

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Contender by Robert Lipsyte

Book Information

Robert Lipsyte, The Contender
Quiz Number: 5262
HarperCollins Publishers, Inc, 1987
ISBN 0-06-023919-0; LCCN
167 Pages
Book Level: 4.5
Interest Level: UG

Alfred Brooks wants something better than the inevitable crime and drugs of Harlem.

Award: Margaret A. Edwards Award; Misc./Other; NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Community Life, Violence; Diseases/Disorders, Drug Abuse/Addiction; Recommended Reading, NY Publ. Library Best Books for the Teen Age; Sports/Recreation, Misc./Other; U.S. States/Regions, New York

Main Characters

Alfred Brooks a seventeen-year-old high school drop-out who learns to fight both in and out of the ring

Aunt Pearl Alfred's aunt who has taken care of Alfred since his mother died

Bill Witherspoon "Spoon" a former boxer under Mr. Donatelli who was encouraged to return to school, became a teacher, and is now a positive role model for the young boxers

Henry an acquaintance of Alfred who becomes Alfred's friend and trainer

Hollis, Major, and Sonny three high school drop-outs who turn to alcohol and crime because they believe racism denies them other opportunities

James Mosely Alfred's best friend, who drifts away from their friendship when he sinks into drug addiction

Lou Epstein one of Alfred's bosses, who was once a boxer

Mr. Donatelli the white manager of Alfred, who is not overly emotional but cares about his boxers and tries to teach them to succeed in life as well as in boxing

Vocabulary

contender a person who strives or struggles in a competition; a competitor

fix a slang term meaning a dose of drugs

polio a disease that can cause paralysis by attacking the spinal cord; caused by a virus, it affects mainly children

spar to box; to go through the motions of boxing

trade a kind of job or work, especially one requiring skilled labor such as electrical work, carpentry, plumbing, or masonry

Synopsis

Alfred Brooks is a seventeen-year-old high-school dropout who lives in Harlem. Alfred's future looks bleak. His grocery store job is leading nowhere, his best friend, James, is a drug-addict, and he lives in a society that offers few opportunities to a young black man.

One evening, Alfred finds James hanging out with Major, Hollis, and Sonny. When Alfred lets it slip that the Epsteins leave money in their cash register on Fridays, James and the street kids break into the grocery store. Alfred had forgotten to tell them about the Epsteins' silent alarm, and James is caught. The others escape, but beat up Alfred because they think he had set them up.

Feeling like a slave to his fear of the street kids and to the hopelessness of his surroundings, Alfred realizes he must make changes. He goes to Donatelli's Gym, a neighborhood boxing club. Donatelli describes the rigorous routine of a boxer and tells him that to succeed, he must want to be a contender: the man who will "...sweat and bleed to get up as high as his legs and his brains and his heart will take him."

Alfred begins to train. He works hard and his attitude

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and confidence improve. Then, discouraged that he is not progressing faster, Alfred goes to one of Major's parties. He drinks heavily and smokes marijuana. The following day finds him sick and running from the police. He realizes the choices made by the street kids are leading them nowhere.

Alfred returns to training, works harder, and is soon ready for his first fight. James continues to decline into addiction. Although Alfred wins his first two fights, he dislikes hurting the other boxers. During the third fight, Alfred does not knock out his opponent because images of his last opponent lying on the mat flash in his mind. The fight ends in a draw. Donatelli tells Alfred he has become a contender, but his fighting days are over. Alfred asks for another fight to convince himself he is a contender.

At the final fight, Alfred endures a beating by a much better boxer. Although he loses by a unanimous decision, Alfred is most proud of this fight. When he returns home, he discovers James has broken through the Epsteins' window and escaped, badly bleeding. He finds James, persuades him to try to turn his life around, and promises to help him beat his addiction.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Although Alfred made many good choices, he was not always certain they were the right ones. Give an example from the book that shows Alfred was unsure of what to do.

Throughout the book, conflicting phrases or opinions of characters flash through Alfred's mind to illustrate his confusion. When he worked in the grocery store, Alfred considered disconnecting the alarm wires. He had doubts when he went to the party. Most importantly, he quits the gym temporarily because of his doubts about whether the rigors of training are worthwhile.

Literary Analysis

Why did Henry limp less heavily at the end of the book? What does this tell you about Henry?

Henry said his limping improved when he got a job with Mr. Donatelli and he began helping Alfred in the ring. This was a sign that Henry's confidence and optimism were increasing.

Inferential Comprehension

What is the difference between a contender and a champion? Which of these did Mr. Donatelli say Alfred should become? Why?

A contender is a person who strives or struggles in a competition. A champion is the winner in a competition or game. Mr. Donatelli stressed that Alfred should focus on becoming a contender.

Learning to work hard and to keep trying would help him beat the obstacles in his life.

Constructing Meaning

Alfred felt a coldness in his stomach before his final fight and wondered if there would ever be anything as important in his life. When did Alfred feel this coldness again? What does that tell us about Alfred?

Alfred felt the coldness when he found James in the cave. The coldness emphasized the importance of Alfred's friendship with James. Before this scene, Alfred wondered if he would ever feel it again.

Feeling it again so soon suggests Alfred's experience in the ring has taught him to recognize his fears and react effectively to them.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

The Contender is a fictional story about a young man who learns to fight both in and outside the ring. Ask students to research factual examples of people who have used sports, the arts, or other positive routes to escape poverty or oppression. Students might want to describe the difficulty the person originally faced, the talents that helped

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the person succeed, the people that inspired and encouraged them, their contribution to society, and the positive influence they have on others today. Discuss how sports and the arts can build self-discipline and self-confidence to help people overcome other problems.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Progress is being made toward solving the problems of racism and poverty. Research the history of major events dealing with civil rights. Make a timeline showing the major events in fighting racism. Discuss the importance of each of these events with the class. Ask students to identify what changes still need to be made. Ask them to come up with positive steps that people individually and as a nation can do to enact these changes.

Recognizing Cause and Effect Although all of the characters in this book faced poverty and oppression, they responded to these hardships in different ways. Ask the class to identify and then compare and contrast the ways each of the characters dealt with the hardships. Discuss what might happen to each of the characters in the future based on their choices. Record the information on a chart. Write the character names in the first column, their major choices in the second, and a probable future in the third. Choose a problem in or out of the book to analyze with the class. Brainstorm to come up with possible ways to solve that problem. Identify possible outcomes associated with each solution. Choose the best solution.

Responding to Literature Although it was clear from the way Alfred stood up to peer pressure that he was strong on the inside, Mr. Donatelli played an important role in helping to build up Alfred's confidence and focus his energy in the right direction. Ask students to think about someone who has been a positive role model. Write that person a letter acknowledging the positive influence they have made and thanking them for their influence.