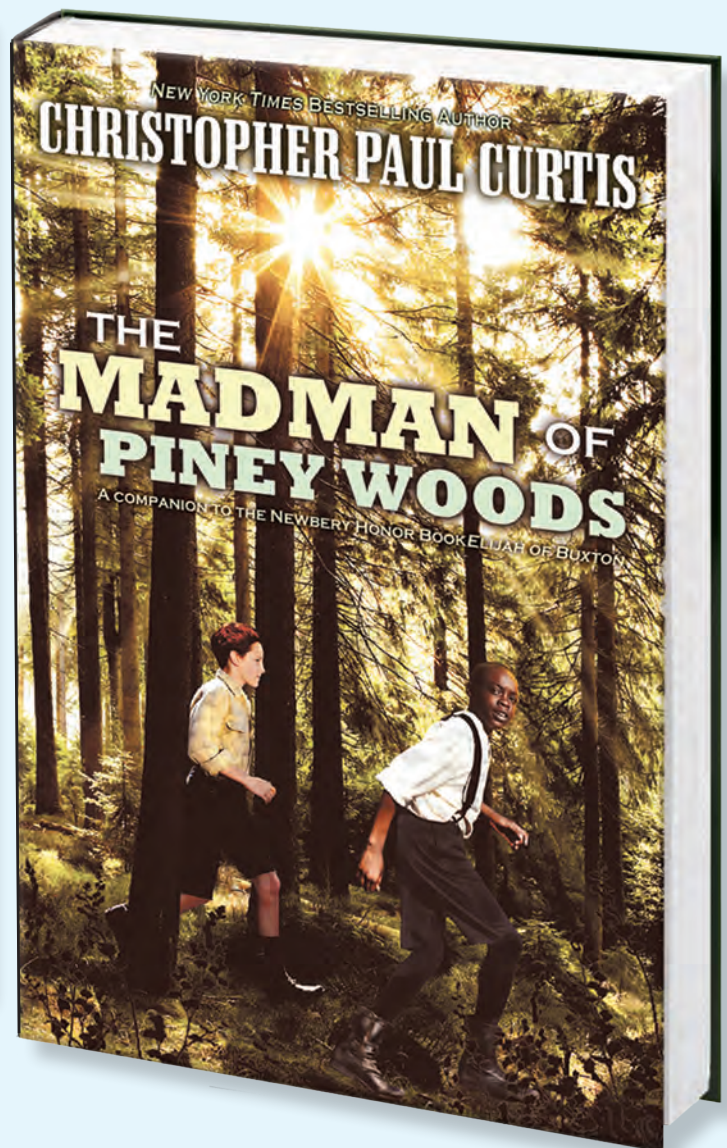
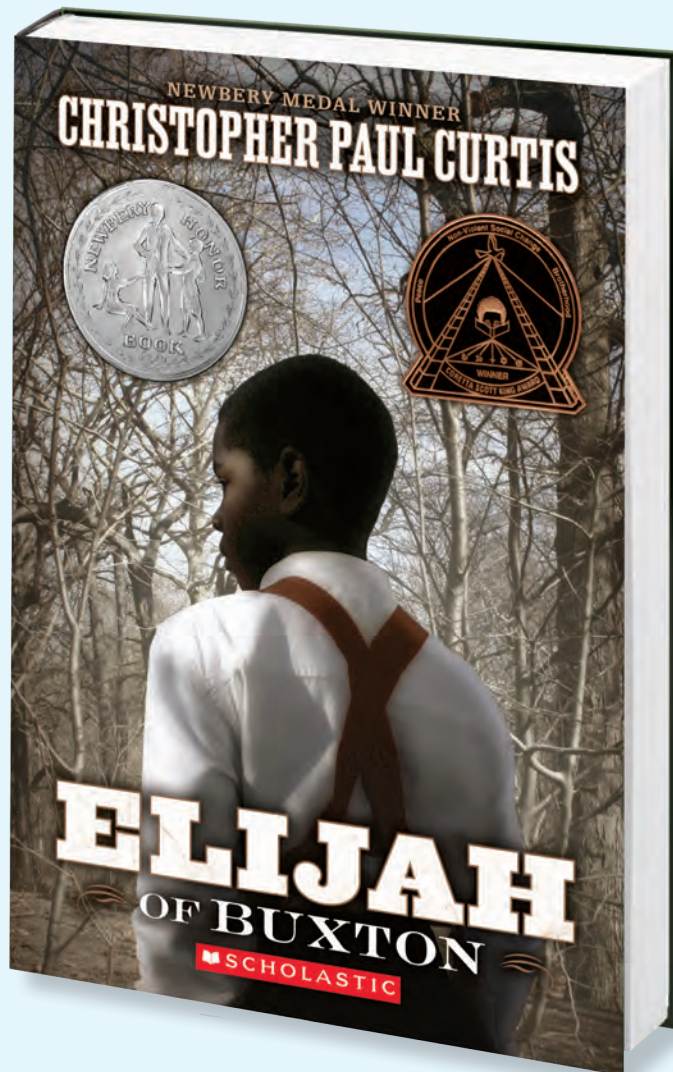


DISCUSSION GUIDE

Grades
3 - 7

Christopher Paul Curtis's Buxton Novels



 SCHOLASTIC

Meets Common Core State Standards—SEE INSIDE

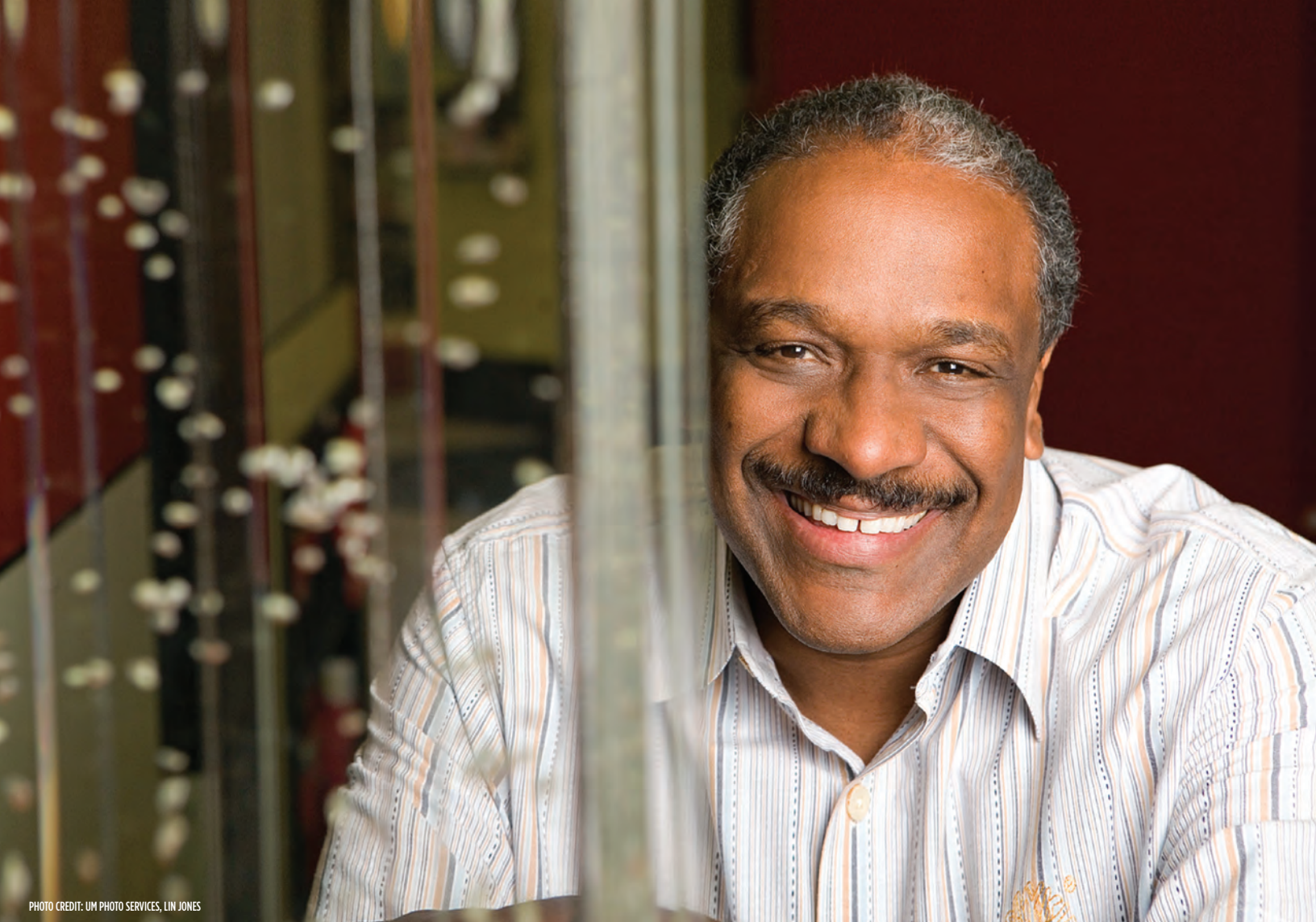


PHOTO CREDIT: UM PHOTO SERVICES, LIN JONES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailed as a modern-day Mark Twain, Christopher Paul Curtis grew up in Flint, Michigan. After high school, he spent thirteen years on the assembly line at Fisher Body Flint Plant No. 1, hanging car doors. He graduated from the University of Michigan-Flint, where he began writing fiction.

His first novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, was awarded both a Newbery Honor and a Coretta Scott King Honor. His second novel, *Bud, Not Buddy*, won the Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Award in 2000. *Elijah of Buxton*, his sixth novel, was also a Newbery Honor Book, a Coretta Scott King Award winner, and a Canadian Library Association Book of the Year.

Visit Christopher online at nobodybutcurtis.com.

GUIDE TO THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS CITED IN THIS GUIDE

READING LITERATURE

Key Ideas and Details

RL. 5-7.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

RL. 5-7.2 Determine a theme of a story from details in the text; summarize the text.

RL. 5-7.3 Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).

Craft and Structure

RL. 6-7.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

RL. 5-7.9 Compare and contrast texts in different forms or genres in terms of their approaches to similar themes and topics.

READING INFORMATIONAL TEXT

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

RI. 5-7.7 Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively), as well as in words, to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

LANGUAGE

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

L. 5-7.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on reading and context.

L. 5-7.5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meaning.

HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

RH. 6-8.7 Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

RH. 6-8.8 Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

Comprehension and Collaboration

SL. 5-7.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

SL. 5-7.3 Identify the reasons and evidence a speaker provides to support particular points.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

SL. 5-7.4 Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

SL. 5-7.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

WRITING

Text Types and Purposes

W. 5-7.2 Write information/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

W. 5-7.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Production and Distribution of Writing

W. 5-7.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task.

W. 5-7.5 With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

W. 5-7.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing, as well as to interact and collaborate with others.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

W. 5-7.7 Conduct short research projects that build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.

W. 5-7.8 Recall relevant information from experiences or gather relevant information from print and digital sources, take notes and categorize information, and provide a list of sources.

W. 5-7.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

ELIJAH OF BUXTON

HARDCOVER: 978-0-439-02344-3 • \$16.99

HARDCOVER IN CANADA: 978-0-545-155664-6 • CAN \$18.99

PAPERBACK: 978-0-439-02345-0 • \$7.99 (CAN \$8.99)

EBOOK: 978-0-545-28119-5 • \$7.99

Eleven-year-old Elijah lives with his parents in Buxton, Canada, a settlement of runaway slaves near the U.S. border. Elijah is the first child in town to be born free, but he knows about slavery and the meaning of freedom from the stories told by those in his community. Unfortunately, all that most people see is a “fra-gile” boy who’s scared of snakes and tends to talk too much. But Elijah learns a “growned-up” lesson about the untrustworthiness of strangers when a former slave steals money from Elijah’s friend, who has been saving to buy his family out of captivity in the South. Elijah’s efforts help bring his own life full circle when he transports a baby girl to freedom. As a baby, Elijah was made a symbol of hope by Mr. Frederick Douglass, and now he has earned this distinction by becoming the youngest conductor on the Underground Railroad.

A NEWBERY HONOR BOOK

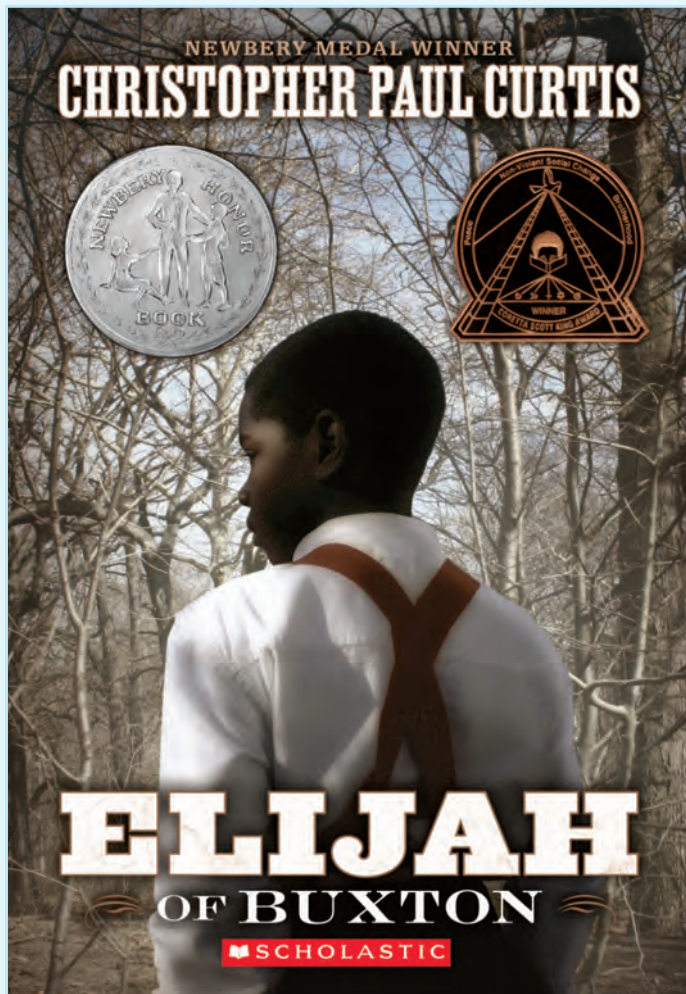
WINNER OF THE CORETTA SCOTT KING AWARD

WINNER OF THE SCOTT O’DELL AWARD FOR HISTORICAL FICTION

WINNER, CANADIAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION BOOK OF THE YEAR

FINALIST, GOVERNOR GENERAL’S LITERARY AWARD

AN AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION NOTABLE BOOK



★ “Rich, masterful storytelling. . . no doubt many readers, young and old, will finish and say, “This is one of the best books I have ever read.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Elijah . . . is an irresistible character. . . This arresting, surprising novel of reluctant heroism is about nothing less than nobility.”

—*Horn Book*, starred review

★ “Curtis’s talent for dealing with painful periods of history with grace and sensitivity is as strong as ever.”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review

★ “A fine, original novel from a gifted storyteller. . . Readers drawn to the book by humor will find themselves, at times, on the edge of their seats in suspense and, at others, moved to tears.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Engage the class in a discussion about the Underground Railroad. In what ways was it like a “railroad”? What was the role of the conductor? Ask students to visit or research some of the “stations” in various states along the routes (www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/states.htm). How did the slaves know that these “stations” were safe?

Locate Buxton, Ontario, on a map. Determine which “stations” might have served a slave traveling from Virginia. Map out a sample route. **RI. 5-6.7; RH. 6-8.7**

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

TRUST

Describe the Right Reverend Deacon Doctor Zephariah Connerly the Third, the man Elijah and Cooter call the Preacher. What is the first clue that he can’t be trusted? What does Elijah’s father mean when he calls the Preacher “a jackleg man of the Lord” (p. 53)? Elijah knows that the Preacher can’t be trusted. Why does it take him so long to admit it? Why does Mr. Leroy put so much faith in the Preacher?

FAMILY

Compare and contrast Elijah's and Cooter's families. Elijah has the reputation of being "fra-gile." How does his family try to help him deal with this character trait? At what point in the novel does Elijah's mother think that he has finally overcome his "fra-gile" condition? Explain how Elijah's family welcomes the new free people to Buxton.

FRIENDSHIP

Describe Elijah and Cooter's friendship. How is Elijah a better friend than Cooter? Explain what Mr. Leroy means when he says to Elijah, "member that we gets 'long but I ain't your friend" (p. 100). Why does Mr. Leroy think it's important that Elijah understand the difference? Discuss whether Mr. Leroy ever sees Elijah as a friend.

RACISM

Mr. Leroy is offended when Elijah uses a racial slur. Elijah explains, "Sir, I only said it 'cause I hear lots of children say it" (p. 99). Why would Elijah think that hearing the word makes it okay to say it? How does Mr. Leroy help Elijah understand the "hatred" wrapped around the word? Living free in Canada doesn't guarantee the people of Buxton a life without prejudices. Cite specific scenes where citizens of Buxton still combat racism.

FREEDOM

Mr. Frederick Douglass talks about freedom. What does he mean by saying the second hardest step to freedom is the first one — and the hardest step of all is the last one (p. 158)? How is this true for people like Mrs. Holton and Mr. Leroy? Discuss what they gained by coming to Buxton. What did they lose? Discuss how Emma Collins helps slaves take that final step to freedom.

COMMUNITY

The Buxton Settlement Creed is "one helping one to uplift all." Explain how helping one another is uplifting to all. Describe how this creed creates the strong sense of community in Buxton. Discuss the many different things the citizens of Buxton do to help one another.

HOPE

Why was Elijah Freeman's birth a symbol of hope for the people of Buxton? Explain the symbolism of the baby at the end of the novel. Discuss why Hope is an appropriate name for her.

VALUES IN CONFLICT

Mr. Travis is the Sabbath schoolteacher to the children in Buxton. What does he want his students to learn from the phrase "Familiarity Breeds Contempt" in Chapter 6? How does Cooter have a difficult time understanding this phrase? Explain how "respect" for his elders keeps Elijah from showing contempt for the Preacher.

RL. 5-7.1, RL. 5-7.2, RL. 5-7.3; SL. 5-7.1, SL. 5-7.3

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Explain the following simile: "And that means the man [Mr. Travis] is on you like a tick, you caint get away from him no matter where you go" (p. 78). Find other examples of similes in the novel. Instruct students to select a favorite scene that involves Elijah, Cooter, or the Preacher and write a simile that describes the situation. [L. 5-7.5](#)

The dialogue in the novel is written in dialect. Ask students to find a favorite passage and rewrite it in Standard English. How does this change the authenticity and tone of the story? [RL. 6-7.4](#)

SOCIAL STUDIES

Read about people of the Underground Railroad on the following website: pathways.thinkport.org/library/people.cfm. Ask students to select one of the lesser-known people and write a tribute to that person from Elijah's point of view. Use photographs and maps to enhance the tribute. If possible, have students post their writing on the schoolwide network for other students to read. [W. 5-7.3](#), [W. 5-7.4](#), [W. 5-7.6](#); [RH. 6-8.8](#)

DRAMA

When a new free person arrives in Buxton, the Liberty Bell is rung twenty times. Everyone in the Settlement comes to the schoolhouse to welcome them. Write and deliver a welcome speech called "Buxton—The Land of the Free" that Elijah might deliver. [W. 5-7.3](#); [SL. 5-7.4](#)

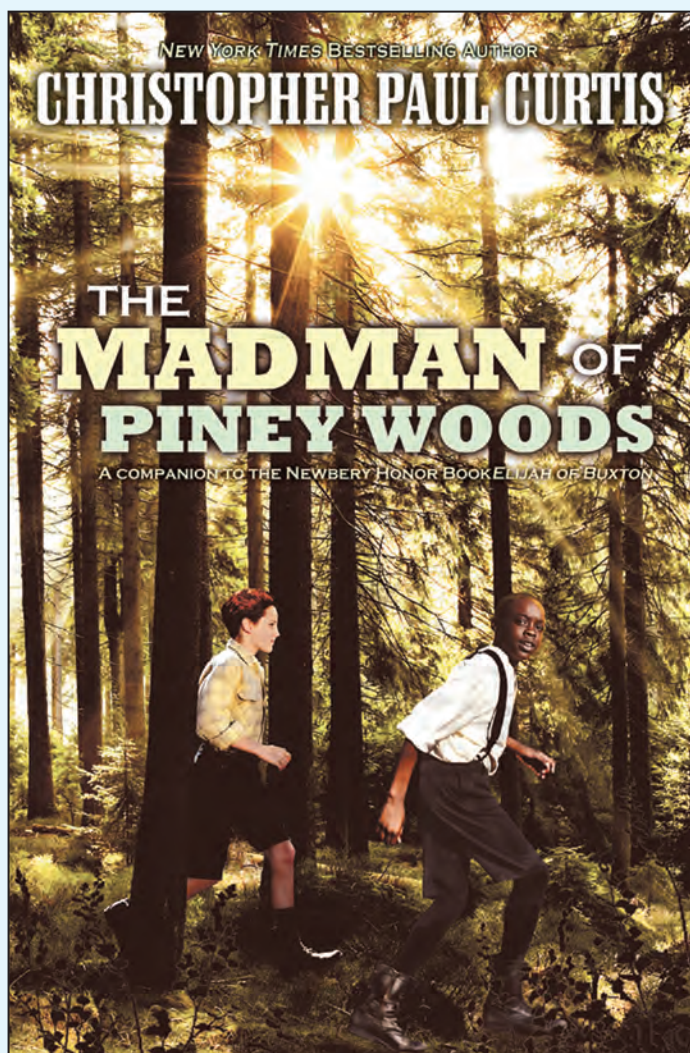
MUSIC

In class, view the "Follow the Drinking Gourd" music video (www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=217595). Identify the "code" words in the lyrics. Explain why the song was so important to slaves escaping to freedom. Discuss why it was also important during the civil rights movement.

[RH. 6-8.7](#); [RI. 5-7.7](#)

VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

Students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context. Such words may include: *conjure* (p. 31), *blaspheming* (p. 41), *scallywags* (p. 58), *shackles* (p. 58), *haint* (p. 60), *jacklegged* (p. 65), *dexterity* (p. 108), *paddy-rollers* (p. 163), *missive* (p. 195), *abolitionist* (p. 204), *slavers* (p. 204), and *eavesdrop* (p. 257). [L. 5-7.4](#)



THE MADMAN OF PINEY WOODS

HARDCOVER: 978-0-545-15664-6 • \$16.99 (CAN \$18.99)

EBOOK: 978-0-545-63376-5 • \$16.99

Set forty years after the events of *Elijah of Buxton*, *The Madman of Piney Woods* tells the story of two boys in alternating first-person chapters: Benjamin “Benji” Alston of Buxton, Ontario, and Alvin “Red” Stockard, of Chatham, Ontario.

When Benji and Red meet by chance at the Upper Canada Forensics Competition, they realize that they have more in common than they first thought. Both are bright, funny, and ambitious. Benji aspires to be a journalist and Red wants to be a scientist, and they are each haunted by the legendary stories of a strange, wild man who inhabits the woods between their hometowns.

Through a series of events the boys become best friends, but meet head on with the wrath and bigotry of Red’s grandmother. Grandmother O’Toole is a white Irish immigrant who has grown bitter over the brutal circumstances of her youth. Benji and Red’s friendship surmounts this obstacle, but their courage and endurance are put to the test when they discover the Madman of Piney Woods injured in the forest. With the help of Buxton’s mayor, Benji rescues the Madman—and his new friend. Sadly, the Madman’s injuries are too grave, and he passes away, but not before giving Benji a new appreciation for the woods Benji has come to think of as his own.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Tell the class that legends belong to the genre of folktales with the following elements: exaggerated characters or events; handed down through generations; fictional, but believed to be true at one time. Then read aloud a legend like *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* or *The Legend of Paul Bunyan* and lead a class discussion about the specific elements of legend in the story. Divide the class into small groups and instruct them to use books in the library or sites on the Internet to locate and read one legend. They may consider the following: Big Foot, Blackbeard, The Headless Horseman, The Vanishing Hitchhiker, The Loch Ness Monster, or a legend specific to their state or region. Apply the elements of legend to the one read, and discuss how it contributes to the culture of its origin. Allow time in class for groups to share. [RL. 5-7.3](#); [SL. 5-7.4](#)

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

FAMILY

Describe Benji Alston’s family. Benji’s parents remind him that his actions reflect on his family (p. 115). Explain how Curly Bennett’s actions reflect on his family. How does Curly try to protect his mother and siblings? Discuss the sibling rivalry that exists between Benji and his brother and sister. What contributes to this rivalry? Compare and contrast Red’s family with Benji’s. How do both boys enjoy a loving relationship with their father?

ACHIEVEMENT

Discuss the talents of Benji, Spencer, Red, Stubby, and Patience. How do they achieve in different ways? Explain why Spencer is excited to win First Runner-Up to Hickman Holmely in the oratorical contest. Discuss how their parents encourage their talents. Make a prediction about the contribution they may make to their communities as adults.

FRIENDSHIP

Describe the friendship between Benji and Spencer. How are they alike? What are their differences? Why is Spencer the first person Benji wants to tell about his apprenticeship at the newspaper in Chatham? Trace the development of the friendship between Benji and Red. How does humor play a role in their strong bond? Explain why Benji is so willing to share the woods with Red. How does the Madman of Piney Woods seal the friendship between the boys?

INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Explain Red's relationship with his grandmother. Red's father suggests that he ask his grandmother about her life before coming to Chatham. Explain what the judge means when he tells Red, "You might get an understanding of the crosses she bears" (p. 64). Contrast Grandmother O'Toole and the Madman of Piney Woods. How does the trauma of the Madman's past explain the way he has chosen to live? What do Benji and the Madman have in common?

At what point does the Madman of Piney Woods become more than just a legend to Benji? How does the Madman owe the peacefulness of his last hours to Benji and Red? Why does the Madman ask to speak with Benji in private?

FEAR

Describe the fear that Benji experiences when he realizes that someone is spying on him in the woods. Why does Red's father say that Grandmother O'Toole is a frightened old woman? Explain what Red's father means when he says that fear kills the human spirit. Explain how the legends of the Madman of Piney Woods and the South Woods Lion Man have instilled fear in the children of Buxton and Chatham. How might what happens at the end of the book change how people talk about the legend of the Madman of Piney Woods?

FREEDOM

There are only seven of the original thirteen settlers of Buxton left. Discuss why Benji thinks they are different from the other citizens of Buxton. Explain why the Madman went south to fight in Mr. Lincoln's army. What price did he pay for his service? How do Benji and Red help set the Madman free?

TRUST

Explain what the Madman means when he tells Benji, "The woods is pulling you in . . . You showed 'em you's worthy of trust" (p. 102). Debate whether Benji ever reveals to his siblings that he can be trusted. How does Curly Bennett trust Red? Red remains in the woods with the Madman while Benji goes for help. What does this single act reveal about trust?

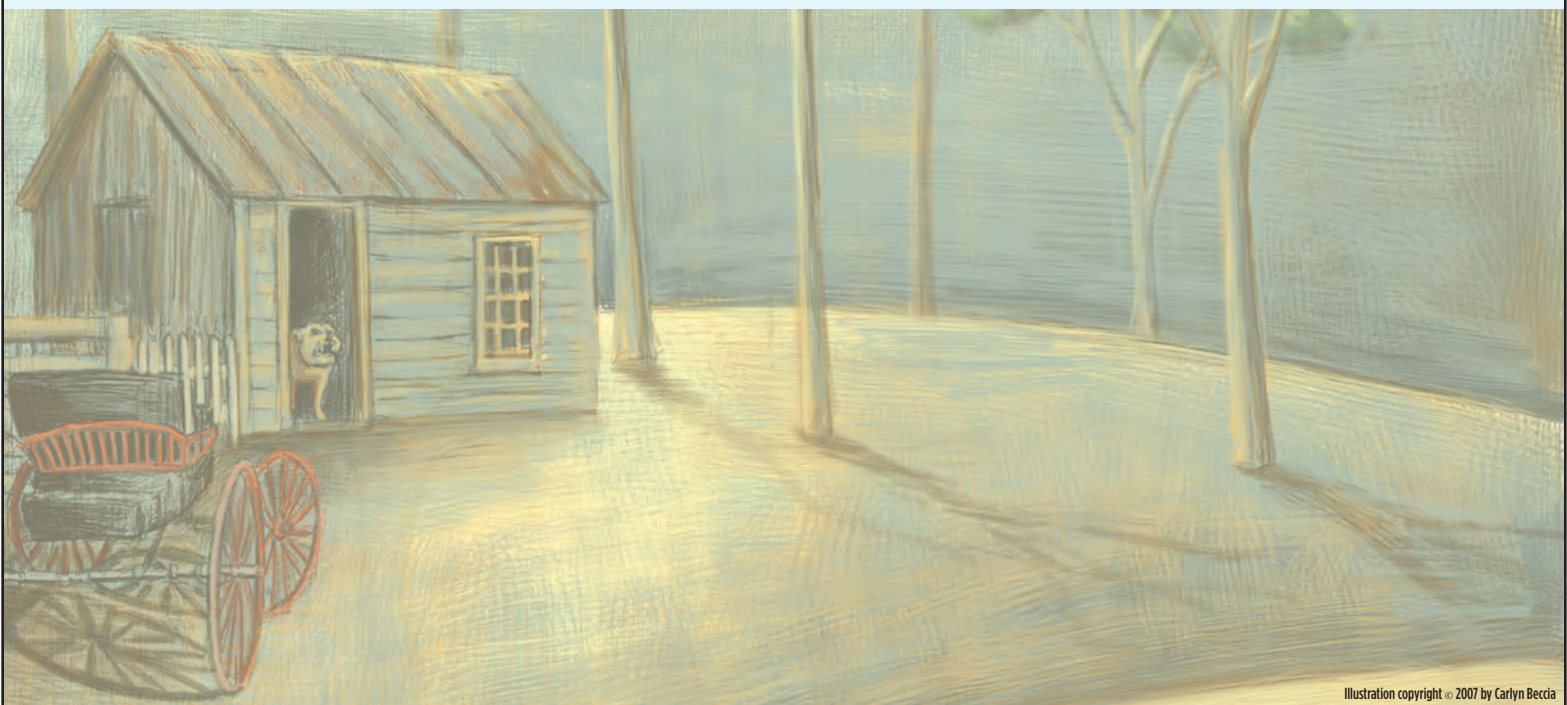
PREJUDICE

Ask students to define prejudice. Discuss Grandmother O'Toole's prejudices against the black Canadians in Buxton. Why does she think that Buxton is cursed? Red is afraid of what his grandmother might say to Benji. At what point does Red realize that Grandmother O'Toole isn't going to change?

VALUES IN CONFLICT

Benji wants to take down the tree house that Patience and Stubby built, but Spencer says that would be like stealing. Why is reconstructing the tree house upside down a similar act? Benji's parents tell him that they won't tolerate lying and thieving. Explain why they think Benji is guilty. How does Benji present himself differently by the end of the novel? What does Cooter have to do with Benji's new sense of values?

RL. 5-7.1, RL. 5-7.2, RL. 5-7.3; SL. 5-7.1, SL. 5-7.3



CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Read aloud “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost: www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171621. Engage the class in a discussion about the themes of the poem. Then have students write an essay that compares the woods in the poem to Benji and the Madman’s woods?

RL. 5-7.9; W. 5-7.2

Red says, “If you want to know a person’s true character, take note of the adjectives they use to describe other people” (p. 331). Divide the class into small groups and ask them to think of adjectives to describe the following characters: Benji, Red, Stubby, Patience, Spencer, Curly Bennett, the Mayor (Elijah Freeman), the Madman (Cooter Bixby), and Grandmother O’Toole. Ask students to use the adjectives and write a character sketch of each character. W. 5-7.4

Explain what the following is a metaphor for: “This is my classroom right here. And these are my teachers” (p. 204). Then write a metaphor that best describes Benji’s feelings toward the Madman, or Mr. B (for Cooter Bixby), as Benji now calls him, at the end of the novel. RL. 5-7.4; L. 5-7.5

SOCIAL STUDIES

Read about African American soldiers in the Civil War: www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/timeline/lincolns-soldiers/. Think about the Madman, Cooter Bixby, and his contribution to “Mr. Lincoln’s army.” Then write a tribute that might be featured on a similar website. Encourage peer editing for clarity, spelling, and grammar.

W. 5-7.3, W. 5-7.5

Learn about the Fort Pillow Massacre by doing research in books or on educational websites, starting with the following: www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/fort-pillow-massacre. Then write a newspaper article that Benji might write about this historic battle and Cooter Bixby’s involvement in the event. Remember to include who, what, when, and how. W. 5-7.3, W. 5-7.7, W. 5-7.8

SCIENCE

Read about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder on the following website: www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-easy-to-read/index.shtml. Then sponsor a class debate that addresses the question: Was the Madman of Piney Woods a victim of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? Refer to evidence from the novel when stating opinions. SL. 5-7.3, SL. 5-7.4

ART

Ask students to use the description of the Madman of Piney Woods in the novel and paint a portrait of him against the backdrop of “his woods” that might hang in Mayor Elijah’s office. RL. 5-7.3

VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

Students should be encouraged to jot down unfamiliar words and try to define them using clues from the context. Such words may include: *impudent* (p. 14), *revelatory* (p. 15), *carbuncle* (p. 19), *forensics* (p. 24), *redundant* (p. 31), *intemperate* (p. 32), *opined* (p. 86), *apparition* (p. 105), *epiphany* (p. 111), *changeling* (p. 122), *abomination* (p. 151), *ethereal* (p. 161), *provocation* (p. 161), *facetious* (p. 200), *paradigm* (p. 206), *avocation* (p. 216), *pestilence* (p. 219), *trepidations* (p. 237), *false* (p. 311), *venomous* (p. 331), and *resilient* (p. 350). L. 5-7.4

CONNECTING THE NOVELS

Christopher Paul Curtis is a master storyteller and uses humor to communicate his message. Discuss whether Curtis’ humor is conveyed more through character or through episodic scenes in the novels. Read aloud passages from the novels to support opinions.

RL. 5-7.1, RL. 5-7.3; SL. 5-7.4

Ask students to write a paper that traces Elijah’s character from his childhood in *Elijah of Buxton* to adulthood in *The Madman of Piney Woods*. Use direct quotes to support claims. Encourage peer editing for spelling, grammar, and clarity. RL. 5-7.3; W. 5-7.4, W. 6-7.5

Several of Curtis’s novels have been staged for live theater or film. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to select a favorite chapter from one of the novels and write it as a one-act play. Have a speaker set the stage, using Standard English. Perform the play for the class.

W. 5-7.3; SL. 5-7.6