

Teacher Guide

Grades 7–8

The Contender

Robert Lipsyte

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THE CONTENDER

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Teacher Guide

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Note

The text used to prepare this guide was the Harper Keypoint softcover published by HarperCollins, ©1967 by Robert Lipsyte. The page references may differ in other editions.

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ISBN 978-1-60878-203-1

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Publisher Information

For a complete catalog, contact—

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P.O. Box 97

Bulverde, TX 78163-0097

Web site: novelunits.com

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Discussion Questions

1. If you were filming *The Corner*, what sorts of “extras” would you hire for the scene where Alfred and Henry walk through the crowd to their seats at Madison Square Garden? What sort of atmosphere would you try to create with that crowd scene? (It is a chaotic scene with a mixture of types: seedy, well-dressed men, rough teenagers, blond white girls, black gamblers from Harlem and their statuesque girlfriends.)
Who is Willie Streeter? What do you learn about him? from what sources? (Willie is the fighter trained by Mr. Donatelli; Jelly mentions that Willie does train his own way regardless of what his trainer says.)
3. How can you tell that the crowd is mostly behind Willie? Why do you think that is? (The crowd cheers and claps wildly for Willie, while there are only polite applause and some boos when his opponent is introduced. Willie is the home-town favorite.)
4. What do you learn about boxing from this section? What are two or three details that couldn't have been included by the author who was not the sport expert that Lipsyte is? (Sample answers: boxers wear mouthpieces; a trainer can have a fight stopped.)
5. Why does Mr. Donatelli have the fight stopped? Is he completely honest with Willie afterward? What is Willie's reaction? Do you think Mr. Donatelli did the right thing? What do the others think? (Mr. Donatelli didn't want Willie to be hurt and to show himself a coward; he just tells Willie that it wasn't worth risking his eye; Willie is angry that Donatelli stopped the fight; Paul, Jerry and the others support Donatelli.)
6. Who is Spoon? Why does he fight anymore? (Witherspoon was once a fighter turned teacher; he was getting too many injuries, and Donatelli advised him to quit.)
7. Why does Jelly say that he is going to check his girlfriend's homework? (Jelly likes to eat and his girlfriend is going to culinary school.)
8. What sorts of daydreams does Alfred have in Spoon's car? How does Spoon know what he is fantasizing about? (Alfred dreams of being a champion; Spoon has had those dreams, too.)

9. How and why does the mood shift suddenly at the end of chapter 7? (Alfred is buoyant with thoughts of the future; then Major and his gang burst his bubble by meeting him on his front stoop.)
10. How does Alfred answer when Major threatens to give him a “squealer’s scar”? Do you think Alfred is being brave—or stupid? Do you think he is frightened? Why do you think Major doesn’t follow through on his threat? (When Major threatens to give him a knife cut for refusing to help rob the Epsteins, Alfred refuses.)
11. What does the final sentence of Chapter 8 mean? How is Alfred feeling? (Alfred feels that he has won a personal victory by standing up to Major.)
12. What do you think Alfred has learned about boxing—and winning—from watching Willie’s fight? Do you think Mr. Donatelli would have gotten the tickets for Alfred if he had known that Willie was going to lose? (Alfred has learned how important it is to listen to Mr. Donatelli—not the crowd—and not to be afraid of injuries.)

Prediction. Will Alfred change his mind by Thursday? Will Alfred help Major by reconnecting the Epsteins’ burglar alarm?

Literary Analysis: Flashback

A flashback is a device by which the author presents scenes or incidents that occurred prior to the opening of the story. Have students examine how Popsyte uses a recollection of Alfred’s as a flashback. Sketch in some details about the past friendship with James.

- How does the author move into and out of it? (pp. 55-56, “He tried to follow the action, but he kept thinking about the day he and James . . . Alfred tried to push the thought away . . .”)
- How essential is the flashback to the design and meaning of the story? (The flashback adds to our understanding of the kind of friendship Alfred and James used to have—and why he misses it so much now.)

Writing Activity

Alfred remembers a good time he once had with James after the two of them had found a boxing and wrestling magazine. Write a memory poem (rhyming or not) about a time you and your best friend laughed together when you were young.

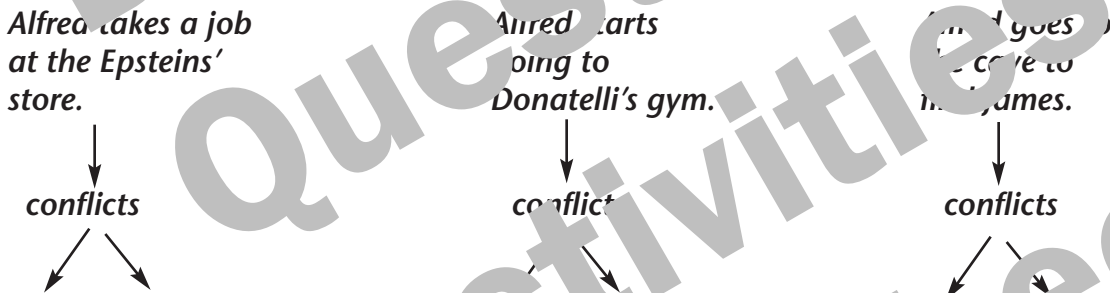
11. How has James helped Alfred in the past? How does Alfred promise to help James now? Do you think he can? (James stayed with Alfred all night when Alfred's mother died; Alfred promises to help James get off drugs, get a job, go back to school.)
12. Why does Alfred answer "Sort of" when James asks if he won the fight? Why does Alfred scrape his feet as loudly as he can as he backs out of the cave? What do you think he would have done if James hadn't agreed to go with him? What do you think will happen to James now? Can Alfred reach him? (Alfred didn't win the fight, technically, but he won his self-respect; Alfred is probably trying to stall so that James will have time to reconsider and go with Alfred.)

Literary Analysis: Climax

The climax of a story is the moment when the action of the story reaches its peak; the reader's emotional response is greatest at the climax. Have students identify the climax of the story (the point at the end of Chapter 19 where Alfred fights Hubbard and loses). Explain that it is only after the climax that the main character has a "moment of illumination" and the full meaning of the story becomes clear. What does Alfred learn by losing to Hubbard? (He is not meant to be a fighter; there are other ways he can make his money.)

Literary Analysis: Conflict

Explain that conflict arises in a story when a character faces a struggle between two opposed forces. These forces may involve other people, nature, or something within the character. On the board, draw the following graphic:



Discuss the conflicts that Alfred faced in each situation. Have volunteers complete the graphic with details from the dialogue. (The resulting graphic might be used as the basis for a writing activity in which students describe how Alfred resolved the conflicts in one case.)

Writing Activity

Imagine that Alfred and James have a conversation six months after the end of the story. Among other things, they discuss their neighborhoods together and their futures. Write the dialogue.