

Title: *The Contender* by Robert Lipsyte (Published in 1967)

Approved for use in High School Reading Intervention Setting

Summary of the Work:

The Contender tells the story of Alfred Brooks, a 17-year-old African American teenager living in Harlem. Struggling with feelings of failure, limited opportunities, and the temptations of drugs and crime, Alfred finds a new path when he discovers boxing. Under the guidance of Mr. Donatelli at a local gym, Alfred begins training to become a boxer—not just to win in the ring, but to find strength, discipline, and purpose in his life. As Alfred faces physical and emotional challenges, he learns that being a true "contender" means standing up for yourself, making hard choices, and striving to be your best—even when the odds are against you.

Professional Reviews and/or Critical Essays:

Kirkus Reviews

Kirkus lauded the novel as “honest and taut and incisive,” describing it as “the best sports novel since early Tunis,” highlighting its compelling narrative and authentic portrayal of the boxing world.

ALA Booklist

The American Library Association's Booklist characterized *The Contender* as “a novel filled with hardships and hope,” emphasizing its exploration of personal growth and resilience.

Language Arts Journal

The journal recommended the book for early secondary school literature studies, noting its suitability for discussions on character development and thematic analysis.

Rationale:

Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* is a powerful and accessible novel that supports struggling readers while exploring the essential concept of identity through challenge. The protagonist, Alfred Brooks, is a relatable teen who faces personal and societal obstacles: peer pressure, poverty, insecurity, and the fear of failure. As he trains to become a boxer, Alfred begins to reshape his identity not through victory in the ring, but through the development of self-discipline, resilience, and moral strength.

Noted Distinction:

- **Margaret A. Edwards Award (2001)**
Awarded by the American Library Association for lifetime contribution to young adult literature, with *The Contender* recognized for transforming the sports novel into authentic literature through its gritty depiction of the boxing world.
- **ALA Notable Book for Children (1967)**
Recognized by the American Library Association as a notable book for children, acknowledging its literary merit and appeal to young readers.
- **Wel-Met Children's Book Award (1967)**
Presented by the Child Study Children's Book Committee at Bank Street College of Education, honoring outstanding children's literature

Lexile Score: 760

Readability Level: 4.5

Learning Resources Guidelines

- The novel meets the Learning Resources Guidelines.

Standard Alignment: CCSS 9-10.1, 9-10.2, 9-10.3, 9-10.5, 9-10.6, 9-10.9

Approval:

Submitted to Committee:

Approved for Adoption:

Notes on the Text:

The Contender is accessible for students who read below grade level while still offering age-appropriate content. It bridges the gap between skill-building and meaningful literature.

Connection to the Curriculum:

Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender* is an effective anchor text for exploring the essential question “How do challenges lead to growth or transformation?”, especially in a high school reading intervention setting. The novel follows Alfred Brooks, a teenager navigating personal insecurity, social pressure, and limited opportunity in 1960s Harlem. These challenges serve as the foundation for Alfred's journey toward self-discovery and personal strength.

Additional Connections:

Students will read, listen, and view supplemental texts: “Floyd Mayweather Jr.: A Boxing Legend,” Gallery Walk: Harlem 1960s, the film *Cinderella Man*, and Video Clip: “What makes someone a real fighter?”