



Don't Take a Ride in Darnell Dixon's Rivy Dog of Love:

Christopher Paul Curtis Talks About His New Book, *Bucking the Sarge*

Only one thing can be more exciting than reading an adolescent novel that is so new, it isn't even on the shelves; that one thing is interviewing the author of that book! After years of reading *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963* with my YA lit students at Utah Valley State University, imagine my delight when I was given the opportunity to interview Christopher Paul Curtis about his new novel, *Bucking the Sarge*. The book, an attention-grabbing story about the life and challenges of Luther T. Farrell, had my interest firm in its grip from the early pages.

I tuned Sparky out and started worrying about what my mother, a.k.a. the Sarge, was gonna say when she found out all my stuff had been ripped off. No, let me break that down; it wasn't what she was gonna say that had me worried, it was what she was gonna do. (2)

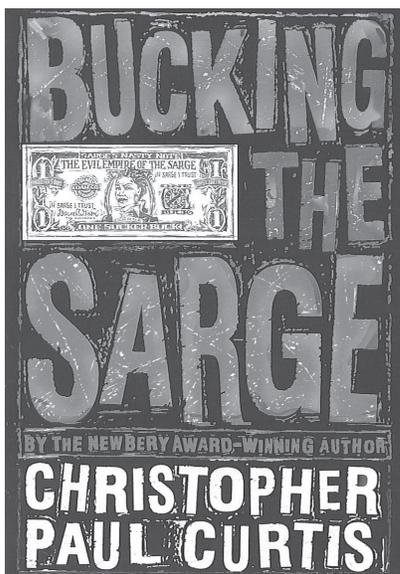
At first blush, this read like beautiful and vintage Christopher Paul Curtis, but it didn't take long to feel a distinct difference. With the introduction of Sparky, rest homes, science fairs, scandal, and a parent who would never win the "Mother



of the Year" award, I knew this was also a new Christopher Paul Curtis: an older adolescent-writing, new-angle-on-life-writing, and visceral-to-the-bone-writing Christopher Paul Curtis. After such a great read, interviewing the author about his new book was just frosting on the cake. In between his many public appearances (Christopher is among the most loved of YA authors), Mr. Curtis kindly took the time to visit with me about *Bucking the Sarge*:

KS: This book is even better than your previous two, both of which were unbelievably successful, both in popularity and in awards. As you move through your career as a writer, do you feel like the experience of writing a book is evolving in any way for you? How was the experience of writing this one different from the previous two? How is your writing changing over time?

CPC: I can't say this was the most difficult book for me to write, there was too much enjoyment in doing it. *Bucking the Sarge* did



take much, much longer than the other two, and I can't for the life of me figure out why. I'd like to blame it all on Jerry Spinelli. Right after *Bud, not Buddy* won the Newbery Medal, he told me that I was going to be so busy that I could forget about doing any writing for a year. I just carried it on for another three years beyond the "Spinelli Year."

KS: Nursing homes are certainly not common experience for the majority of teens and can seem a bit macabre or creepy, and so probably does the idea of working in one to a teenager. What did you want to capture about that experience and where did you get a working knowledge of the physical care provided to adults in that type of setting?

CPC: I lived next door to a nursing home in Flint, Michigan, and the man I hung car doors with at the G.M. auto factory worked in one after hours. I saw both extremes of treatment of the "clients." Some people who cared for the clients were kind to them but others were brutal. I think it was the perfect world to put Luther into to show the horrible amount of responsibility that had been dumped on him and the dignified way he handled it.

KS: Luther doesn't think about running away, nor even seem to harbor visible hatred for his mother despite how she exploits him. Why not?

CPC: I think the Sarge has Luther so cowed that striking back is

way on the bottom of any list he would develop. He has seen her power and knows there is no way he can fight it. Also everyone keeps telling him how lucky he is.

KS: When Luther and his friend, Sparky, go with Little Chicago and Darnell Dixon, Sarge's flunkies, to evict a family from their apartment, it all becomes very personal for Luther when he discovers that one of the two kids in the family is Bo Travis, a classmate of his. Despite a fairly unstable living situation, Bo is a good student who was last year's third place winner in the science fair. In the act of discarding all the family's possessions to prepare the apartment for the new tenants, Luther learns that KeeKee, Bo's little sister, has won Citizen of the Month, all A's and B's on her report card, and the Book Worm Award for the month of April, and was her school's spelling champion. Could a kid from an evicted household really be such a good student?

CPC: Oh yeah, I think there is an age when the child finally gives up and doesn't want to win anything or do anything. But, KeeKee was still young enough that the weight of her situation hadn't crushed the joy of learning and discovering new things out of her. I know several children who are from absolutely horrible homes who do very well in school. I don't think their future prospects are very good, but at this time the spark of youth is carrying them forward.

KS: You make great use of conversation in your books. Do you rehearse dialog in your writing before you proceed to "write" conversations? (rehearse the slang and idioms?)

CPC: I don't so much rehearse it as I write it and re-write it and then do it all again. As a writer I have the luxury of going back over things a million times until they are right, it may appear (I hope) spontaneous but it's really the end product of a long process.

KS: Each of your books seems to be built around chapters. Do they help you organize your thoughts, almost like an outline? Do you have all the chapter titles determined before the end of the book, and then flesh out the chapters as you continue writing?

CPC: I do the opposite, actually. I name the chapters after they are written. That's one of the really fun parts of writing and I use it as a reward for finishing.

KS: Any new accomplishments at your house?

CPC: I'm working on a novel that I'm absolutely in love with called *Elijah of Buxton*. It takes place in Ontario, Canada, in the 1860s, and I have never had a writing experience like this; the book is flying out of me!

KS: We can't wait to read it! Thank you so much for your fabulous books, your willingness to speak person to person with young adult audiences all over, and for

sharing your thoughts on
Bucking the Sarge.

CPC: You're welcome.

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The only way we readers can make the wait for *Elijah of Buxton* more endurable is to pick up a copy of *Bucking the Sarge* during the wait.

Our interview with Mr. Curtis only begins to capture the mood and essence of his new novel. Only in the reading can we travel with Luther T. from old homes into new and better places, only in the reading can we laugh at the hilarious capers of boys growing up in Flint, Michigan, and only in the reading that we recognize Luther's

ability to make sense of the world:

As I pulled onto the expressway I couldn't help thinking of that great philosopher, whose name escapes me at the moment, who once said, "He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day (259).

And it is in the reading that we now have more characters to root for. Thank you, Mr. Curtis!

Review of *Bucking the Sarge*

Once again, Christopher Paul Curtis's beloved hometown of Flint, Michigan, provides the setting and (not so beloved) home for his teenage protagonist. In *Bucking the Sarge*, Curtis's latest offering from Wendy Lamb Books (Random House), fifteen-year-old Luther T. Farrell is a young man intent on living life the way he sees fit and bucking the control of his tyrannical mother, the Sarge. The Sarge, so nicknamed for her drill instructor interpersonal style, is just as intent on keeping Luther within the grip of her iron fist where she can exploit him as cheap labor in her string of rental units. Luther and his friend Sparky do odd maintenance jobs for the Sarge, including painting, and cleaning out the possessions of evicted tenants—a task that Luther finds both immoral and distasteful.

Sarge is a greedy and conniving Flint slumlord with considerable influence and property holdings and a talent

for bending others to her will. She has conned a local government official into faking Luther's age on a driver's license so he can work for her government-scamming group home for elderly men. In addition to assorted work on Sarge's other properties, Luther drives the group home van, taking the residents to the doctor and other necessities. Sarge further exploits Luther by requiring he live in the home and provide for the residents' personal needs. He does all this, surely more than a full-time job, while juggling school, the rigors of his beloved science fair, a wanna-be romance with smart Shayla, and his friendship with his hilarious sidekick, Sparky.

Although his mother's scams have provided Luther with wheels, "fifty bucks in [his] wallet at all times . . . and six million dollars . . . in that education fund," credit cards, and some prestige in the neighborhood, Luther wants out.

Winning the science fair for the third year in a row will put him on track for a good college and for a life as one of America's eminent philosophers. While Luther admires the integrity and morality manifested in the words of Socrates and Aristotle, support for his plans are not to be found at home. His cruel and manipulative mother, the Sarge, has other ideas for Luther:

. . . And I know you're the one that's got all these high-and-mighty plans to be a fool-osopher one day, but the truth is that you're gonna be running these houses for me for the rest of your life (pg. 79).

Putting a contemporary and urban twist on this coming-of-age story, Christopher Paul Curtis uses dark humor and parodies of the American economic system to build a story that provides a departure from his former works. This is a new Christopher Paul Curtis, and fifth- and sixth-graders who loved *Bud, Not Buddy* and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*,

1963, are probably not old enough to catch or appreciate all the nuances of the life experience with which Curtis has endowed Luther, nor are all the elements of a story about slum

lords and loan sharks appropriate for that age —this is truly a book for adolescents. An easy yet exceptional story, readers will find *Bucking the Sarge* filled with hilarious antics by resource-

ful kids in the hood, a smart young man who courageously carves out a new future, and a never-ever-expected ending from Luther T. Farrell, a well-mannered and likeable protagonist.

After earning an English and music education degree from Utah State University in Logan, Utah, (Dr.) Kay Smith enjoyed seven years of teaching high school English. In 1993 and 2000 respectively, she earned an M.Ed. and Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from

Brigham Young University. After working ten action-packed years as a secondary principal, she left what she loved and decided to do what she really loved: teach English education on the college level. She currently teaches Young Adult Literature and

Methods of Literacy at Utah Valley State College. She is married to Michael D. Smith, and they are the proud parents of seven children and proud grandparents of six. She can be reached at smithky@uvsc.edu.

