**The Van Gogh Café by Cynthia Rylant**

**Reviewed by Ricki Marking-Camuto**

Cynthia Rylant's The Van Gogh Café is a short, simple read about the magic that occurs in

everyday life. Ten-year-old Clara loves living in Flowers, Kansas with her dad. Every morning before

school, she helps him serve breakfast at the Van Gogh Café.

The Van Gogh Café is located in what used to be a theatre, and Clara thinks that is why so much

magic happens in her dad's café. Whether the odd occurrences are magic or just small, everyday

miracles that are only really noticed by those looking for the fantastic, is debatable. But to Clara,

everything that happens in the Van Gogh Café is extraordinary from an opossum that helps a

widower get a new lease on life to a lost seagull that finally finds its way to California - and

everything in between.

Although short, The Van Gogh Café is an uplifting read that offers readers a quick pick-me-up for

those days when all the magic seems to have disappeared from the world. To Rylant's Clara, there is

always magic at the Van Gogh Café, one just needs to step on in.

The Van Gogh Café by Cynthia Rylant

Reviewed by Sandy Stone

When I was seven or eight year’s old and home sick from school, my mom brought me

two things in bed: a hot cup of Earl Grey tea and this darling book that I always keep

nearby. Of all the books in the entire world, this is the one that stole my heart.

Clara is an imaginative, precocious young girl who lives in Flowers, Kansas with her dad.

They own a cafe on the main street in town, a cafe that was once a theatre. The magic in

those walls still makes funny things happen in the cafe, and Clara notices it all. Like the

possum...

Barely 100 pages, this book can easily be read within an hour. Any time I feel upset, sick,

depressed, or simply bored with life, I escape to the Van Gogh Cafe. It's a dream of a

children's book that will certainly inspire and entertain any adult with an imagination…

The Watson’s Go to Birmingham by Christopher Paul Curtis

Reviewed by Michael Moth

The many adventures of the "Weird Watsons" of Flint, Michigan are recalled in this

book, told from the perspective of 10 year-old Kenny, the middle child. The exploits of

his older brother, Byron, nicknamed "Daddy Cool" by the family, are hilarious, and the

parent’s reactions are even better.

Although mostly a humorous novel, the book also introduces readers to the reality of discrimination and racial tension, culminating with a fictionalized account of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, which claimed the lives of four African American girls, all of whom the book is dedicated to.

The reader has a first-hand account of the emotions that young Kenny experiences, having thought that his younger sister was a victim of the attack. Curtis' debut novel for young readers is a wonderful way to learn about our turbulent past in regards to racial discrimination without being too preachy. A highly recommended read for children ages 8 and older.

The Watson’s Go to Birmingham by Christopher Paul Curtis

Reviewed By Zachary Smith

A voice that's both smart and naive, strong and scared, fourth-grader Kenny Watson tells about his African American family in Flint, Michigan, in 1963. We get to know his strict, loving parents and his tough older brother, who gets into so much trouble his parents, decide to take him back "home" to Birmingham, Alabama, where maybe his strong grandmother will teach him some sense in him.

Several of the family stories are a bit self-conscious (we keep being told we're going to laugh as Dad put on a show and acts the fool), but the relationships aren't idealized. Racism and the civil rights movement are like a soft rumble in the background, especially as the Watsons drive south. Then Kenny's cute little sister is in a Birmingham church when a bomb goes off. She escapes (Curtis doesn't exploit the horror), but we're with Kenny as he dreads that she's part of the rubble.

In this compelling first novel, form and content are one: in the last few chapters, the affectionate situation comedy is suddenly transformed, and we see how racist terror can invade the shelter of home.