

*This guide was prepared using the HarperTrophy edition, © 1967. Other editions may differ.*

## SYNOPSIS

**Chap. 1** On a Friday in June, 17-year-old Alfred Brooks contemplates the sky above Harlem and waits for his best friend, James Mosely. Alfred, who lives with his Aunt Pearl, stocks shelves at Epstein's grocery and gives his earnings to his aunt, who also supports three daughters. For companions, he hangs out with Hollis, Sonny, and Major, members of a gang that meets in a dismal basement room. On payday, the boys try to mooch off Alfred, who is the only member with a job.

The gang contemplates the fact that the Epstein brothers close at 8:00 P. M. to attend synagogue. They ridicule Alfred for working for "whitey." He retorts, "They was the only ones gave me a job when I quit school." When the gang plans an impromptu robbery at the store, James asks Alfred to act as lookout. Alfred rejects the invitation and wanders aimlessly down the street.

Henry Johnson, one of Vito Donatelli's protégés at the local gym, shadowboxes. He invites Alfred to observe a workout by Willie Streeter, a prize contender preparing for a fight in Madison Square Garden. The appearance of a police cruiser warns Alfred that the gang has tripped a silent burglar alarm. On the run to save James, Alfred arrives as four carfuls of police investigate. Too late, he learns that one thief is in custody.

Alfred races to the rock, a spot in the park where he and James have rendezvoused for a decade to share friendship and funny stories. Inside a cave under the rock, Alfred flashes back to the night seven years earlier when his father left home and three years later when his mother died of pneumonia. During Alfred's hard times, James remained true. James quit school four months after Alfred quit; the two amuse themselves with movies, but James's main solace is the gang.

Leaving the park without his friend, Alfred walks toward home. Major and Hollis bully him and blame him for the failed robbery that ended with James's arrest. Alfred admits that he forgot to warn them about the silent alarm and crumbles from their pummeling. As police officers patrol the alley, the bullies flee. Alfred crawls into the darkness and faints.

**Chap. 2** On Saturday morning, Alfred awakens in his aunt's bed after Henry and Mr. Johnson carry him to safety. Alfred lamely fibs that a dog knocked him off a stone fence on Lenox Avenue. Aunt Pearl doubts the story. Before leaving for work at Mrs. Elversen's, she asks if James and Alfred were both involved in the attempted robbery and wishes that she could move her family far from tenements and crime. Alfred withdraws under the covers and considers joining the army.

After examining his swollen face in the mirror, he watches television, then sleeps until dark. Saturday night activity

enlivens the neighborhood. He avoids Henry and walks to Donatelli's Gym above Dr. Corey's dentist office. The seedy building is famous for black boxing champions Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson, both of whom trained there. Alfred introduces himself to the stocky owner and asks to begin working out.

**Chap. 3** Donatelli sizes up Alfred, inquires if he is afraid, and declares, "There's no place to hide in a boxing ring." He sets up a schedule: at 5:30 A.M., running in the park, followed by breakfast; work; a light lunch; then training. Alfred will jump rope, stretch, and do sit-ups, push-ups, and knee-bends.

Donatelli predicts that Alfred will know in a few weeks whether the training is worth the effort. He implies that Alfred is a quitter because he left school in the 11th grade. Alfred insists that he wants to be a champion; Donatelli informs him, "It's the climbing that makes the man." He promises to be available if Alfred needs him.

**Chap. 4** On Sunday, Aunt Pearl glides past street preachers. Alfred avoids their encouragement to agitate against white racism. At a small church, the family attends services. Afterward, a subway ride to Jamaica takes them to Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Wilson's house. Alfred's uncle needles him about quitting school and compares him to his son Jeff, who wants to go to Africa with the Peace Corps after college graduation. Uncle Wilson urges Alfred to adopt a trade. Aunt Pearl realizes that the visit humiliates her nephew. On Monday morning, Alfred, dreading questions from the Epsteins, watches the clock in anticipation of his first run.

**Chap. 5** At the park, two police officers stop Alfred and ridicule his ambition to train for the boxing ring. Back home, Aunt Pearl readies the girls for school and ponders why Alfred would arise so early. He explains that he went for a walk. She concludes that he works like a man and deserves his privacy. To her, Alfred is "somebody special."

At the store, Jake, Lou, and Ben Epstein question Alfred about the break-in. Tension forces Alfred to eat alone and to keep to himself as he works. James appears at the window, then swaggers away. Lou makes the bank deposit rather than trust Alfred with the money. Because of the unspoken suspicion, Alfred broods as he sweeps and considers robbing the grocery the next Friday. Henry reminds him that Donatelli expects him at the gym.

**Chap. 6** Because activity is brisk among athletes, Alfred feels out of place and considers leaving. Dr. Corey starts him on sit-ups. Denny demonstrates the correct way to exercise. Alfred completes 34 sit-ups and watches the procedures of applying liniment, taping hands, and arranging sparring matches. Donatelli leaves a ticket so Alfred can see a real fight.

**Chap. 7** From the subway, Alfred and Henry walk to Madison Square Garden. Jelly Belly sits beside Henry. Donatelli prepares Willie for the fight. After warm-up sparring, the main

## THE CONTENDER

event focuses on Willie Streeter, attended by Donatelli, Corey, and Bud. The opponent, Junius Becker, causes Willie's eye to bleed. Donatelli stops the fight; the referee declares a TKO. In the locker room, Willie complains that he could have won.

After the fight, Alfred meets Bill "Spoon" Witherspoon, a graduate from City College who is studying for a teacher's license. Spoon drives Alfred and Henry home. Outside the house, Hollis and Major wait for Alfred.

**Chap. 8** The gangsters mock Alfred and ridicule his dress clothes. They press him to disconnect the grocery store's silent burglar alarm the following Friday. If he refuses, they threaten to cut him from ear to mouth as a sign of his disloyalty to the gang. Despite the danger of retaliation, Alfred refuses. His tormentors give him until Thursday to change his mind.

**Chap. 9** Police officers encourage Alfred on his Tuesday morning run. At home, his cousins ridicule his regimen. He admits to Aunt Pearl that he wants to be a boxer. She is alarmed for his safety and plans to consult Reverend Price about Alfred's new interest, which is not her choice of an ambition for her nephew.

**Chap. 10** By the second week of training, Alfred, working closely with Donatelli, develops soreness. Reverend Price predicts that boxing is just a phase. By the middle of the third week, Alfred feels better and looks forward to his morning run. One afternoon, Alfred practices a jab at work; Lou, a former student at Donatelli's gym, shows him how to lead straight from the shoulder. He suggests that Alfred forget boxing because the sport is fading among former fans.

Late in July, Aunt Pearl leaves the girls with their aunt and uncle while she works at the Elversens' summer house. As Alfred works on his timing, he learns that Willie has lost a match. Major invites Alfred to a party. Donatelli recognizes that Alfred has lost his concentration on boxing. Henry warns Alfred not to go to the party, but Friday night finds him restless and discontent. He heads for the clubroom.

**Chap. 11** At the party, Major refers to Alfred as "the champ." His girl friend June introduces him to her cousin Arlene. Going from vodka to marijuana, he loses control of his senses. Toward morning, new arrivals bring more liquor. Hollis offers James white powder. Alfred tries to stop James from taking the drug, then passes out.

**Chap. 12** At 9:30 P.M. that Saturday, Alfred awakens to a ringing telephone. Aunt Pearl reports that she will remain at work until Thursday. She asks Alfred to call Dorothy on Sunday morning to report her plans to pick up the girls. He passes out in the bathroom. A second call invites him to Coney Island. He tries to sober up with hot coffee.

Hollis bangs on the door and leads Alfred to a white Cadillac convertible. They cruise to Coney Island; Alfred recalls he hasn't eaten since Friday. The approach of the police forces Major to roar into traffic to avoid arrest for car theft. Alfred runs away. He attends a movie and ponders how the gang entices him to do wrong.

Sunday evening, Alfred returns to the apartment and a ringing telephone. Major insists that he supply an alibi—a card game at Alfred's house. On Monday, he is stiff and sore; Ben kids him about his big weekend. That evening, Aunt Dorothy scolds him for forgetting to deliver Aunt Pearl's message. She invites him to dinner on Tuesday; Alfred declines.

Late on Tuesday, Henry limps into the grocery store. Alfred avoids him by going to a triple feature. That night, he

returns to the gym. Donatelli assumes he is quitting and says goodbye. Alfred asks how he would know if he has the makings of a boxer. Donatelli replies that he must get hurt for the first time.

**Chap. 13** In August, Alfred returns to training and spars with Angel. Bud reminds him of his combinations; Henry calls time. Alfred decks Angel. Donatelli compliments Alfred for using his head. Lou Epstein comes to observe and leaves money for Kid Ryan, his former opponent. On the way out of the gym, Lou offers to teach Alfred to work the cash register. Alfred fights so well against Jose that Donatelli decides that Alfred is ready for a mouthpiece.

**Chap. 14** In October, Alfred prepares for his first fight. Henry comes to escort him to Donatelli at noon. Lou promises to see him in the ring. Henry tells James that the clubroom was raided for marijuana and heroin. Sonny and Justin were arrested; the rest ran. Mr. Johnson closed the storeroom.

At 3:30, Spoon and his wife Betty welcome Alfred and feed him. Henry awakens him from a nap to leave for the fight. At the shabby Long Island City Union Hall, Alfred is examined by a doctor, weighs in at 134.75 pounds, and receives black shorts. Bud tapes his hands. Henry drapes him in a monogrammed white terry-cloth robe. In the ring, Alfred faces three two-minute rounds with Joe Rivera.

The first round leaves Alfred dizzy. The crowd disapproves of his duck-and-run strategy. Donatelli urges him not to change. Alfred wins the second round and, by majority decision, the match. A slam to the groin collapses his limbs; Rivera apologizes. Donatelli declares that the audience is more interested in pain than in sport.

**Chap. 15** Aunt Pearl is concerned that Alfred is limping. She learns from Mr. Epstein that Alfred has completed his first fight and admires his manhood. She recalls her own ambitions to be a singer, but her mother refused to allow her to participate in a stage show. At age 17, Pearl married John, who died before the twins were born. Alfred is disillusioned by the brutality that accompanies his first win, but has no intention of quitting.

**Chap. 16** While fighting Griffin, Alfred obeys Donatelli and Henry, who urge him to press on aggressively. Alfred sustains a sharp blow, then decks Griffin. Alfred regrets the blow. That night, he walks dejectedly to the park. At work, Lou compliments him on the second win and urges him to take the day off.

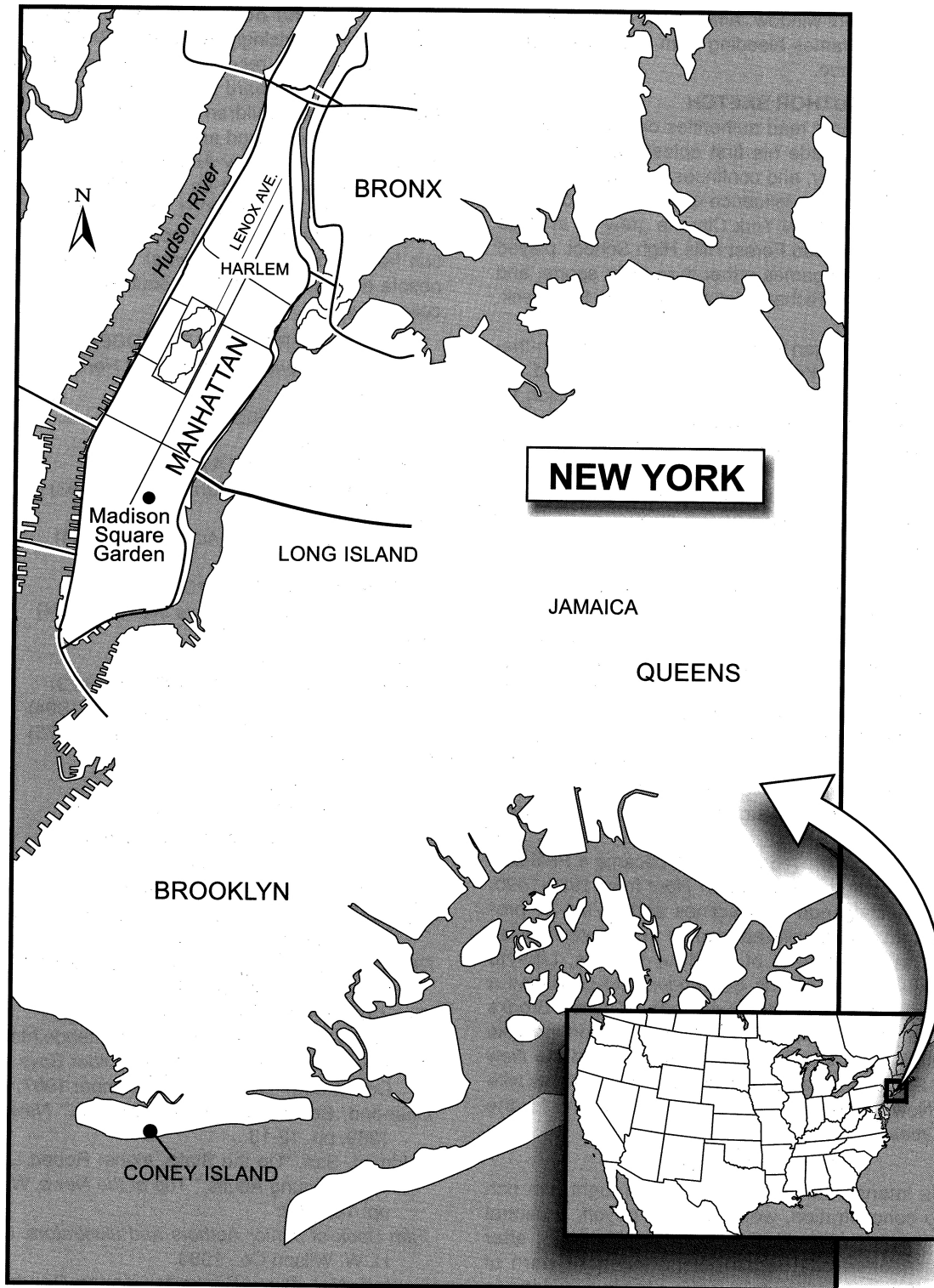
**Chap. 17** At Thanksgiving, Uncle Wilson appreciates Alfred's success. The next fight is a week before Christmas. Jeff, who usually outshines Alfred, has lost interest in Africa and the Peace Corps. Wilson ruins the meal by shouting at Jeff. The men leave the table. Alfred indicates that he is less sure of his future and that he may enter night school.

Jeff drives Alfred and his family home to Harlem. Jeff compliments the change in Alfred's negative attitude and encourages his interest in self-help programs for blacks. Jeff promises to continue their conversation when he returns at Christmas. On the way into the apartment, Alfred sees a huddled wino. He fails to recognize James, who begs a handout. Alfred hesitates to feed James's need for drugs, but hands him six dollars. James snatches it and lurches away.

**Chap. 18** The third match, against Barnes, results in a draw. Alfred obeys Donatelli and follows him to the gym. Because of his hesitancy in the ring, Donatelli insists that he retire because he lacks the killer instinct. Alfred insists that he will "finish."



## THE CONTENDER



**Chap. 19** The fourth bout puts Alfred on edge. He knows that he is quitting and tries to turn in his robe. Henry insists that he has earned it. Spoon tells Alfred that he is sending Herbert Davis, a potential classroom troublemaker, to the gym. Henry promises to watch for him. Spoon also gives Alfred a reading list. When Betty suggests a narcotics clinic for James, Alfred reports that James has disappeared.

Alfred eats his pre-fight steak, naps, then rides downtown to Parkway Gardens in Brooklyn. Against Donatelli's advice,

he fights Elston Hubbard in the second bout. Donatelli threatens to quit managing Alfred, but Alfred convinces him that he must face this challenger. Toe to toe, the boxers scrap it out. The decision goes to Hubbard, who compliments Alfred for being tough. Greeters exult over Alfred's performance in a difficult fight. Donatelli remarks that Alfred now knows defeat.

**Chap. 20** Alfred returns late to the apartment after dining at a restaurant with his supporters. Aunt Pearl interrupts with bad news: the police believe that James broke into Epstein's

## THE CONTENDER

grocery through the front window. Alfred bolts out to the cave in the park and finds James bleeding from a cut. He carries James toward the avenue.

### AUTHOR SKETCH

One of America's most read authorities on youth and athletics, Robert Lipsyte made his first splash with *Nigger*, a biography of Dick Gregory, and continues to produce incisive studies of athletics and their influence on human needs. Born on January 16, 1938, in New York City, he grew up in Rego Parks, Queens. He attended Forest Hills High School, played the usual child-centered games rather than team sports, and chose as literary heroes Richard Halliburton, John Steinbeck, and J. D. Salinger.

At age 19, Lipsyte began acquiring his substantial on-the-job training at the *New York Times*, where he worked the graveyard shift as a copyboy for two years to pay tuition for Columbia University. In 1959, he postponed plans to move to California to get a master's degree and began an eight-year stint on the baseball and boxing beat as writer and statistician. One of the delights of his job was personal interviews and friendships with the stars of the sports, particularly Muhammad Ali, whom Lipsyte considers one of America's greatest athletes.

A significant period in Lipsyte's career was the Black Power movement and its impact on the 1968 Summer Olympics, a time that saw the publication of his bestseller, *The Contender*. At the beginning of the 1970s, Lipsyte deserted deadline journalism for more demanding, polished writing, lecturing, radio commentary, and teaching. In the 1970s and 1980s, Lipsyte worked for the *New York Post* and NBC's *Sunday Morning*. He produced a young adult trilogy: *One Fat Summer*, *Summer Rules*, and *The Summerboy*. In 1978, he dealt with cancer through two years of chemotherapy.

Rejuvenated with improved health, he became a PBS correspondent and hosted *The Eleventh Hour* from 1989-1990. Once more, the challenge of deadlines and on-the-air presentation brought out his skills as reporter and sports specialist. In 1991, at the request of youthful readers, Lipsyte returned to Alfred, hero of *The Contender*, and published a sequel, *The Brave*, which features 40-year-old Alfred Brooks as a police sergeant on drug detail. Lipsyte's shorter works have appeared in *TV Guide*, *Nation*, *Harper's*, and the *New York Times Sports Magazine*. He currently lives with his wife Marjorie in New Jersey and writes a weekly column for the *New York Times*.

### CRITIC'S CORNER

Lipsyte's intense study of sports has brought him rich insights into concentration, work, and the payoff, a central theme in the sub-genre of sports literature. In 1965, after hearing a seasoned Las Vegas boxing manager warn of three flights of dark, twisting stairs leading to his gym, Lipsyte used the image as an impetus to his writing of *The Contender*, his first venture into young adult fiction. His personal opinions about the destructive nature of competitiveness, particularly against minority athletes, has helped to establish sanity and compassion as an antidote to the relentless drive of schools to achieve trophies and championships. In his view, the push to win at any cost, even pain and permanent injury, demonstrates the nation's—and world's—obsession with winning. Among those he blames are sportswriters.

Lipsyte's achievements as columnist, screenwriter, short

story writer, and novelist have brought him numerous awards, not surprisingly five Dutton Best Sports Stories citations. He has also received a *New York Times* Outstanding Children's Books award in 1977 as well as the Mike Berger Award, Wel-Met Children's Book Award, Child Study Children's Book Award, and an ALA Best YA Book. Other honors include the New Jersey Author and New Jersey Institute of Technology awards and an Emmy for hosting *The Eleventh Hour*. On January 15, 2001, he received the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in young adult fiction from *School Library Journal*. Both the University of Minnesota and the University of Southern Mississippi house his collected works.

### OTHER BOOKS BY ROBERT LIPSYTE

*Arnold Schwarzenegger: American Hercules* (1993)  
*The Brave* (1991)  
*The Chemo Kid* (1992)  
*The Chief* (1993)  
*Free to Be Muhammad Ali* (1978)  
*Jim Thorpe: Twentieth Century Jock* (1993)  
*Jock and Jill* (1982)  
*Joe Louis: A Champ for All America* (1994)  
*Liberty Two* (1974)  
*The Masculine Mystique* (1966)  
*Michael Jordan: A Life above the Rim* (1994)  
*Nigger* (1965)  
*One Fat Summer* (1977)  
*Something Going* (with Steve Cady) (1973)  
*Sports and Society* (with Gene Brown) (1994)  
*SportsWorld: An American Dreamland* (1975)  
*Summer Rules* (1981)  
*The Summerboy* (1982)  
*That's the Way of the World* (1975)

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### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To discuss the value of peer groups
2. To describe the physical, mental, and emotional effects of losing both parents
3. To characterize the value of physical training and competition
4. To acknowledge the importance of achievement, autonomy, and self-fulfillment
5. To characterize the importance of goals
6. To note the value of moral support during difficult times
7. To contrast characters in their responses to despair, isolation, fear, pain, excitement, anticipation, and insecurity
8. To characterize causes of crime and violence in the lives of urban teens
9. To outline conflicting emotions
10. To contrast the atmosphere of small and large groups of people with solitude

### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To outline the role of the trainer
2. To recount how James slips into addiction and is shot
3. To discuss the difference between hobbies and escapism
4. To explain why Pearl worries about Alfred
5. To account for the author's emphasis on frustration and violence
6. To describe the expectations for a high school dropout

7. To contrast Mr. Donatelli, Spoon, and Lou in terms of compassion and sensitivity
8. To note the coping mechanisms that sustain Alfred in the ring
9. To contrast the store and Uncle Wilson's house as settings
10. To evaluate family, work, love, prestige, and trust as they apply to Alfred
11. To explain the role of boxing fans in the story
12. To discuss the author's attitude toward sports as character builders

### LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Robert Lipsyte's fiction, present the following terms and applications:

**round character** a realistic being who possesses a complex or multifaceted array of traits. Alfred seems real to the reader because he displays normal hopes and dreams and makes common errors in judgment. Lipsyte depicts him in uneasy family settings, with friends, exercising, talking with adults, avoiding street rabble rousers, facing opponents in the ring, and setting goals at the gym to help him become an adult. His ambivalence toward boxing as a suitable activity places him in situations that challenge his outlook and ability to cope with adversity.

**sociological novel** reform literature, also called *roman à thèse*, which has much in common with the protest novel. The genre uses character and action to delineate a social problem, such as oppression, economic exploitation, racial discrimination, patriarchy, or unemployment. Alfred's problems with the gang and work for the Epsteins typify the hard and limited life of a high school dropout. Lipsyte emphasizes that his immaturity and inexperience leave him vulnerable to difficulties with the police, relatives, his trainer, employers, and peers.

**symbol** a concrete object that stands for a complex or abstract idea or relationship and implies more than the literal meaning of the word or words, such as the rock, the white monogrammed robe, and the boxing ring. Being a contender in the ring and striving to better himself through work and exercise reflect artificial and real challenges in Alfred's life. His failure in the last bout and his inability to rescue James from crime suggest mature challenges that are neither all good nor all bad. Alfred learns that he must evaluate events on a broader scale in terms of the greater good to himself and the people he loves and trusts. Moving toward the light in the final scene, he appears to direct both James and himself toward better and more prosperous times.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING

The milieu of Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* sets Alfred's experiences in a real environment. He grows up in Harlem, where the famous Lenox Avenue is an everyday street in his movements. From an all-black environment, he travels south-east by stuffy subway car and bus to his relatives' house in a prosperous middle-class section of Jamaica, Queens. Later, he makes a day drive in a stolen Cadillac along the Hudson River to nearby Coney Island, a popular entertainment site. The last two atmospheres unsettle him as he learns to fend for himself against a critical uncle and unwise peers who squeak by the law to steal cars, indulge in alcohol and drugs, and carouse.

The indoor settings place Alfred in close proximity to



## THE CONTENDER

friends, family, and outsiders. At home in a Harlem tenement apartment, he has the love of his motherly aunt, who tries to understand his lifestyle after he drops out of high school. At work in a neighborhood grocery store, he departs from black society to work for a pair of kind Jewish employers. The settings that draw Alfred into gang activity include a seamy storeroom club center and the questionable partying that jeopardizes his health and safety with alcohol and marijuana. To withdraw from danger, he goes to his secret cavern in the park, a snug subterranean cubby shared with James near a rock, a symbol of security.

In the gym, on the street during early morning runs, and in multiple boxing rings, Alfred learns to compete with himself in building strength and preparing for competition against another boxer. During his outdoor runs, he receives the scrutiny of the police and discovers them supportive of his efforts. The experience of hard physical activity forces the fictional setting inward as Alfred studies the internal elements of ambition and self-discovery. It is the internal battleground on which he fights his hardest battles and attains the most insight into the meaning of adult choices. Returning to the park after his last fight in the ring, he is ready to lead James out of their womb-like hiding place into the light of the adult world.

### CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

#### Novels

Edward Bloor, *Tangerine*  
Frank Bonham, *Durango Street*  
Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*  
Terry Davis, *Vision Quest*  
Kaye Gibbons, *Ellen Foster*  
S. E. Hinton, *The Outsiders*, *Rumble Fish*, *Tex*, and *That Was Then, This Is Now*  
Chris Lynch, *Shadow Boxer*  
Robert Newton Peck, *A Day No Pigs Would Die*  
John Steinbeck, *The Red Pony*  
Paul Zindel, *The Pigman*

#### Plays

Carson McCullers, *A Member of the Wedding*  
Jane Wagner, *J. T.*

#### Nonfiction

Bryce Courtenay, *The Power of One*  
Mark Mathabane, *Kaffir Boy*  
David Wilkerson, *The Cross and the Switchblade*

#### Videos/DVDs

*The Outsiders*  
*The Power of One*  
*That Was Then, This Is Now*

### THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in *The Contender* should include these aspects:

#### Themes

- poverty
- family
- loss
- survival
- gangs
- competition
- self-esteem
- escapism
- goals
- challenge

- selflessness

#### Motifs

- coping with loss of parents
- seeking a refuge in physical activity
- comprehending the dangers of gang activity
- learning to trust adults
- accepting the risk of befriending a weak, vulnerable person

### MEANING STUDY

Below are significant words, phrases, or sentences from the novel. Explain each in context. Chapter and page numbers pinpoint each entry so that you can re-read the passage in which it appears.

1. The Epsteins would be in their synagogue now, wearing skull caps and praying. (Chap. 1, p. 6)  
*(Unlike most Christian neighbors in Harlem, the Epsteins attend worship services on Friday evenings at sunset, the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath, which concludes on Saturday at sunset. The wearing of yarmulkes by males is an obligatory head covering to show respect for the house of God.)*
2. He's going to fight in Madison Square Garden next week. (Chap. 1, p. 6)  
*(One of New York City's architectural and sports landmarks, Madison Square Garden is an indoor complex built in Manhattan in 1968. The first building on the site, a boxing arena built in 1879, replaced a railway depot and remained in use until it was demolished and rebuilt in 1925. In the circular arena and forum of the current structure, visitors watch sports events by the Rangers hockey team and Knickerbockers basketball team and attend dog shows, rodeos, rock concerts, circuses, political conventions, bowling matches, a sports hall of fame, a sports art gallery, and religious gatherings.)*
3. "I had polio," said Henry. (Chap. 13, p. 114)  
*(A severecrippler of the nervous system worldwide, poliomyelitis ravaged children and adults in the United States from 1942 to 1953. Before the synthesis of vaccines and Sabin's oral immunization, victims contracted the virus through the throat, from which it traveled to the circulatory and lymphatic systems and into the spinal cord and nerves. Beginning with headache, fever, sore throat, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, restlessness, drowsiness, and fever, the disease can paralyze the central nervous system and destroy nerve cells. Patients suffer muscular atrophy that can inhibit movement, walking, swallowing, and breathing. The most advanced cases require breathing assistance.)*
4. There was one fighter in those days, a pretty good light-heavyweight named Junior Ellis. (Chap. 13, p. 117)  
*(Weight divisions even out the chances for boxers of different sizes by pairing them with contenders in the same class. Traditionally, the sport has required eight weight divisions. At 138 pounds, Alfred is a lightweight boxer.)*
5. A tall heavyweight, a little soft around the middle, stood up and began to shadowbox. (Chap. 14, p. 124)  
*(Shadowboxing is a simple limbering exercise requiring no equipment, special dress, or sparring partner. The quick jabbing rhythm and coordinated footwork prepare the boxer for the ring and keep the muscles in tone in the time period before a match begins.)*
6. Dimly, he heard the ten-second warning buzzer. (Chap.

## THE CONTENDER

14, p. 127)

*(Part of the boxer's strategy requires quick analysis of the opponent's physical stamina and ability to last out a round. The ten-second alarm allows both boxers to gauge the strength of themselves and their opponents and to make the most of remaining energy.)*

7. The bell rang, and Rivera slammed a short right uppercut into Alfred's groin. (Chap. 14, p. 129)  
*(Blows below the belt are strictly outlawed in standard boxing settings. Because of the tenderness and delicacy of the genitals and lower abdomen, unscrupulous contenders often aim their fists into the area to cripple an opponent with painful and potentially harmful trauma. It is the job of the referee to watch for illegal strategies and to halt the fight if a boxer falls victim to such low blows.)*
8. He was from the Apollo Theater. (Chap. 15, p. 132)  
*(One of the significant landmarks of Harlem, the Apollo Theatre on 125th Street introduced black entertainers, including jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald, who won the theater's amateur contest in 1934, and the Miracles, a pop singing group that debuted in 1958. Long before integration, the Apollo was also the meeting ground for enthusiastic fans both black and white.)*
9. You don't have the killer instinct. (Chap. 16, p. 148)  
*(Mr. Donatelli, who has an experienced eye in sizing up athletes and their capabilities, recognizes that Alfred lacks the unique drive of a star boxer. The term "killer instinct" describes a willingness to take advantage of an opponent's weakness and drive him to the canvas.)*
10. Elston Hubbard was already in the ring, flexing his forearm muscles so the Marine Corps emblem jumped on the smooth bronze skin. (Chap. 19, p. 157)  
*(Hubbard sports a tattoo picturing a globe overlaid with an anchor, eagle, and rope, the symbol of the United States Marine Corps. Formed on November 10, 1775, the Marines first fought in the War of Independence. They distinguished themselves in the wars against the Barbary pirates and the War of 1812. Marines have served in all major U. S. wars and in numerous small conflicts abroad.)*

### COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers with quotations from the novel.

#### Motivation

1. What causes Alfred to go to the gym?  
*(Life for Alfred is a mix of boredom and too much challenge. Without parents, he misses the family support and closeness that children from normal homes enjoy. Bored with his job at the Epstein brothers' grocery store, where one of the few pluses of his assignments is delivering orders on the store bicycle, Alfred looks for challenge that suits his entrance into adult responsibilities. The gang offers one alternative, which carries with it indulgence in drugs and alcohol and adventures in petty crime and auto theft.  
Alfred has a firm enough grounding in values from his Aunt Pearl to reject the more dangerous and life-threatening activities in favor of working out at Mr. Donatelli's gym in preparation for a career in boxing. Among other*

*boxers, he explores self-challenge, a sensible acceptance of his own body's limitations and the regimen that trains limbs, eyes, mind, and reflexes for the boxing ring. Motivated to work out and train, Alfred accepts the challenge of the gym as a worthwhile endeavor to better himself.)*

#### Setting

2. Describe Alfred's home.  
*(Alfred lives in a tenement in Harlem in the northern end of New York City, the most concentrated black neighborhood in the United States. Background landmarks like the Hudson River, Apollo Theater, and Lenox Avenue place him in a real setting permeated with historical significance for United States history, in particular, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the black nationalist movement of the 1960s. When he journeys from his Aunt Pearl's apartment, he takes a paying job at Epstein's grocery store and finds safety in withdrawal to triple feature movies. After his mother's death, he retreated to an underground lair at the rock in the park, a secret space he shares with James.*

*When Alfred visits his relatives in Jamaica, Queens, he enters a different kind of neighborhood. In Lipsyte's description, he passes from projects and grimy factories to "clean, grassy streets lined with neat little houses." At the home of his Uncle Wilson, Aunt Dorothy, and cousin Jeff, the atmosphere and tone suggest the family's superiority to common working-class Harlem blacks like Aunt Pearl and Alfred. He finds himself a poor second to a boy who intends to study law in college and enter the Peace Corps. The unspoken contrast creates tension in Alfred. His Aunt Pearl, an intuitive mother figure, moves directly to the matter with a simple question, "What's troubling you, Alfred?"*

#### Character Development

3. How do outsiders influence Alfred?  
*(As a beginning boxer, Alfred depends on Mr. Donatelli, Henry, Spoon, Jelly Belly, and Dr. Corey, but the relationships vary from his comfortable camaraderie with James and gang. On the street, his male associates seem to understand him better than his family or employers, yet their slide toward lawlessness, substance abuse, and violence warns him that there have to be better choices than the life of a street thug. Other relationships, particularly the overly judgmental opinions of Reverend Price, seem wrong for Alfred. The brief positive influence of the police, Betty, and Spoon is too shortlived to have a lasting effect.*

*The strongest role modeling comes from Alfred's regular early morning workouts and afternoon sparring at the gym. Under the influence of Donatelli, Alfred begins making mature assessments of self and the demands of an athletic career. From Donatelli, Alfred hears the judgment call, that he lacks "the coldness to beat a man into the ground when you sense his weakness." At this pivotal moment, he is able to choose between competing for a win and quitting at the point when boxing demands a more aggressive stance than Alfred is capable of.)*

#### Historical Setting

4. How does Lipsyte set the story in an historical era?  
*(It is important to the novel to understand that Harlem filled with blacks from all sections of the United States*

## THE CONTENDER

during early twentieth-century flight to industrial cities in the North. The 1920s brought together people filled with hope in the all-black environment and regret at giving up better residences in search of freedom. For most of them, life required residence in urban tenements, a situation that continued to the 1960s, the setting of the novel.

To street politicians, the important goal for urban blacks is nationalism, a separation from "whitey" and the establishment of independence. Obliquely, Alfred hears "The white man's got his foot on your throat" and "You gonna lick his shoe?" Street-corner gatherings respond in the same call-and-response as the familiar sermon scenario demanding the same polarized thinking common to church services. Alfred hurries past a rabble rouser jabbing his finger at an obvious church-goer and taunting, "Ain't that sweet? On his way to pray to Whitey's God, learn to Tom and turn the other cheek." Alfred refuses to join the march with a boy handing out leaflets and angrily strides away from an accusation that he is a "happy little darky.")

### Theme

5. What does the author reveal about competition?

(The themes of pain and challenge enhance Alfred's growth as an individual. He learns the pleasure of a sense of accomplishment after arising at early hours to run and performing sit-ups, shadowboxing, sparring, and punching at the mirror and peanut bag to strengthen his abdomen, arms, and shoulders. Eventually, Mr. Donatelli, by setting goals farther out of Alfred's reach, raises the stakes to a point at which pain becomes too demanding. Donatelli remarks at the pivotal moment that Alfred has "learned to work hard, to concentrate. To climb.")

At the novel's climax, Donatelli rules out a career for Alfred, yet adds, "I'd like you to keep training, keep running, spar with the new boys coming up. . . . But no more fights. The white monogrammed robe, Alfred's reward for hard work and persistence, seems out of range for a youth of his capabilities. By handing it back to Henry to be recycled for another contender, Alfred seems resigned to Donatelli's limitations on his success.

Rejecting a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure, Alfred refuses to quit when he faces Elston Hubbard at the Parkway Gardens in Brooklyn. Although Donatelli orders Henry to untape Alfred's hands, Alfred chooses to fight a man seven pounds heavier and more experienced. At this point in his relationship with Donatelli, Alfred indicates that the challenge is not to prove himself to others, but to compete with self.)

### Interpretation

6. How does the title symbolize manhood?

(Unlike Jeff, whose dream lies in the ideals of the Peace Corps, Alfred chooses to mold a life for himself in the real world of Harlem. Being a contender and accepting mature responsibilities become Alfred's lifeline as he moves beyond a simple-minded grocery store job and the bullying of a street gang toward athletics. He is a likely candidate for training because he has energy to expend, but no certain goal for his life. At the beginning of the story, when gang activity and triple feature movies replace real action in his life, he needs the gym and its structured training under expert supervision.

In the final chapter, after Alfred loses to Elston Hubbard in a match decided unanimously on technicalities, Alfred is ready to hear Donatelli's reminder, "Now you know, Alfred. Now you know, too." The story advances one more chapter to show a maturity in Alfred that exceeds sports and returns him to the real environment of Harlem in the 1960s. Upon learning that James is in danger of bleeding to death after cutting himself in a robbery of Epsteins' grocery store, Alfred chooses friendship, a complex decision based on strong values of loyalty, gratitude, and compassion. Because James supported Alfred after Ernestine's death, Alfred reciprocates when James faces arrest. To his question about the tape on Alfred's face, Alfred reports that he "sort of" won the match, an indication that he accepts various levels of winning, primarily a victory over fear.)

### Conflict

7. Why does Alfred leave boxing?

(Alfred moves on from boxing because he no longer needs it. More adept at self-discipline, he has trained mind, muscle, and reflexes to fend off attacks and to follow the rules of engagement. His rejection of street demonstrators, drugs and alcohol, gang bullying, and crime proves that he has left behind his Harlem boyhood, which he characterizes as "Mosely of the Jungle and Bad Brooks.")

The new challenge of adulthood brings into focus James's need of a friend. At this low point in James's life, Alfred promises to share his "friends, Henry and Bud and Mr. Donatelli" to get James in shape to defeat "the junk." No longer in need of boxing, Alfred opts for night school and "a recreation center for little kids." With self-assurance, he tells James, "Dare anybody if you and me partners again.")

### Atmosphere

8. How does Lipsyte characterize the boxing areas?

(Alfred is surprised that "the gym looked like Reverend Price's Hell." The sounds of bells ringing, the peanut bag going "rackety-rackety-rackety," and ropes swishing complement the swirl of sweaty, "half-naked bodies . . . jumping and twisting and jerking around." For the first time, Alfred takes in the battering of bellies with fists, sparring, the two Puerto Rican boxers jabbing at their reflections in the mirror, and exertions at jump rope and on floor mats, the atmosphere that soon draws him into boxing.

Chapter 13 introduces Alfred at work sparring with Angel and hearing Bud's criticism that he isn't working on combinations. The rhythms of workout take on a mechanical sound: "Jab-jab-hook . . . jab-hook-right . . . jab . . . hook to the body . . . cross to the chin . . . body . . . head . . . jab . . . jab . . . jab . . ." In Chapter 19, Alfred takes a stand against Elston Hubbard by following the sounds and moves he learned in the gym: "Left . . . left . . . hook . . . cross." When the fight intensifies, the rhythms turn into motions, "Stick, stick, cross, hook, pop-pop." Added to the atmosphere of the boxing world are Alfred's words to himself, "Throw everything you got, you gonna have to, gonna stand here all day and all night and take what you got and give it right back, gonna hang in forever, gonna climb, man, gonna keep climbing, you can't knock me out.")



## THE CONTENDER

### Author Purpose

9. Why does Lipsyte's view of athletics translate into reader appeal?

*(From a pro-child point of view, Lipsyte's first novel centers on the theme of maturing and gaining experience by challenging the self to higher standards. The story of boxer Alfred Brooks is really a tribute to all young athletes who compete to test their limits and to learn how self-control and discipline can translate into adult successes. Lipsyte's intention to show an average youth in the process of bettering himself centers on commitment to an ideal, a virtue that young readers understand and respect.)*

*Although dated, the validity of Lipsyte's purpose and aim still ring true in the 21st century. Alfred becomes a likeable character who survives the usual vulnerabilities of a young man growing up in a tough city. Following a loss in the ring to Elston Hubbard, Alfred comes out a winner through character and loyalty to James rather than the empty trophies that are the standard ends to athletic competition.)*

### Structure

10. How does the alternation of scenes enhance the text?

*(By depicting Alfred in varied situations—with his sweet-natured Aunt Pearl, in a subway bound for Queens, at a party with the gang, in a stolen car, in the ring, at the grocery store, and reunited with James at the rock—Lipsyte maintains a rounded study of a realistic teen. The constant movement of scenes from domestic to public and private locales parallels the normal range of human encounters, which reveal numerous sides to a fictional personality. Thus, Alfred seems more human, less like a cardboard jock hero, and more admirable for managing the threats and traumas of everyday life. The symbolic conclusion shows him stopping the bleeding and guiding James "over the rocks and the bushes and the new snow, toward the lights of the avenue." The way ahead implies that Alfred is equal to hindrances and focused on an attainable future.)*

### HOW LANGUAGE WORKS

Robert Lipsyte is skilled at presenting character through dialogue. The speeches of various members of the fictional cast express their biases and interests through words:

1. Major, a cynical gang member, expresses the anti-Semitic point of view of Harlem blacks with his sneering question, "How much them Jews give you for slavin', Uncle Alfred?"
2. Alfred thinks over the didactic tone of his school principal, Mrs. McCormick, who intones a standard warning, "Chil-dren. With-out ed-u-ca-tion man is a sav-age beast."
3. Aunt Pearl, who is aptly named, speaks the motherly love of a woman who wants to protect children from the city's dangers: "Oh, Alfred it's like you're my own son. I know you try so hard, you so good. I know it ain't easy, living here. Someday, someday we're gonna move away."
4. Donatelli, more didactic than a classroom teacher, warns Alfred from the beginning of the realities of athletic competition: "There's no place to hide in a boxing ring. You're all alone in there with another man who wants to hit you more times, and harder, than you hit hiim. There

are rules, and there's a referee to make sure you follow them. It's not the street. You follow me?"

5. Reverend Price, the stereotypical preacher, speaks of evil in the person of Satan: "The devil's agents wear new uniforms these trying days, but their poisons are the same. They say go out and hate the white man. They say go set yourself down in places where you are not wanted."
6. Uncle Wilson, impressed by his son Jeff, sounds like a proud parent: "[Jeff] says once colored people are all voting the—what's he call it?—yeah, the white power structure going to find more jobs for them, more opportunities for advancement. World is changing."
7. Both man and boy in the final scene, Alfred states his new idealism in terms that James can understand, "I'll be around. Gonna get you clean, man, and gonna keep you clean."

### ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

#### Art

1. Post a bulletin board contrasting settings described or mentioned in the text. Place landmarks on a tourist map of New York: the cracked ceiling above Alfred's rollaway bed in Aunt Pearl's apartment in Harlem, the cave under the rock, the gang's clubroom, the alley where Alfred crawls away from the police, Donatelli's gym, Madison Square Garden, Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Wilson's house in Jamaica, Epstein's grocery, Long Island City Union Hall, and Parkway Gardens in Brooklyn.
2. Design an athlete's daily regimen, a business card for Mr. Donatelli or Betty Witherspoon, office hours for the narcotics clinic, an epitaph for Ernestine Brooks, a graph depicting the number of fatherless children reared by their mothers, or the racial breakdown of Harlem and Jamaica, a news headline about Alfred's last fight, a chart depicting the different weight classes of boxers, a placard naming events at Coney Island or Madison Square Garden, a list of works that night students should read, a body chart showing legal blows during a boxing match, and a schematic drawing of the New York subway system or of the park and the path leading to James and Alfred's rock.
3. Draw a mural emphasizing James and Alfred's friendship. Provide insight into James's salvation from addiction.

#### Cinema

1. Draw settings for a movie version of *The Contender*. Show the placement of actors, music, costumes, and proper lighting.
2. View various films about young people who make difficult decisions, e. g. *Boyz 'n the Hood* or *Tex*. Discuss why filmmakers focus on youth and their problems.

#### Drama and Debate

1. Create a storyboard account of these conversations: Uncle Wilson's evaluation of Alfred, Mr. Donatelli and Dr. Corey's plans for Willie Streeter, Spoon and Betty's ambitions, Aunt Pearl's counseling session with Reverend Price, the twins' opinion of boxing, Jeff's arguments with Uncle Wilson about college and the Peace Corps, James's interrogation at police headquarters, and the Epstein brothers' concerns for Alfred's role in the robbery.

## THE CONTENDER

2. Compose a short speech in which you describe the role of athletics in the lives of these characters: Lou Epstein, Mr. Donatelli, Henry Johnson, Spoon, Jelly Belly, Angel, Jose, Elston Hubbard, Willie Streeter, Joe Rivera, Griffin, Barnes, and Alfred Brooks.
3. Lead a debate about the use of sports as a method of building character.
4. Role-play the part of trainer, referee, doctor, promoter, ticket taker, fan, timekeeper, manager, sparring partner, and challenger. Indicate how each person influences Alfred's decision to continue fighting or to quit.

### **History and Social Studies**

1. Make an oral report on the theme of parentless children. Consider various possibilities, for example, the fact that Alfred's father deserted his wife and son and that Ernestine Brooks died of pneumonia. Add other possibilities—imprisonment, mental illness, physical disabilities, homelessness, court-ordered separation, foster care, military service, natural disaster, and abandonment.
2. Survey the history of the Peace Corps. Why does Jeff want to go to Africa? How does social work in a foreign country compare with neighborhood improvement in Harlem? Why does Jeff respect Alfred?
3. Compose an extended definition of family. Determine why Aunt Pearl's name symbolizes her role in Alfred's life. Why does she respect her nephew? What does she share of her own maturing years? What does her early marriage and failure to appear onstage say about adult memories of youth? Why does she try to express what Ernestine would have wanted for her son?

### **Language Arts**

1. Contrast female characters in terms of action, unselfishness, and compassion. Which characters have the greatest influence on Alfred? on the gang? on the outcome of the story? Comment on Lipsyte's failure to create more influence from female characters.
2. Create and discuss a list of images from the novel that appeal to the five senses, for instance "Alfred tried to imagine himself up there, taking a long drink of water from the taped-up bottle in Bud's hand, spitting it out in one long stream into a bucket, opening his mouth so Dr. Corey could jam in the white mouthpiece."
3. Study the background elements of the story, particularly the origins and rules of professional boxing, the problems of parentless children, religion as a solution to problems, hatred between black ghetto residents and Jewish store owners, drug addiction and alcoholism, and juvenile delinquency. How does the author depict Lou, Ben, and Jake? Why does Donatelli stop fighters before they get hurt? Why are boxing fans insistent on blood and brutality? How do police officers antagonize adolescents? Why is Reverend Price so quick to dismiss Alfred's ambition?
4. Compose a character sketch emphasizing Alfred's change in attitude as he controls his diet, exercises, works out at the gym, goes to bed early, runs in the park, and prepares himself mentally to face another boxer. Explain why Alfred bounces back after the return to old ways at the gang's party.
5. Read aloud other descriptions of coming of age. Discuss

the importance of idealism and the main character's ability to adapt to reality.

6. Compose an informal essay on violence. Consider the role of weapons, brawling, bullying, intimidation, threats, and controlled fights in Alfred's life. Which experiences have the most influence on his evolving character and on his relationships with adults?
7. Report on the importance of supervised boxing for young men who are considered at risk. Characterize the importance of challenging the self and building the body as preliminaries to adulthood.
8. List phrases that underscore the themes of struggle, acceptance, self-esteem, racism, and family unity.
9. Contrast the speaking style of Alfred, his aunts, the trainer, street orators, the minister, and the gang. Comment on psychological differences in each, including trust in Alfred, optimism, and acceptance of his choices.
10. Make posters of sports jargon.

### **Law**

Compose a first person account of James's time in custody. How are juvenile delinquents arrested, questioned, arraigned, incarcerated, and counseled? Why is James vulnerable to police suspicions? How does gang membership hasten James's descent into drug addiction and crime?

### **Sports**

1. Pose questions to a panel on the differences between James, Henry, and Alfred as contenders. What forces does James battle? How does physical disability impair Henry? Why does Alfred try to help James fight drugs? What aspirations have the boys considered and discarded? Which character is more likely to become a contributing member of society and a dependable husband and father?
2. Create a website illustrating gym routine. Show rope jumping, both types of punching bags, floor exercises, sparring, shadowboxing, combinations, taping, and preparation for a fight. Note the importance of cleanliness, experienced trainers, medical attention, and proper equipment to protect the mouth, skull, and genitals.

### **Psychology and Health**

1. Explain to a small group why Alfred feels responsible for James. Why is money the wrong gift for a narcotics addict? What symptoms suggest that James suffers from low self-esteem? Why is successful treatment dependent on James's attitude? Why does James risk arrest by crashing into the grocery store window? How would you help James?
2. Describe in a short speech the effects of loss, disillusion, failure, discrimination, unfairness, humiliation, arrest, injury, ridicule, fatigue, fear of opponents, and disappointment. Which term best expresses Alfred's greatest challenge? Why does he feel unjustly blamed for the first robbery?
3. Explain in a theme how the author characterizes the influence of bullying on fearful or undersized young people. Research the psychological ramifications of bullying. What is its purpose? Why do people like Major and Sonny concentrate on overpowering others and manipulating or corrupting them? What is the best way to deter

## THE CONTENDER

bullies?

4. On flash cards, outline first aid for intoxication, bruises, and hemorrhage.

### ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. Compose a list of scenes for a mural or cartoon depicting a boxer's life.
2. Make a thorough list of items essential to a movie version of the book. Beside the items, explain how they fit into the action.
3. Name characters who give Alfred advice. Summarize the wisdom of each, particularly that of Reverend Price, Aunt Pearl, Uncle Wilson, and Mr. Donatelli.
4. Outline chronologically the settings of the story, including boxing rings, activities with relatives and the gang, entertainments, worship, work, visits with friends and supporters, and transportation.

## ANSWER KEY

### VOCABULARY TEST

- |              |                |              |
|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1. synagogue | 6. serenely    | 11. patent   |
| 2. mimicked  | 7. store-front | 12. attaché  |
| 3. calloused | 8. stitch      | 13. squealer |
| 4. tenement  | 9. probation   | 14. smirk    |
| 5. contender | 10. bunions    | 15. tenpin   |

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Sentence Completion (30 points)

- |                          |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Madison Square Garden | 9. squealer's scar |
| 2. tea                   | 10. marijuana      |
| 3. silent alarm          | 11. Kid Ryan       |
| 4. Aunt Pearl            | 12. mouthpiece     |
| 5. sparring              | 13. James          |
| 6. fence                 | 14. Coney Island   |
| 7. Peace Corps           | 15. Lou            |
| 8. TKO                   |                    |

#### Part II: Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. E | 6. J  |
| 2. A | 7. B  |
| 3. F | 8. I  |
| 4. C | 9. H  |
| 5. G | 10. D |

#### Part III: True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. T  |
| 2. F | 7. F  |
| 3. T | 8. T  |
| 4. T | 9. F  |
| 5. T | 10. F |

#### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. A | 6. E  |
| 2. F | 7. G  |
| 3. I | 8. D  |
| 4. J | 9. H  |
| 5. E | 10. B |

#### Part II: Short Answer (30 points)

- |              |               |                    |
|--------------|---------------|--------------------|
| 1. Major     | 6. Donatelli  | 11. Spoon          |
| 2. ice cream | 7. Aunt Pearl | 12. James          |
| 3. June      | 8. 5:30 A.M.  | 13. Aunt Pearl     |
| 4. Angel     | 9. cashier    | 14. liniment       |
| 5. Apollo    | 10. Alfred    | 15. Reverend Price |

#### Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- |                                |                 |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. peels cabbage leaves        | 6. an alibi     |
| 2. Lou                         | 7. share a meal |
| 3. lasts into Saturday morning | 8. Wilson       |
| 4. attend synagogue            | 9. Joe Rivera   |
| 5. Coney Island                | 10. John        |

#### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.



## THE CONTENDER

### VOCABULARY TEST

Fill in the sentences below with answers from the list that follows:

antiseptic	contender	matchmaker	serenely	store-front
attaché	footwork	mimicked	smirk	synagogue
bunions	funky	patent	spar	tenement
calloused	gill	probation	squealer	tenpin
conga	liniment	racketeer	stitch	workout

1. They close early on Friday to go to \_\_\_\_\_.
2. "Where's James," \_\_\_\_\_ Major.
3. He felt her \_\_\_\_\_ hand move gently over his swollen jaw long before he saw her red-rimmed eyes peering down at him.
4. Aunt Pearl waited until they had clattered out of the apartment and down the \_\_\_\_\_ stairs before she turned back to Alfred.
5. It's not easy trying to become a \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Aunt Pearl sailed \_\_\_\_\_ past the nationalist rally.
7. The little \_\_\_\_\_ church was only half filled when they walked in, but Reverend Price was already behind the lectern, thumbing through his Bible.
8. The spring was out of his step, and suddenly the \_\_\_\_\_ seemed unbearable, and he could hear cars moving through the park.
9. They'll let him go on \_\_\_\_\_.
10. [The shoes] were worn and cracked, with holes for Lou's \_\_\_\_\_.
11. Clarence Martin's Magical Potion. \_\_\_\_\_ Pending.
12. Seedy men with mashed-in faces waved their cigars at tall, well-dressed businessmen carrying \_\_\_\_\_ cases.
13. You ever hear of a \_\_\_\_\_'s scar?
14. You ain't that big I can't still whip that \_\_\_\_\_ off your face.
15. The ball knocked him over like a \_\_\_\_\_.

## THE CONTENDER

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Sentence Completion (30 points)

Using the list that follows, supply a term to complete each of the following statements.

arena	heroin	mouthpiece	squealer's scar
Aunt Dorothy	James	Peace Corps	subway
Aunt Pearl	Kid Ryan	protective cup	Sugar Ray
Coney Island	Lou	Queens	tea
contender	Madison Square Garden	Rick	tenement
Ernestine	marijuana	silent alarm	TKO
fence	milk	sparring	white trunks

1. On the day that Alfred first visits the gym, Mr. Donatelli's best boxer fights at \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Before a fight, Alfred drinks \_\_\_\_\_ and eats steak, toast, and salad.
3. The robbery fails because Alfred does not mention the Epsteins' \_\_\_\_\_.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ recalls wanting to join the chorus line at the Apollo Theater.
5. Alfred's first ring fight is simple \_\_\_\_\_ with Angel at the gym.
6. Alfred lies to Aunt Pearl about falling off a \_\_\_\_\_ on Lenox Avenue.
7. After college, Jeff wants to join the \_\_\_\_\_ and serve in Africa.
8. The halting of the fight between Junius Becker and Willie Streeter results in a \_\_\_\_\_.
9. Among gang members, the \_\_\_\_\_ is a sign of disloyalty.
10. Vodka and \_\_\_\_\_ cause Alfred to become disoriented.
11. Lou insists on giving money to \_\_\_\_\_, his old opponent.
12. One of the first pieces of gear that Alfred wears is a \_\_\_\_\_.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ was a true friend when Alfred's father abandoned the family.
14. At \_\_\_\_\_, Alfred gets sick, throws up, and goes to a movie.
15. When the last grueling fight ends, \_\_\_\_\_ believes the fight was like "the old days."

#### Part II: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- |   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| ___ 1. dies of pneumonia.                                       | A. Donatelli      |
| ___ 2. threatens to stop managing Alfred.                       | B. Reverend Price |
| ___ 3. chides Alfred for failing to deliver a message.          | C. Uncle Wilson   |
| ___ 4. thinks Alfred should learn a trade.                      | D. James          |
| ___ 5. impresses Donatelli by using his head and decking Angel. | E. Ernestine      |
| ___ 6. works for Mrs. Elversen.                                 | F. Aunt Dorothy   |
| ___ 7. believes that Alfred will soon give up boxing.           | G. Alfred         |
| ___ 8. question Alfred's first run in the park.                 | H. Mr. Johnson    |
| ___ 9. closes the clubroom permanently.                         | I. police         |
| ___ 10. begs like a wino near Aunt Pearl's apartment.           | J. Aunt Pearl     |

## THE CONTENDER

### Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if any part is false.

- 1. Boxing helps Alfred most by controlling his weight and alcohol consumption.
- 2. James recalls when he and Alfred dropped out of 11th grade and spent their time under the big rock.
- 3. The ride from Harlem to Jamaica requires a transfer from subway to bus.
- 4. Aunt Pearl fears that Alfred is mixed up with a gang of grocery store robbers.
- 5. Alfred likes to escape worries by attending movies.
- 6. After the gang takes over the recreation center, Rick goes back to college and joins the Peace Corps.
- 7. James peddles the white powder to Hollis.
- 8. Before the robbery, Alfred made the grocery store's bank deposits.
- 9. When Aunt Pearl delivers her nephew's lunch, she senses tension at the gym.
- 10. Because Alfred quits school, he becomes known as a quitter.

### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Explain why fighters must run, eat well, rest, and work out.
- 2. Describe the motions that keep Alfred from getting hit.
- 3. Discuss evidence that the gang is a bad influence on James.
- 4. Characterize city life for a dropout.
- 5. Outline Alfred's career in the boxing ring.



**THE CONTENDER**

**COMPREHENSION TEST B**

**Part I: Matching (20 points)**

Match the following descriptions with places from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- |   |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| _____ 1. Alfred's sleeping place                          | A. foldaway bed                 |
| _____ 2. James's hiding place                             | B. restaurant                   |
| _____ 3. site where the trainer tapes fighters            | C. alley                        |
| _____ 4. location from which Aunt Pearl calls             | D. Africa                       |
| _____ 5. place where June introduces Arlene               | E. clubroom                     |
| _____ 6. spot from which Alfred crawls home               | F. cave                         |
| _____ 7. path at Coney Island                             | G. boardwalk                    |
| _____ 8. Jeff's ambition                                  | H. grocery window               |
| _____ 9. place where Alfred glimpses James's swollen face | I. locker room                  |
| _____ 10. place where Alfred celebrates his last fight    | J. Mrs. Elversen's summer house |

**Part II: Short Answer (30 points)**

Supply a word or phrase in answer to each of the following questions. Place your response in the blank provided at left.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Who drives a stolen Cadillac?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. What does Alfred eat to settle his stomach at Coney Island?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Who introduces a cousin to Alfred?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Against whom does Alfred first spar?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. At what theater did Aunt Pearl want to perform?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Who believes, "It's the climbing that makes the man"?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Who realizes that visits with Wilson and Jeff are humiliating to Alfred?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. At what time does the first run begin?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. What job skill does Lou offer to teach Alfred?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Who decks Griffin?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Who anticipates being licensed?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Who breaks the grocery window?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Where does Alfred's pay go?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. What potion soothes sore limbs?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Whom does Aunt Pearl consult about Alfred's future?

## THE CONTENDER

### Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Underline a word or phrase from the list below to complete each of the following statements.

1. At the grocery Alfred (rides the delivery bicycle, peels cabbage leaves, posts special signs in the window, all of the above).
2. (James, Henry, Lou, Elston Hubbard) was a former student at Lou's gym.
3. The party at the clubroom (lasts into Saturday morning, causes Mr. Johnson to call the police, precedes the gang's robbery of a grocer, involves car theft).
4. The Epsteins leave on Friday night to (attend matches at the Long Island City Union Hall, drive Alfred to Parkway Gardens, watch Alfred train, attend synagogue).
5. Hot coffee does not prepare Alfred for (the theft of a white Cadillac convertible, Coney Island, Arlene, cleaning the milk shelf).
6. Major expects Alfred to supply (oranges soaked in vodka, a lookout, an alibi, his own trunks).
7. After the last fight, Betty intends to (give Alfred a monogrammed white robe, get a teaching license, take Alfred to a restaurant, share a meal).
8. (Wilson, Jeff, Alfred, Aunt Dorothy) ruins Thanksgiving dinner by shouting.
9. (Elston Hubbard, Willie Streeter, Angel, Joe Rivera) apologizes for hitting Alfred.
10. (Ernestine, Alfred's father, Ben, John) dies just before the twins are born.

### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Compare Jeff, Henry, and James in terms of ambition.
2. Discuss the importance of training to Alfred's self-esteem.
3. Describe crowd behavior at boxing matches.
4. Discuss Aunt Pearl's role as substitute mother.
5. Account for the importance of Alfred in James's life.



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