

2003

## Celebrating One of Michigan's Most Prominent Authors: Christopher Paul Curtis Keeps Us Turning the Pages

Dwight Blubaugh  
*Northwestern Elementary, Eaton Rapids*

Kristi Karns  
*Northwestern Elementary, Eaton Rapids*

Joe Latham  
*Northwestern Elementary, Eaton Rapids*

Amy Mestelle  
*Northwestern Elementary, Eaton Rapids*

Amanda Weston  
*Northwestern Elementary, Eaton Rapids*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

---

### Recommended Citation

Blubaugh, Dwight; Karns, Kristi; Latham, Joe; Mestelle, Amy; and Weston, Amanda (2003) "Celebrating One of Michigan's Most Prominent Authors: Christopher Paul Curtis Keeps Us Turning the Pages," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 19: Iss. 2, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1259>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

**CELEBRATING ONE OF  
MICHIGAN'S MOST PROMINENT  
AUTHORS:  
CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS  
KEEPS US TURNING THE PAGES**

DWIGHT BLUBAUGH (WITH  
KRISTI KARNS, JOE LATHAM, AMY  
MESTELLE, AND AMANDA WESTON)  
NORTHWESTERN ELEMENTARY,  
EATON RAPIDS

Some events are so life-changing that they are forever remembered by those who experience them. Meeting a famous author was one such event for four Eaton Rapids, Michigan, fourth graders. Here, in their own words, is their story:

Christopher Paul Curtis is probably the top African-American male author of young adult literature. Though he has had only two books published, he has already won the Newbery Honor and Medal, as well as the Coretta Scott King Honor and Medal. Curtis was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, and he now lives with his wife and daughter (his son, Steven, is now grown) in Windsor, Ontario.

I challenged the fourth graders in our Northwestern Elementary School classroom to read Christopher Paul Curtis's two books, a picture book biography about him, and over 100 pages of internet articles about the author. I invited the first four to finish the required reading to visit Curtis's house in Windsor, Ontario, Canada to interview the author. The following interview and article is a writing collaboration that involved all five of us.

On Saturday, March 22 2003, our group made the two hour drive from the far side of Lansing, across the state, through Detroit to the international border. We stopped to look around the Windsor Public Library where Mr. Curtis does the majority of his writing. We were surprised to find Curtis working in his usual spot on the second floor, which gave us a chance to meet him a couple hours early.

We were immediately put at ease by his friendliness and constant smile. Mr. Curtis is over six feet tall with broad shoulders, moustache, and slightly graying dreadlocks. We talked briefly, got a few photos, then let Curtis get back to his work.

Later, at the Curtis home, a large brick house with an indoor pool and a tennis court with basketball hoops, we met Chris's wife, Kay Curtis, and his daughter Cydney who were both born on the island of Trinidad. Like Chris, Kay also smiled a lot, often due to Chris's jokes or friendly teasing. Cydney is an active 11-year-old who enjoys reading, writing, and playing piano. A friendship quickly developed between Cydney and the three girls on the interview team.

Then the group got down to the business of interviewing Mr. Curtis and his family (see interview below). Afterward came a snack break, a tour of the house, autographing of books, and group pictures. The Curtises generously gave a hardcover copy of Chris's books to each of the students and autographed them – Cydney also signed the copies of *Bud, Not Buddy* and wrote "See page 124," as she wrote the song her dad included on that page. While reading the interview, be sure to keep in mind that Chris's answers are often tongue-in-cheek.

**An Interview with Christopher Paul Curtis**

*Northwestern Interview Team (NW): Your two books, The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963 and Bud, Not Buddy, are both historical fiction, while your upcoming book, Bucking the Sarge, is contemporary realistic fiction. Do you prefer to write about historical events or modern day events, and do you think you will continue writing about both?*

Christopher Paul Curtis (CPC): I think I have more fun with the historical. I think historical is easier to write because you have so many resources you can go to to learn about a particular era or a particular time. When you're writing about stuff that's new or stuff that's going on now, contemporary things, it's not as much fun for me. I'm using my imagination

as much, but it's good to go to the library and read books from an era or listen to music from that era or watch movies. So I think I like writing historical fiction. I think historical fiction is easier to write too. You have so many different resources that you can pull in and things that will make the story interesting, and my job as a writer is to keep readers turning pages - that's my job. And with historical fiction, I can take a lot of different things that have happened and put them in the book to make them more interesting, and the fact that they really did happen, I think, does make it more interesting.

*NW: What other genres might you write in?*

CPC: I don't know. This last book has taken me a long time to do. I don't know whether it's because it was a contemporary book that it's taken me longer to do or what it was, but I think my next couple will be historical. I don't like writing adventure too much. Well, I shouldn't say that. I think a good historical fiction has a lot of different genres in it. There's fiction, there's adventure, there's romance, there are a lot of different things that go into making a story more readable. But I can't think of any one particular genre that I will prefer to go to next.

*NW: Do you plan to continue writing strictly for children and young adult readers, or do you think you might ever write any books for adults?*

CPC: When I write the books that I write now, I really don't think of them as books for children or young adult readers. I think of them really as stories, and I think a good story can be read by anybody. I don't think you have to be a particular age to enjoy a story. Adults can read a book for children, and there are some things that you don't write about for children. The subjects might be a little too intense or too frightening or whatever, but I don't think of myself really as a writer for children. Even though my narrators have been young people, I could easily write a book for adults, I think, but once again, I think this is something that writing the young adult book, *Bucking the Sarge*, has shown me. The writing

of a book like that is easier in some ways than a book for ten-year-olds because the older you get, you have a wider expanse of language that you can use. One of the things you have to do when you're writing is you have to make the character narrating be realistic. If I have a ten-year-old saying things like, "I believe that the world situation is becoming more and more treacherous every day," Joe might say that, but not the average 10-year-old, right Joe? But you have to try to keep it realistic, and as you get older, there are more things that an older person, they're more experienced, they've done more reading, they know more in some ways, so writing an adult book is something that I think would be easier than writing books for young people. But I have so much fun doing THIS, so I have no immediate plans to do that. And besides, I owe my publisher three books for young people so... I've got no choice.

*NW: You've mentioned that when you were growing up there was basically no black literature for children. What do you think of the current state of African-American children's literature, and what changes have you seen in the last decade or so in this area of literature?*

CPC: There weren't a lot of books that were for, by, or about black people when I was growing up, and sad to say, it's still the case in many ways. I am about the only male writer for young people in the 10-year-old middle readers. There aren't a lot of other African-American male writers. There are some females, but Latino, African-American, Native American are all underrepresented in literature. I don't know why. There are probably lots of reasons as to why that is, but it's something that needs improving. I'm glad and hope that my books can kind of fill in that little niche for students who want to read books like that, but I think there's a lot of room for improvement.

*NW: You've mentioned that your favorite adult authors are Kurt Vonnegut, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston. How much have these authors influenced you in your own writing?*

CPC: I don't think that they've influenced me a lot. I think that the fact that I came to writing in a way that most writers don't come to it - writing is a profession that is very difficult. It's something that you really have to work at and want. In the beginning, in particular, because there's a lot of rejection involved. There's a long period, an apprenticeship really, where you have to learn how to write, and learn how to tell a story, and I didn't go through that. I started much older than most people start when they want to write. So I don't think I was really influenced in any way by writers like that. After I say that I have to say though that they have influenced me in that, not directly the way they tell the story, but what I can do as a writer, I go to their books and I can look at them as enjoyable reading. I go to a Kurt Vonnegut book and just have a good laugh or try to understand what he's saying. But then I also go back and look at it as a writer and I say, "How did Kurt Vonnegut make me feel this way, how did he make the story move like that? What was it that made this funny?" And I can try to tear the story apart like that to better understand the way he got that. So, I think it's kind of dangerous to use somebody as an influence, and that's one of the great things about writing. Nobody has lived the life I've lived. Even if there was someone who lived the exact same life I've lived, they would look at it in a different way. You and I don't see things in the same way. No one's lived the same life you've lived. I couldn't tell a story about you as well as you could. And the fact that you could tell a story your own way and really without being influenced by someone, I think that's what makes writing special and that's what keeps it kind of unique, that we don't have people who say, "He's a writer of this school or of that school." I think that fresh writing is something that really comes from within you.

NW: *Are you friends with any other authors?*

CPC: I can't STAND authors -- I can't stand being around them. Next question. (breaks into a grin) No, I'm kidding. Yeah, Chris Crutcher, I'm good

friends with. I go to a lot of conferences and I meet a lot of different authors. And you become friends with them because they're funny people and you admire their work, so it's really good to sit and talk with them and you become friends. I made a good friend, last November, I think it was. It's an adult writer named Jules Feiffer -- a very nice guy who makes me laugh a lot. It's a lot of fun to go out and meet a lot of different other authors. Gary Paulsen I know and like a great deal. So there are a lot of different authors I like.

NW: *The Watsons and Bud, Not Buddy deal with issues of racial prejudice. Growing up in the 1950s and '60s in Flint you've mentioned that you were largely sheltered from racism. Both as a child and as an adult, what types of problems have you encountered with racism?*

CPC: There's kind of a misconception about racism. A lot of times people think that it happened in the South only. But even in the '50s and '60s in Flint there was a lot of segregation. It wasn't forced by law, but it was segregation nonetheless, and my parents were both involved in the Civil Rights movement. There were times we'd go out and picket stores or restaurants that wouldn't hire black people, so there was racism there. Yeah, you see racism all the time. One of the surprising things about moving to Canada - when I was growing up, Canada had a reputation for not being racist, that there was not much racism in Canada. But once we've lived here, you get a kind of a different perspective. I think the country has changed because in the '60s and '70s there was a large influx of people from Africa and from the West Indies, and I think racism came to the fore. That was one of the surprises about moving to Windsor, that there's a lot of racism here, and in particular, the police force has a tendency to be very racist. As a black parent you have to be very careful with how you tell your children to handle situations. Growing up, Steven, being a young black male, I had to be really careful with him and tell him that when you deal with the police you just have to be very careful. Don't do anything stupid. Don't say

anything stupid. Just be careful. He was stopped many times riding his bicycle, “Whose bicycle is that?” This was all here in Windsor. I have been stopped many times, driving. Someone around the corner robbed a store, and he looked like me, so it’s a part of life, I think. You hope that it’s getting better, but I don’t know. It seems to me in some ways that we’re becoming more and more polarized, that we’re drifting further and further apart. But yeah, it’s still alive.

*NW: Which of the characters from your books most reflect parts of your own personality?*

CPC: I get this question a lot. So basically what people are asking, like with Byron and Kenny, they say which one are you, and the way I look at that question is, “Am I a juvenile delinquent, thug, and hoodlum, or am I a sweet, loving, kind, tender, sensitive, intelligent person?” The second one. No, all the characters are really composites. They’re parts of me, they’re parts of my brothers, my sisters, my parents. It’s one of the really fun things about writing, that you don’t have to have somebody there, you can create people. You can make them a certain way. It’s something that you can combine the characters and make things. I think that in some ways I’m like Kenny and some ways I’m like Byron. Bud I don’t think I’m anything like. Bud was just a fellow who came to me, so I really don’t think I’m much like Bud.

*NW: Other than living through the time period of The Watsons, what research did you need to do for that book and for Bud, Not Buddy?*

CPC: Good question. For *The Watsons* I didn’t have to do a lot of research, and there are two reasons for that really. Number one, I lived through the time, so I had an idea of what it was like. Number two, I was looking at it through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy. How old are you, Joe? Almost ten. And ten-year-old boys just aren’t interested in a lot of things other than what, Joe? Food and movies – they don’t think about a lot of things, but they want to have fun,

right? You want to have fun. So you have to change their view a little bit. So I didn’t have to do too much for that because I was a ten-year-old boy at that time, so I remember what kind of things I was thinking about. I did have to find out some things about the bombing of the church. I had to go back and – language changes from decade to decade, and they’re pretty major changes. The way you speak is different from the way I spoke when I was your age, so kids talk in a different way. So things you say, like now you say what, the one big thing is “Sweet,” right? You guys say, “Sweet?” Do they say “sweet” all the time? Or here’s another one – I was like, ya know, like you, like, and he was like...” And it drives you crazy. But see, if I were to put that into a book back in the ‘60s, someone would say, “Wait a minute - they didn’t talk like that then,” so you have to do research on that. *Bud, Not Buddy*, I had to do a lot more research. Originally it started out that I was going to do a book on the sitdown strike at the factory I worked in, but I didn’t know anything about it, so I had to watch a lot of movies from the era to try to listen to how people spoke. I read a lot of books that were written in the ‘30s to get some kind of an idea of the kind of language, to catch the language and nail that. I listened to radio shows from the ‘30s. Just anything to try to expose myself to the ‘30s, to the kind of things that people would think. So, the older the book is, and the less knowledge you have about it, the more research you have to do if you want to make it realistic.

*NW: What do you like most about writing?*

CPC: That would be so hard to list. I like everything about writing. The only thing that I really don’t like is the same thing that I’m sure that you don’t like, which is editing and rewriting. You know, once something is done, leave it alone, it’s done. But I love the creative process. I go to the library, I sit, I write, I use my imagination - that’s a lot of fun. I create characters – that’s a lot of fun. I get to travel a lot because I write. I love doing that. I meet a lot of interesting people. Now, how many other people in Windsor, Ontario, have a group of fourth grade

Michiganders come over to their house to interview them? That wouldn't happen if I weren't a writer. Would you interview me if I worked in a warehouse in Allen Park? Would you guys come over here? You KNOW you wouldn't. I love everything about it really. I make a good living, I have a lot of fun, I get to meet good people. I hadn't traveled much before I'd written that, now I've traveled all over the country. I live a great life.

NW: We read that *Bud, Not Buddy* actually started as a book about the sit-down strike in Flint. How did that idea evolve into the eventual book that it became?

CPC: Good question. I had all the research done on the sitdown strike. I'd written probably two chapters on it to get the story going. And then in the meantime, this, of course, is (holds up the palm of his right hand)...

NW: *A hand?*

CPC: Michigan! (looks exasperated) See, I was in Ohio yesterday and they had an excuse for not knowing – you don't have an excuse. Can we edit that, and then we'll jump forward to this again? Alright - pretend. (holding up palm again) So this, of course, is...

NW: *Michigan!*

CPC: This is Michigan. We had a family reunion over here in Grand Rapids, and I'd gone to the family reunion, and they started talking about my grandfather who had a band called Herman E. Curtis and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression. During the 1930s he actually had a band like that, and it was just very interesting. I loved the name, so I started to think of a story like that. When I write I have two things going on at the same time. In case I get tired of writing about Bud, I'll have something else going so I won't stop writing, and the story of Bud just took off and I never finished the sitdown strike story. I don't know, maybe someday I will.

NW: *What writing methods do you use when you write?*

CPC: What I do is I divide my writing into two very distinct parts. The first part, when you guys came to the library, if you stayed you would have seen me doing the creative part. I just sit down and I let it go. I don't think about the story. I just get information from whatever I want to write about that deals with the story, but I don't try to put it in the shape of a story. Then the next morning I usually get up very early, 5:00 or so, and I do editing and rewriting to try to make it part of the story. So that's really my main method of doing it.

NW: *What do you want readers to come away from your books with? Do you start writing with a message in mind, or do the messages just work themselves into your books as you write?*

CPC: I think that, probably subconsciously, you'd have a message, but I think that's the kiss of death with a book when you start to read it and you can hear, "Here comes the message." I think that's terrible. What I want the readers to come away with most of all? I think it's very important that you have fun with the book. Reading is a very fun thing to do and if you have fun with the book, it makes you want to keep reading it, right? And what is my job as a writer, I'm supposed to keep you...?

NW: *Turning the page.*

CPC: Turning the page. And laughing and having fun is one of the best ways. But also what it does is, like in *The Watsons*, *The Watsons* is not a book about the Civil Rights movement. It's a book about a family, really. And it tells about their trip. And what I hope that you'll bring away from that, when they go to that church, when Joetta is in the church and we don't know whether Joetta was killed or not, I want Joe to feel like he's part of the Watsons family and if you can imagine how it would feel if somebody that you loved and somebody that you cared about was in

that church. So, hopefully that's what you do. I hope my books make you ask questions to find out about things.

*NW: How are the titles selected for your books?*

*CPC: The Watsons Go to Birmingham* - you need a working title, you need something to identify the book as you're writing it. So that was how *The Watsons* came about. I needed a story – first I called it *The Watsons*, and then when Wilona Watson wrote the part about the trip down to Birmingham, I called it *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. My editor and publisher weren't real happy with the title. They said it was confusing and that people wouldn't remember it. We tried to find something different, but nothing seemed to work. And they're right because even to this day people will come up to me and say... "Oh yeah, you wrote that book, uh, The Washingtons go to Boston, right? And they can't remember the title exactly, so usually titles are something that are very catchy and grabby. And with *Bud, Not Buddy*, it was just a case of, I thought that kind of summed up Bud's feelings. His mother had told him, "Don't let anyone call you Buddy. That's not your name – that's a dog's name. Or somebody who's being false-friendly, yes. Did you like the chapter titles in *The Watsons*? How each chapter had its own title? (discussion about favorites) While you're looking, I'll tell you my favorite chapter, I think it's chapter five. "Nazi parachutes attack America and get shot down over the Flint River by Captain Byron Watson and his flame thrower of death." And what's the other one? Bobo Brazil meets the Sheik – these were old-time wrestlers, from long ago.

*NW: You were working on a picture book, Mr. Chicky's Funny Money, awhile back. Are you still planning to do anything more with that book?*

*CPC: Mr. Chicky's Funny Money* wasn't a picture book. It's a novel. I finished it. It needs a lot of work. I think the main problem, and this isn't somebody who you guys would know. It has too much James Brown in it. (recognition from students)

You know James Brown? Let's see you do a James Brown move. You can't?!? Why? Joe! Who is James Brown? A singer and a dancer. He goes "WAAOOOWWW!" (James Brown-like shriek) a lot. He kind of took over the story, and it just – it needs work. Maybe someday I can polish it up and do something with it.

*NW: You have also talked about writing a book about Deza Malone, the girl Bud meets in Hooverville. What's happening with that idea?*

*CPC: My goodness, where are you guys getting all this research?*

*NW: From the books and five thick article packets that are, like, this thick. (another student) They (the packets) were boring!*

*CPC: Thanks a bunch. I think I heard your mom calling, you've got to go! Deza Malone, yeah. I don't think I started saying that until relatively recently, but yeah, I would like to do – a lot of times when I go to schools, girls say to me, "Why don't you write a book about girls? And I say...*

*NW: Because you aren't a girl – you don't know what it's like to be a girl.*

*CPC: I don't know, but that doesn't mean I can't write about being a girl. It makes it difficult, but what about your Harry Potter? Is J. K. Rowling a man? Was she ever a little boy?*

*NW: No, but you could write about him.*

*CPC: That's right. That doesn't mean that she has to. It's much more difficult to do. It would be a lot more difficult for me. I'd have to talk to a lot of girls and see how they feel about things.*

*NW: Talk to your wife and daughter.*

*CPC: Yeah, I talk to them. But I'd have to talk to a lot of different girls because you want a lot of input*

on it. I don't want anything that these two might come up with – it might be kind of... (twists his face and makes a funny noise like a car engine that won't turn over), kind of scary.

*NW: Are you working on anything else currently?*

CPC: I'm actually doing an introduction for another one of my favorite authors, Mark Twain - his book *The Prince and the Pauper*, Modern Libraries is doing a reissue of the book and I'm writing the introduction for that. And it's been a lot of fun because I went back and read a lot of Mark Twain's books, and I'd forgotten how much I'd enjoyed them, and what a great author he was. So that's what I've been working on. (reminder from Kay) Oh yeah, I wrote an introduction for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (puzzlement from student) It's a book that was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and it was written in the 1830s. It was about a slave, and it's interesting because he escaped – well no, in the story he doesn't escape. But one of the women in the story escapes and comes through Canada and ends up in the area around Chatham. There's actually an Uncle Tom's Cabin there, a museum. There was a man named Josiah Henson that the character was based on, and it's very interesting. And I'll give you a copy of the book. It's a great book, especially for being 170 years old.

*NW: What other ideas have you thought about for future books, and how many other books do you have ideas for?*

CPC: I don't know – I get ideas all the time, and I write them on scraps of paper. Which ones of you are writers? Excellent. What you have to do is you save those ideas and then you can use them later for books. I'm really concentrating on what I'm writing now, so I haven't really thought too much beyond the Deza Malone story and maybe on the sitdown strike story. And I do want to do a sequel to Bud, Not Buddy, about Bud, an actual sequel about Bud.

*NW: Where do you see yourself with writing in*

*another ten or twenty years?*

CPC: Ten or twenty years – boy! I hope I'm still writing. Writing's not one of those things that you have to retire from. You can keep doing it. Some writers are still writing very good things in their seventies and eighties. I hope that I can still be writing and working on things like that because it's a great life. It's something I enjoy doing.

*NW: Other than the very basic premise of Bucking the Sarge that's been described in other interviews, what else can you tell us about the book, like what is the setting?*

CPC: The setting is Flint, Michigan, again. It's a group home. It's between a group home and school, and the narrator's name is Luther T. Farrell. He's 15 years old. And it's really his story to get away from – two things really – to get away from his mother and to get away from Flint, which he sees as something that is falling down and that he knows that - one of the things he ends the book with is, "He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day. Some of the time it's best to just get out of there and go somewhere else, so Luther has kind of come to that conclusion. See, now I've told you the end of the book, you won't read it now.

*NW: Originally we read that Bucking the Sarge would be released in 2002. We even saw published that it had already been released in 2002. What is the expected date of release?*

CPC: Now it won't be until fall of 2004. Because it takes a long time – once I'm done with it, it usually takes two years, but they're going to really push this fast. It will be out in fall of 2004. So, don't hold me to that, though.

*NW: Is it basically done?*

CPC: Yeah, it's done. My editor (Wendy Lamb) and I, when I was in New York, we went over some things when I'd written some new things. It's done,



but it needs to be kind of sewn together better. We're still doing revisions, and I'm still doing some fresh writing, cutting a lot of things. I've cut, so far, about probably 90 pages, and added another 90, so it's going all over the place. But mark my word, 2004.

*NW: We looked at the timeline in the Ann Gaines picture book biography about you, but the book is a bit ambiguous about when your thirteen years on the assembly line were. We wondered if you could clarify that for us and what else you could fill in?*

CPC: (looking at timeline in book) 1953, born May 10th, Flint, Michigan – actually it was 1973 that I was born (yes, he's joking). 1971, graduates from high school and goes to work at Fisher Body – wrong! 1971 I graduated from high school, I started going to the University of Michigan, did terribly, didn't go to class, Joe, messed up, boy it was terrible. I was sick of school. So I didn't actually start working in the factory – I think I had a grade point average of about point zero-something or other. But 1972, I started working in the factory, September 15, 1972. Right after high school, I was in a theater group from Lansing called Suitcase Theater and I traveled there every week, I think it was Tuesdays and Thursdays for rehearsals, and then we toured through the United States, Canada, and Europe. So I did that. Growing up, every summer we would be in the theater – my mother put my sisters and I in the theater, so we had a lot of experience with theater, and then my trip to Europe with all the theater people made me realize I didn't want to be around theater people anymore, so I have never done any acting since then. (looking back at timeline) Meets future wife, Kay, at a basketball game. Begins writing full-time. I was actually in the factory from 9-15-72 until 9-30-85, so I was there for thirteen years. After I quit the factory, it wasn't actually done for the writing, I just was so fed up with factory life that I quit, and I had a lot of other jobs. I worked as a maintenance man in an apartment complex, I mowed lawns, I worked as Senator Reigle's campaign manager for Flint for the 1988 election. I worked at MichCon as a customer service representative, and then I started

working in the warehouse at ADP in Allen Park, and that's it as far as work history. '93, begins writing full-time. I did that for a year. '93, went back to the warehouse. '94, submits novel to contest by Delacorte – true, everything. *Watsons Go to Birmingham, Bud, Not Buddy*. Oh, they left out 2002, *Bucking the Sarge* was published. (laughter) Other than that, I've read this, and there are a lot of things that, it's a pretty...

*NW: We found some inaccuracies. It said you were the only African-American author to win the Newbery Medal.*

CPC: Yeah, it should have been "male." No, I don't think she interviewed me. There's another one being done – what's her name? (looks at Kay) Denise Jordan is doing a much more in-depth biography.

*NW: Your life has radically changed since you won the Newbery Honor and the Coretta Scott King Honor for The Watsons in 1996. Then Bud won both the Newbery and Coretta Scott King medal in 2000. What were the first things you did and thought when you learned that your books had won these important awards?*

CPC: With *Bud* winning the Newbery and the Coretta Scott King, you hope in your wildest dreams that these things will come true, but you never believe they will, and when it won, what really touched me and really got to me was they called and said that it had won the Newbery, and that was so thrilling to hear and I was on the speaker phone with librarians, and then one of the people from the publishing house called and said, "When they make the announcement to the public, we'll let you hear it. We'll hold the cell phone up so you can hear it." They called back about 20 minutes later and the person was sitting at the front of these librarians, and they said, "Here it is," and they held the cell phone up and started reading out who won, and when they said and the Newbery this year goes to *Bud, Not Buddy*, and then you could hear the people cheer.

That really touched me, that got me. But the awards make a big difference because what they do is they put the books in all the libraries and all the schools. They're exposed a lot more and as a writer my job is to keep you...

*NW: ...turning the pages.*

CPC: And more people turn the pages when they think the book has won awards.

*NW: It was widely reported a few years ago that the film rights to The Watsons were bought by Whoopi Goldberg, and that it would become a made-for-television movie. Do you know anything about what's happening with the movie project of The Watsons?*

CPC: Whoopi Goldberg bought the rights, they had a script written, they had it cast. Alfre Woodard was going to be the mother, Whoopi Goldberg was going to be the grandmother, Damon Wayans was going to be the father. Levar Burton was going to direct it. She wasn't able to sell it – she couldn't sell it. She tried the major motion pictures, she tried the television networks. She tried cable. She couldn't sell it. She held onto it for about six years and then she sold it to someone else and they're talking about - another company has the rights now, and they're looking to develop it as a television series. They wanted to do it as kind of a black "Wonder Years."

*NW: That's amazing that they couldn't sell it.*

CPC: Quincy Jones is – they're looking at *Bud, Not Buddy* now, so maybe something will happen with that.

*NW: What other noteworthy experiences have you had because of your literary successes?*

CPC: Let's see – lots of things. Boy, just so many wonderful things have happened. I've met a lot of people that I never would have had a chance to meet. J.K. Rowling, Gary Paulsen, Jacqueline Woodson. I

was on the Today Show in Times Square – but our tape (of the show) was destroyed in the flood. Scholastic made a poster of famous African-Americans, with Martin Luther King and others. When we got it, Kay's reaction was, when she saw my picture, she said, "What's wrong with this picture?" (laughter) But, the funny thing about that is that I got a letter from a little girl who had seen the poster, and she wrote me a letter saying, you know, very nice, "Dear Mr. Curtis, I like your book, blah, blah, blah," And then her final question was, "Do you wear make-up?" because in that picture I had make-up on, because when you go on television they put makeup on you, and they say, "You'll never know, you'll never know. No one will ever know you have it on." Oh boy. This is someone you won't know – I ended up looking like Little Richard.

*NW: You charge about \$3,000 per day to go visit classrooms, right?*

CPC: No – five. Five thousand dollars, yeah. It was three, but then after the Newbery, it made it go up, so it's up to \$5,000 now.

*NW: Do you ever run sales on it? Special prices?*

CPC: You know, since you guys came here, I think we can knock, what, \$50 off it, what do you say, Kay? \$4,950. No, you know, some of the time I do schools for...

Kay Curtis (KC): \$200, and haven't been paid yet. Since Christmas.

CPC: You know, since you guys are from Michigan - see this is how I get in trouble, right Kay? What am I gonna say, Kay? Tell them what I'm going to say - just save me the trouble.

KC: "I'll do it for free."

CPC: I'll come to your class and talk to your class if you'd like. (More discussion about specifics – Curtis mentions that he can make a side trip when

visiting his mother in Grand Rapids today an interview with someone who wants to meet and also speak with her. True to his word, the day before his fiftieth birthday, Mr. Curtis visited and spoke to the fourth graders of Northwestern, where he was a huge hit.)

*NW: Do you have any parting thoughts?*

*CPC: We said we have some writers here, right? My parting thoughts, I'll just give the advice I give to writers all the time. There are three rules of writing, right? The first rule of writing is write every day. Writing is like anything else that you do, the more you do it, the better you get at it. The second rule of writing is to have fun with your writing. If you're having fun with something you do, you'll put a lot more into it, it's a lot more interesting. Make the writing fun. You can have fun with writing because when you write, you're in control of everything. Third rule – ignore all rules. Because you will learn your own way of writing. It's like the question you asked earlier about who influences me. You'll find your own way, and once you learn the basics – that doesn't mean ignore the rules of English or writing – there are certain things you have to do, but once you learn those things, ignore all rules, just have fun with it, go with it, and write it your own way.*

### **About the Authors**

Dwight Blubaugh teaches fourth grade at Northwestern Elementary in Eaton Rapids. This is the second of an ongoing series of author interviews by his students.

Kristi Karns likes to spend time reading and writing; Joe Latham enjoys baseball, music, and math; Amy Mestelle likes reading and playing percussion; and Amanda Weston finds sports, reading, and writing enjoyable. All are now fifth graders at Greyhound Intermediate School in Eaton Rapids, MI.

*Editor's Notes: An unabridged version of the interview can be found at:  
<http://scnc.erps.k12.mi.us/~nwestern/blubaugh/authorarticle2.htm>*

*Websites and other Christopher Paul Curtis resources as discussed in Julie King's "Teaching In/about Michigan: Resources for Teachers" column on pages 50-53.*