

MODEL: THEME AND SYMBOL

Alfred is a high-school dropout who is barely staying out of trouble with the law. One night after getting beaten up, he steps into a gym to see if he can join the neighborhood boxing club. As he talks to Mr. Donatelli, the gym owner, about the challenges of training as a fighter, Alfred realizes Mr. Donatelli may be talking about more than just boxing.

from

THE CONTENDER



Novel by Robert Lipsyte

“How far did you go in school?”

“Eleventh grade.”

“What happened?”

“I quit.”

5 “Why?”

“Didn’t seem like any reason to stay.”

“What makes you think you won’t quit here too?”

Alfred swallowed. He suddenly wished he hadn’t come up the steps, that he was somewhere else, anywhere. He thought of the cave.

10 “Well?”

“I want to be somebody.”

“Everybody is somebody.”

“Somebody special. A champion.”

15 Donatelli’s thin lips tightened. “Everybody wants to be a champion. That’s not enough. You have to start by wanting to be a contender, the man coming up, the man who knows there’s a good chance he’ll never get to the top, the man who’s willing to sweat and bleed to get up as high as his legs and his brains and his heart will take him. That must sound corny to you.”

“No.”

20 “It’s the climbing that makes the man. Getting to the top is an extra reward.”

“I want to try.”

Donatelli shrugged. “Boxing is a dying sport. People aren’t much interested anymore. They want easy things like television, bowling, car rides. Get yourself a good job. Finish high school. Go at night if you have to.”

25 “I’ll try hard.”

“Talk it over with your parents.”

“I don’t have any. I live with my aunt.”

30 The pale blue eyes came around again. They seemed softer now. But the voice was still cold and flat. “It’s not easy trying to become a contender. It’s never any fun in the beginning. It’s hard work, you’ll want to quit at least once every day. If you quit before you really try, that’s worse than never starting at all.”

Close Read

1. Reread the boxed text. What conflict is set up?
2. What is Alfred’s goal? What does Mr. Donatelli think about that goal?
3. Given what Mr. Donatelli says in lines 14–20, what do you think boxing might symbolize to him?
4. Reread lines 29–31. What lesson might Alfred learn from training as a boxer? State this lesson as a theme.