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English 112B
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Book Talk-The Contender

Author information/biography

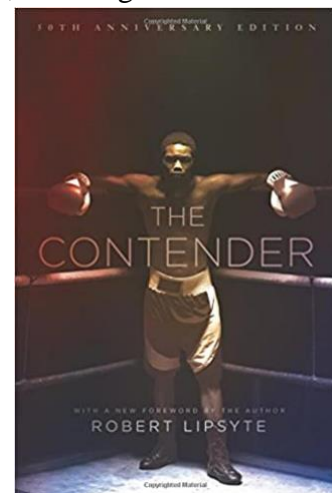


Robert Lipsyte carries two distinct writing lives, one as a journalist and one as an author of fiction. His life as a journalist began in 1957 when in need of a summer job he applied to be an “editorial assistant”. He then became a reporter at 21, and soon after in 1967, *The Contender* was the first YA novel he wrote. Based off people and similar events that happened as a boxing reporter in New York, *The Contender* was a solid stepping stone for the other YA novels that came after. Other popular novels include *The Brave*, *One Fat Summer*, and *The Twinning Project*.

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Summary of the Book

The Contender follows Alfred, a young African-American male growing up in the city of Harlem. With drugs, gangs, and violence lingering nearby, as a high school dropout, Alfred struggles to find his purpose and direction in life. Alfred’s worth is tested time and time again as his family questions the future he is currently building for himself and surrounds himself with “friends” who steal, and are in and out of jail. His grocery store job leading nowhere, he finds himself going to Donatelli’s Gym, a boxing club in Harlem, to escape the friendships that are leading him to nothing but trouble. He soon begins to learn how to box, gain momentum in his life and is energized, yet falls back into partying, using drugs and nearly being arrested. *The Contender* showcases Alfred’s journey against the many adversaries he was put up against, but highlights his determination and grit to build a better future for himself.



Quotes

<p>“You have to start by wanting to be a contender, the man coming up, the man who’s knows there’s a good chance he’ll never get to the top, the man who’s willing to sweat and bleed to get up as high as his legs and his brain and his heart will take him”(33).</p>	<p>This quote embodies essentially the entire theme of the novel and Alfred’s constant fight within himself to change old habits, as well as the challenges against him put forth by others. The idea of being a “contender” instead of a champion highlights the ongoing efforts and journey to grow intellectually and emotionally. It highlights the importance of continuous growth to get where you want but even when you do reach it- there’s still room for more. This is a great quote that highlights identity and self-improvement, 2 of the most important themes of the novel.</p>
<p>“If I could have just talked to James into going to a movie that Friday night. If I just could have thought of something to say at the party when he was looking at me with the junk in his hand”(129).</p>	<p>This quote is significant as it represents Alfred’s battle in not wanting to let his past life and relationships go. As he begins his growth, friends are left behind and this hurts him as he would want them to learn and change their ways too. He is hopeful that James will soon change or get the help he needs, however he is acceptive that as much he is willing to be there for James, James must be willing to help himself first-and this builds guilt and pain within him.</p>
<p>“Now you know, Alfred. Now you know, too” (152).</p>	<p>This quote is important as it’s the climax of the novel. It’s Alfred’s moment of realization that he is a contender and has been all this time throughout the various obstacles he has faced. Mr. Donatelli has seen it in him from the moment he began to box along with earning his mouth guard, the robe, and winning his boxing matches. Now Alfred sees the change within himself and is confident in that he won’t fall back into old friendships that do him no good and has now created a better future for himself and Aunt Pearl.</p>

How might you use this book in a classroom?

While *The Contender* embodies the theme of identity and struggle as highlighted in chapter 6, it can be best tied into chapter four: Books About Real-Life Experiences. I think the constant adversaries Alfred faces like the bullying he endures, the violence, and family trauma he carries can really resonate with students. I think introducing novels that allow students to not fully resonate to but empathize with, allows for assignments like discussions, seminars, and essays to be much more well thought out on their behalf.

Some ways the book could be introduced to a class could be allowing students to write silently for 20 minutes about a personal or family struggle they feel have set them back but are still prideful of. As a teacher you can also join in on the assignment to have students feel comfortable in being open and vulnerable. You as a teacher could share and allow students to also share if they feel comfortable. I think an assignment like this could begin the conversation and also hint at the theme of identity, growth, and a sense of worth within the novel.

I think this novel is suitable for ages 12 and up given that the novel carries themes of drugs, bullying, and self-worth which could be ideal for a student in middle school perhaps 6-8 grade who is beginning to learn who they are and can use Alfred's journey to fuel and motivate the journey of their own. Teens should read this novel because:

- It could allow them to understand other people, their struggles, and those around their community
- It could teach them to persevere through whatever challenges they/or someone they know may be facing
- The novel could bring reassurance to the reader in that they are not alone, and shouldn't be ashamed of their journey

Text Complexity

Quantitative Complexity: According to Lexile and the Dale-Chall tools, the LEXILE RANGE complexity is 690L, and the Dale-Chall gave a final score of 6 making it suitable to read for grades 7-8. *The Contender* is an easy to follow read due to its simplicity, short sentence structure, and lack of complex words.

Qualitative Complexity/ Reader Task Considerations: Given the themes, the language and the subjects of the novel including: family, drugs, gangs, bullying, violence, sports, and mentorship; the complexity and various topics could appeal to young readers in finding their identity and voice both in and out of the classroom. Their unique life experiences among finding who they want to be in life and what is most important to them is what I think best allows them to relate to Alfred and his story. This novel is one that allows for intellectual growth and engages with troubled teens who are trying to turn their life around both for themselves and their family. This novel resonates with Exeter Quality #6: “Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through entanglement of personal lives”. Alfred’s journey is a simple and clear read that highlights obstacles, how to overcome them, and even when you do, it might not all be such a happy ending. Definitely a great read for students grade 7-8.