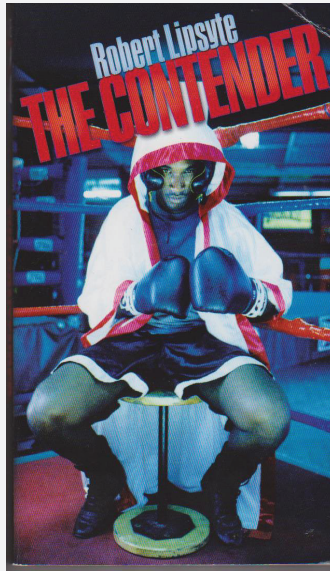


First Opinion: Hope and Realism Offered in this Classic Sports Novel

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

Chris Crowe



Robert Lipsyte's first novel, *The Contender*, debuted in the fall of 1967, the same year as a handful of other books that would later become classics of young adult literature: S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*; Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*; Ann Head's *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*; and a poetry anthology titled *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle*.

One of the earliest reviews of *The Contender* called it "the best sports novel since early [John R.] Tunis." It went on to say, "This is so good—so honest and taut and incisive—that the few contrivances . . . are more to be regretted than condemned. A crackling story that no boy should miss" (*Kirkus* 1146). Two months later, *The Christian Science Monitor* praised the sense of hope that resided in the gritty realism of Lipsyte's book, concluding that "some of the stories in today's news might even be different if here and there a boy in the shadows were to learn from Alfred and the road he takes—away from savagery and unreason toward a world of understanding" ("A Contender and a Contention" B13). Praise for the novel continued to pile up; a week later, *Commonweal* said that *The Contender* was "no mere sports story, no mere ideological tract, but a remarkably successful novel in its own right" (181). A reviewer in *The Horn Book* admired the story's glimmer of hope amid a "grim and frightening" reality as well

as the positive relationships with adults and the occasional moments of humor. It concluded with a strong endorsement: "If it is honesty and realism that teen-agers want in their books, this is one for those who have not yet switched to books for adults" (759). In addition to praising dialogue, characterization, and sports scenes, *The Saturday Review* also reported that "the vignettes of Harlem life [are] drawn with candor" (39).

Nearly all reviewers praised Lipsyte's depictions of boxing and his portrayal of the mean streets of New York City, but two reviews that appeared within three days of one another leveled a mean critical eye on *The Contender*. While praising the quality of sporting detail and the transformation of Alfred from a boy on the ropes to a young man with a future, Nat Hentoff's *New York Times* review said that because of his heavy-handed didacticism, Lipsyte's novel "fails as believable fiction." The review concludes with this body-blow: "If the Horatio Alger approach is to be at all relevant in a work of fiction set in the ghetto, it needs to be considerably updated and treated with much less naiveté than here" (351). Writing in *Library Journal*, Susan O'Neal offered similar criticism: "As a sports story, this is a superior, engrossing, insider's book; but as social commentary on problems in a Negro ghetto, it is a superficial, outsider's book which doesn't increase real understanding" (4262).

Most teenagers don't read book reviews, so the few criticisms of *The Contender* and its 1967 siblings that dealt with real, contemporary problems found an eager audience and steady sales. Despite these books' popularity, the 1968 Newbery Award committee snubbed the realistic novels like *The Contender*, *The Outsiders*, and *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*, giving the award instead to E. L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*.

But even without an endorsement from the American Library Association, *The Contender* and other of the "new" novels for teenagers, gradually found their way, not just into the hands of readers, but into secondary classrooms. About a year after the release of *The Contender*, African American author Dorothy Sterling published a long article in *English Journal* lamenting the racial stereotypes and the general absence of strong characters of color in contemporary fiction being used in American schools. Her review of fifteen recent juvenile novels with interracial themes turned up the same sorts of problems, leading her to complain, "Most are written by white writers for white readers and do not get inside the skin of the black characters" (821). She did, however, find three such books to recommend, one of which was Lipsyte's *The Contender*. English teachers must have been paying attention because a general search of *English Journal* issues published in the 1970's turns up many references to the novel, evidence that within a few years of its publication, Lipsyte's debut book found itself in regular rotation in English classrooms around the nation.

What about the impact of the novel's success on its author? In 1987—twenty years after *The Contender* first appeared in print—Lipsyte reported that the personal impact had been significant. "The pleasure of writing [*The Contender*] and the psychic and financial rewards opened possibilities that changed my life" (16).

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About the Author

Chris Crowe is a professor of English at Brigham Young University where he teaches young adult literature, teaching methods, and creative writing. He is also the author of several books, including *More than a Game: Sports Literature for Young Adults* and the novel, *Mississippi Trial, 1955*. His newest historical novel, *Death Coming Up the Hill*, will be released in October 2014.