

Talking with Christopher Paul Curtis

The award-winning author discusses his latest work, the historical novel *Elijah of Buxton*.

By Dean Schneider

Christopher Paul Curtis grew up in Flint, Michigan, where he spent 13 years on the assembly line at the Fisher Body Flint Plant No.1. It was the success of his first novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, which was both a Newbery Honor Book and a Coretta Scott King Honor Book, that enabled him to leave the factory and write full time. *Bud, Not Buddy*, Curtis' second novel, won both the Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Book Award. *Elijah of Buxton*, the author's most recent novel, won the Coretta Scott King Book Award, the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, and a Newbery Honor Book designation. Curtis is known for his ability to bring historical periods to life with memorable characters and plenty of humor. He currently lives in Windsor, Ontario. The following interview was conducted at the American Library Association 2008 Annual Conference in Anaheim.

DS: *I know you admire Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and how she approached the difficult subject of slavery "from the*

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periphery." Can you explain how you did that with *Elijah of Buxton*?

CURTIS: I'd always wanted to write about slavery, but I think to write from a slave's point of view would be impossible. I don't think any of us can put ourselves in the mind of a person who has been so dehumanized and so debased, so I couldn't find a way to get into the story. After reading *Beloved*, which is about people who have escaped from slavery but continue to live with its ghost, and then going to the Buxton settlement of escaped slaves, I felt that this was the perfect opportunity. What could be more interesting to write about than the first child who was born free? He or she would have to be a very special person in the eyes of the former slaves. So, when I say "from the periphery," I mean somebody who has not been poisoned by slavery,

because I couldn't write from that point of view.

DS: *There is so much wisdom in this novel and so much humor, even in the direst circumstances. As a storyteller, how were you able to be so wise and funny at the same time?*

CURTIS: I don't think I'm wise and funny. What I'm trying to do is just tell the story, and the humor and tragedy are so closely intertwined that the line is blurred between them. Humor gets us through; it can be an aid to get by really tragic circumstances. When I write I'm not consciously trying to make the humor balance the tragedy. My mission is just to tell the story.

DS: *One of the most powerful scenes in *Elijah of Buxton* is when Elijah is about to say the "N word" and Mr. Leroy gets after him, saying that one*

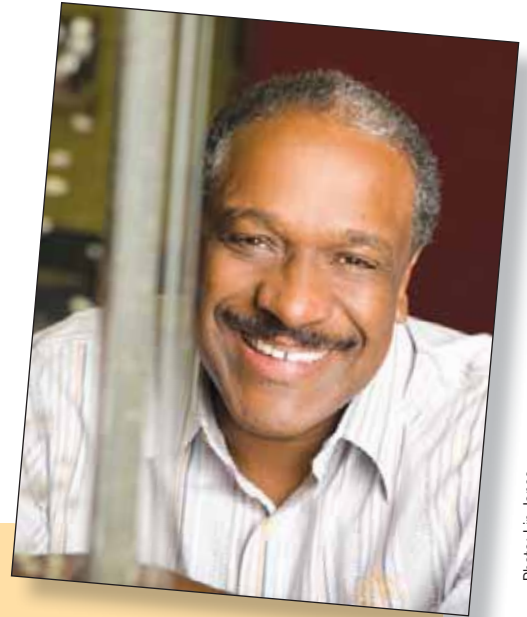


Photo: Lin Jones

day that word “gunn be buried right ’long with the last one of ’em” slavers. How do you feel about young-adult novels that continue to use the word in the name of being historically accurate? Would you rather the word be buried, as Mr. Leroy says?

CURTIS: Of course I’d rather it be buried, but I think it is a part of our history and part of our present, even. I think the only way it can be used is in a historical context. It is a word, a legitimate word, a horrible word full of hate, but it is a word and we can’t ignore that. As a writer, there are certain things you can’t dance around; you can’t imply the hatred and bitterness behind the word by using some other word to try to hint at it, so I think it’s fine to use in historical context. An author has to be true to what was going on and to what he sees, and as long as it’s not used gratuitously, it’s fine. It’s a jarring word, but it is an accurate part of our history.

DS: *I like that Elijah has not become a hero by the end of the story. He has acted according to his conscience and has done something heroic, but he is still a young, fragile boy, and even Mrs. Chloe has to tell him to get himself together and quit all of that swooning. Was it a struggle to keep Elijah true to his character and not make a mythic hero out of him?*

CURTIS: I’m very conscious of not having a young person be superheroic. There are certain things you can do and certain things you can’t do, and if you have the young person doing these things, then you’re into fantasy. I kind of played with that; at the end of the story, Elijah talks of freeing the people in the barn, but he couldn’t do that. It’s disrespectful to the slaves and to your readers because people who sold slaves were serious about it; slaves were a valuable commodity. There’s no way that a kid could have come in there and fouled that up for them.

DS: *Was it difficult to re-create the speech of the times? What research did*

you have to do on dialect or slang?

CURTIS: What I did was kind of a version of southern African American speech, which we still have vestiges of today. If you go into parts of Mississippi, what you hear is pretty close to the way slaves spoke. Then I filtered in some Canadian with more of an English type of dialect. Elijah would have had two things pulling at him—his parents and the way they speak, and the larger community and the teachers, who are telling the kids, “This is the way you say these things.” It’s hard to do dialect because there’s no standardized spelling and sometimes it doesn’t read the way that you want it to and can start to sound stilted; it’s the kind of thing that you have to hint at.

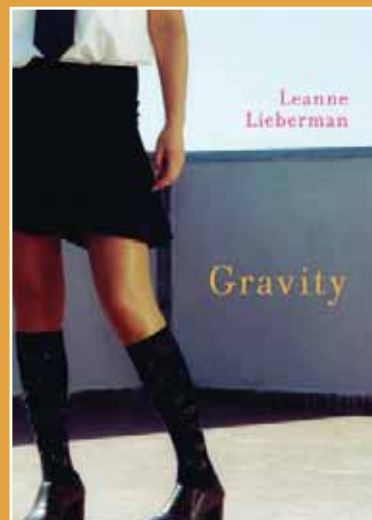
DS: *Elijah of Buxton is full of memorable scenes and characters, and certainly the Preacher stands out. He is a smooth-talking con man, but do you see him as entirely evil? What were his intentions in the carnival scene?*

CURTIS: I don’t think that he had good intentions. The Preacher saw that money ran things, and he was always looking for ways to make money. I think he would have taken Elijah and gone on the road with the carnival for a while and then brought him back, but he was kidnapping a kid to make money. I don’t think that he was totally evil; he was human and got caught up in the love of money, and it led him astray.

DS: *Students often complain that all of the books we read are sad. Readers will certainly shed some tears while reading Elijah, yet author and editor Andrea Davis Pinkney said that it “leaves us with the greatest gift any novel can give—hope!” Is this the main thing that you hope readers gain from Elijah?*

CURTIS: Yes, I do. I hope that they have a desire to learn more about historical times, about what happened in Buxton in particular, and I hope that they realize that even though they can’t save the

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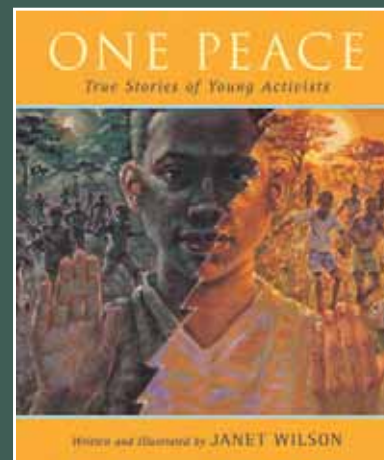
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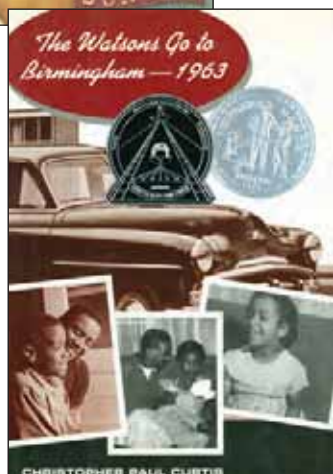
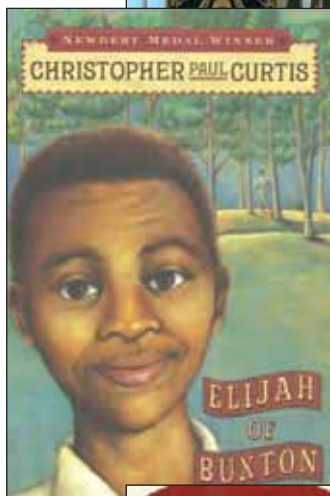
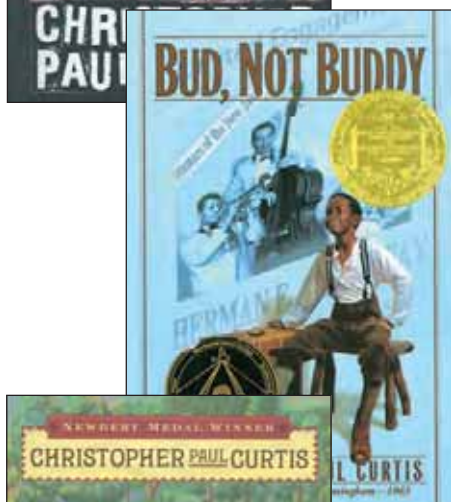
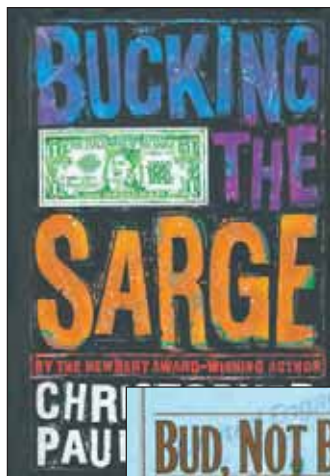
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world, they can do one little thing at a time to make a difference.

DS: *Clearly, part of the hope in this novel is the power of education. Was education a priority of the Buxton settlement from the beginning?*

CURTIS: Very much so. The settlement was started by the Reverend William King, and one of the things that he stressed was education. The school in Buxton was so good that people from the white community started taking their kids out of the public schools and bringing them to this school. It was an outstanding education. The first black lawyer in Canada went to the school at Buxton. The former slaves realized that education was the one thing that nobody could take away from you; if you learn how to read and write well, then you can go places in the world.

Mr. Leroy realizes that he can't deal with white people because he's not sure what they're saying; it was like they're speaking a completely different language. He knows that Elijah is different; Elijah is somebody who has been brought up with freedom and nourished properly so he looks different, he doesn't have the fear that has to be instilled in a slave child. It's written all over his face: this kid hasn't been a slave.

DS: *What was it, besides education, that made Buxton work?*

CURTIS: William King experienced other settlements that fell apart pretty quickly because of poor management, so he felt it was very important to have strict rules, to micromanage. The houses had to be 30 feet from the road. There had to be a flower garden in front of the house and a vegetable garden behind the house. Residents had to buy a 50-acre plot of land and clear and drain it. The house itself had to be a certain size and had to have four rooms. People who had been told what to do all of their lives hadn't developed the skills to take care of everyday living.

Through these rules, they did learn how to do it, and the Buxton settlement endured.

DS: *What do you see as the value of historical fiction for children?*


CURTIS: I see that it's a great gateway, a good way to get an interest in things. There's nothing drier than reading facts in a history book. As Scott O'Dell said, it's important that young people have a historical perspective about what shaped their world, and through reading historical fiction kids are learning things without even realizing it.

Sampling Curtis

Buckling the Sarge. 2004. 272p. Random/Wendy Lamb, \$15.95 (9780385323079); Laurel-Leaf, paper, \$6.99 (9780440413318). Also available in an audio edition from Listening Library. Gr. 5–9.

Bud, Not Buddy. 1999. 256p. Delacorte, \$16.95 (9780385323062); Yearling, paper, \$6.99 (9780440413288). Also available in an audio edition from Listening Library. Gr. 4–6.

Elijah of Buxton. 2007. 352p. Scholastic, \$16.99 (9780439023443); paper, \$7.99 (9780439023450). Paperback available February 2009. Also available in an audio edition from Listening Library. Gr. 6–8.

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963. 1995. 224p. Delacorte, \$16.95 (9780385321754); Yearling, paper, \$6.99 (9780440414124). Also available in an audio edition from Listening Library. Gr. 4–6. 

Dean Schneider teaches seventh- and eighth-grade English at the Ensworth School in Nashville, Tennessee. For an article on teaching Curtis' *Elijah of Buxton* in the classroom, see p.11.