

<http://www.crmvet.org/poetry/fhughes.htm#fcr>

DISCUSS

Check Comprehension

Reinforce students' comprehension by asking the following questions. Be sure to follow up on student responses by asking *why* they formulated certain opinions and *which pages* in the text support their claims.

Cause and Effect

What caused teachers to treat Kenny differently than other kids in the school?

(Sample response: Kenny was very smart. He cared about learning.)

What effect did this special treatment have on Kenny?

(Sample response: Kids teased him.)

Make Inferences

Why would Kenny's smartness make him enemies of other students?

(Sample response: Because some kids may feel jealous that Kenny can read better.)

Why did Byron show Kenny how to squint and look at people sideways, but then sometimes called him Cockeye Kenny himself?

(Sample response: Byron doesn't want other people to pick on Kenny, but thinks it is okay for family to pick on family.)

Characters' Perspectives

How does Kenny feel when people call him Poindexter, egghead, or Cockeye Kenny? Explain.

(Sample response: He feels embarrassed and like an outcast.)

Mr. Alums, the fifth grade teacher, tells the class, "I've often told you that as Negroes the world is many times a hostile place for us." Why would he say this?

(Sample response: During the time that the story takes place, unfair laws were set in place that treated black people unkindly. He wants the students to learn to become good readers so that they can protect themselves from some injustice when they get older. Being literate gives you power.)

Using Evidence from the Text

Challenge students to support their claims with evidence from the text by asking the following questions:

What does the bus driver think of the way Larry Dunn treats the new boy on the bus?

(Sample response: The bus driver is angry with Larry.)

How do you know that the bus driver was angry? On what page of the text does it tell you this? What are the words that give you this idea?

(Sample response: On page 30, it says, "The bus driver was really mad.")

Deepen Comprehension

Think-Pair-Share

In order to deepen students' comprehension, they need to *discuss* the book. Ask students to partner with a classmate sitting next to them to discuss the following questions:

On page 28, Kenny says a "miracle" happened: He was sent a savior. Why does Kenny view the new Southern boy as his savior? Do you agree with Kenny's judgment?

Allow students 3-5 minutes to talk about these questions with their partner. Encourage them to take turns listening, and then sharing out their ideas. After the pairs have had a few minutes to talk, return to the whole group and ask for a few volunteers to share *their partner's* ideas. Ask if others in the room had similar thoughts or if they have different points of view.

WRITE

Have students respond to this prompt:

Even though Kenny gets called names like “Poindexter,” “egghead,” and “professor,” he continues to put the same effort into his reading and his schoolwork. Unlike Kenny, many people would not choose to ignore the teasing, but would instead stop the reading, studying, etc. so that the teasing might stop. Have you ever ignored being teased by your peers in order to do the right thing? Explain your situation and how it made you feel about yourself.

REFLECT

Invite students to share their writing prompt responses with the class. Encourage them to note ways in which their peers’ stories are similar to their own. Ask:

In the future, if you get teased or if you see someone else get teased, how do you think you will react?



Joetta (Skai Jackson) smiles at her brothers on the way to Birmingham.

Lesson #3

Friendship & Forgiving

Lesson 3
Academic
Language

**desperate
jabbering
version**

READ

Read Chapter 3, pages 32 – 46

It is up to the educator’s discretion to determine the most appropriate reading strategy for the students. (Please refer to Appendix A for a list of possible reading formats and their respective literacy benefits.)

Overview of Chapter 3

In Chapter 3 we experience the demise of Kenny’s friendship with L.J. Jones, a sneaky friend who managed to trick Kenny, not only by stealing about 100 of his dinosaurs, but also by making him feel pretty foolish in the process. Although at first reluctant, Kenny finds a new friend in the new boy at school, Rufus Fry. A problem arises when Kenny hurts Rufus’ feelings by laughing at his raggedy clothes along with the other kids. With the help of Momma, the pair manages to patch things up. After a bit of contemplation, Kenny finds real value in his friendship with Rufus and comes to the conclusion that Rufus is right about him, Kenny “is different from the rest of them other people.”

Journaling

In just a few sentences, pretend you are Kenny and summarize what happened in Chapter 3. Focus on the main parts of this chapter.

(Sample response: Kenny befriends Rufus Fry, a new student from Arkansas. Kenny shares his lunches with Rufus. LJ stole a bunch of Kenny’s dinosaurs. Kenny hurts Rufus’ feelings by laughing at him, but tries to make amends.)

DISCUSS

Check for Comprehension

Reinforce students' comprehension by asking the following questions. Be sure to follow up on student responses by asking *why* they formulated certain opinions and *which pages* in the text support their claims.

Context Clues

Consider the following passage from Chapter 3 of *The Watsons* (p. 33):

*This guy was real **desperate** for a friend because even though I wouldn't say much back to him he kept **jabbering** away at me all through class.*

Ask students if they can use context clues to determine the meaning of the words *desperate* and *jabbering*.

Identify Details

On the playground Kenny and Rufus have an interesting conversation about a squirrel. What does Rufus say to Kenny that is so surprising?

(Sample response: In Arkansas, it is normal for people to shoot squirrels and eat them for dinner.)

In this chapter, Kenny figures out that there are two things wrong with Rufus. What are those two things?

(Sample response: 1- Rufus has a funny accent and 2- Rufus wore the same clothes all the time.)

On what page of the book do we learn this?

(Page 42)

Make Inferences

Why did Rufus save half of the sandwich Kenny gave him for later?

(Sample response: To give to his little brother Cody.)

Why would Rufus save the half sandwich for his little brother?

(Sample response: Rufus and Cody are poor and do not have a lot of food to eat.)

Characters' Perspectives

On the bus, when Larry Dunn makes fun of Rufus' clothes, Kenny joins in the laughter. Why did Kenny do this?

(Sample response: Kenny was afraid Larry would pick on him, too.)

How did Kenny's choice make Rufus feel?

(Sample response: Rufus' feelings were hurt and he refused to talk to Kenny.)

When Kenny goes to Rufus' house to try to make amends, Rufus says to Kenny, "I didn't think you was like all them other people. I thought you was different." How does this make Kenny feel?

(Sample response: Kenny feels sad and ashamed.)

Deepen Comprehension

Fishbowl Discussion

In order to deepen students' comprehension, they need to *discuss* the book. Ask four students to volunteer to start the fishbowl. Provide them with the following prompt:

When Rufus tells Kenny that he thought Kenny was different, what did he mean by this? In what ways was Kenny "different" from others? Why was this important to Rufus?

Encourage students to take turns speaking, to explain why they agree or disagree with each other, and to support their claims with evidence from the text.

WRITE

Have students respond to this prompt:

Sometimes, when things are difficult, we need to find the courage to do the right thing. When Kenny laughed at Rufus on the bus, he did not have the courage to stand up to Larry Dunn. Can you think of a time when you needed courage in order to make a good decision? Explain what happened and talk about how courage helped you.

REFLECT

Cultural Connection

We learn in Chapter 3 that there are significant regional differences in the way Kenny and Rufus regard squirrels. Rufus says it is normal for people to shoot and eat squirrels, but Kenny thinks this sounds crazy. Ask students:

Can you think of ways in which your family practices and beliefs are different from those in other neighborhoods, towns, or even countries?

Explain to students that differences among people are common and should be respected because that is what makes us special. Some of the causes of segregation were rooted in people's reluctance to value differences.



The Watson's cousins (Shameik Moore and Josephine Lawrence) talk to the Watson kids (left to right: Harrison Knight and Skai Jackson) about their involvement fighting for civil rights in the Birmingham Children's March.

Lesson #4

Empathy & Conflict Resolution

Lesson 4
Academic
Language

**orbiting
hypnotized
disappear**

READ

Read Chapter 4, pages 47 - 63

It is up to the educator's discretion to determine the most appropriate reading strategy for the students. (Please refer to Appendix A for a list of possible reading formats and their respective literacy benefits.)

Overview of Chapter 4

In Chapter 4 we get to know the characters of Kenny and Byron a little better. Born in Alabama and not really knowing much about the cold, Momma actually thought that her kids would freeze to death walking to school! This is probably why she insisted on dressing them in so many layers that they became known as "the Weird Watsons doing their mummy imitations." When Joey and Kenny complained about all the layers of clothing, Byron told them a tale about fake garbage trucks that picked up the frozen bodies of people who died on the streets. Although Kenny wasn't quite sure if Byron was telling the truth or not, it put an end to Joetta's whining about all the layers. When Larry Dunn steals Kenny's real leather gloves, Kenny turns to Byron for help. Byron gets revenge on Larry, but in a way that makes Kenny almost wish he hadn't snitched, for only "By and Buphead could make you feel sorry for someone as mean as Larry Dunn."

Journaling

In just a few sentences, pretend you are Kenny and summarize what happened in Chapter 4. Focus on the main parts of this chapter.

(Sample response: Kenny has to help take Joetta's layers of clothes off at school just like Byron used to do for him. Larry Dunn picks on Kenny and Rufus and steals Kenny's gloves. Byron finds out that Larry has picked on Kenny, so he pressures Kenny into teaching Larry a lesson.)



In Chapter 4, we learn that Momma is overly concerned about how cold it can be in Flint. Challenge students to do a brief investigation into the climate differences between Flint, Michigan and Birmingham, Alabama.

Average Weather for Birmingham:

<http://www.weather.com/weather/wxclimatology/monthly/graph/USAL0054>

Average Weather for Flint, Michigan:

<http://www.weather.com/weather/wxclimatology/monthly/graph/USMI0295>

DISCUSS

Check for Comprehension

Reinforce students' comprehension by asking the following questions. Be sure to follow up on student responses by asking *why* they formulated certain opinions and *which pages* in the text support their claims.

Draw Conclusions

Why did some kids call Kenny and Joetta the “Weird Watsons?” (Sample response: Because they looked like mummies when they were all bundled up in their winter coats.)

Make Inferences

Why was Momma so concerned about her children getting cold?

(Sample response: Because she was from the south where the weather is much warmer—it is likely that the cold bothered Momma more than it did native northerners.)

The other kids only called Kenny and Joetta the “Weird Watsons” when Byron was not around. Why?

(Sample response: Because Byron intimidated other kids and would get revenge on anyone who picked on his siblings.)

Why did Byron tell Kenny and Joetta the story about the garbage truck that picked up frozen bodies?

(Sample response: To trick them into not complaining about wearing too many layers of winter clothes.)

Characters' Perspectives

When Kenny complains about having to help Joetta with her clothes, Byron says, “Who you think took all that stuff off your little behind all these years? What goes around goes around.” What does Byron mean by this?

(Sample response: Byron is telling Kenny that in the Watson family, the older sibling's job is to care for the younger sibling. Or, Kenny should stop complaining because he was also once a helpless baby like Joetta.)

Characters' Actions

Why does Kenny pretend to lose a pair of gloves?

(Sample response: He wanted to give his gloves to Rufus.)

Other than to be a bully, what reason would Larry have to steal Kenny's gloves?

(Sample response: It was freezing outside and he did not have a pair of his own gloves to keep him warm.)

Using Evidence from the Text

Challenge students to support their claims with evidence from the text by asking the following questions:

Rufus figures out that Larry Dunn stole Kenny's gloves. What evidence does he have to prove it?

(Sample response: On page 58, it says that after getting a Maytag Wash from Larry, Rufus finds snow in his pocket that is covered black from shoe polish.)

How does Kenny react when he realizes he only has one glove?

(Sample response: He is very upset. On page 58 it says that he "sat on the curb, sniffled a couple times, and finally cried.")

In this Chapter we learn that Larry Dunn is poor. What evidence supports this inference?

(Sample response: Page 56 tells us that Larry Dunn used to wear socks on his hands to keep warm, before he stole a pair of gloves. On page 61 we learn that Larry only wears a thin t-shirt under his windbreaker and that there are holes in the bottoms of his tennis shoes.)

Deepen Comprehension

Think-Pair-Share

Ask students to partner with a classmate sitting next to them to discuss the following questions:

When Byron punishes Larry for stealing Kenny's gloves, Kenny does not approve. On page 62, Kenny says, "I wished I hadn't told Byron about what happened, I wished I just could have gone the rest of the year with one glove. I couldn't stand to see how the movie was going to end, so me and Rufus left." What does it say about Kenny's personality that he feels sorry for Larry the bully?

Allow students 3-5 minutes to talk about these questions with their partner. Encourage them to take turns listening, and then sharing their ideas. After the pairs have had a few minutes to talk, return to the whole group and ask for a few volunteers to share *their partner's* ideas. Ask if others in the room had similar thoughts or if they have different points of view.

WRITE

Have students respond to this prompt:

In this Chapter, the Watson brothers encounter many dilemmas. Kenny and Byron have different ways of solving conflicts. Kenny is timid and allows himself to get bullied, yet he is empathetic and kind. On the other hand, Byron is confrontational and bullies others, yet is strong and never gets picked on. Think of a time that you –or someone you know— had the strength to choose empathy and kindness over revenge and meanness to solve a dilemma.

REFLECT

Invite students to share their writing prompt responses with the class. Encourage them to note ways in which their peers' stories are similar to their own. Discuss how having empathy and treating others kindly often makes us feel the best. Then, challenge the students to think of how acts of compassion can better their community. Ask:

We notice in this chapter that several of the characters cannot afford proper clothing for the winter. This is very true for many people in our country. Do you feel a responsibility to treat the needy with compassion? What are some ways that communities can help those who are unable to afford clothing and food?



Mr. Robert (David Alan Grier) sits with the Watson kids (left to right: Skai Jackson, Bryce Clyde Jenkins, Harrison Knight) in a movie theater, and Kenny asks why they have to sit in a separate section of the theater, way up in the balcony.

Lesson #5

Choices & Consequences

Lesson 5
Academic
Language

glugging
traitor
parachute

READ

Read Chapter 5, pages 64 - 74

It is up to the educator's discretion to determine the most appropriate reading strategy for the students. (Please refer to Appendix A for a list of possible reading formats and their respective literacy benefits.)

Overview of Chapter 5

In Chapter 5 Byron gets caught lighting matches—again! After numerous threats, Momma decides that she has to make good on her promise to burn Byron's finger in order to teach him a lesson that he won't forget. But after five unsuccessful tries, with Joetta blowing out the flame from her matches, Momma finally gives up and decides to turn Byron over to Dad instead.

Journaling

In just a few sentences, pretend you are Kenny and summarize what happened in Chapter 5. Focus on the main parts of this chapter.

(Sample response: Byron gets caught playing with fire in the bathroom. Momma wants to punish Byron by burning his fingers, but Joetta saves him.)

DISCUSS

Check for Comprehension

Reinforce students' comprehension by asking the following questions. Be sure to follow up on student responses by asking *why* they formulated certain opinions and *which pages* in the text support their claims.

Context Clues

Consider the following sentence from Chapter 5 (p. 66):

*Byron was on **take seven** when Momma finally wondered why the toilet was being flushed so much and came upstairs to see what was going on. The whole upstairs smelled like a giant match and she knew something was **fishy** even before she got to the top step.*

Given the context of the sentences, what do "take seven" and "fishy" mean?

Make Predictions

Do you think Byron will ever play with fire again? Why?

(Sample responses: No, because he's terrified of Momma's punishment. OR - Yes, because this is not the first time he has been caught.)

Characters' Perspectives

What is Kenny's perspective on the punishment that Byron is to receive from Momma?

(Sample response: Kenny only feels a little sorry for Byron, but not too sorry because he believed Byron deserved the punishment and because Byron did not take his chance to run when he had it. Kenny is also curious to see if Momma will really burn Byron.)

On page 69, why is Kenny terrified when Momma tells him to go get the matches?

(Sample response: He knew if he disobeyed Momma, he would be in serious trouble. But if he obeyed her, Byron would kill him. Either way, he was going to anger someone.)

On page 73, Kenny notes that “Momma’s horrible snake woman voice came out again...” Why does this alarm Kenny? And why would Momma have such a voice?

(Sample response: Momma doesn’t usually talk like that, and so her change in tone signals to Kenny just how furious she is.)

Characters’ Actions

What was Momma’s reaction when she caught Byron playing with fire in the bathroom?

(Sample response: Momma was so angry, she decided to burn Byron as punishment.)

Why did Joetta keep blowing out the matches when Momma was trying to burn Byron’s finger?

(Sample response: Because she didn’t want to see her brother get hurt. She loves her big brother and was trying to protect him.)

Using Evidence from the Past

Challenge students to support their claims with evidence from the text by asking the following questions:

Momma knows first hand how dangerous fire can be. What happened when she was a little girl?

(Sample response: On page 64, it says that “her house caught on fire and for two years after that she and her brothers had to wear clothes that smelled like smoke.”)

What kind of reaction did this story get out of the different Watson family members?

(Sample response: On page 64 it says that Momma and Joey would get sad and cry, but that Kenny and Byron thought it was kind of funny.)

What evidence do we have that Byron did not take Momma’s fire warnings seriously?

(Sample response: On page 64, we learn that Byron calls her childhood story “Momma’s Smokey the Bear Story.” The same page tells us that this was not Byron’s first offence and that he’d been caught playing with fire before.)

Deepen Comprehension

Fishbowl

Ask four students to volunteer to start the fishbowl. Provide them with the following prompt:

Byron has a bad track record of playing with fire in the house and Momma strongly disapproves because she believes Byron's games put the whole family in danger. Discuss whether Momma's reaction when she discovers Byron burning tissue in the bathroom is extreme. Is Momma's decision to burn Byron as punishment a just choice? Why? Was it appropriate for Joetta to intervene to save Byron? Why?

Encourage students to take turns speaking, to explain why they agree or disagree with each other, and to support their claims with evidence from the text.

WRITE

Have students respond to this prompt:

Sometimes people can laugh at things that other people think are very serious. For instance Byron makes fun of Momma's story of the fire she experienced when she was a young child. Write about why you think that is. Explain how people can tell the difference between something that is funny and something that is serious.

REFLECT

Invite students to share their writing prompt responses with the class. Discuss how the different characters' perspectives on the situation vary. Talk about how it can be difficult to know how to react during times of trouble. Ask:

In this Chapter, Kenny knows that Byron is playing a dangerous game, but he chooses not to snitch on his big brother. Think of a time that you knew a friend or sibling was doing something dangerous. How did you react? How did the situation unfold? If you could go back, what would you do differently?



With great curiosity, the Watsons (left to right: Anika Noni Rose, Bryce Clyde Jenkins, Skai Jackson, Wood Harris, Harrison Knight) peer inside the Brown Bomber to find out what is hiding under the sheet: a brand new record player for their long road trip! "I see you've chosen the top of the line, the cream of the crop, the True-Tone AB-700 model, the Ultra-Glide!"

Lesson #6

Empathy & Understanding

Lesson 6
Academic
Language

peon
mourning
conscience

READ

Read Chapter 6, pages 75 - 85

It is up to the educator's discretion to determine the most appropriate reading strategy for the students. (Please refer to Appendix A for a list of possible reading formats and their respective literacy benefits.)

Overview of Chapter 6

In Chapter 6 the boys are sent to the grocery store and told to sign for the purchases. Believing that this meant the family was on welfare, Byron is both angry and mortified. His attitude quickly changes, however, once he figures out that it's only a credit system and he can sign for "free food." Soon thereafter he goes back and signs for a bag full of junk food. Kenny finds out about this newest mischief when cookies come flying at him from the tree that Byron happens to be hanging from while eating green apples and munching down cookies. Byron throws a couple of the cookies at a mourning dove and ends up killing it! Kenny is perplexed by Byron's actions when Byron actually starts to cry! Byron's emotional display embarrasses him and he starts throwing green apples at Kenny until the "punk" leaves him alone. When Kenny returns to the scene of the crime, he discovers that Byron has not only buried the bird, but has put together a makeshift Popsicle stick cross as well. Byron sure was hard to understand these days!

Chapter 6 lets the reader know that it could be embarrassing for kids in the 1960s to admit when they were on welfare. Challenge students investigate what it meant to be on welfare in the 1960s.



Michigan League for Public Policy—Welfare in the 1960s:

<http://www.mlpp.org/about-us/league-history/the-1960s>

Food Stamp Act of 1964 – War on Poverty:

http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/rules/Legislation/history/PL_88-525.htm

Also, Byron buys a box of Swedish Cremes to eat.

What exactly are Swedish Cremes, anyway?

http://thestir.cafemom.com/food_party/135954/swedish_cream_cookies_will_make

Journaling

In just a few sentences, pretend you are Kenny and summarize what happened in Chapter 6. Focus on the main parts of this chapter.

(Sample response: Byron learns that he can sign for groceries at the store, so he buys himself some cookies. Byron accidentally kills a dove and feels badly about it. He makes a grave for the dove.)

DISCUSS

Check for Comprehension

Reinforce students' comprehension by asking the following questions. Be sure to follow up on student responses by asking *why* they formulated certain opinions and *which pages* in the text support their claims.

Cause and Effect

What caused the mourning dove to die?

(Sample response: Byron threw a cookie at it.)

What effect did the bird's death have on Byron?

(Sample response: Byron was so sad he threw up and then started to cry.)

What lesson, if any, do you believe Byron learned from the dove's death?

(Sample response: Hopefully Byron will think before he makes poor choices next time.)

Characters' Perspectives

On page 85, Kenny says, "I really wished I was as smart as people thought I was, 'cause some of the time it was real hard to understand what was going on with Byron." What made Kenny feel this way?

(Sample response: Kenny is confused because Byron felt so bad for hurting the bird, but never seemed to feel bad about picking on human kids.)

Kenny tries to comfort Byron after he gets sick, and in response Byron throws green apples at Kenny, calls him a “punk,” and tells him to leave. Why would Byron behave like this?

(Sample response: Byron is embarrassed for exposing his feelings.)

Making Predictions

How do you think Byron’s parents will react when they find out that he signed for “free food” in the form of cookies at the grocery store?

(Sample response: They will burn him. Or make him eat cookies until he pops.)

Using Evidence from the Text

Byron and Kenny are both bothered by the idea of being on welfare. What parts of the book let us know this?

(Sample response: On page 76, Kenny says, “If I found out I was going to be on welfare I was going to really have to get ready to be teased.” On page 78, he doesn’t want anyone to hear him tell Mr. Mitchell that the Watsons are on the welfare list. Byron, on page 76, complains that being on welfare is embarrassing and makes him seem like a peon.)

Deepen Comprehension

Whole Class Discussion

Pose the following prompt to the whole class:

Byron’s behavior is confusing and frustrating to his family. For example, Kenny felt that Byron was becoming hard to understand, especially after the peculiar way he acted after he killed the mourning dove. What are some of the behaviors that Byron has displayed that make his actions seem confusing? What could be causing Byron to act in these ways?

Encourage students to talk to *each other*, rather than to you. Remind them to explain why they agree or disagree with each other, to support their claims with justifications from the book, and to ask each other questions about their ideas.

WRITE

Have students respond to this prompt:

Do you think Byron is a good person? Explain your reasoning.

REFLECT

Invite students to share their writing prompt responses with the class. Then talk about how good people can sometimes make poor choices or behave in unkind ways. Ask:

Do you know of someone who has made an unkind decision that you felt was wrong? Did the person apologize or try to make things right again? What is an example of a time that you have needed to forgive someone for something you thought was wrong?



Daniel Watson (Wood Harris) sits in the driver seat of the family car, the Brown Bomber.

Lesson #7

Choices & Consequences

Lesson 7
Academic
Language

linoleum
executioner
tolerate

READ

Read Chapter 7, pages 86 - 99

It is up to the educator's discretion to determine the most appropriate reading strategy for the students. (Please refer to Appendix A for a list of possible reading formats and their respective literacy benefits.)

Overview of Chapter 7

In Chapter 7 we find Byron once again in trouble. Somehow deciding that he wanted a change of hairstyle, Byron gets a new "conk," a "process," a "butter." Momma says he looks like a clown with his chemically straightened, now reddish-brown hair, all stiff and sticky looking! She sends him to his room to wait for Dad to come home. Dad takes care of things by shaving Byron's head completely bald! Byron was sent to his room and Joetta and Kenny were sent outside so that Momma and Dad could have one of their "adult-only" talks. The kids came back in the house just in time to hear Dad talking on the phone long distance to Grandma Sands in Alabama.

CONNECTION



In Chapter 7, Byron's hair causes quite the stir within the Watson household. As it turns out, Byron was not the only person in the 1960s to choose such a hairstyle. Interestingly, many popular Black musicians in the 1960s adopted these straightened hairstyles:

<http://newlynatural.com/blog/2009/08/its-just-hair-the-conk/>

Hair Straightening Products in the 1960s:

Conkoleen Hair Cream was a styling product marketed towards Black men who wanted straighter hair. In fact, the product's jingle was:

If your hair is short and nappy, Conkoleen will make you happy.

This was particularly controversial at the time because the Black community emphasized the importance of loving one's natural self—and for many, like Momma and Dad in this story, that meant not altering your naturally curly hair.

During the Civil Rights movement, the conk hairstyle was particularly criticized as detrimental to the entire Black race because it involved engaging in a dangerous chemical process all for the intent of eliminating Black features in order to look more White. Here is more information on the history of Black hair:

<http://www.jazma.com/black-hair-history>

Journaling

In just a few sentences, pretend you are Kenny and summarize what happened in Chapter 7. Focus on the main parts of this chapter.

(Sample response: Byron straightens his hair and Momma gets angry about it. Joey doesn't understand why Byron keeps making poor decisions that get him into trouble.)

DISCUSS

Check for Comprehension

Reinforce students' comprehension by asking the following questions. Be sure to follow up on student responses by asking *why* they formulated certain opinions and *which pages* in the text support their claims.

Context Clues

Consider the following passage from Chapter 7 (p. 86):

*Byron had gotten a **conk!** A **process!** A **do!** A **butter!** A ton of trouble! His hair was reddish brown, straight, stiff and slick-looking.*

Kenny uses several terms to describe the same thing. Given the context of the sentences, what is Kenny talking about?

Characters' Motivations

Why would Byron straighten his hair? What do you think motivated him to do this?

(Sample response: During the 1960's, this was a popular hairstyle for hip black men. Byron thinks it is cool.)

Characters' Perspectives

Momma and Joetta are both upset by Byron's new hairstyle, but for different reasons. What are the different reasons?

(Sample response: Joetta is upset because she knows that the hairstyle will get Byron in trouble. Momma is upset because she and daddy do not approve of that type of hair and they did not give Byron permission to change his hair. OR – Momma and Dad view Byron's hairstyle as disrespecting Black culture.)

Dad ends up shaving Byron's head. Considering the fact that the story takes place in 1963, how do you think Byron felt about being bald-headed?

(Sample response: He probably felt very embarrassed and uncool. He might also have felt embarrassed because his big ears stick out.)

Making Predictions

What do you think might have been discussed during the "adult-only" talk between Momma and Dad?

(Sample response: Momma and Dad were talking about how to get Byron to behave.)

What do you think that Dad might have to get back to Grandma Sands about?

(Sample response: Maybe they wanted her advice on how to make Byron behave. Or maybe they want to plan a visit.)

Deepen Comprehension

Structured Debate

Organize the class into four groups. Explain to them that each group will adopt a different character's perspective to contemplate the following prompt:

On page 92, Joetta asks Byron, "Byron, why won't you behave? Why won't you think about what's going to happen to you when you do something wrong? Why do you always do stuff to get people mad at you?" Byron does not get a chance to answer because Dad has just walked in the door. If he had been able to respond, what do you think Byron would say? Would his response to Joetta be honest? Pretend you are a member of the Watson family and explain why you believe Byron has been behaving this way. What are solutions that could improve Byron's behavior?

Assign each team a different family member: Joetta, Kenny, Byron, and Momma & Dad. Give the teams 5 minutes to formulate their ideas. Next, allow each team to present an explanation for why Byron acts the way he does and offer solutions for how to amend his behavior. After each team has presented their case, allow the teams to take turns questioning each other and offering counter opinions. Encourage students to talk to *each other*, rather than to you. Remind them to explain why they agree or disagree with each other, to support their claims with justifications from the book, and to ask each other questions about their ideas. At the conclusion of the debate, help students make connections between how their arguments were similar or different and reiterate that it is normal for people to have different perspectives on the same situation.

WRITE

Have students respond to this prompt:

Do you believe it was fair of Dad to shave Byron's head? Explain.

REFLECT

Invite students to share their writing prompt responses with the class. Then talk about how there are tricky situations where it is difficult to decide how to react fairly. Ask:

What does it mean to be fair and just? When troublesome situations happen, how can we be sure to treat all people fairly?