**The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 Chapter Summaries and Assignments**

**Birmingham Church Bombing History article**

Assignment: Answer the following questions.

1. When was the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church?
2. Describe Birmingham in the 1960s. Think about race and segregation.
3. Why was the city nicknamed “Bombingham?”
4. Why was the 16th Street Baptist Church a target?
5. What were the names and ages of the four girls who died?
6. What were two Acts that were passed as a result of the bombing?

Character List

**The Weird Watsons and Their Supporting Cast:**

**Kenneth:**(Kenny)a 10-year old smart kid often picked on by his peers for his intelligence and his pesky lazy eye.

**Byron:**(By) Kenny’s older brother who often takes on the title of head teaser and bully. All of his bad behavior is what sends the Watsons to Birmingham.

 **Joetta:**(Joey) Kenny’s little sister. She falls victim to Byron’s pranks as well but mostly because she is the youngest and isn’t aware of his trickery. When the church bomb goes off, she avoids it because of Kenny’s love and protection of her.

**Wilona:**(Momma) the mother of the 3 siblings and the wife of Daniel. Her hometown is Birmingham and she truly hates the cold Michigan weather.

**Daniel:**(Dad) the father of the 3 siblings and the husband of Wilona. He is from Flint, Michigan where the family resides and is just as determined as Momma to stop Byron’s behavior. His archenemies in Birmingham are Moses aka Hambone and Grandma Sands.

**Grandma Sands:**the mother of Momma and grandmother of the Watsons.

**Buphead:**fellow delinquent and friend of Byron’s.

**Rufus and Cody:**country transplants from Arkansas, new to Clark Elementary. Rufus is the eldest of the two and Kenny’s newest friend. He is also often teased but for being southern fried and for being poor.

**Mr. Robert:**Grandma Sands’ dearest friend after Grandpa passed away.

* **Chapter 1: And You Wonder Why We Get Called the Weird Watsons**

Summary: The book opens withKenny and his family trying to make it through an extremely bitter cold day in Flint, Michigan. Momma is disgusted by the cold, as usual, and Dad does everything he can to avoid setting her off into her usual tirade of how she ended up there in the first place.

To take the edge off the icy exterior that has formed about Momma’s attitude, Dad retells how he ended up with her instead of that Hambone Henderson. Everyone busts their guts laughing at Dad’s reenactments and embellishments, except Byron who has to play too cool for school. Eventually they decide to leave their cold house and go over to Aunt Cydney’s house.

When their car, The Brown Bomber, cannot be moved from the snow, Dad sends Kenny and Byron to dig it out. With Byron as devilish as he is and just having pulled a mean prank on Kenny with fellow delinquent Buphead, Kenny immediately puts his guard up, as Byron starts to yell and scream. Vanity can be harmful to your health and Byron learns that the hard way. Never kiss a frozen mirror with moist lips. And you wonder why they call them the Weird Watsons.

Assignment:



* **Chapter 2: Give My Regards to Clark, Poindexter**

Kenny finds relief from Larry Dunn, one of his many bullies, when two new country kids from Down South board the bus one morning. He is so happy he can relinquish the title of easiest target for teasing that he calls the poor souls his saviors from God.

Kenny shares with readers that his brother has given him some good advice on cutting down on the bullying and teasing. Byron shows his rarely seen human side.

Assignment: Answer the following questions.

1. Why did Byron show Kenny how to squint and look at people sideways, but then sometimes called him Cockeye Kenny himself?
2. 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?
3. What does the bus driver think of the way Larry Dunn treats the new boy on the bus? On what page of the text does it tell you this? What are the words that give you this idea?
4. On page 20, 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?
* **Chapter 3: The World’s Greatest Dinosaur War Ever**

Although Kenny finally finds a true friend in Rufus, he ends up doing something to hurt Rufus’ feelings one day on the bus. Even with his tattered clothing and Arkansas accent, Kenny realizes that he is a good person to have around when he wants to play with dinosaurs. It doesn’t take long for Kenny to realize how badly he messed up with Rufus. After a talk with Momma, things start to brighten up and The World’s Greatest Dinosaur War Ever was on again.

Assignment: Write a complete paragraph supporting our inference that Rufus and Cody’s family do not have much money.

Be sure to include:

A topic sentence

TWO pieces of text evidence

Your own reasoning, and

A Conclusion sentence

* **Chapter 4: Froze Up Southern Folks**

Momma had lived up north 15 years but the cold in Michigan still got her worked up into full mommy mode when it came to keeping her kids warm. Because of her obsession with fighting off the frigid air, Kenny and Joey had to suffer on their trips back and forth to school wearing several layers of clothing that was a pain to change in and out of once they got there and when it was time to leave. The heat from wearing all those layers was unbearable!

After a “Maytag wash cycle” by Larry Dunn, Rufus and Kenny discover that you can paint a pair brown leather gloves black with shoe polish. By and Buphead to the rescue!

Assignment: Write six questions about chapter four. Each question should start with “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” or “why.” Then use those questions to write an objective summary of chapter four. Remember! Objective summaries do not include your opinion. Simply the facts!

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

Momma threatens By with burning his fingers if she catches him playing with matches again. That didn’t stop him because a little later Kenny hears him playing with them in the bathroom. When Momma catches him she tries her best to make good on her promise but little Joey won’t let it happen. Byron avoided getting his fingers burned off but he didn’t avoid having to deal with Dad when he got home.

Assignment: Strong verbs are words that describe the action in a sentence. Some verbs are said to be stronger than others, and these are the ones that tend to make your writing more effective. Here’s how it works: take a verb like fall and another verb with a similar meaning like plunge. Now, compare these two sentences: 1) I watched the rock fall into the water. 2) I watched the rock plunge into the water. In the first sentence, you learn that the rock fell, but in the second sentence you also learn how the rock fell. The word plunge means “to enter quickly and forcibly into something”. So, with the word plunge, the reader gets all the meaning of the verb fall, plus the additional meaning that explains how the rock fell as well. That is what makes it stronger! Strong verbs SHOW, not just TELL!

In chapter five, the author uses many different strong verbs. Read these sentences from the chapter. Notice the strong verbs in each one.

A. I sneaked to the bathroom door and peeked through the keyhole.

B. Momma snatched Byron’s neck and, stopping just to pick up the matches that Byron had dropped, she dragged him all the way down the stairs!

C. …Momma let go of his throat and stormed into the kitchen.

D. He didn’t even make it out of the living room before Momma tackled him.

E. Four more times Momma lit a match and four more times Joey patoohed them out.

 Explain why these are effective verb choices. The first one has been done for you.

A. sneaked, peeked These verbs show that Kenneth didn’t want to get caught. They allow the reader to picture him being very secretive.

B. snatched, dragged

C. stormed

D. tackled

E. potoohing

**Chapter 6: Swedish Cremes and Welfare Cheese**

Momma and Dad sign up for a charge account for groceries with Mr. Mitchell. During dinner, Momma sends the two boys to get a few things to finish preparation. When Byron is told that he should request that the food be put on charge he flies off the handle thinking they are on welfare. Once Kenny signs for the food, because Byron is too ashamed to, it is not long before Byron starts running up his parents’ tab.

Kenny is ambushed by Swedish crèmes thrown at him by Byron in the alley behind the store. While they are back there, Byron shoots one of the cookies at a bird and kills it. As his emotions get the best of him seeing the bird die at his hands, he throws up the stolen snacks he was munching before the accidental killing. When Kenny tries to revel in Byron’s victory of killing the bird, Byron lashes out at Kenny. Later on, Kenny returns to the scene and finds that By had buried the bird and given it a little funeral. Kenny finds himself more confused by his brothers teasing, meanness, and sensitivity.

Assignment:

Kenneth struggles with understanding his older brother. Let’s analyze the character of Byron. Complete the following chart using chapter six to help you. The first one has been done for you.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Byron’s actions in Chapter 6 | What do you think these actions say about Byron? |
| 1. After finding out the groceries aren’t provided by welfare, Byron was smiling and even put his arm around Kenneth on the way home. He even carried the groceries for Kenny.
 | This tells us just how upset Byron gets about welfare. He is embarrassed about this and would not be proud to be on welfare. It also shows that his nice actions towards his brother match his mood. |
| 1. Byron gives Kenneth some of the Swedish Cremes to each and them when Kenneth realizes that Byron took the cookies without his parents knowing, Byron says “Don’t even think about it , Poindexter, you ate two of ‘em yourself so quit wastin’ my cookies and just shut up and enjoy what’s left.”
 |  |
| 1. Byron hit and killed a bird with one of the Swedish Cremes and then gently brushed pink frosting off of the dove’s chest.
 |  |
| 1. Byron gets sick and when Kenneth tries to comfort him by putting his hand on Byron’s back, Byron pops him in the arm and then throws a rotten apple at Kenneth.
 |  |
| 1. Byron made a grave for the bird with two popsicle sticks tied together in a cross.
 |  |

 Direct characterization – an author comes right out and tells us about a character.

Indirect characterization – an author reveals the personality of a character through his/her actions, dialogue, and dialogue of others.

What type of characterization does the author mostly use with Byron?

* **Chapter 7: Every Chihuahua in America Lines up to Take a Bite out of Byron**

By gets a conk (harsh version of a chemical hair relaxer) put in his hair against his parents’ wishes. Momma is absolutely livid when she admonishes him and informs him that Dad will see to his demise after work. Kenny takes the rare opportunity to tease By as he waits for Dad to get home only Joey spoils the turned tables torment by being extra sensitive to By’s feelings.

After a good shaving of By’s head, Dad gets on the phone to Alabama. After the conversation is over with Grandma Sands, the kids think things have blown over until a week later when Dad shows up with a surprise for their car, The Brown Bomber.

Assignment:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Passage | Based on context clues, what do you think the underlined words mean? |
| Byron had gotten a conk! A process! A do! A butter! …His hair was reddish brown, straight, stiff, and slick-looking. (Page 58) |  |
| “Shoot, you think I care what them squares say?” (page 60) |  |

**Chapter 8: The Ultra-Glide!**

The children realize something is up with their parents but they aren’t exactly sure of what it is. After dazzling the family with the Brown Bomber’s new record player, Dad breaks the news to By that he’s going Down South for the summer and potentially the next school year.

Assignment: Choose one of the following options.

1. “Yakety Yak.” Listen to the song “Yakety Yak” as you read the lyrics that your teacher provides (check Important Documents).

 1. What words describe the tone of this song?

 2. What does “Yakety Yak” mean or refer to in this song?

 3. What does the content of this song say about music during this time?

1. Disc jockey. In the 1960s, disk jockeys, also known as DJs, played a great role in the wit, humor and fun of the radio broadcasts. Most radio announcers spoke in clear, correct English, but some disc jockeys broke all the rules of on-air behavior and invented outrageous personalities for themselves. It was not uncommon for a disc jockey to create a rather long rhyme all about himself and just how good he was at playing records. In this chapter, Mr. Watson cannot help himself as he imitates a disc jockey (page 75).

Create your own disc jockey rhyme. Pretend that you are the man with the plan who will make the records spin and people dance again… Create a rhyme at least ten lines long. Use Mr. Watson’s disc jockey rhyme as an example.

**Chapter 9: The Watsons Go to Birmingham--1963**

Early Sunday morning, a week before the trip to Birmingham, Kenny and Dad sit and have a talk out in the car as they listen to records. Dad explains to Kenny that Byron is being sent Down South to get a good understanding of how the world works outside of his current world. With the recent, bad events happening down there between whites and blacks, Dad states that it is still quieter down there than it is in Flint and that’s best for By right now.

The night before the trip Momma and Dad get wind of a plan of Byron’s to make a run for it to avoid Alabama. That night By sleeps in their room.

Comedy ensues for the start of the trip as Dad cuts up southern style once again and Byron goes back on his promise to hurt Momma and Dad real good with the good ole silent treatment. Momma keeps the round-trip itinerary.

Assignment: Answer each of the questions in complete sentences. Be sure to read and answer the complete question! Hint: Each of these responses needs to be two or more sentences!

1. Based on the text, what can the reader infer about Grandma Sands and how things will be at her house? Use text evidence.
2. Describe how Birmingham will be different from Flint based on your background knowledge about the time period.
3. What is the author implying when he says, “We think it’s time Byron got an idea of the kind of place the world can be, and maybe spending some time down South will help open his eyes” (pg.123)?
4. How do you think the story would be different if it began in Birmingham instead of Flint?
5. Why effect does Dad’s imitation of a hillbilly accent (pg. 132) have on the story? Why is this used?
* **Chapter 10: Tangled Up in God’s Beard**

Dad has a different outlook on the trip and Momma’s book is shot down as he drives through Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee all in day one of the trip rather than the planned three days.

As they head back to I-75 to coast along some more, Dad asks everyone to let their fingers run through the air as the car moves along the highway. He likens the sensation to running your fingers through God’s beard.

Assignment: Imagine you are Grandma Sands. Write a letter to Byron explaining how he will be expected to behave at her house in Birmingham. Describe how Birmingham will be different from Flint.

This letter should be in proper letter format (Dear… Love…) and be at least a paragraph in length.

**Chapter 11: Bobo Brazil Meets the Sheik**

By the time the Brown Bomber lands in Alabama Dad has a beard of his own. In 18 long hours, the Watsons make it to Birmingham. Kenny and Joetta have never met Grandma Sands and all three get teary-eyed at the sight of each other. It seems the Alabama heat has already broken By down and he’s “yes ma’am-ing” and “no ma’am-ing” with the best of ‘em before they are in the house.

Assignment:

Read the following passage from the novel describing when Byron met Grandma Sands.

“Instead of King Kong and Godzilla it was like King Kong and Bambi; instead of Bobo Brazil and the Sheik it was like Bobo Brazil and Captain Kangaroo; instead of Dracula and Frankenstein it was like Dracula and a giraffe, and Byron was all neck” (page 106).

In the passage, there are eight allusions to pop culture. Remember! An allusion is a reference to a famous person, place, or thing.

1. List the eight allusions.

2. Choose two of the allusions. Why did Kenny choose to use that allusion? What does the allusion mean?

Example: Bambi: Bambi was a sweet, innocent cartoon deer created by Disney. This reference implies that Byron did not put up much of a fight when interacting with Grandma Sands.

\*\*\* You may need to Google some of the allusions if you are unfamiliar with them.

**Chapter 12: That Dog Won’t Hunt No More**

To Kenny’s chagrin, By is having a jolly good time down south and is eating up every story told to him. He is already on the straight and narrow. Instead of rebelling, he’s falling in love with the place and Kenny can’t wait to get away, if only the heat wouldn’t keep putting him to sleep he’d be packed and waiting.

Momma finds out the true nature of Grandma Sands relationship with Mr. Robert.

Assignment: Choose one of the following options.

1. Create a comic strip for chapter 12. Be sure to include images and speech bubbles. There should be at least three cells/ sections.
2. Write an objective summary about chapter 12 using exactly 50 words. Make sure you answer the 5 Ws (who, what, when, where, why)!
* **Chapter 13: I Meet Winnie’s Evil Twin Brother, the Wool Pooh**

Grandma Sands warns the children to stay away from Collier’s Landing: something about a whirlpool catching a boy up in the water and taking him under. Kenny is determined for some country-time, Fantastic Adventure and shucks the warning. By tries to sway them to go down to the public swimming pond in the opposite direction but to no avail. Kenny still can’t figure out what is up with him.

The signs at the landing didn’t say anything about a Wool Pooh, the evil brother of Winnie the Pooh, so Kenny trudged on as the cool, deep blue water lured him in. The square fingered and toed Wool Pooh nearly took him under but “Byron, the angel" came through to rescue him from the water. Once he was on land again, Byron let loose a ton of emotion after seeing his brother nearly dying and having to save his young life.

Assignment: Answer the following questions

1. Reread the first paragraph of chapter thirteen. What word does Grandma Sands use in her warning that sounds like Wool Pooh?
2. What might the Wool Pooh symbolize?
3. We know that the Wool Pooh is not real. It is a creation of Byron’s imagination, and Kenneth thinks that it is real. However, it does serve as a symbol. Create a list of at least five words that personify the Wool Pooh.

**Chapter 14: Every Bird and Bug in Birmingham Stops and Wonders**

Kenny is still trying to get over his near-death experience with Wool Pooh when he feels the earth shake while sitting under a Magnolia in the yard behind Grandma’s house. Everyone scatters to find Joey as the news comes in that her church had just been bombed, only Kenny couldn’t move. The community sprints to the wreckage to find their children. Kenny is the only one to approach the bombed building. Through hysteria, he sees a familiar being.

Wool Pooh is at the church and the sight of his faceless form stirs Kenny from his dreamland. On the way home as he glides past what seems like throngs of people in the streets, Kenny makes his way back to Grandma’s house where Wool Pooh teases him with Joey’s shiny, shiny black shoe. Soon he comes out of the hallucinations he was experiencing and realizes he and his sister both had managed to avoid Wool Pooh’s square fingers.

Assignment:

Because this story is told in the first-person point of view, and Kenny is telling the story, the reader gets a “fuzzy” picture of what happened at the church because things for Kenneth were a blur. Let’s piece together the facts by answering some questions.

1. What did Kenneth hear when he started going to sleep under the tree in his yard (page 121)?

2. Where were Byron and Mr. Watson when the sound occurred?

3. When Kenneth was inside the church, and he tried to pull out the little shiny black shoe, what did he imagine that he saw?

4. Why do you think that Kenneth imagined that he saw this?

5. When Kenneth returned home and saw Joey, what did he think about her?

6. Why did Joey think that Kenneth had on different clothes?

7. Why was Joey not inside the church when the incident occurred?

**Chapter 15: The World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital**

That night the Watsons Head back to Flint with Momma and Dad worried sick about Kenny. His odd disappearances have them unsure of how to handle treating him after what happened, wondering what he actually saw and if he was really at the church after the bombing. Joey tells a story where he leads her back to Grandma Sands. What his parents don’t realize is that Kenny’s disappearances and when he reappears occur before and after he visits the World-Famous Watson Pet Hospital to recoup and heal through their magic powers after the disturbing images he saw that day in Birmingham.

Momma tries to force Kenny to interact with his siblings and Rufus and Cody but things are different now. Each one of them seemed to have lost their charm. Soon Byron discovers Kenny behind the couch and then everyone starts to treat him special. This was the first time he had ever known By to be this nice to him. By fills him on how he saved Joey and tells him how brave he was for doing what he and the grown-ups couldn’t do that day and that there were no magic powers or a Wool Pooh. After their talk, Kenny reflects on the reality of magic powers and the square-toed man recognizing that there is some truth to these fairytales.

Assignment:

Think of a topic that is associated with this novel. You could choose something broad, such as the Civil Rights Movement, or you could choose something more specific, such as a character or the Wool Pooh. Use the following outline to write a cinquain poem about the topic you chose.

Cinquain Poem Outline

Line 1: a noun

Line 2: two adjectives to describe the noun in line one

Line 3: three –ing verbs

Line 4: a phrase describing the noun in line one

Line 5: a synonym for the noun in line one

Example

Kenny

Curious, Gullible

Questioning, Caring, Healing

“Yakety Yak! Don’t talk back”

Narrator