



## THE CONTENDER

Pb 0-06-447039-3

An ALA Notable Children's Book  
An ALA Best of the Best Books  
for Young Adults



## THE BRAVE

Pb 0-06-447079-2

An ALA Best Book for Young Adults  
An ALA Recommended Book  
for Reluctant Young Readers  
Fanfare Honor List (*The Horn Book*)



## THE CHIEF

Pb 0-06-447097-0



## WARRIOR ANGEL

Tr 0-06-000496-7

# A Teacher's Guide for THE CONTENDER, THE BRAVE, THE CHIEF, AND WARRIOR ANGEL

By Robert Lipsyte • Grades 7 up

### Introduction

The characters in Robert Lipsyte's books illustrate the basic goodness in human nature and the desire to help others. This is exemplified many times throughout all four novels. Each character determines what he can do to help someone else the way he has been helped. This not only makes for well-developed characters, but also illustrates important qualities such as kindness, compassion, and appreciation.

### In the Classroom

Robert Lipsyte addresses prejudice, fear of bullies, split families, death, loyalty to friends and family, and being true to oneself in ways that teenagers will embrace. The characters in these novels will grab the hearts of readers and help them grasp the complex issues that challenge the human race. This teacher's guide contains discussion questions and activities that will help your students understand the characters' motivations and enable them to apply the lessons the characters learned to their own lives.

### Pre-Reading Activity

Even without any prior knowledge of boxing, students will enjoy getting to know the characters and learning about a sport with which they may not be familiar. However, because these four books are set in the world of boxing, some background information will enhance their reading experience. Divide the class in thirds, and have each group research a different area of the sport. Ask the first group of students to investigate boxing and make a list of terms and definitions associated with the sport. The second group can choose a famous boxer, such as Muhammad Ali or Oscar de la Hoya, and give a report to the class about his life as a boxing champ. Finally, the last group of students can research the heavyweight championship and report the definition, history, and qualifications to the class.

**NEW!**

# THE CONTENDER

## About the Book

Robert Lipsyte brings the world of boxing to life with the story of Alfred Brooks, a scared, skinny African-American boy who is bullied by the neighborhood tough guys. Alfred finds refuge at Donatelli's Gym with Mr. Donatelli and the other members who, help him discover the effort required to be a boxer. Alfred trains hard, learning how to box and working with other boxers. After a few wins and a tough loss, Alfred realizes he doesn't have the heart and instinct to be a champion, but he is a contender.

## Discussion

Alfred has some tough choices to make in regard to his friends. Does he succumb to peer pressure to take drugs, rob the Epstein's store, and possibly wind up in jail or does he remain alone to face the tough guys on the street? This is not an easy choice to make. Discuss the steps Alfred took to help him stand strong in the decision he made. Relate Alfred's choices to similar situations your students have had to face and discuss the outcome of their decisions.

## Activity

Alfred is determined to take the high road through life. He trains hard to become a boxer and works cleaning Mr. Donatelli's gym to pay for his training. What can teens do today to help them break free from influences that would get them into trouble with their parents or the law? Ask students to research after-school activities or outreach programs in their area that they might suggest to a friend in trouble. Suggest the YMCA

[www.ymca.net/index.jsp](http://www.ymca.net/index.jsp)

or Boys & Girls Clubs of America

[www.bgca.org/clubs/](http://www.bgca.org/clubs/)

as a place to start. Have students look on the Internet and/or interview someone from an organization and report to the class what they discover.

# THE BRAVE

## About the Book

Alfred Brooks gives back to Donatelli's Gym when he helps train Sonny Bear, a seventeen-year-old boxer who leaves the Moscondaga Indian Reservation for the streets of New York. Sonny is hard and angry because of the abuse he takes for being an "injun," and the people who are involved with Sonny, who have to work hard to help him discover his physical and inner strength. There is Jake, Sonny's uncle, who constantly talks about the Running Braves and the legends of the Moscondaga people; Martin Witherspoon, who trains with Sonny; Alfred Brooks, now a New York cop who encourages and supports Sonny; and Henry Johnson, who runs the gym and manages Sonny. It takes all of them to help Sonny become a contender for the heavyweight title and discover how to take control of his life.

## Discussion

"People helping people" is a predominant theme of *The Brave*. Brainstorm with your students and make a list of the people who helped Sonny and others to achieve a common goal. Then ask students what they do to help others become better people and/or what others have done to help them. Discuss how a sacrifice of personal gain and desire must sometimes be made in order to truly help someone overcome a tough challenge.

## Activity

Sonny is cheated out of winning several fights with local heroes, and even the amateur title is taken away from him because of a technicality. Ask students to investigate examples of bribery in sports (e.g. Olympic scandals.) Have there ever been instances where foul play has been suspected? What, if anything, was done about it? Have students report their findings to the class.

# THE CHIEF

## About the Book

After Alfred is paralyzed by a drug dealer's bullet, he turns to managing Sonny Bear full-time. Martin Witherspoon becomes Sonny's writer, helping promote Sonny as a heavyweight champion contender. But the group begins to fall apart. A gambling casino on the reservation is splitting the Moscondago people and distracts Uncle Jake. Sonny goes to Hollywood and almost loses his career. Martin travels to Los Angeles to draw Sonny back to his roots and his dream of becoming the youngest heavyweight champion.

## Discussion

An ongoing theme in *The Chief* is Sonny's desire to seek personal victory. He continues his efforts to better himself despite the prejudice he faces in and out of the ring. Discuss with students the specific things Sonny and his friends did to help him overcome the obstacles he faced. Ask students to relate the action Sonny took to their own situations. What can they do to help themselves and others be better people?

## Activity

The gambling casino on the reservation causes a division among the Moscondago tribe. Have students investigate gambling casinos located throughout the United States on Indian reservations. Why is gambling legal on Indian reservations? Has the building of these casinos created similar hard feelings to those what the Moscondaga people experienced? Have gambling casinos been a benefit or detriment to tribes?

# WARRIOR ANGEL

## About the Book

After winning the heavyweight championship, Sonny turns his back on Alfred, Marty, and the people at Donatelli's Gym. He signs with the big-time promoter Elston Hubbard. But Sonny soon learns that his new management team is only concerned with how much money he can make for them. Feeling used and alone, Sonny begins to lose his fighter instinct when a mysterious person who calls himself the Warrior Angel begins to e-mail him. The Warrior Angel helps Sonny return to Donatelli's and renew his relationship with his old management team—but the Warrior Angel is not all he appears to be.

## Discussion

There are similarities in the lifestyles of the Warrior Angel and Sonny; both are in a "prison" of sorts, both are suffering from psychological problems, and both are searching for something better. Ask students what other similarities they see and how they help Sonny and Starkey (a.k.a. Warrior Angel) connect. On the last page, Sonny tells Starkey, "You saved me, so I could save you. That's how you complete the mission." How does this change their relationship, and what does it say about the lessons Sonny has learned about friendship and loyalty on his way to the top?

## Activity

Alfred grows from a teenager in *The Contender* to a retired police officer in *Warrior Angel*. During his lifetime, what has changed in the boxing arena, in the field of computer technology, and in the medical field that contributed to the overall believability of Starkey, the Warrior Angel? Divide the class into groups of three and have each group investigate an area of change, make a time line of the major events, and determine how the changes contributed to the novel's success. Students can then report their findings to the class.



## About the Author

Robert Lipsyte currently lives in New York and is a highly respected columnist and a prize-winning sports reporter for *The New York Times*. He has also been a network correspondent for CBS television and an Emmy award-winning author of a television documentary series about sports. However, he has gained the greatest satisfaction from his young adult books because he feels “that I’ve had the chance to make a real impact on minds that are still open to possibility and change.” This impact was rewarded in 2001 when Robert Lipsyte received the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement for young adult fiction.

In 1964 Mr. Lipsyte began covering professional boxing, in particular the rise of Muhammad Ali’s career. He used those experiences as the basis for his first young adult novel that he wrote in 1967, *The Contender*. Thirty-five years later he has written *Warrior Angel*, the fourth and final book in this series.

## A Note from the Author

Most of my books have come out of my reporting for *The New York Times*. *The Contender* sprang out of a late-night conversation with an old boxing manager the night before the Muhammad Ali-Floyd Patterson fight in Las Vegas. The boxing manager told me about a set of rickety steps going up to a run-down gym, where contenders would spar for the chance to hit the big time.

Ten years later, on assignment at an upstate New York Indian reservation, I had the chance to meet some Indian teenagers and elders; from this assignment came *The Brave* and later, *The Chief*.

*Warrior Angel* came about some thirty-five years after I wrote the first book of what was never intended to be a series. I was on assignment to write about mental health. I talked with schizophrenic teenagers, and heard about their experiences in hospitals and at home. I realized I had something more to say about Alfred Brooks and Sonny Bear, who appear in the first three books, and about a new character, Starkey, and how he affects their lives.

It’s amazing to think so much time has passed between *The Contender* and *Warrior Angel*, and how young adult books have changed—and stayed the same. I feel the same pleasure writing for a teen audience as I always did, and I am busy working on a new young adult novel that came out of my assignment covering NASCAR last year.

See you on the road,  
Bob Lipsyte

Also by Bob Lipsyte:

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