

Focus ON READING

Vocabulary

READING
COMPREHENSION

The Watsons Go to
Birmingham—1963

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ACTIVATE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Reproducible Activities

Focus Your Knowledge

During the 1960s, black Americans were fighting for equal rights and desegregation—the right to share the same privileges and facilities as white Americans. This struggle is called the Civil Rights movement.

- Look at a map of the eastern United States. Find Flint, Michigan, and Birmingham, Alabama. What do you know about these two places? How might these two places be different? How might they be the same? How does their location on the map affect these conditions?
- What do you know about the Civil Rights movement? How will this knowledge help you to understand the life of a young black boy in the United States in the 1960s?
- How does the Civil Rights movement affect life today? Why might knowing about civil rights be important?
- What is terrorism? How did it affect life in the 1960s? How does it affect life today? What can Americans do to stop terrorism?



Focus Your Reading

Vocabulary Words to Know

Study the following words and definitions. You will meet these words in your reading. Be sure to jot down in your word journal any other unknown words from the reading.

juvenile delinquent—a young person who breaks rules set by parents and authorities

vital—necessary; important; required

numerous—very many; a great number of

miraculous—wonderful; incredible; like a miracle

intimidate—to scare, threaten, or bully

emulate—to copy the actions or behavior of someone

cockeyed—crossed-eyed; having a squinty eye

thug—a mean person; a bully

punctual—on time; prompt

radioactive—giving off radiation, usually thought of in connection with certain kinds of explosions or reactions

Things to Know

Here is some background information about this section of the book.

Narcissus is a young man in Greek mythology who falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. He becomes so obsessed with the reflection that he forgets to eat and drink. He eventually dies and is turned into a flower.

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) was a novelist and poet who wrote about racial relationships and difficulties. He was one of the first black writers to make a living by writing.

A **twenty-two** (usually written **.22**) is a type of gun that uses bullets with a 22-millimeter diameter.

The **Nazis** were a group of people who came to political power in 1933 in Germany. Their leader was Adolf Hitler, a man who wanted to rule the world. In 1939, the Nazis became involved in World War II, with Germany, Italy, and Japan fighting Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

Build Your Vocabulary

Read the sentences below. On the line, write your definition of the word in bold type. Then, on another sheet of paper, use that word in a new sentence of your own.

1. “Byron had just turned thirteen so he was officially a teenage **juvenile delinquent** and didn’t think it was ‘cool’ to touch anybody or let anyone touch him, even if it meant he froze to death.”
juvenile delinquent: _____
2. “I’ve often told you that as Negroes the world is many times a hostile place for us. . . . I’ve pointed out time and time again how **vital** it is that one be able to read well.”
vital: _____
3. “I’ve stressed on **numerous** occasions the importance of being familiar and comfortable with literature.”
numerous: _____
4. “I want you to carefully note how advanced this second-grade student is. . . . I want you to be aware that some of our kids read at **miraculous** levels.”
miraculous: _____
5. “If, instead of trying to **intimidate** your young brother, you would **emulate** him and use that mind of yours, perhaps you’d find things much easier.”
intimidate: _____
emulate: _____
6. “See? You ain’t **cockeyed** no more, your eyes is straight as a arrow now!”
cockeyed: _____
7. “We’d be standing on the corner waiting for the bus, Byron, Buphead and all the other old **thugs** in one bunch, Larry Dunn, Banky and all the other young thugs in another bunch, the regular kids like Joetta in a third bunch and me off to the side by myself.”
thugs: _____
8. “‘This is the only way you little punks is gonna learn to be **punctual**. I hope that fool has a pleasant walk to school.’ Then no matter how hard the late kid banged on the side of the bus the driver would just take off, laughing out the window.”
punctual: _____
9. “. . . instead of digging each one of the couple hundred dead dinosaurs a grave we dug one giant hole and buried all the **radioactive** ones in it, then we put a big rock on top so no radioactivity could leak out.”
radioactive: _____

Check Your Understanding

Short Answer

Write a short answer for each question.

1. Why does Dad say the kids could have been “the Hambonettes”?
2. Why are the Watsons going to Aunt Cydney’s house?
3. What happens to Byron while he and Kenny are scraping the windows of the Brown Bomber?
4. Why doesn’t Kenny believe Byron is in trouble when he hears By mumbling for help? What convinces him?
5. Why does Kenny call Byron the Lipless Wonder?
6. Who is the king of Clark? How does Kenny compare him to Byron?
7. Why is Kenny nervous about Byron going to junior high school?
8. In what ways does Kenny think Rufus will be his personal saver?
9. How does Kenny lose his dinosaurs?
10. Why does Rufus stop playing with Kenny? Why does Rufus come back?

*Focus Your Reading**Vocabulary Words to Know*

Study the following words and definitions. You will meet these words in your reading. Be sure to jot down in your word journal any other unknown words from the reading.

imitation—a copy of something

pomade—a nice-smelling oil used to style hair

mature—adult; full-grown

frostbite—an injury caused by extreme cold

skimpy—meager; not full or sizable; not enough

carp—a type of large fish

snatched—grabbed quickly

hypnotized—spellbound; took control of someone's mind

traitor—a person who betrays his or her beliefs, country, friends, or something else very important

peon—a peasant; a low worker

Things to Know

Here is some background information about this section of the book.

Montgomery Ward's was a department store.

Maytag is a brand of washing machine and other large appliances.

The Miracle Worker is the title of a book and a movie about Helen Keller, a woman who was deaf, blind, and could not speak. Her teacher, Annie Sullivan, taught her to communicate using sign language against the palm of her hand. It must have seemed like Ms. Sullivan had performed a miracle when she was able to make Helen understand and understandable.

Sugar Ray Robinson was a popular African-American boxer.

Smokey the Bear is a bear character used in advertisements promoting fire safety and the prevention of forest fires.

The Untouchables was a popular television show about a group of detectives led by Eliot Ness. These law officers were often involved in gunfights, car chases, and other action scenes.

Welfare is a government program set up to help families who do not have enough money to buy food and other necessities.

The Magnificent Seven is a movie about seven cowboys who help people in need.

Build Your Vocabulary

Read the sentences below. On the line, write your definition of the word in bold type. Then, on another sheet of paper, use that word in a new sentence of your own.

1. “We wore so many clothes that when Byron wasn’t around, the other kids said stuff like ‘Here come some of them Weird Watsons doing their Mummy **imitations**.’”
imitations: _____
2. “. . . Joey was a little oven and inside all these clothes she’d baked up her own special perfume, with the smell of shampoo and soap and the **pomade** Momma put in her hair.”
pomade: _____
3. “Yeah, but what you don’t know is that Momma’s only doing what’s right, there’s something she don’t want you two to know yet, but I know you some real **mature** kids so I’m a tell you anyway.”
mature: _____
4. “This is the last [pair of gloves], Kenny, after this you won’t have anything for the rest of the year so be very careful. . . . Do you know what **frostbite** will do to you?”
frostbite: _____
5. “You’d have to be pretty tough to stand around giving people Maytags on a day as cold as this with those **skimpy** clothes on!”
skimpy: _____
6. “*The Great Carp Escape* was about a **carp** that was trying to get out of a net in the Flint River. The stupid fish would run into the net, get knocked down, then get back up and run into the net all over again.”
carp: _____
7. “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!”
snatched: _____
8. “Joey kept pulling at his hand but it looked like Byron was **hypnotized** and he wouldn’t move.”
hypnotized: _____
9. “Joey climbed off Momma’s lap and Byron’s eyes got bigger and bigger but his **traitor** hands kept him pinned to the couch.”
traitor: _____
10. “You really gonna make me go embarrass myself by signing a welfare list for some groceries like a blanged **peon**?”
peon: _____

Check Your Understanding

Short Answer

Write a short answer for each question.

1. What does Kenny say is the worst part of wearing his winter clothes?
2. What does By tell Joey and Kenny the big doors on garbage trucks are used for?
3. How does Rufus recognize Kenny's gloves?
4. What is *The Great Carp Escape*?
5. Why does Momma get upset when Byron plays with fire?
6. Why does Momma need to get another set of matches?
7. What does Momma say that convinces Joey that Momma has to burn Byron?
8. Why can't Kenny tell Momma that By got "free food"?
9. What happens to the mourning dove By kills?
10. Why is Kenny confused by Byron's treatment of the bird?

Focus Your Reading

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Study the following words and definitions. You will meet these words in your reading. Be sure to jot down in your word journal any other unknown words from the reading.

linoleum—a type of flooring, often shiny and slick, that was once commonly used in kitchens

pinnacle—the highest point

seniority—status earned by age or length of time in a job

vibration—a feeling of shaking, trembling, or quivering

dispersal—the act of scattering something or the state of being scattered

phonic—having to do with sound

symphonic—having to do with a large orchestra (a symphony) or sounding like one

haphazardly—carelessly

enhance—to make better

maestro—someone who is very skilled at writing, teaching, or conducting music; sometimes referring to one who plays music

Things to Know

Here is some background information about this section of the book.

Bozo was a popular television clown known for his bright red, stiff hair that stuck out over each ear.

Death row is the nickname for the part of a jail where prisoners who are to be put to death are kept. The governor of the state can call to give a prisoner a stay of execution, which means that the punishment is put off.

“**Straighten Up and Fly Right**” is a song made popular by black singer Nat King Cole.

“**His Royal Highness, Yul Watson**” refers to the movie *The King and I*, in which Yul Brynner plays the King of Siam. Brynner shaved his head for the role and made that style popular.

45 is another name for a vinyl record; it refers to the speed at which the record spins on the turntable. Records were popular before the introduction of CDs. A record player uses a needle to read the grooves on a record, making them sensitive to scratches or bumps. Because some records are about the size of a dinner plate, they are sometimes called “platters.” Because a record player spins the record, people would sometimes say “Spin it” to tell someone to play a record.

Build Your Vocabulary

Read the sentences below. On the line, write your definition of the word in bold type. Then, on another sheet of paper, use that word in a new sentence of your own.

1. “Byron started walking toward Momma in slow motion, sliding his feet on the **linoleum**.”
linoleum: _____
2. “The height of technology. . . . The ultimate in American knowledge. . . . It’s the **pinnacle** of Western civilization.”
pinnacle: _____
3. “Dad started shaving. ‘Well, just so there’s no problems, I’ve got **seniority** on you, so I get the bathroom first, deal?’”
seniority: _____
4. “As I’m certain you are aware, the problem in the past with this new technology in automotive sound has been road **vibrations** interfering with an accurate **dispersal** of the **phonic** interpretations. . . . In other words, I’m sure you know that in the good old days every time you drove over a bump with one of these things the needle would jump and scratch the record.”
vibrations: _____
dispersal: _____
phonic: _____
5. “Before I dazzle you with the **symphonic** sound of this unit, let me point out some of its less-appreciated features.”
symphonic: _____
6. “And I can tell by that intelligent look on your face, Mrs. Watson, that you have grasped that that speaker is not placed in the rear deck **haphazardly**, no, ma’am. Some people think we just have a hole hacked in back there by any old mechanic, but nothing could be further from the truth.”
haphazardly: _____
7. “That opening is scientifically and mathematically positioned by a factory-trained technician to **enhance** the TT AB-700’s true high-fidelity sound!”
enhance: _____
8. “We at Flint’s only soul station, WAMM, dedicate this song to Daniel, from Wilona. Spin it, **maestro!**”
maestro: _____