

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Contender

by Robert Lipsyte

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ISBN: 978-1-58049-885-2

Item No. 202231

Chapter 1

1. The title of this novel consists of an article and a noun. Look up the noun, *contender*, in a dictionary and copy the definition. Then, using a thesaurus, find synonyms for *contender*. Using the definition, synonyms, and cover of the book as evidence, write a paragraph predicting what will happen in the book.
2. At the start of the story, Alfred is waiting for James, his best friend, who is very late. Alfred shows his impatience by checking the time and telling himself that James will be there in just five more minutes. James, however, is still not in sight after the extra-allotted time.

Recall a time when you were waiting for someone who was very late. What emotions did you feel? Were you anxious, angry, worried, frustrated? List at least three emotions you felt and explain your reasons for feeling this way.

3. Alfred has had some tough times in his life, such as his father leaving and his mother's death. Through these times, James has been with him to give him comfort. Alfred remembers the exact words James said to him, "Gonna be all right, Alfred. I'm gonna stick by you. We're partners, right?" These words brought relief in some very hard times in Alfred's life.

Think of a difficult time in your life. Describe a person who comforted you during this time, and explain what this person did or said to help you.

Response Journal

4. As Alfred waits in the cave, he wishes James had escaped and was with him. Imagine that James did escape the police, and write a possible conversation between the two boys. It may begin like this:

Alfred: James, I'm so glad you didn't get caught!

James: Why didn't you tell me about the alarm? I thought we were friends!

Alfred: I'm sorry, man. I forgot, really. Are you all right?

James: Well, here's what happened . . .

5. While Alfred waits in the hiding place, he thinks about his friendship with James, especially how it has changed as they have grown older. As children, they explored the cave together. As teens, they dreamed of starting a business together. Now, as they enter adulthood, Alfred works at the store while James fraternizes with drug addicts and thieves. This separation breaks Alfred's heart as he waits. Describe a time when you and a friend grew apart and explain how it made you feel in a letter to that friend.

Chapter 2

6. At the beginning of this chapter, Alfred sits in bed and remembers his night. He feels safe in bed, despite all of the dangerous occurrences last night. Alfred tastes the baloney sandwich and warm milk. He hears the children playing in the street. He feels the pit in his stomach as he thinks about James. And he sees the crowded, cluttered apartment.

Write a descriptive paragraph about a place where you feel safe. What does it feel like, smell like, sound like, look like, and taste like?

7. Alfred, the main character, finds himself linked to the character of Henry again in this chapter. Alfred is battered, bruised, fearful, and heartbroken as he walks the streets. But, even though Henry is crippled, he seems to think positively about the neighborhood and his life. The two boys have very different perspectives of life in Harlem. Contrast how Alfred feels about life in the neighborhood to how Henry feels about life in the neighborhood.

Generate a list of more adjectives using a T-chart, or write a contrast paragraph.

Chapter 3

8. When Alfred goes into the gym, he pretends to be tough and fearless, even though his fleeing from Major is what led him to the gym in the first place. He is surprised when Donatelli says, “A man must have some fear and learn to control it, to make it work for him...”

Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Defend your opinion and support it with examples of situations from your life.

9. Becoming a contender will change Alfred’s life in many ways. One of the first changes he needs to make is his lifestyle, including his diet. Donatelli’s training diet directs: For breakfast, he should have toast, two boiled eggs, juice and tea; for dinner, he should have meat, green vegetables, fresh salad, milk, and fruit; he should not eat fried foods, beans, cabbage, pies, cakes, or soda.

Compare your diet to Donatelli’s diet. Make a list of what you ate yesterday for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks. Reflect on which diet, Alfred’s or your own, is healthier. Then list the changes you would make to both diets.

10. Alfred’s desire to be “somebody special, a champion,” helps to bring him to Donatelli that evening. Donatelli says this isn’t good enough; “It’s the climbing that makes the man. Getting to the top is an extra reward.” Alfred may never become a champion, but the fight for the chance to become a champion is what will shape his life for the better.

Think of a time when you worked your hardest to reach a goal. How did this extra effort influence your confidence? Describe what happened and how this changed your outlook.

Chapter 4

11. Sunday is a very busy day for Alfred. He also goes through many emotions on this day as he gets taunted by the protesters, hears the preacher's sermon, sees Major outside the church, talks with his uncle, and sets his alarm clock to begin his contender training.

Imagine you are Alfred writing a diary entry of your Sunday. Summarize the events that have occurred, and focus on the emotions you were feeling during each of the different events.

12. Jeff is Alfred's older cousin. He has had a very successful life: winning prizes at high school graduation, being elected president of his sophomore class, going to proms, attending college, and now possibly joining the Peace Corps. Because of his accomplishments, the family sees Jeff as Alfred's role model.

Write a paragraph describing a role model in your life. Be sure to include accomplishments this person has achieved and why you look up to him or her.

13. In the first few chapters of the book, we have learned a lot about Alfred and his current way of life. He has many reasons for wanting to become a contender, despite all of the harsh mental and physical requirements ahead of him.

Write a short essay explaining to a classmate who doesn't understand why Alfred wants to become a contender. Explain how pushing himself to the limit mentally and physically will be helpful.

14. This book was written in 1967. The setting, time and place, of this story is in the 1960's in New York, specifically Harlem. We hear of some historical occurrences during this time while Uncle Wilson talks to Alfred and while Alfred is walking to church.

Use an encyclopedia, history book, or the Internet to explore the 1960s, focusing specifically on issues or events related to civil rights. Create a timeline listing historic events during the 1960s that you feel are relevant to this story. Try to list at least a dozen events and dates.