

Grades
3 - 7

DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE BUXTON CHRONICLES

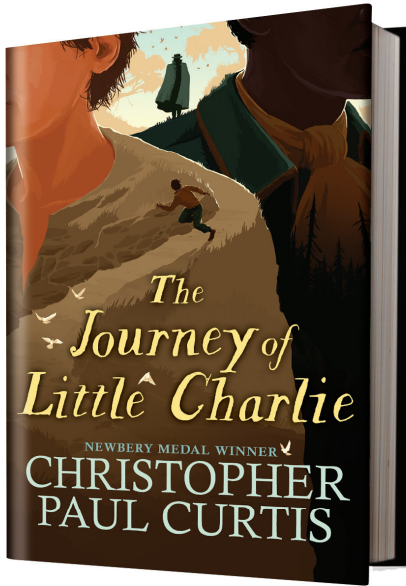
"Curtis' storytelling style shines... it paints an unflinchingly honest picture of the past, while providing a glimmer of empowerment and hope."

—*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

by Newbery Medal Winner

CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS

From the Author's Note, *The Journey of Little Charlie*



I first became aware of Buxton and its outsized importance to both Canadian and American history while doing research for two other books, *Elijah of Buxton* and *The Madman of Piney Woods*. I intended to set *Little Charlie* there as well, but the story had other ideas.

I came across an article published by Mary Ann Shadd Cary in a newspaper called the *Provincial Freeman* in September 1858. Shadd described a young African American boy whose family had lived in Canada for years who was (unbeknownst to him) being taken by train back into the US by a slave catcher. A white resident of London, Ontario, saw the two at a train station and became suspicious. He telegraphed ahead and, during its stop in Chatham, Ontario, the train was overtaken by a very large group of black and white people from Buxton and Chatham known as the Buxton Vigilance Committee. The boy, Sylvanus Demarest, was freed.

This article raised so many questions in my mind, chief among them this: How did this boy not know what was happening to him? Finding no other sources to research, I decided to answer my own questions by writing a novel about the incident, knowing nothing more about Sylvanus than his name.

So that's where I was going to go with *Little Charlie*. I was going to tell in alternating chapters the story of two boys: one black, Sylvanus Demarest, and one white, Little Charlie Bobo. I'd hoped to explore how much each was a product of his own environment and times, as well as to try and analyze what goes into making a human being do something courageous.

But once I started pinning Little Charlie to the page, once I got to know his voice and personality, I knew this was *his* book. Sylvanus was going to have to wait.

I saw something in Little Charlie and knew, in spite of his circumstances and upbringing, that this was a character capable of doing something very brave, even heroic.

Here was someone who was capable of seeing the lie of what he'd been taught.

Here was someone who possessed great courage to which we all could aspire.

Here was someone who, when presented with a great historic injustice, might have shaken his head and muttered, "Isn't that terrible?"—but instead of those words being the end of his reaction, they were the beginning, and he decided to cross a line, to step over into the ranks of the one-tenth-of-one-percent who really *would* initiate something brave.

A step that is available to all of us.

Christopher Paul Curtis

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

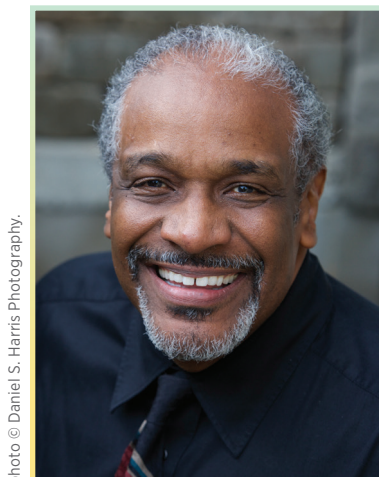


photo © Daniel S. Harris Photography.

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. *Elijah of Buxton*, the first of the books in the world of Buxton, 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.

SCHOLASTIC READS PODCAST



Don't miss this special Scholastic Reads Podcast, hosted by Suzanne McCabe, Scholastic Editor-at-Large as she speaks with Christopher Paul Curtis, the author of many beloved, award-winning books for young readers! Listen as he talks about his newest book, *The Journey of Little Charlie*, the latest installment in the Buxton Chronicles. Christopher talks about his love of history, his childhood in Flint, MI, and why humor is a crucial element of his heart-wrenching books.

Episode available here: <http://oomscholasticblog.com/podcast/christopher-paul-curtis-learning-history>

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**SCHOLASTIC READS
PODCAST**

..... Episode #56: Christopher Paul Curtis: Learning from History

**"It is so important that we
look at each other and
realize the things we have
in common are so much
more important."**

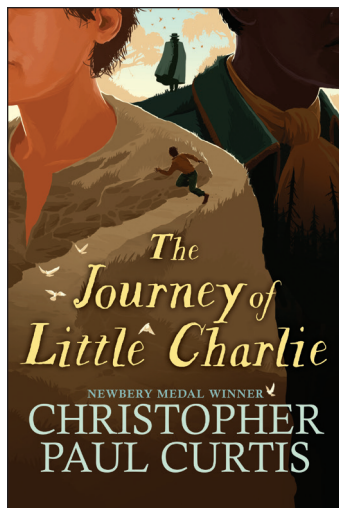
- Christopher Paul Curtis,
author of *The Journey of Little Charlie*

LISTEN >

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR

The Journey of Little Charlie

Hardcover: 978-0-545-15666-0 • \$16.99 | Ebook: 978-1-338-16400-8 • \$10.99



ABOUT THE BOOK

Twelve-year-old Charlie is down on his luck: His sharecropper father just died and Cap'n Buck—the most fearsome man in Possum Moan, South Carolina—has come to collect a debt. Fearing for his life, Charlie strikes a deal with Cap'n Buck and agrees to track down some folks accused of stealing from the cap'n and his boss. It's not too bad of a bargain for Charlie... until he comes face-

to-face with the fugitives and discovers their true identities. Torn between his guilty conscience and his survival instinct, Charlie needs to figure out his next move—and soon. It's only a matter of time before Cap'n Buck catches on.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Once the Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1850, it was legal for blacks to be captured in the North and transported South by slave catchers. Read aloud the full Author's Note in the back of the book, and ask students to think about all of the questions Christopher Paul Curtis had after reading the *Provincial Freeman* newspaper article. Pair students and have them research answers to one of those questions. For example, to answer the question of what it was like in 1858, students can research population statistics, politicians, inventions, major news stories, and maps and flags of the time.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

COURAGE

The morning of his first boat and steam locomotive ride, Little Charlie is nervous about going to Canada. How does his new haircut and clothing give him confidence? After returning from Canada, Little Charlie decides to help Syl's parents escape. He could have walked away from everything after waking up in the jail in Chatham; why does he risk his safety one more time?

EMPATHY

In the smith's shop, despite having just been shackled, Syl's mother tells Little Charlie, "I seent in your heart and I knows you ain't gonna do this." (p. 219). Why does Little Charlie feel empathy towards Sylvanus after seeing him interact with his crush, a pretty girl named Michelle? How does spending time with Cap'n Buck allow Little Charlie to feel empathy towards him, despite how evil he is?

INTEGRITY

The Cap'n teaches Little Charlie how to recognize when someone is trying to "fleece" him (p. 96) and also explains that to run a con, "you got to get your mark off balance and keep him that way until it's too late" (p. 167). In what ways does the Cap'n fleece and keep Little Charlie off balance in the book? How does Little Charlie manage to finish his journey with integrity, despite the influence of the Cap'n?

RESPONSIBILITY

Sheriff Jackson tells Little Charlie, "some of the time, responsibility gets put on us when we think we ain't ready for it" (p. 34). How has Little Charlie already shown that he is responsible at the start of the story? Why does the Cap'n choose to depend on Little Charlie, even though he and his mother try to run away?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Ask students to explain the statement in the following sentence: "With them words, *the cap'n had just writ my funeral speech.*" (p. 204). Discuss with them what hyperbole is, then have them find other examples of hyperbole in the novel. Individually or in groups, ask students to choose one of the hyperboles to write at the top of a large sheet of paper, then use the rest of the page to create a poster illustrating the hyperbole.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Read about the United States' Fugitive Slave Act and its impact on Canadian history, starting with: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/fugitive-slave-act-of-1850/>. Research a historical figure mentioned and create a short 100-word biography of the person, highlighting their accomplishments and written as if they are being introduced to deliver a major speech.

MATH

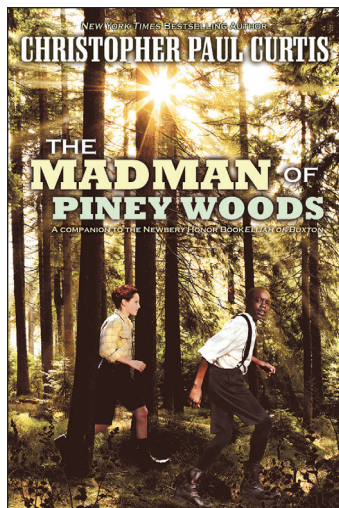
Using context clues, calculate how many days Little Charlie's journey takes and how many miles he travels; create a timeline. Make predictions, based on Little Charlie's statements, about how far he might travel on his next journey or when he grows up. Create a graph that tracks how much money (and/or debt) Little Charlie and the Cap'n have at different points in time during the story.

TECHNOLOGY

Create an interactive map online that each student can access, and assign them a specific place referenced in the story. Ask students to create a pin for the place they were assigned; have students include a summary of what occurred there in the book and a relevant image, including that in the pinned map if possible.

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR THE **MADMAN** OF **PINEY WOODS**

Hardcover: 978-0-545-15664-6 • \$16.99 | Ebook: 978-0-545-63376-5 • \$4.99



ABOUT THE BOOK

Newbery Medalist Christopher Paul Curtis brings his trademark humor and heart to the story, told in alternating chapters, of two very different boys who join forces to uncover a mystery in the woods. Benji and Red couldn't be more different. They aren't friends. They don't even live in the same town. But their fates are entwined. A chance meeting leads the boys to discover that they

have more in common than meets the eye. Both of them have encountered a strange presence in the forest, watching them, tracking them. Could the Madman of Piney Woods be real? In a tale brimming with intrigue and adventure, Christopher Paul Curtis returns to the vibrant world he brought to life in *Elijah of Buxton*.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

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. Read aloud *The Legend of John Henry* and discuss its elements. In small groups, use books from the library or sites on the Internet to locate and read one legend specific to your state or region. Discuss what this legend tells you about the culture at the time, how it reflects values and ideas of the region, and what people think about this legend now.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

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.

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?

FEAR

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. How have the legends of the Madman of Piney Woods and the South Woods Lion Man instilled fear in the children of Buxton and Chatham? How might people talk about the legend of the Madman of Piney Woods at the end of the book?

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?

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?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Explain the idiom in the sentence: "You got your *foot in the door* and now it's up to you" (p. 115). Find idiomatic expressions in the novel and ask students to research their origins. 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). Have students think of adjectives to describe Benji, Red, Stubby, Patience, Spencer, Curly Bennett, the Mayor (Elijah Freeman), the Madman (Cooter Bixby), and Grandmother O'Toole, and then write a character sketch of each character.

SOCIAL STUDIES

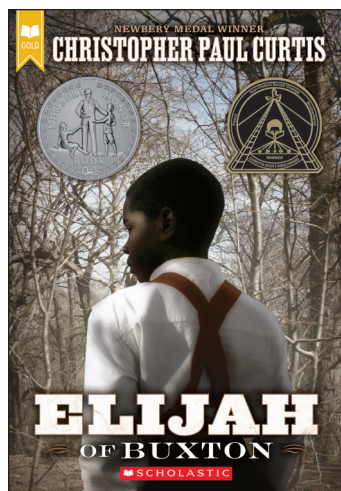
Show *Bottom Rail on Top*: <http://www.pbs.org/video/civil-war-bottom-rail-top/>. Think about the Madman, Cooter Bixby, and his contribution to the Civil War. Write a tribute that could be featured on a plaque in Buxton. Learn about the Fort Pillow Massacre, starting with this site: <http://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/fort-pillow-massacre>. Ask students to compose an article, like Benji might write, about Cooter Bixby's involvement in this battle.

ART

Use the description of the Madman of Piney Woods in the novel to create a portrait of him against the backdrop of "his woods" either in a traditional format (painting, drawing) or via another form of visual art.

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS FOR **ELIJAH** OF BUXTON

HC: 978-0-439-02344-3 • \$16.99 | PB: 978-0-439-02345-0 • \$7.99 | Ebook: 978-0-545-28119-5 • \$4.99



ABOUT THE BOOK

In master storyteller Christopher Paul Curtis's Newbery Honor novel, eleven-year-old Elijah lives in Buxton, Canada, a settlement of runaway slaves near the American border. Elijah's the first child in town to be born free, and he ought to be famous just for that—not to mention for being the best at chunking rocks and catching fish. Unfortunately, all that most people see is a

“fra-gile” boy who’s scared of snakes and tends to talk too much. But everything changes when a former slave steals money from Elijah’s friend, who has been saving to buy his family out of captivity in the South. Now it’s up to Elijah to track down the thief—and his dangerous journey just might make a hero out of him, if only he can find the courage to get back home.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Engage the class in a discussion about the Underground Railroad. What do they already know about it? In what ways was it like, and not 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.

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?

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.

INTEGRITY

Mr. Leroy knocks Elijah Freeman down, yelling at him for using a foul word, but then he shows and tells him about the scars that he has from slavery. Why is Elijah the one who apologizes? Elijah tries his best, and he is devastated that he can’t save Mrs. Chloe and the others. Why then does he remark, “my conscience was chewing at me and choking on my guts” (p. 325)?

RESILIENCE

Elijah is frequently called “fra-gile”, and he wants to have more control of his emotions; however, his feelings don’t stop him from taking action. How does Elijah show resilience when he has to read the letter to Mrs. Holton? After initially fainting when he first encounters enslaved people in the stable, in what heroic ways does Elijah rebound from this moment of fragility?

COURAGE

When Elijah finds himself alone in Detroit after Mr. Leroy passes away, he faces his fears and makes independent choices. Why does Elijah keep searching for the Preacher alone instead of going home to Buxton for help? How does Elijah show courage when he turns Jingle Boy around and returns to the stable for the last time?

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. Select a favorite scene that involves Elijah, Cooter, or the Preacher and write a simile that describes the situation.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Read about people of the Underground Railroad on the following website: pathways.thinkport.org/library/people.cfm. Select one of the lesser-known people identified on the site and write a tribute to that person from Elijah’s point of view. Use photographs and maps to enhance the tribute. If possible, post your writing on the schoolwide network for other students to read.

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.

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.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS FOR THE BUXTON CHRONICLES

THE **MADMAN** OF **PINEY WOODS**

ELIJAH OF BUXTON

The Journey of Little Charlie

CONNECTING THE NOVELS

After reading all the Buxton novels, have students create triple Venn diagrams where each circle represents one of the books; compare and contrast elements of the stories using the spaces in the Venn diagrams. Identify web tools where students can create crossword puzzles with their vocabulary words and definitions. Form students into groups and ask them to write and perform one-act plays in which characters from different books interact with each other. Create timelines and maps that show where and when the stories connect and overlap.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

HUMOR

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

GROWING UP

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.

COURAGE, FREEDOM, FRIENDSHIP, INTEGRITY, and RESILIENCE

Discuss how these themes overlap in all the Buxton novels. Have each student select a theme that appeals to them and list examples of it from all three stories. Turn these lists into poems, use them for brainstorming essay topics, or revise them into scripts for podcasts and book talks.

VOCABULARY/USE OF LANGUAGE

Before using a dictionary, have students use context clues to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words, such as the ones listed in each of the books as follows:

The Journey of Little Charlie

automaton (p. 3), vexed (p. 6), commence (p. 15), ponder (p. 16), cleave (p. 23), deadweight (p. 27), bogus (p. 32), ornery (p. 37), buckboard (p. 51), trickster (p. 52), inkling (p. 55), yokel (p. 57), vile (p. 59), bushwhack (p. 65), rickets (p. 84), peculiar (p. 90), reprobate (p. 92), sideboard (p. 116), gumption (p. 129), blemish (p. 135), chiggers (p. 144), calico (p. 152), keen (p. 161), premonition (p. 171), vigilance (p. 188), rue (p. 189), daft (p. 192), britches (p. 201), rucksack (p. 207), overwrought (p. 209), chafed (p. 229), bearings (p. 234)

The Madman of Piney Woods

impudent (p. 14), carbuncle (p. 19), forensics (p. 24), intemperate (p. 32), shenanigans (p. 36), humane (p. 66), gluttony (p. 81), opined (p. 86), apparition (p. 105), epiphany (p. 111), changeling (p. 122), monotone (p. 138), abomination (p. 151), ethereal (p. 161), facetious (p. 200), paradigm (p. 206), impartial (p. 211), avocation (p. 216), pestilence (p. 219), trepidations (p. 237), falsetto (p. 311), venomous (p. 331), eschew (p. 362)

Elijah of Buxton

daft (p. 8), conjure (p. 31), blaspheming (p. 41), brogans (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), eavesdrop (p. 257)

This guide supports Common Core and other state and next generation standards. See below for the specific Common Core standards addressed in this guide.

Reading Literature. Key Ideas and Details: 5-7.1,2,3; Craft and Structure 6-7.4; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 5-7.9;
Reading Informational Text Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: 5-7.7

Language. Vocabulary Acquisition and Use: 5-7.4,5

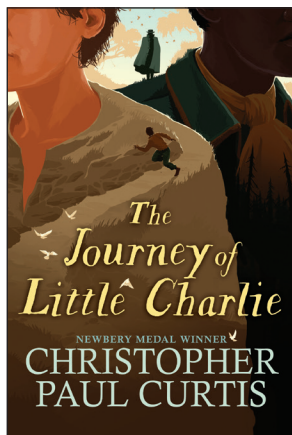
History/Social Studies. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: 6-8.7,8

Speaking and Listening. Comprehension and Collaboration: 5-7.1,3; Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas: 5-7.4,6

Writing. Text Types and Purposes: 5-7.2,3; Production and Distribution of Writing: 5-7.4,5,6;
Research to Build and Present Knowledge: 5-7.7,8,9

Discussion guide written by Deimosa Webber-Bey, Senior Library Manager, Scholastic Library and Archive; Coretta Scott King Book Awards Committee, Publications Chair; Black Caucus of the American Library Association, Fundraising Committee. Contributions from Pat Scales, Children's Literature Consultant.

THE BUXTON CHRONICLES

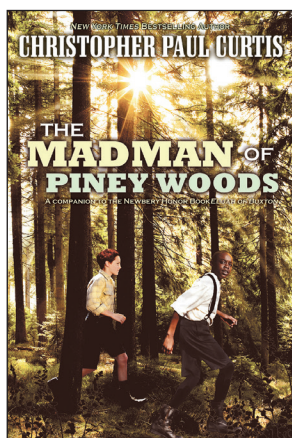


The Journey of Little Charlie

Hardcover: 978-0-545-15666-0 • \$16.99
Ebook: 978-1-338-16400-8 • \$10.99

Christopher Paul Curtis brings his trademark humor and heart to the story of a boy struggling to do right in the face of history's cruelest evils.

- ★ "This is an old story demanding to be told a new way, and master storyteller Curtis proves just the one to do it."—*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, starred review
- ★ "A characteristically lively and complex addition to the historical fiction of the era from Curtis."—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★ "Curtis's unsparing novel pulls no punches as it illuminates an ugly chapter of American history."—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review
- ★ "A thought-provoking book from a master storyteller."—*School Library Journal*, starred review
- ★ "Curtis's ability to intertwine humor and tragedy, change pacing effectively, and find hope in the direst of circumstances is masterful."—*Horn Book*, starred review



The Madman of Piney Woods

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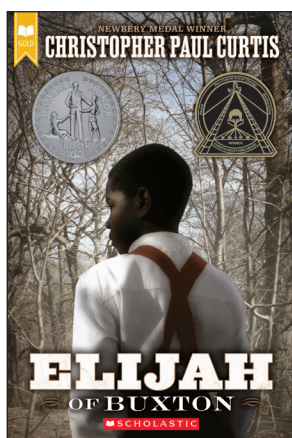
A *Horn Book* Best Book of the Year

A *New York Times* Notable Children's Book of the Year

A New York Public Library 100 Children's Books for Reading and Sharing Selection

Booklist Editors' Choice

- ★ "A delight...quintessential Curtis."—*Booklist*, starred review
- ★ "A journey of revelation and insight... profoundly moving yet also at times very funny."—*Horn Book Magazine*, starred review
- ★ "Beautiful storytelling as only Curtis can do it."—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★ "Curtis masterfully interweaves goofy family vignettes, memorable characters, and thought-provoking themes into a page-turner with appeal to multiple audiences and tastes."—*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, starred review



Elijah of Buxton

Hardcover: 978-0-439-02344-3 • \$16.99
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In the book that introduces us to the world of Buxton, eleven-year-old Elijah, the first child in the town who is born into freedom, embarks on a dangerous journey to America in pursuit of a thief and discovers the unimaginable horrors of the life his parents fled.

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."—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★ "A fine, original novel from a gifted storyteller."—*Booklist*, starred review
- ★ "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



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