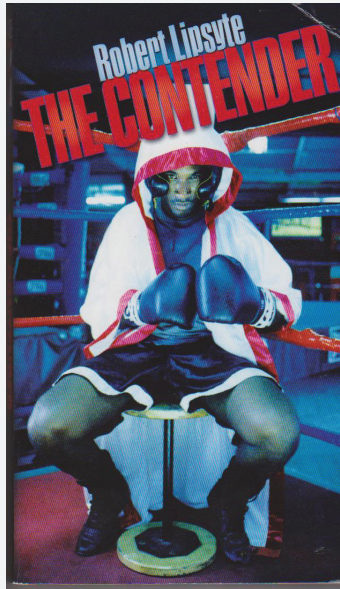


Words from the Author

Lipsyte, Robert. *The Contender*. New York: HarperCollins, 1967.

Robert Lipsyte



The first few times I walked into a classroom to talk about my new book, *The Contender*, there were gasps loud enough to make me wonder if I had egg on my face. Actually, the gasps were about my face. It was white.

Some teachers and students were disappointed that this novel about a black high school dropout hadn't been written by a black author. Others were relieved that they wouldn't have the unaccustomed and presumably uncomfortable experience of having to meet and talk with a black person (this was 1967). The gasps I appreciated were from those surprised that I was white; how could I know so much about life in Harlem?

Almost fifty years later, this doesn't seem as quaint as it should; after all the integration, the black quarterbacks, the black president, the younger generation's conceit of a post-racial society, I'm not sure I could create a black protagonist with as much confidence, nay, arrogance, as I did in my twenties.

Even though I was operating out of an egalitarian sensibility—all people are pretty much the same, I thought then and still do—the book was not written consciously as a racial lesson, a symbolic tutorial. The hero of *The Contender* was black and his boxing teacher was white because that made the most sense in the world I was writing about, a world I thought I knew. My parents were New York City public school teachers who worked mostly in black neighborhoods (I'd attended

a predominately black kindergarten to be in my mom's school). I'd taught English in the mostly African-American and Latino Rikers Island jail. My first book was the autobiography of the black comedian and civil rights activist, Dick Gregory, entitled *Nigger*. I was a *New York Times* boxing reporter on the Muhammad Ali beat. And while many black readers seemed sorry (spoiler alert!) that Alfred Brooks didn't become a champion, none disputed his portrayal. Later, there would be readers and writers (mostly white) who said that whites shouldn't write about blacks because there were so few black writers being published. I couldn't argue with that. But that wasn't the reason I went on to write mostly about white males. As that 1960's promise of racial equality seemed less certain over the years, I began to question just how deep was my understanding of my black characters.

My best friend over many of those years, a black TV producer I worked with, dismissed my doubts. "Look how much we share," said Roger Sims, "how close we are." And yet, there were parts of his life with which I could empathize but never fully understand: what it felt like to be shunned by other cadets as a member of the first group of black men admitted to the Air Force Academy; his concern about being marked as an affirmative action hire; his mixed feelings about the fear in white people's eyes as he approached them on city streets at night, a 6-foot-6-inch, 300-pound dark skinned man. I could imagine the inner Roger but never really know it.

He encouraged sequels to *The Contender*, even as I began to question the terrible physical and mental price that boxers, including Ali, paid for their careers. Roger, until his recent death, maintained that I was a white liberal sentimentalist. Black folks usually had to pay with their bodies, he said, because they weren't born with that white skin head start: Get used to it, Bobby!

Not so easy. While *The Contender* remains the most popular of my young adult novels, as I go into classrooms to talk about it these days, I often try to get kids to think beyond boxing to other sports and other ways (drama club and orchestra, creative computer programming, even writing, God help them) to learn discipline and gain self-esteem.

Then again, when suburban white girls in the audience tell me how Alfred inspired them to keep climbing, to become contenders, I wonder if maybe, subconsciously, the book was some kind of symbolic tutorial, after all. Maybe I can get used to that.

And what about the gasps of surprise and relief I get now when I walk in? More often than not, they moan, "That book is so old and he's still alive!"

I know I can get used to that.

About the Author

Robert Lipsyte was born in New York and has been a resident of Closter, New Jersey, where he was inducted into the New Jersey Literary Hall of Fame in 1993. The ALA Margaret A. Edwards Award was awarded to Lipsyte in 2001, citing four books published from 1967 to 1993. He is credited with transforming the sports novel to authentic literature using the ongoing theme of the struggle of protagonists to seek personal victory despite defeats. His books focus on the search for self-definition by young adults.