

• Meet the Author •

Christopher Paul Curtis

Nick Glass of www.TeachingBooks.net interviewed Christopher Paul Curtis at BookExpo Canada 2007 about Curtis's novel *Elijah of Buxton*.



***Elijah of Buxton* offers readers a new perspective on the issue of slavery in our nation's history. This book tells the remarkable story of Elijah—a first-generation free-born child and the son of escaped slaves—who lives in the slavery-free town of Buxton, Ontario near the U.S.-Canadian border. What circumstances led you to examine slavery from this vantage point?**

CPC: I'd always wanted to write a book about slavery, but I couldn't think of a way to approach it. I had always thought that it would be unimaginable to write a book from the point of view of a slave. I couldn't imagine putting myself in the position of someone who's been so debased and so dehumanized. But Buxton was a place where slaves had a different experience.

What led you to discover the town of Buxton?

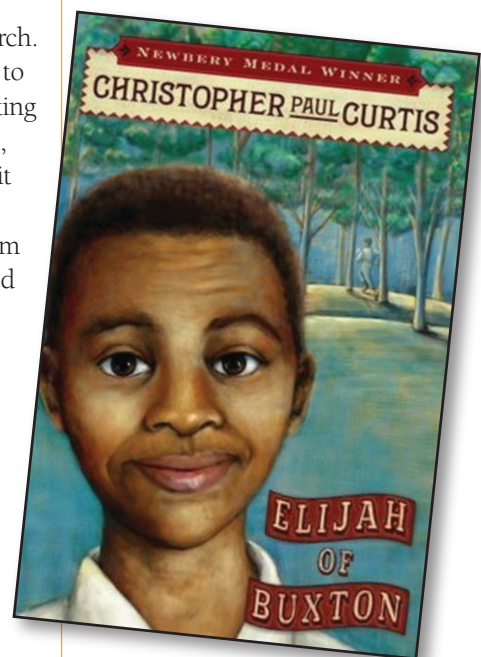
CPC: Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew about the town of Buxton, but I had forgotten its significance. I lived 40 miles away from Buxton—a town that was historically a safety zone for freed slaves—but I never really put it together in a meaningful way. It was the experience of visiting the actual geographical place of Buxton that made me think about putting the story there. I was driving to Toronto one day and I saw a sign that said, "Buxton: five kilometers," and the sign triggered memories from history class. I took the Buxton exit and I drove around and got a feel for the place. Then I went home and got on the Internet and did a lot of research. From my experience of going to Buxton and subsequently visiting its history museum, I thought, "These are people who made it out of slavery, so maybe I can write a story about slavery from that angle." That's what seemed to work for me.

Can you talk more about the historical significance of Buxton?

CPC: The town of Buxton, Ontario was established in 1849 as a safe haven for freed slaves. The location

was ideal because it was near Windsor, Ontario which is on the border between Canada and the U.S. Originally, slaves escaping from the United States just crossed the Detroit River (separating Detroit and Windsor) and found freedom in Windsor. However, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it a requirement for white people to find out if the black person that they were confronting was a slave or had been a slave, and it was a requirement that you hold that person until you found out.

Because of this law, people were kidnapping people from Windsor and taking them south and selling them as slaves. Windsor was basically too close



to the border, so that's how Buxton got established. Going forty miles farther into Canada to the town of Buxton provided a protective cushion. Buxton became a safety zone from the Fugitive Slave Act.

The rich history of Buxton provided a dramatic setting for this book. How did you develop the identity of Elijah and his place in the Buxton community?

CPC: I thought about what it would be like for Elijah to be a first-generation freeborn child. To me, there is a contrast between the freedom of his childhood in Buxton and the painful history of his parents' experiences as slaves in the United States. Elijah has to deal with the fact that his parents were slaves, and the fact that at any time people from America could come, as they did, and kidnap people from Buxton and try to take them back to the United States. This tension between Elijah's innocence and his awareness of being in a very serious situation is present throughout the story.

How did the contrast between Elijah's viewpoint and his parents' viewpoint shape your personal understanding of slavery?

CPC: Writing this book through the eyes of a ten-year-old who was born free gave me the ability to look at slavery from a different perspective. Elijah didn't experience slavery firsthand but was trying to understand it. As

a writer trying to understand slavery, I could relate to Elijah. Here was someone who was not a slave but at the same time had sympathy and empathy for who his people were and how they had freed themselves.

I wanted to show how Elijah came to understand the meaning of slavery from his parents. I thought about how his parents would explain what slavery was about. I wondered how they would do it because it was so close to them: so personal, and so horrible. I think the fact that Elijah was free from birth turned him into a different kind of person than his parents were.

Can you describe other ways in which you imagined the lives of these characters?

CPC: The main thing I thought about was what the day-to-day life would be like for a person who had been a slave, but who was now free. I wondered what their everyday state of mind would be like. Elijah's parents would have been tremendously affected by their experience of escaping slavery. Nowadays we know so much about Posttraumatic Stress Disorder that we can identify some of what they must have experienced. I imagined that even after all of that, there would still be the humanity.

There are equally strong comic and tragic elements in *Elijah of Buxton*. How do you go about weaving these threads together?

CPC: To me, humor and tragedy are totally intertwined. Every joke that you can think of has a thread of something horrible going on in it. Humor has always been a way to deal with tragedy. If something horrible happens in the world, within 15 minutes there are sidesplitting jokes about it on the Internet. I think that young people tend to be drawn to the funny side of things. Particularly, young people don't always see the importance of certain events in the way that adults do—they just don't have the experience yet to grasp the significance. Therefore, they can find the humor in tragic situations easier than adults.

In *Elijah of Buxton*, you created a shocking and hilarious scene in which Frederick Douglass comes to Buxton. While there, Elijah has the misfortune of getting sick on him. What can you share about the development of this episode?

CPC: When I've spoken to groups and I explain this scene, I get these looks that say, "Throw up on Frederick Douglass! He's an icon!" But by writing this scene, I am pointing out that this icon is a person. He was a human being and these things happen. Rather than making fun of him or degrading him, I think that this fictitious incident in the book brings out his humanity. We get a glimpse of Frederick Douglass as a person, and not just a historical figure.

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In what other ways did you blend fact and fiction for the sake of *Elijah's* story?

CPC: As a writer, I think that it's essential to mix fiction and fact. I don't try to do anything that is going to change any historical happenings, but I have to fill in all the things that happened, even if they didn't happen in real life. I have John Brown and Frederick Douglass coming to Buxton at the same time. Research will show that they were never there at the same time. But with things like that, I'll take liberties because it adds to the story and it makes it more interesting. Readers know that it's not a completely historically accurate story. It's fiction. It's a novel.

The role of education in the lives of freed slaves plays an important role in *Elijah of Buxton*. How did education affect individuals as well as the community?

CPC: Education for the newly freed slave was the key to freedom. One of the reasons Buxton succeeded as a community was because it was beautifully set up. Buxton was established by Reverend William King, a white Presbyterian minister from Philadelphia. This minister had very strict rules that the people of Buxton had to follow. He mandated that everybody had to learn to read and write.

There had been other colonies established for escaped slaves and most of them failed. These other towns collapsed because the former slaves didn't have the skills

for making a town work. If you can read and write well, then you can learn how to do pretty much anything. African Americans who were enslaved were not allowed to learn to read and write upon punishment of death. It is human nature that when you get the chance to take something that has been held away from you, you really go for it. Reverend William King realized, and the people of Buxton came to realize, that education was and still is the key.

What are your thoughts on the role of education in today's times?

CPC: Education is the one thing that can't be taken away from you. Reading and writing are the two greatest skills that we'll ever learn in school. If that's all you learn in school, you're doing all right. I think it's tragic what's going on in the United States now with education. Lots of kids are not taking advantage of educational opportunities that people 150 years ago would have died for. In a lot of ways, we've let the legacy down. We have not followed through and maintained the importance of education as we should have.

The scene in *Elijah of Buxton* in which a mother hands her baby to a twelve-year-old boy speaks volumes of the opportunity to escape. What were your thoughts while writing this emotional scene?

CPC: This scene was heart-wrenching to write. The mother tested Elijah to see if he was capable of doing it. Rather than just give her baby to an average

kid who wouldn't know what to do with it, she knew she could trust Elijah. Through Elijah, she could give this child a life. It was the ultimate sacrifice for her and it was the ultimate gift Elijah gave her. She would be free, and her child would have the chance for freedom.

Can you describe the role of the Liberty Bell in the history of Buxton?

CPC: Buxton was a very well-known community throughout the United States. Slave communities knew about it. Freed African-American communities knew about it. As a gesture of gratitude and appreciation of what was going on in Buxton, a group of former slaves in Pittsburgh put money together and cast a 500-pound brass bell that was given to the Reverend King and it was called the Liberty Bell. Every time slaves who escaped from the United States came to Buxton, the bell would be rung as a way of bringing them into their new life.

When the town of Buxton was created, it was on a plot of land that was three miles by six miles. One of the conditions put on people who came was that you had to buy a 50-acre plot of land as a minimum. There was a covenant that land could not be sold to white people because the Reverend King felt as though speculators would come in and take advantage of these people. Therefore, for the longest time Buxton was pretty much a completely black community.

When did that change?

CPC: In the 1920s, a lot of the land was sold to white people. North Buxton became a black community and South Buxton became a white community. When the church was sold to a congregation in South Buxton, in a tremendous blunder, they sold the Liberty Bell along with the church. Since then, the bell has been in an enclosed steeple. I've never seen a steeple that had no opening in it, but this bell is enclosed. The bell is rung every Sunday but no one can go see the bell because of "safety concerns." The government of Canada actually provided \$20,000 to have a replica made, since they would not give the bell to the history museum. When they went to take measurements of the bell, they wouldn't let them measure the bell for casting, so they had to make up a replica of the bell. I can't understand why the people won't share the bell or give up the bell. I think it's kind of emblematic.

What most captivated you about Buxton and inspired the story of Elijah?

CPC: To me, the real attraction of Buxton is not the bell or the museum. It is to look at the land see the place where people toiled. When I look at a 50-acre plot of land, it looks huge to me. I can't imagine pulling every tree up and with a mule and doing that.

I look at that land and imagine the irrigation ditches that the former slaves dug ... it's almost palpable ... it's almost in the air the sense of pride that they must have felt. I imagine how it must have felt to be able to say for the first time, "This land is mine. This is something that somebody's not going to take away from me. This is something that I have worked for, and this is the fruit of my labors." That is what struck me when I first went to Buxton.

The land in Buxton is still being farmed. I'm not a person who believes that there's an air to things, but there's an air there.

There's an air to being in Buxton. As an American, and as a person who lives in Canada, I feel great pride. I look at that, and I think these people really accomplished something.

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For teaching resources about Elijah of Buxton, visit www2.scholastic.com/browse/book.jsp?id=4743.

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Books by Christopher Paul Curtis

- ***Bucking the Sarge*. Random House, 2004.**
- ***Bud, Not Buddy*. Random House, 1999.**
- ***Elijah of Buxton*. Scholastic Press, 2007.**
- ***Mr. Chickee's Funny Money*. Random House, 2005.**
- ***Mr. Chickee's Messy Mission*. Random House, 2007.**
- ***The Watsons Go to Birmingham — 1963*. Random House, 1995.**