

The Contender Study Guide

The Contender by Robert Lipsyte

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Plot Summary

“The Contender” is a young adult novel by Robert Lipsyte. In the novel, Alfred Brooks is a black 17-year-old high school dropout living in Harlem in the mid-1960s. Alfred is dissatisfied with his job and confused by the changes he sees going on around him, and begins training at Donatelli’s Gym to become a boxer. Although Alfred wants to be a champion, Mr. Donatelli says that first he will need to show that he has what it takes to become a contender. During his second fight Alfred knocks his opponent out, and is unable to get the image of the other fighter crumpling to the ground out of his mind. After his third fight, Mr. Donatelli tells him that he should retire because he doesn’t have the ‘killer instinct,’ but Alfred says he needs to fight one more match. Alfred is beaten badly in his last fight, but refuses to be knocked out and doesn’t give up. With nothing left to prove to himself, Alfred can leave boxing and apply the lessons he has learned to the rest of his life. First published in 1967, “The Contender” is the first in a series of young adult novels about boxing by award winning author and sports journalist Robert Lipsyte. The series is continued in “The Brave.”

One Friday evening 17-year-old Alfred Brooks goes to the local ‘clubroom’ to look for his best friend James. He finds James hanging out there with Major, Sonny, and Hollis – three local hoodlums. Major asks Alfred why he isn’t at his job at Epsteins’ Grocery Store, and Alfred says that the Epsteins close the store early on Fridays because they are Jewish. Major decides they should rob the store and James agrees. James wants Alfred to come with them, but Alfred refuses. After the other boys leave Alfred remembers that a silent alarm was installed in the store the week before and hurries after James to warn him, but he is too late. There are police cars all around the store, and Alfred hears someone say that one boy was arrested. After waiting for James for hours at a cave in the park that only the two of them know about, Alfred heads home. He runs into Major and the others, who tell him that James has been arrested and blame him for not warning them about the alarm. They beat Alfred until he is unconscious and leave him in the street.

When he comes to he is in bed in the apartment where he lives with his Aunt Pearl and her three daughters. Aunt Pearl tells him that Henry – another local boy – and his father found Alfred and carried him home. Alfred feels guilty about James being arrested and thinks that his life is going nowhere. Later that night he decides to take a walk, something he often does when he needs to think. He ends up in front of Donatelli’s Gym, where champion boxers have trained and where Henry, the boy who helped carry him home, has a job. Alfred finds Mr. Donatelli, an older white man, sitting in the gym alone and tells him that he wants to train to be a champion fighter. Donatelli tells him that before he can be a champion Alfred will have to become a contender and says that it is hard work; Alfred will want to give up at least once a day, but if he quits before he really tries it will be worse than if he never started. Alfred says that he wants to try.

Alfred gets up at 5:30 Monday morning and runs through the park (part of the training Donatelli outlined to him) and then returns to the gym after work. The gym is filled with fighters working out, shadowing boxing, and sparring in the ring. Alfred is told that Mr.



Donatelli isn't at the gym because he has a boxer fighting at Madison Square Garden that night. After introducing himself to Bud Martin, Mr. Donatelli's assistant, Alfred learns that Donatelli has left a ticket to the fight for him with Henry, and the two boys take the subway to the Garden to see the fight. After Mr. Donatelli has the referee stop the match when his fighter, Willie Streeter, is cut over the eye Alfred follows Henry to the dressing room where he meets Spoon, an ex-fighter that Donatelli once managed who is now a school teacher. Spoon explains to Alfred that Streeter "showed some dog," protecting his eye after it was cut and not attacking his opponent. Along with keeping him from being more seriously hurt Donatelli stopped the fight so that Streeter wouldn't look like a coward.

Alfred starts training the following day and for the next several weeks he runs in the park every morning and shadowboxes, works on the punching bags, and exercises at the gym after work. Occasionally Mr. Donatelli or Bud Martin stop by and comment on how he's doing, but usually only Henry pays attention to him, holding the heavy bag while he hits it and timing his workouts. After a while, Alfred begins to resent the fact that Mr. Donatelli won't let him spar in the ring with other fighters and wonders if there is any point to his training. One Friday evening Major stops by the gym; he tells Alfred that there will be a party at the clubroom that night and that James, who Alfred knows is out on probation but has not spoken to since he was arrested, will be there. Alfred goes to the party and gets drunk. When James finally shows up he hardly acknowledges Alfred, and a few minutes later Alfred sees James buy a bag of heroin. Alfred wants to tell James not to mess with the drug, but is too drunk and passes out before he can say anything. A few days later, feeling depressed and confused, Alfred goes back to the gym to quit. As he is saying goodbye to Mr. Donatelli he realizes that if he quits he will never know how far he could have gone, and decides to continue his training.

Mr. Donatelli finally lets Alfred spar at the gym and soon decides that he is ready to fight for real in the fight clubs. Alfred wins his first fight by unanimous decision. In his second fight, Alfred knocks his opponent out and even though the other fighter isn't injured, Alfred is upset by the fact that he could hurt, or even kill, someone in the ring. The image of the fighter crumpling to the canvas haunts Alfred. A few days later, after returning from Thanksgiving dinner with some relatives, Alfred sees James huddled in the shadows outside his apartment building; James looks so bad that Alfred hardly recognizes him. He tries to get James to come upstairs for some hot food, but all James wants is money for a fix, and Alfred gives it to him.

During his third fight Alfred fails to throw an easy knockout punch, and Mr. Donatelli says that it is time for him to retire because he doesn't have the "killer instinct." Alfred says that he needs to fight one more time to see what he is capable of, and reluctantly Mr. Donatelli lets him fight an older, more experienced boxer. Alfred takes a terrible beating during the first two rounds, but in the third round he trades punches in the middle of the ring with the other fighter and refuses to go down. Even though he loses the fight, Alfred has proven everything he needs to prove to himself and is ready to retire. When he gets home that evening Aunt Pearl tells him that James was injured while trying to rob Epsteins' again and is running from the police. Alfred finds James hiding in the cave in the park, and after refusing to give him money for another fix talks

him into going to the hospital. Alfred has learned that he can do anything he puts his mind to if he gives it all he's got, and tells James that he will help him beat his addiction and that together the two of them will make something of their lives.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

Chapter 1

Alfred Brooks sits on the stoop of his apartment building in Harlem one Friday night waiting for his best friend James who is supposed to go with the movies with him. When James doesn't show, Alfred heads down the street to a back alley and then walks down a set of steps into the 'clubroom.' James is there along with Major, Hollis, and Sonny – three neighborhood hoodlums. When James says that he has no money for the movies, Alfred says that he has some money and can pay for him. Major comes over and asks why Alfred isn't still at work since it isn't even eight o'clock. Alfred says that the Epsteins, who own the grocery store where he works, always close early on Friday to go to synagogue and that they are so religious that they never even touch the money in the cash register after sundown.

Major immediately says that they should rob the store and wants Alfred to come with them. When Alfred refuses, Major says that he is a 'slave' and starts shuffling around the clubroom, calling him 'Uncle Alfred' while Hollis and Sonny laugh. James tells Alfred that he doesn't owe the Epsteins anything, but Alfred says that they were the only people who would give him a job after he dropped out of high school and that they treat him well. Alfred then begs James to come to the movies with him, but James leaves with the others. Henry, a young man with a crippled leg, comes into the clubroom soon after and tells Alfred that he is working at Donatelli's Gym. He says that Alfred should come to the gym and train to be a boxer, but Alfred ignores him and leaves the clubroom. As soon as he is on the street, Alfred remembers that the Epsteins had a silent alarm installed in the grocery store earlier that week. Alfred runs towards the store to warn James, but when he arrives he sees that police cruisers and a crowd of onlookers are already there. He hears someone say that the police caught one of the boys.

Alfred makes his way to the park and goes to a small cave that he and James played in when they were younger, thinking that if James has not been caught that is where he would hide. As Alfred waits he remembers the good times he had there with James when they were younger. When Alfred finally leaves the cave it is full dark, and he walks towards home. As he turns into his street he meets Major, Sonny, and Hollis. Alfred asks where James is, and Hollis says that the police caught him. Major says that Alfred knew about the alarm, and the three of them start to beat him. After several minutes two policemen come into the street and Major, Hollis, and Sonny run away. Alfred crawls into an alley and hides behind a garbage can, where he passes out.

Chapter 2



When Alfred comes to the next morning he is at home in bed. Aunt Pearl has nursed him through the night and tells him that Henry and his father found him and carried him home. Aunt Pearl asks what happened, and Alfred says that he fell off a high wall he was walking on. He can see that she doesn't believe him. Aunt Pearl then tells him that James was arrested for breaking into Epsteins'. Alfred says that he knew James was going to try to rob the store, but he wasn't with him. Aunt Pearl leaves for work, and Alfred goes back to sleep. When he wakes up again it is noon. He remembers that James is in jail and blames himself because he told the others about the money in the cash register, but he didn't remember about the silent alarm. He watches some television and then goes back to sleep. When he awakens again it is dusk. He gets up, dresses, and heads out to the street. He meets a small boy on the front stoop who tells him that Major and Sonny are looking for him.

As Alfred walks, taking care to stay away from places where he might run into Major, he sees Henry limping along across the street on his way home from his job at Donatelli's Gym. Not being in the mood to thank Henry for carrying him home he hides behind a parked car until the other boy is out of sight, then crosses the street and walks in the direction Henry came from. Soon he finds himself standing across from a building housing a bar on the first floor, a dentist on the second, and Donatelli's Gym on the third. He looks at the building for a while, and then thinks he sees Major coming down the street towards him. He quickly runs across the street to get away, but when he looks over his shoulder he realizes that it is not Major. He then sees that the door leading upstairs to Donatelli's Gym is open; he walks through it and starts to climb the steps. When he finally reaches gym he is out of breath. A short man with white hair is alone in the gym. Alfred tells the man his name and says that he has come to be a fighter. The man says, "Okay, Alfred Brooks. Take off your shirt."

Chapter 3

Mr. Donatelli looks Alfred over. Then, he has him get on a medical scale. He is five feet seven and three-quarters inches tall and weighs 124 pounds. Mr. Donatelli asks if he has ever boxed before, and Alfred says no. Donatelli says that he can see Alfred has been fighting in the street and then walks over to the boxing ring in the center of the room. He tells Alfred that a boxing ring is not like the street; there are rules, and a referee, and there is no place to hide. He says that no one starts off fighting in the ring – they have to earn their way in, and most of the kids who come to him quit before they get there. He then points to a large canvas bag hanging from the ceiling by a chain and tells Alfred to go over and hit it. Alfred hits the heavy bag, but it barely moves. Donatelli then points to a small bag hanging from the ceiling in another corner of the room and tells him to hit it a few times. Alfred hits it with his right hand, but misses it with his left when it bounces back. Donatelli says that the heavy bag is for power, and the 'peanut' bag is for speed. Before Alfred gets into the ring he will have to be able to slam the heavy bag around all day and punch the small bag fast enough to make it sound like a machine gun.

Donatelli then tells Alfred what it will be like if he trains to be a fighter. He will get up at 5:30 to run in the park every morning, even if it rains or snows, to build up his wind and



legs. After breakfast Alfred will go to work and then come to the gym directly after to do sit-ups, push-ups, and jump rope. He will then go home and be in bed by nine. Donatelli tells him that his friends and family will think he's a fool for trying to be a fighter. He will be tempted to stay out late and party with his friends. Pretty soon he will start to think he's a fool, too. Donatelli then asks him how far he got in school, and Alfred says that he quit after the 11th grade. When Donatelli asks him what makes him think he won't quit boxing too, Alfred says that he wants to be someone special – a champion. Donatelli says that everyone wants to be a champion, but he needs to want to be a contender first because it is the climb toward the top that makes the man. He says that it is hard work and that Alfred will want to quit at least once a day. He then tells Alfred that nothing is ever promised to anyone and that if he starts this and quits before he really tries it will be worse than never starting at all. Donatelli then tells Alfred that he lives in the gym so he is always there and wishes Alfred luck no matter what he decides to do. Alfred leaves the gym and heads towards home.

Analysis

These first three chapters serve to introduce Alfred Brooks, the main character in the novel, and give the reader an idea of the world in which he lives as well as Alfred's relationship with his best friend James. Even though he dropped out of high school after the 11th grade because he didn't see any point in going on with his education, Alfred is a bright young man who is willing to work to make something of himself. Throughout most of his life James has been Alfred's closest friend, and someone that he has always been able to count on. Together they found the cave in the park when they were seven and made it their secret meeting place, and for the next ten years Alfred and James did almost everything together. When Alfred's father left home for good when he was ten, James helped him get through it. Then, three years later when Alfred's mother died, James talked with him through the night and helped to ease the grief and pain he was feeling. Although at this point it is only hinted at in the narrative, the reader understands that since Alfred quit school and started working full-time at Epsteins' Grocery Store, James has started pulling away from him, spending more and more time with Major, Hollis, and Sonny – the neighborhood street 'hoodlums' – in their basement clubroom. Even though Alfred does what he can to keep the friendship alive, it is obvious that he and James are increasingly moving along separate paths. After James is arrested for robbing Epsteins' Grocery Store Alfred blames himself for talking about the money in the cash draw in front of Major and the others and forgetting about the silent alarm, but most of all because he was unable to talk James out of going with the others.

Rather than spending all day hanging around in the clubroom with Major and the other boys and getting into trouble, Alfred has managed to get a job at Epsteins' – a small neighborhood grocery store – that he takes very seriously. Alfred respects the Epsteins and is grateful to them for giving him a job when no one else would, but the other boys make fun of him and call him a 'slave' because he works for 'the white man.'

The novel is set in the predominantly black Harlem section of New York City in the mid-1960s. Prejudice and racism are everywhere in both the black and white communities.



At one point, while Alfred is trying to talk him out of robbing the grocery store, James says that, “Whitey been stealing from us for three hundred years. We just going to take some back.” At another point, Alfred hears someone in the crowd that has gathered around Epstein’s store after it was robbed say that the only reason the police come to their neighborhood at all is to take care of the white-owned stores. Although Alfred seems to be mostly free of these feelings of prejudice himself, this undercurrent of racial unrest runs throughout the entire novel.

Although he knows that Major and the other boys believe that he didn’t tell them about the silent alarm on purpose and are looking for him to beat him up again, Alfred finds that he is restless and cannot remain cooped up in the apartment where he lives with his Aunt Pearl and her three young daughters. He walks through the streets of Harlem and tries to make sense of what has happened to both himself and to James, and eventually finds himself in front of Donatelli’s Gym, where people in the neighborhood say that Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson – both world champion boxers – once trained. After seeing someone that he mistakenly thinks is Major walking towards him on the street and immediately becoming frightened, Alfred realizes that unless he does something to change things he will have to spend the rest of his life living like a slave, and running away from everything that scares him. When he starts the long climb up the steps to Donatelli’s Gym he finds himself wishing that James were with him. But, he realizes that this is something that he will have to do alone.

When Alfred finally enters the gym it is empty except for Mr. Donatelli, a stocky older man with white hair. When Alfred tells Mr. Donatelli that he wants to be somebody – a champion – the older man tells him that everybody is somebody. He says that it is more important to be a contender than it is to be a champion because it is the hard work and determination that it takes to try and get to the top that makes a man what he is. Donatelli is honest with Alfred and tells him exactly what training is going to be like, warning him that nine out of ten times the kids who come to train at the gym quit before they ever get to step into the ring. When Alfred says that he wants to try and that he will try hard, Donatelli tells Alfred that no one is ever promised anything. It’s obvious that the older man is not only talking about boxing but also about life.

Discussion Question 1

After James is arrested while trying to rob Epstein’s with the other boys, Alfred blames himself. Do you think that James being arrested is really Alfred’s fault? Was there anything Alfred could have done that he didn’t do to stop him? Discuss the relationship between Alfred and James.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Alfred head out the night after he is beaten up even though he knows that Major and the others are still looking for him? What is it that finally makes him climb the steps to Donatelli’s Gym, and what does he hope to find there?



Discussion Question 3

When Alfred first goes into the gym, Mr. Donatelli tells him that nothing is ever promised to anyone, and that it is more important to be a contender than it is to be a champion. Do you think these concepts apply to life in general, and if so why? Can you relate these ideas to any pursuit in your own life?

Vocabulary

Stoop, twilight, ragged, giggled, synagogue, religious, squeeze, shouldered, crippled, stench, hustled, stiffen, pneumonia, transistors, burglar, swollen, peering, baloney, bloodshot, linoleum, junkies, musty, tangled, loomed, murky, butcher, rasping, vertical, polished, wringing.



Chapters 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4

The next morning Alfred goes to church with Aunt Pearl and her daughters. He has hardly slept, replaying the time he'd spent in Donatelli's Gym over in his mind all night. As they walk to church, they pass a 'nationalist' rally at which a speaker is telling the small crowd that the white man has his foot on the black man's throat. Alfred hurries past the rally, but he is soon stopped by a young man from the neighborhood named Harold and his girlfriend Lynn. They tell him that they are organizing a march for their rights and ask him to march with them. Alfred tells them that he is going to church and walks away quickly. When they finally reach the storefront church, Aunt Pearl takes her place with the choir, and Alfred finds a seat in the rear. As Reverend Price preaches his sermon, a man sitting next to Alfred pokes him and points toward the back door. Alfred sees Major and Hollis standing there, grinning at him. He turns away quickly, and when he looks again a short time later, they are gone.

After church, Alfred takes the subway with Aunt Pearl and her daughters to have Sunday dinner with his Aunt Dorothy and Uncle Wilson at their nice house in Jamaica, Queens. After dinner, Alfred and Uncle Wilson sit on the front porch and talk. Wilson asks about Alfred's job and if there is any opportunity for advancement, and then tells him that the world is changing for 'colored people' and that he needs to start planning ahead. Wilson then starts talking about his son, Alfred's cousin Jeff, who is in college. Wilson says that Jeff is thinking about going into law and that he will be going South in the summer to work on voter registration. Wilson says Jeff believes that once more colored people start to vote there will be more opportunity, and tells Alfred that he needs to be ready. Later, when they are back in their apartment in Harlem, Alfred has trouble falling asleep thinking about his dead-end job at Epsteins', and about James, and about what Uncle Wilson said to him. Finally he sneaks into Aunt Pearl's room, takes her alarm clock, and sets it for 5:30.

Chapter 5

Early the next morning Alfred smiles as he runs through the park. He seems to be all alone but two police officers step out from behind a bush and ask him where he is running to so early in the morning. He tells them he is in training for boxing, and when the cops ask who his manager is, he says it is Mr. Donatelli. The cops recognize the name and tell Alfred that they will look for his picture in the paper, then go back into the bushes. Alfred decides that he's run enough for one day even though he knows he hasn't and walks home, where Aunt Pearl is getting her daughters their breakfast. She asks Alfred where he has been and why he needed her alarm clock, and Alfred says he just took a walk. Aunt Pearl knows something is wrong and questions him. Alfred tells her that somehow he is going to be someone special, and then leaves for work.



When Alfred gets to work Lou Epstein – the oldest of the three Epstein brothers – says that he wants to talk to him. Lou takes Alfred into the storeroom and asks him if he knew about the break-in Friday night. Alfred says he heard something about it, and Lou tells him that his friend James Mosley had been arrested but was released on probation. Lou asks if Alfred knows who the other boys were and Alfred says no. Lou then says that he and his brothers trust Alfred, but that there is no point in ‘tempting fate.’ Alfred doesn’t understand what Lou means, but for the rest of the day he can feel that there is an uncomfortable tension in the store. Shortly after lunch Alfred sees James walk past the store. Alfred calls to him, but James gives him a cold look and walks away. At 2:45 Lou takes the large bills out of the cash register and fills out a bank deposit slip. Rather than giving the deposit to Alfred to take to the bank as he usually does Lou hands it to his brother Jake, and Alfred understands what he meant by not tempting fate. At the end of the day, as Alfred is thinking about going to the movies, Henry stops in the store. He says that Mr. Donatelli told him that he stopped by the gym Saturday night and asked him about Alfred. Alfred asks what Henry told him, but Henry says he has to run and leaves without answering.

Chapter 6

After work Alfred goes to Donatelli’s Gym. The gym is filled people working out on mats, jumping rope, and punching the bags. There is an old, thin black man shouting at two fighters in the ring, but Alfred doesn’t see either Henry or Mr. Donatelli anywhere and decides he will come back another time. He turns towards the door and runs into a chubby little man who identifies himself as Dr. Corey, the dentist downstairs, and who asks if it is Alfred’s first day. When Alfred says it is, Dr. Corey says that Donatelli isn’t at the gym because one of his boxers is fighting at the Garden that night. He tells Alfred that he should start with sit-ups to strengthen his stomach, and then walks over to the ring and talks with the old black man. Alfred lies down on one of the mats and starts doing situps.

Henry finally shows up and tells Alfred that he has been downtown picking something up for Mr. Donatelli’s assistant Bud Martin, the old black man standing by the ring. Bud then calls Henry, and Henry leaves Alfred alone again. Alfred does a few more sit-ups, and then wanders over towards Bud and Henry trying not to look out of place. A young fighter named Red shoves past Alfred and demands that Bud tape his hands, but Bud tells him to tape them himself. Bud is packing a black satchel and tells Henry to get him another jar of Vaseline because Willie Streeter – the boxer fighting at the Garden – cuts easily. Alfred asks what happens if he gets cut, and Bud shows him a jar filled with yellow paste that he says stops bleeding and keeps cuts clean. He tells Alfred that it’s a secret formula he invented forty years before for a lightweight fighter called Lightning Lou Epp. As Bud is talking Red comes back and says that he needs a head guard because he is going to spar. When Bud tells him that no one spars unless he or Donatelli says they can Red throws a punch at him. Bud knocks the punch away easily, and hits Red hard in the jaw. Red bolts out of the gym, and Bud tells the other boys who have gathered around not to say anything to ‘the boss,’ because everybody gets a second chance. Bud then asks Alfred his name and when he tells him, Bud says that Henry has a ticket for him to see the fight at the Garden.



Analysis

Although he does his best to try and fit in with the world around him, Alfred increasingly sees himself as an outsider almost everywhere he goes. As he is walking to church with his Aunt Pearl, the speaker at the nationalist rally points him out and calls him an Uncle Tom on his way to pray to the white man's God. Just a few minutes later Harold, a boy that he knew from high school who had always been very interested in politics, tries to get him to join a civil rights march he and his girlfriend are putting together and when Alfred refuses, Harold calls him a "happy little darky." The world is changing, and Alfred finds that he is both confused and frightened by his inability to find a place for himself. Even when he is talking with his Uncle Wilson – who has a good job and has been able to move his family out of the inner city to a nice area in Queens – all the older man can talk about is how quickly things are changing and how Alfred has to be ready when the opportunities start to come. When he gets back to Harlem, however, all Alfred can think about is the dirty streets, the junkies in the alleyways, his best friend James in jail, and his dead-end job. The only thing that seems to give him any hope is the excitement that he feels when he remembers his visit to Donatelli's Gym.

Alfred starts Monday off with his first run in the park and is feeling happy and hopeful until he is stopped and questioned by the two cops. Even though they let him go after only a couple of questions, the good mood he had been in is ruined, and his day quickly goes downhill from there. As soon as he arrives at work he can tell that things are different. Although Lou Epstein – the oldest of the three Epstein brothers – tells him that they all believe that he's a good kid and they trust him, Alfred sees that the middle Epstein brother Jake keeps watching him out of the corner of his eye, and the youngest brother Ben doesn't say a word to him even though he usually talks to him all day long. Alfred becomes even more depressed when he sees James, whose face is swollen, shoot him a cold look as he passes by the store which makes him think that his best friend blames him for his being arrested and beaten. By the end of the day all Alfred wants to do is disappear into the darkness of a movie theater and stay there forever. When he finds out from Henry that Mr. Donatelli had asked about him, he remembers how he felt when he was in the gym talking to the older man and his dream of being someone special, and decides to give the gym another shot.

When he to Donatelli's Gym, it seems nothing like it had when Alfred first visited it. The gym is full of black, white, and Puerto Rican fighters all of whom are working out and who seem to know where they are supposed to be. Alfred immediately finds himself feeling as though he doesn't belong and thinks about leaving, but is stopped when he runs into Dr. Corey, the dentist from downstairs, who tells him that starting today is better than starting tomorrow. As Alfred tries to fit in he learns that one of Mr. Donatelli's boxers – Willie Streeter – is fighting that night at Madison Square Garden, the largest fight venue in New York City. When Mr. Donatelli's assistant Bud Martin tells Alfred that Henry is holding a ticket to the fight for him, he explains that Donatelli told him that if Alfred came back he might as well see what he was coming back for. At this point it is apparent that Donatelli saw something in Alfred the first time he met him that he liked. He has more than just a passing an interest to him.



Discussion Question 1

The novel takes place in Harlem during the mid-1960s – a time of racial tension and dramatic changes in the Black community and the United States as a whole. Describe the different groups and ideas that Alfred encounters in his neighborhood and contrast these “street” ideas with what he hears from Uncle Wilson. How do these diverse ideas and the prejudice that seems to surround him affect Alfred?

Discussion Question 2

How does Lou Epstein’s (and the other Epstein brothers’) attitude toward Alfred change after James is arrested during the robbery? Do you think this change is justified even though Alfred didn’t participate in the robbery?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Alfred return to Donatelli’s Gym after he finishes work? What differences does Alfred find there compared to when he was there the first time, and how does he deal with them? Why does Donatelli leave him tickets to the fight at the Garden?

Vocabulary

Stepladder, chanted, clustered, bubbling, whipping, sleeve, outstretched, lectern, twisted, tambourines, sermon, soot, wicker, splintery, daintily, tuxedo, tiptoed, spongy, stitch, trudging, welfare, shortest, probation, bunions, gasping, amateurs, grumbled, tattered, patent, limping.



Chapters 7-10

Summary

Chapter 7

Alfred and Henry find their seats at the Garden shortly before the fights start. They are soon joined by a tall, fat boxer Alfred saw working out in the gym earlier called Jelly Belly. Jelly says that he just came from where Mr. Donatelli was giving Willie Streeter his final instructions on how to fight his opponent, Junius Becker. Alfred says that he read Streeter could become the next champion, and Henry tells him that Mr. Donatelli is counting on it. Alfred has a hard time following the action during the preliminary fights, and mostly listens to the comments Henry and Jelly make. Eventually, Alfred sees Mr. Donatelli leading Willie Streeter – a tall, handsome black man – towards the ring followed by Bud Martin and Dr. Corey. When the ring announcer introduces Willie the crowd begins to cheer, and Alfred is impressed with how cool and confident the young fighter looks. Nothing much happens during the first few rounds but finally the two fighters bang heads and Becker goes down on one knee. Soon after Becker gets up Jelly says Willie is in trouble. Alfred can see that Willie is bleeding from a cut over his left eye and that Becker is aiming his punches at the cut. When the round ends Donatelli, Bud Martin, and Dr. Corey all crowd around Willie in his corner, and Donatelli calls the referee over. Alfred asks what is going on, and Henry tells him that Mr. Donatelli has stopped the fight.

Alfred, Henry, and Jelly make their way down to the locker room where Mr. Donatelli is talking to Willie. A tall young man with a broken nose whom Jelly calls Spoon greets them and says the mood isn't good. Suddenly Alfred hears Willie shout that he would have won the fight if Donatelli hadn't stopped it, and Bud Martin shouts back that Donatelli saved him out there. Spoon, Jelly, Henry, and Alfred quietly leave the locker room. As they walk toward the exit, Spoon says that Willie might have won the fight if he'd kept pressing after he was cut, but that he'd gotten scared and kept trying to protect his eye. Spoon says that Donatelli stopped the fight to keep Willie from being hurt and to keep him from looking like a coward.

Spoon, whose name is really Bill Witherspoon, gives Henry and Alfred a ride home. On the way, he tells Alfred that he was once the number seven light-heavyweight contender but that Mr. Donatelli said that he should quit when he started taking too much punishment in the ring. He says that after he quit boxing he'd gone to college, graduated, and then started teaching. When they arrive in Harlem Spoon, he lets them out in front of Henry's house and says that he will be coming by the gym. After Spoon drives away, Henry asks if Alfred wants to sit on the stoop with him, but Alfred says he has to get up early to run. He then thanks Henry for carrying him home Friday night, and walks down the street towards his house. When he reaches it, he finds that Major, Hollis, and Sonny are there waiting for him.



Chapter 8

They take Alfred to the clubroom. Major says that they are going to rob Epsteins' again, and wants Alfred to disconnect the alarm before he leaves work on Friday. When Alfred refuses, Major pulls a knife and threatens to cut his face, but Alfred refuses again. Major asks why and Alfred says it's because he doesn't need to do it. Major says the Epsteins don't care about him, and Alfred says that it has nothing to do with the Epsteins. As Alfred walks out of the clubroom Major says that he has until Thursday to decide, but Alfred ignores him.

Chapter 9

The next morning Alfred runs for over an hour, and one of the cops who'd stopped him the day before waves and shouts that he's looking good. When he arrives home, Aunt Pearl is getting the girls' breakfast and Alfred cakewalks through the kitchen. Aunt Pearl asks where he has been, and Alfred says that he has been running to build up his wind, and then tells her that he is going to be a boxer. Aunt Pearl tells him that she doesn't like boxing because it is full of gangsters and fighters can get badly hurt. Alfred tells her that he is serious, and Aunt Pearl says she can see that he is more excited than she has ever seen him before, but wishes he was excited about something other than boxing.

Chapter 10

Alfred starts training at the gym, and during the first week there is nothing but pain as he spends hours shadowboxing in front of a mirror. The second week is worse. He can barely lift his arms after hours of sit-ups and push-ups, and twice he falls asleep before dinner. The pain begins to lessen during the third week. Some days Spoon comes to the gym and works with Alfred on the heavy bag teaching him how to hit hard without hurting himself, but most days he works out alone with only Henry watching him. One day when there is nothing to do at work Alfred starts shadowboxing in the back room and Lou Epstein sees him. Lou asks him if he wants to be a boxer, and Alfred tells him that he is training at Donatelli's Gym. Alfred remembers his first conversation with Bud Martin and asks Lou if he was Lightning Lou Epp, who used to cut easily. Lou is happy that Bud remembers him. He tells Alfred that no one is interested in the fights anymore and that even good fighters can't make a living at it because of all the racketeers, then tells him to say hello to Bud and Donatelli for him.

In July, Aunt Pearl goes to work at her employer's summerhouse and leaves the girls with Aunt Dorothy in Queens, so Alfred is alone in the apartment. As Alfred is walking home from the gym one night he runs into Major who tells him that James sometimes comes by the clubhouse and that he should stop by. Dr. Corey stops by the gym one evening and shoves a piece of plastic in Alfred's mouth so that he can learn to breathe while wearing a mouthpiece, and tells him he'll make him a custom one for his first fight. One Friday Major stops by the gym while Alfred is working out and tells him that there will be a party at the clubhouse that night and that James will be there. After Major leaves Alfred begins to slow down and Mr. Donatelli notices. Donatelli says that Alfred is



not concentrating and that he needs to work harder. Alfred wants Donatelli to tell him when he will be able to put on some real gloves and spar, but keeps his thoughts to himself. When Alfred quits for the day Henry asks if he wants to go to the movies with him and Jelly, but Alfred says no. As he starts for home Alfred decides that it is too hot to sleep. He heads toward the clubroom, telling himself that he will only stay for a little while and thinking that maybe he will be able to straighten things out with James.

Analysis

Even though he has a hard time following the fights he sees at the Garden and doesn't understand most of what is going on in the ring, Alfred finds it all very exciting, and he is particularly impressed with how composed and confident Willie Streeter seems to be. However, when Mr. Donatelli stops the fight Alfred learns from Bill Witherspoon that in reality after being cut above the eye Willie "showed some dog" and lost his courage. He got scared because it was the first time he had ever been really hurt in a fight. Rather than continuing to punch his opponent, all he did was dance away and try to protect his eye. Even though Mr. Donatelli was counting on Willie to be a champion, he stopped the fight to keep Willie from being hurt worse and to keep him from embarrassing himself in front of the crowd. Later, as he is driving Henry and Alfred home, Spoon tells them that Mr. Donatelli told him it was time to quit even though he was winning because he was taking more punishment than he should have been taking. Mr. Donatelli didn't want him to get seriously injured. Although he still sometimes dreams of what might have been, Spoon knows that quitting was the right thing to do and has remained close to Mr. Donatelli, who was the best man at his wedding the year before. Alfred begins to understand that there is more to Mr. Donatelli than just being a boxing manager. He is also a compassionate man who cares about the fighter's health and well being as much, if not more, than he does about winning.

During his first two full weeks of training, Alfred works harder and hurts more than he ever has before in his life. Eventually, his muscles start to adjust to his new routine, and he begins to feel stronger and sharper. As he runs in the park each morning, he begins to recognize other regular joggers and waves to them as well as the two cops who stopped him his first day. His outlook and attitude become more positive. Even the fact that there is still some tension at Epstein's because of the robbery doesn't get him down as much as it did before. Although Aunt Pearl doesn't like the fact that he wants to be a boxer and worries that he will be hurt, she is relieved that he isn't getting into trouble like his friend James. She doesn't try to stop him because he seems more focused and excited than she has ever seen him before. His days are long and exhausting, and there are days when no one but Henry pays any attention to him as he shadowboxes or does pushups and knee bends at the gym. As his body grows stronger Alfred's determination to be someone special grows stronger as well.

Even though he goes to the movies or hangs out with Henry and Jelly Belly most Friday and Saturday nights, Alfred finds himself missing James more and more as the weeks go by. He calls and leaves messages, but James never calls him back. Alfred never sees him on the street. When Major tells Alfred that James sometimes hangs out in the



clubroom, Alfred asks Major to let him know the next time James comes by – seemingly forgetting that Major and his friends had beaten him up and threatened to cut him just a few weeks before. After Major stops by the gym and tells Alfred that James will be coming to a party at the clubroom that night, Alfred loses interest in working out for the rest of the day. For the first time, he begins to resent the fact that all he has done since he started coming to the gym is shadowbox and work out. When Mr. Donatelli tells him that he needs to work harder and then walks away, Alfred becomes discouraged and irritated and leaves the gym early. Although he tells himself that he is going to the clubroom to find James and try to straighten things out with him, it's apparent that Alfred is also frustrated with how slowly things seem to be going at the gym. He is rebelling against all of the hard work which, at that moment, seems to be taking him nowhere.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Mr. Donatelli stop the fight at the Garden? Did he do the right thing, or do you think he should have given Willie Streeter the chance to win?

Discussion Question 2

When Major asks Alfred why he won't disconnect the silent alarm at Epsteins' so that he can rob the store, Alfred says that it is because he doesn't need to. What do you think Alfred means by this, and why do you think he feels this way?

Discussion Question 3

After Major stops by the gym, Alfred becomes frustrated with the fact that all he's been allowed to do is shadowbox, exercise, and punch the bags. What causes this change in Alfred, and why do you think he didn't ask Mr. Donatelli to let him spar when he wanted to? How does Alfred decide to deal with his frustration?

Vocabulary

Milled, marquee, tattoos, frankfurter, spotlights, tuxedo, plopped, chow, preliminary, bouts, applause, squirming, technical, upholstered, badges, gutless, argued, quivering, disconnect, vein, cakewalked, smirk, schoolteacher, wrinkled, gangster, staggered, curiosity, devote, lugging, racketeers, perspiration, gagged, floppy, sheepishly.



Chapters 11-13

Summary

Chapter 11

Major sees Alfred as soon as he reaches the clubroom, which is crowded with kids dancing and drinking, and offers him wine. Alfred refuses and asks about James. Major says that he'll be there soon. Major's girlfriend introduces Alfred to her cousin Arlene, and they start to dance. Major comes by with a bottle of wine, and Arlene drinks; but, Alfred refuses again. A few minutes later Major offers him half an orange soaked in vodka, and Alfred gives in and eats it. He immediately feels drunk, and he and Arlene sit down. Someone passes a marijuana cigarette to them. After a moment's hesitation, Alfred smokes some. For the next few hours he drinks and smokes. At dawn Alfred feels sick and barely makes it outside to the alley to throw up.

James finally arrives, and Alfred drunkenly asks where he has been. James' face looks thin, and his clothes seem too big for him. Alfred tells James that he forgot about the silent alarm and never meant for him to be caught. James says it doesn't matter anymore and that he knows Uncle Alfred is fool enough to have forgotten about the alarm. James turns his back on Alfred and walks away with Major. A few minutes later Alfred sees Hollis give James a packet filled with white powder. Alfred rushes over and tells James that he shouldn't mess with that, but James snarls at him to go away. As his legs start to give out, Alfred begs James to listen to him. James asks him what he has to say, but Alfred passes out before he can say anything.

Chapter 12

The telephone awakens Alfred at 9:30 Saturday night. It is Aunt Pearl, who asks him to call Dorothy and give her a message, which Alfred forgets the moment he hangs up. Feeling terribly hung-over from the party, Alfred passes out in front of the television. At 8 o'clock Sunday morning, the phone awakens him again. It is Major, who tells him that Friday night he'd said he wanted go to Coney Island on Sunday. A few minutes later Hollis pounds on his door and leads Alfred to where Major is waiting behind the wheel of a white Cadillac. Sonny and a younger boy named Justin are in the back seat. Major says that he borrowed the car, and Alfred relaxes in the front seat. When they arrive at Coney Island, Major parks in front of a hot dog stand, and Alfred realizes that it has been almost two days since he ate anything. Major sends Justin to get hot dogs. While they are waiting, two cops approach the car. Hollis tells Alfred that the car is stolen as Major pulls out into traffic. The cops start to run after the car, shouting. Alfred jumps out of the car and twists his ankle, but he gets to his feet and blends in with the crowd on the sidewalk. Alfred walks to the boardwalk by the beach and buys some food. But, he eats it too fast and a moment later throws it all up. Alfred gets off the boardwalk and walks through unfamiliar streets until he finds a movie theater, where he rests his throbbing ankle and lets his stomach settle. When he leaves the theater Alfred finds a



subway station and gets back to Harlem in the evening, where he walks through the streets for hours before finally going home.

Alfred falls asleep almost immediately. When he wakes up, it is already Monday morning. He tells himself that he will never be a boxer, so there is no point in running anymore. He comes home directly after work and falls asleep in front of the television. After work on Tuesday he goes to the movies and then walks aimlessly through the streets, ending up in front of Donatelli's Gym. He walks up the steps and finds Mr. Donatelli sitting in a chair with his back to the door. Alfred walks to his locker and puts his boxing clothes and shoes in a paper bag, then tells the older man goodbye and says he is sorry. Donatelli says that Alfred has nothing to apologize for. Alfred asks if he would ever have been a contender, and Donatelli says that he needs to ask himself that question. Alfred then asks when Donatelli would have known if he could have been a contender, and Donatelli says he would know after Alfred was hurt for the first time in the ring. Alfred drops the bag containing his clothes and asks Donatelli if he will tell him when he knows. Donatelli says he won't have to tell him, because Alfred will know too.

Chapter 13

As August ends and September begins, Alfred starts sparring in the ring. During one sparring session he is able to catch Angel – one of the small, quick Puerto Rican fighters – with a jab and then pin him against the ropes, and during another session manages to dodge punches from an older, more experienced boxer named Denny. Henry watches and encourages Alfred during every session. Both Bud Martin and Mr. Donatelli notice that Alfred is improving and using his head when he spars. One afternoon Lou Epstein drops by the gym near the end of a session. He comments on how good Alfred is getting. He leaves the gym with Alfred. When they are on the street, Lou asks if he knows how to work the register at the store. Alfred says that he doesn't, and Lou tells him to come in a little early tomorrow and he will teach him. Alfred's next sparring partner is Jose, who isn't as fast as either Angel or Denny, but he hits harder. After Jose catches him with a couple of hard right-hand punches, Alfred begins to time Jose's attack. In the third sparring round, he catches him with a pair of quick, hard punches that drop Jose to the canvas. Mr. Donatelli jumps into the ring and tells Alfred that it is time he went to Dr. Corey to get fitted for a custom mouthpiece.

Analysis

When Alfred goes to the party at the clubroom Friday night, he initially tells himself that he will only stop by for a short while so that he can talk to James and explain to his friend what happened the night he was arrested. But, it isn't long before he is drinking and smoking marijuana with the rest of the kids there. Although he knows that he is breaking training and shouldn't be doing it, the frustration he felt while at the gym that afternoon carries over to the party, and he rebels against how worthless all the hard work he has been doing feels to him, as well as how pointless his whole life feels. When James finally does show up, Alfred hardly recognizes him. James' clothes are too big for him, his teeth are yellow, and his eyes appear to have sunken into his head. Instead of



being glad to see Alfred, or even angry with him for forgetting about the alarm at Epsteins', James hardly even acknowledges him. When he does, it is only to insult him. When he sees James buy a packet of white powder that he knows is heroin from Hollis, Alfred tries to stop him from taking it, but he is too drunk and high to make any sense. He passes out before he can say anything that might mean something to his James.

After almost getting arrested in Coney Island for being in a stolen car with Major and the others, Alfred finds himself feeling even more depressed, hopeless, and alone. He doesn't even consider going to the gym Monday night because he knows that all he will be doing is jumping rope and shadowboxing, and he has managed to talk himself into the idea that he has only been fooling himself about ever being a fighter. When he finally goes back to Donatelli's gym it is late Tuesday night and everyone except Mr. Donatelli has left. Although he has gone there to quit, there is a part of Alfred that hopes Mr. Donatelli will try to talk him into staying – or at least give him some encouragement – but the older man keeps his back to Alfred throughout their conversation and tells him that the only person who would ever have known if he could have been a contender was Alfred himself. The reader understands that by not giving Alfred any specific answers to his questions he is forcing the younger man to think about what quitting will really mean to him. When Alfred eventually decides to stay it is not because Mr. Donatelli has encouraged him to, but rather because Alfred decided that he needs to find out who he is and what he is capable of.

Alfred resumes his training and is soon able to start sparring with some of the other fighters at the gym. Sometimes Bud Martin comments on his performance, and other times Donatelli himself watches him, but Henry is always there in his corner when he spars. As the weeks pass Alfred continues to learn from his time in the ring and improve his performance. After he learns to track the rhythm of Jose's attack in the ring and manages to knock him down with two quick punches, Mr. Donatelli is impressed enough to send him to get fitted for a custom mouthpiece, which Alfred and the reader understands means that he will be competing in real boxing matches and not just sparring very soon.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Alfred choose to get drunk and high at the party even though he knows he shouldn't? Was there anything Alfred could have said to James to keep him from taking the white powder?

Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Alfred quit when he goes to the gym Tuesday night to clean out his locker? Do you think he ever really intended to quit and, if so, what do you think changed his mind?



Discussion Question 3

What does Mr. Donatelli see while he is sparring that makes him think Alfred is ready for his first real fight? Is it simply his improvement in the ring, or is there something more?

Vocabulary

Sprawled, funky, dizzy, conga, newcomers, invisible, fluttered, gravel, rattlesnake, fumbled, stagecoach, devotional, convertible, cruised, dangled, churned, mingled, registration, stomped, accelerator, cuffed, vomiting, aimlessly, throbbed, swollen, advancement, exploded, oozing, unlacing, chattering, pivoted, rematch, creaky.



Chapters 14-16

Summary

Chapter 14

One morning in October Alfred awakens at 5:30. Instead of running, he tries to fall back to sleep. When she gets up, Aunt Pearl sees that he hasn't run and asks if he is feeling okay. She says that he will be late for work if he doesn't get moving. Alfred says he feels fine and that he has the day off. Aunt Pearl asks Alfred to tell her why he's staying in bed, and Alfred promises that he will tell her later that night. At 10:00 Henry comes by, and they walk to the gym. Mr. Donatelli is waiting and takes them down to Dr. Corey's office where the dentist hands Henry a box containing Alfred's custom mouthpiece. After buying Henry and Alfred lunch, Donatelli hails a cab and gives Henry a key and some money, saying he will meet them later. Henry tells Alfred that they are going to Spoon's apartment. Alfred asks if Henry goes to the clubroom anymore, and Henry tells him that a few weeks before there had been a party. When the police came and broke it up, they found marijuana and heroin. James had been there, but he had gotten away with most of the others. After the party Henry's father – who owned the building – closed up the clubroom and Major, James, and the others scattered.

Spoon arrives at the apartment at 3:30, and a few minutes later his wife Betty comes home and disappears into the kitchen. Spoon tells Alfred that he is now teaches full time and taking courses at night for his master's degree. He says that Alfred could finish high school at night if he wanted to. Betty returns with a steak for Alfred. After he finishes eating he, Henry, and Spoon take a walk around the neighborhood. When they get back to the apartment, Spoon takes Alfred to the bedroom and tells him to try to sleep. A short time later, Henry wakes him and says it's time to go. Mr. Donatelli is there and he, Alfred, Henry, and Spoon get into Spoon's car. They stop by the gym and pick up Bud Martin and Dr. Corey. They drive to a large, shabby looking building. Spoon leaves the others in the front and wishes Alfred luck.

The five of them are led to a large room filled with other fighters and managers. A doctor looks Alfred over quickly, and another man tells Donatelli that Alfred will be wearing black trunks. Donatelli then tells Dr. Corey that he will be sitting next to Spoon in the audience and that Henry will be working in Alfred's corner during the fight. They then go to a smaller room marked "Black Trunks and Seconds Only." Donatelli and Bud Martin each tape one of Alfred's hands while Henry ties his boxing shoes. Henry then tells Alfred to close his eyes; when he opens them again he sees Henry holding a new white terrycloth robe with "Alfred Brooks, New York" printed on the back. Alfred is speechless. A man with a clipboard enters the dressing room and says that Alfred goes on third and will be fighting a kid named Rivera, and Donatelli slips the gloves on Alfred's hands. A few minutes later, Alfred walks to the back of the fight club auditorium with Henry, Bud, and Donatelli. Bud comments that it isn't the Garden, and Donatelli says that tonight it is. Alfred watches as one of the fighters in the ring is knocked out and a moment later



climbs through the ropes into the ring. After getting instructions from the referee and going back to his corner, the bell signaling the start of the first round rings.

Alfred is immediately hit in the mouth, but recovers and hits Rivera with a few jabs, then takes a punch to the side of the head. Donatelli screams at him to stick and run. Alfred dances around Rivera, but the other fighter doesn't chase him and stays planted in one spot. The crowd boos, and someone shouts for Alfred to get in there and fight. Alfred moves in and out as the boos from the crowd increase. Near the end of the round Alfred stays close to Rivera for too long and is knocked down by two quick, hard punches. The bell rings as the referee reaches three in the ten-count, and Alfred gets up and staggers back to his corner. Donatelli tells him not to listen to the crowd and to keep sticking and running. Alfred does this in the second round and starts to wear Rivera down with his jabs while avoiding the other fighter's punches. When the bell rings, Donatelli tells him that he won the second round and that he needs to ignore the crowd and keep sticking and running. Alfred does this, landing his jab and then backing away before Rivera can hit him. The bell ending the third round – and the fight – rings, and Rivera hits Alfred in the groin with a late punch. The ring announcer declares Alfred the winner by unanimous decision, but he barely hears it through his pain. Alfred is carried back to the dressing room where the doctor says that he'll be sore for a while but will be alright. Donatelli leans over and says that he can't listen to the crowd, because all they want is pain and blood. Alfred hears Henry say that Alfred won the fight, and then hears Donatelli say that it isn't enough.

Chapter 15

When Alfred gets home that night Aunt Pearl is upset by how bruised his face is, and tells him that she heard from Lou Epstein that he had his first fight that night. Alfred says that he didn't tell her about it because he was afraid she would try and stop him. Aunt Pearl then tells him that when she was seventeen a man from the Apollo Theater heard her singing in the church choir and wanted to sign her up for the chorus in a show. She, Aunt Dorothy, and Alfred's mother Ernestine had begged their mother to let Pearl sign the contract, but her mother had refused saying that shows were sinful and finally the man went away. Pearl got married, had her daughters, and got on with her life but she tells Alfred that even though she probably wouldn't have been a star she would have liked to have tried. She then asks Alfred if he won his fight and when he says that he did, she asks him if the victory tasted sweet. Alfred says no.

Chapter 16

Alfred's next fight is against a boxer named Griffin. Donatelli tells Alfred to go after him and attack, but Griffin keeps landing his punches on Alfred and wins the first two rounds easily. During the break before the third round, Henry tells Alfred that their only chance to win is for Alfred to knock Griffin out. Alfred manages to dodge a punch and catch Griffin with an uppercut, followed by a hard hook to the jaw. Griffin immediately goes down in a heap and is counted out by the referee. Alfred walks over to Griffin as his manager is trying to get him to his feet and starts to apologize for hitting him so hard, but Donatelli pulls him away and leads him through the cheering crowd to the dressing



room. Alfred feels sick to his stomach thinking about how Griffin had just collapsed like a dead man, and he keeps remembering the sound of his hook connecting with Griffin's jaw as Spoon drives him home, and later as he tries to sleep.

When he gets to work the next morning Lou Epstein can see that something is wrong and he asks if Alfred wants the day off, but he says he is fine. Alfred is unable to keep his mind on his work and makes a few mistakes while working the register, and finally Lou Epstein sends him home. As he is walking home, Alfred runs into Harold and his girlfriend Lynn – the neighborhood political activists. They ask him if he would like to be involved in their new recreation program, saying the kids would really respect a boxer. Alfred tells them that he's only had two fights, but they say that doesn't matter. He promises to think about it, and walks away. He is still unable to get the vision of Griffin crumpling to the canvas out of his mind, and he heads to a theater to lose himself in a movie.

Analysis

On the day of his first fight Alfred is nervous and excited, but he does his best to relax. After Henry picks him up at Aunt Pearl's apartment, Mr. Donatelli sends the two of them off to Spoon's apartment in another part of the city to get Alfred away from familiar surroundings, people, and distractions. When they finally arrive at the fight venue, it is nothing like Alfred had pictured it; the building is full of fighters and managers and the fights take place one after another with almost no break in between. During the first round of his fight Alfred tries to stick and run like Mr. Donatelli wants him to, but he can't help listening to the crowd as they scream for him to stop running and stay in there and punch. Back in his corner at the end of the round – in which he was almost knocked out – Mr. Donatelli tells him to ignore what the crowd says, because they aren't the ones in there getting punched. Alfred listens to Donatelli and is able to shut the crowd out for the most part for the rest of the fight. He wins the fight by unanimous decision, although he is hurt by a blow to the groin after the final bell rings. As he is being looked over in the locker room, Mr. Donatelli again tells Alfred that he can't listen to the crowd because all they want to see is blood and pain, and then says that winning isn't enough. It's obvious that Alfred's victory in the fight isn't as important to Donatelli as his learning to ignore the crowd and not let them influence the way he fights an opponent.

When Alfred returns home after the fight he confesses to Aunt Pearl that he didn't tell her about the fight beforehand because he knew that she didn't approve of his boxing and was afraid that she would try and stop him. She tells Alfred that he is an adult, and then shares a story with Alfred about when she was the same age as he is now and her mother forbade her to sing in a theater. Although she still doesn't approve of boxing and wishes Alfred would find something less dangerous to become interested in, she understands the effect that not even being able to try something can have on a person. While the author has always presented Aunt Pearl as a kind and caring person, during this conversation Alfred sees her as someone not all that different from himself for the first time in his life, and gains a new respect for her as a person.



Although Dr. Corey is usually in the corner with Bud Martin and Mr. Donatelli whenever any of Donatelli's boxers have a fight, it is Henry and not Dr. Corey who is the third man in Alfred's corner during his first two fights. For the first fight Henry meets Alfred hours before they go to the fight venue, and stays with him at Spoon's house all day. During the second fight, Henry helps rub Alfred down to keep him loose between rounds, and is the one who tells him that the only chance he has of winning is to knock Griffin out. Even though Alfred still misses James and thinks of him often, in the months following Alfred's decision not to quit Henry has begun to fill some of the void losing James has left in Alfred's life. Especially when he is at the gym or in the ring, Alfred has begun to depend on Henry more and more without realizing it.

Despite winning his fight with Griffin, Alfred finds himself unable to forget the sound his glove made when it connected with Griffin's jaw, or the way the other boxer crumpled to the ground. He is unable to enjoy the cheers of the crowd as he walks back up the aisle to the locker room, even though he knows Griffin was only dazed and not seriously hurt. Alfred is both confused and a little frightened by what happened at the end of the fight, and realizes that if it had been him that had been knocked out instead of Griffin the crowd would have been just as happy. He understands that, just as Mr. Donatelli told him after the first fight, the crowd didn't care about him or his opponent – they only wanted to see pain and blood. Alfred finds it impossible to get these thoughts – and the memory of Griffin crumpling to the canvas “like a dead man” – out of his mind the day after the fight and eventually goes to the movies to get away from his own thoughts.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss how the relationship between Alfred and Henry has changed and evolved during the course of the story. Why does Mr. Donatelli have Henry take Alfred to Spoon's apartment in an unfamiliar part of the city before the first fight? Why do you think Donatelli has Henry replace Dr. Corey in Alfred's corner?

Discussion Question 2

After telling Alfred that she wished she had been allowed to try to be a singer in a show when she was younger, Aunt Pearl asks Alfred if winning his first fight tasted sweet to him, and Alfred says no. Why do you think Alfred feels this way? Why does he continue to train if he doesn't enjoy winning?

Discussion Question 3

During the first fight Mr. Donatelli tells Alfred to “stick and run”, but during the second fight he tells him to move in and attack. Why does Mr. Donatelli change the way he wants Alfred to fight in the second match? Why is Alfred upset after he knocks Griffin out and wins the fight?

Vocabulary

Eyelids, nightstick, drowsily, clatter, shrugged, register, biceps, uptown, polio, whisky, marijuana, heroin, storeroom, scattered, briefcase, solitaire, integrated, murmur, surrounded, satchel, ringer, quiver, corridor, leaflet, heavyweights, numbly, dazzled, whistle, majority, flopped, bundled, tweed.



Chapters 17-20

Summary

Chapter 17

Alfred, Aunt Pearl, and her daughters go to Wilson and Dorothy's house for Thanksgiving dinner. Wilson's son Jeff is home from college and is very impressed that Alfred has won his first two fights. Alfred says that his next fight is in a week, and that he has another scheduled for the week before Christmas. Jeff asks Alfred if he enjoys boxing, and Alfred tells him that he likes the people at the gym, and working out and running, but that he isn't sure how he feels about actually fighting. Uncle Wilson suggests that Alfred consider getting a job with a supermarket chain where there are opportunities for advancement. Alfred surprises everyone by saying that he is thinking about finishing up high school at night. When it is time to leave, Jeff offers to drive them back to Harlem. During the trip, Jeff says that Alfred has changed, and he no longer seems to be just drifting along through life. Jeff then says that instead of working in Africa for a while after he graduates from college like he planned, he is thinking about organizing self-help programs in the Black community. Alfred tells him that they are trying to organize a recreation center in his neighborhood. Jeff says that with his athletic background Alfred would be a natural for something like that.

When Jeff drops them off at home, Aunt Pearl comments on how well Alfred and Jeff got along. She can't remember ever hearing Alfred talk so much. As they start up the steps toward the door, Alfred thinks he recognizes a figure moving in the shadows. Alfred tells Aunt Pearl that he will be up in a moment and goes back down the steps. When he reaches the huddled figure Alfred sees that it is James. He hardly recognizes him because he looks so terrible. Alfred tells James to come upstairs with him and have some hot food, but James says that he needs money for drugs. When Alfred says that a fix won't help him, James promises that he is going to quit but that he needs one more fix to get him through. Reluctantly, Alfred takes six dollars out of his wallet. James grabs the money and moves quickly down the street.

Chapter 18

The next fight is with a boxer named Barnes who fights dirty in the clinches, pinning Alfred's arms, stepping on his toes, and hitting him in the kidneys. Donatelli screams at Alfred to break out of the clinches, but Alfred finds this hard to do. At one point, Barnes stumbles and leaves his head open for an uppercut, but Alfred remembers Griffin twitching on the canvas and doesn't throw the punch. The fight is declared a draw. When Spoon drops Donatelli at the gym, he asks Alfred to come upstairs with him. When they reach the empty gym, Donatelli puts his arm around Alfred's shoulders and says that it is time for him to retire. Alfred asks why, and Donatelli says that he doesn't have the killer instinct and that he doesn't really like to fight. Donatelli tells him that the fight clubs will start matching him with better, tougher fighters in the future who could



really hurt him. He wants Alfred to keep training at the gym and working with the younger fighters like Spoon does, but there will be no more fights. He then says that he knows Alfred has conquered his fear and that he will be able to do all the other things he wants to do with his life because he has learned how to work hard and concentrate. Alfred says that if he quits now it will be like not finishing what he started, and he must finish. When Donatelli asks why, Alfred says, "So I can know, too."

Chapter 19

Alfred is nervous as he waits with Henry in Spoon's apartment on the afternoon before his last fight. Henry says he is sorry that Alfred is retiring and when Alfred asks if he will keep on working with fighters, Henry says that Mr. Donatelli wants him to start training the younger boxers. Alfred says that since he will only have used his robe four times someone else at the gym can have it, but Henry says he bought it for Alfred and he should keep it. Alfred says he thought Donatelli bought him the robe, but Henry tells him that he did because Alfred was his first fighter. Before Henry started helping to train Alfred all he did was sweep up around the gym, but now he is learning to be a trainer. Spoon gets home at 3:30 and gives Alfred a reading list for night school; he says that he and Betty can go through the list with him if he comes over next week when they are both off for Christmas. As Alfred goes to the bedroom to lay down after eating the steak Betty cooks for him, Spoon says that he talked to a friend of his who can get James a place in a narcotics clinic. Alfred says that James has left the neighborhood and that he can't find him, and Spoon says to let him know if he turns up.

At the fight club the man with the clipboard says that Alfred goes on second against a kid named Elston Hubbard. Donatelli immediately tells the man to forget it, and says that Henry can untape Alfred's hands. When Alfred says that he wants the fight, Donatelli tells him that Hubbard is older and bigger than Alfred, and that he could hurt him. Donatelli tells Alfred that he doesn't need to prove anything to him, and Alfred says that he needs to prove something to himself. Finally Donatelli tells the man they will take the fight.. Alfred asks Donatelli if he understands that he has to do this and Donatelli says that he does, and then tells him to jab.

Hubbard is already in the ring when Alfred gets there, flexing his large muscles. When the fight starts Alfred is almost immediately knocked down and only barely manages to get up in time. Alfred hits Hubbard with a few jabs, but Hubbard lands a number of hard, painful shots to Alfred's head and stomach and he is knocked down again just before the end of the first round. The beating continues during the second round, and Alfred is knocked down again. The referee asks if he has had enough, but Alfred says he is fine and the fight continues. At the end of the second round the referee comes to Alfred's corner and asks Donatelli if he wants to let the fight go on. Henry shouts that Mr. Donatelli must let it go on, and Donatelli lets the fight continue. In the third round Alfred stands toe-to-toe with Hubbard and even though everything is hazy and there seem to be three Hubbards in front of him he trades punches with the larger fighter. Alfred gets the worst of it, but he refuses to go down and takes everything Hubbard hits him with. The bell rings but neither Alfred nor Hubbard hears it, and soon people are pulling them apart. Hubbard is declared the winner by unanimous decision but as the referee holds



up his arm Hubbard breaks away, runs across the ring, and throws his arms around Alfred. The two fighters hug each other and cry, glad that it is over. Finally, Hubbard tells him that he is tough and the crowd cheers Alfred as he walks up the aisle away from the ring. In the dressing room, Donatelli smiles as Henry unlaces Alfred's gloves and says, "Now you know, Alfred. Now you know, too."

Chapter 20

Alfred is very late getting home after the fight, but Aunt Pearl is up waiting for him. She tells him that the police were there earlier looking for James because he'd broken into Epsteins' that night. He smashed right through the front window. He managed to get away, but he cut himself badly on the glass. Alfred rushes out of the apartment and runs to the cave in the park where he and James had played as children. He finds James hiding there. The sleeve of James' coat is soaked with blood, and more blood is dripping off his hand. Alfred says that if he doesn't get some help right away he could lose his arm or even bleed to death. Then, he ties his handkerchief tightly around James' arm. The flow of blood slows.

Alfred wants to take James to the hospital, but James asks him for money for a fix instead. Alfred tells him that it will just mess him up more and says that he can help James beat his heroin addiction. Alfred reminds James of how he stuck with him the night Alfred's mother died. He tells him that he is going to stick with him now. Alfred says he is going to go to night school, and James can come with him. He is going to work with kids in a recreation center, and James can help. Alfred tells him that he can get him a job and get Mr. Epstein to help with the police. Even if he has to go to jail for a while, it won't be forever. He will be there when James gets out. When James asks Alfred why he wants to do all this, Alfred tells him that it is because they are still partners and because he knows he can. Finally, James agrees to go to the hospital. Alfred helps him out of the cave and lets James lean on him as he gently guides him back toward the street.

Analysis

Alfred continues to grow and gain more confidence in himself as a person as a result of what he is learning from training at Donatelli's Gym. However, he is unable to truthfully tell Jeff that he enjoys boxing when his cousin asks him. Alfred still remembers what it was like when he knocked out Griffin in his second fight and how he looked as he lay on the canvas twitching, and this vision keeps him from throwing the punch which could have knocked Barnes out in the next fight and won him the match. Mr. Donatelli sees that while Alfred has come a long way in the months he has been training and has shown great courage and determination, he doesn't have the "killer instinct" that it takes to become a champion. It is time for him to retire. However, while Mr. Donatelli believes that Alfred has done all he needs to do in boxing, Alfred still feels that he has not truly tested himself and the only way to do that is to fight someone who might actually be able to hurt him. There is something that Alfred still needs to prove to himself. Even though he isn't certain what it is, he knows that the only place he can do it is in the ring.



While Alfred has been in training to be a boxer, Henry has been in training to be a fight trainer. As they wait at Spoon's apartment the afternoon before Alfred's final fight, Henry says that he is sorry that Alfred is retiring. Alfred was his first fighter, the one who helped him move from simply sweeping up the gym and rinsing out mouthpieces to actually taking part in the day-to-day training and working in the corner during fights. Henry, who has always seemed shy and a little slow to Alfred, has also grown as a person and has formed a strong bond with Alfred that goes beyond the ring. It's reasonable to assume that after the last fight is over, Alfred and Henry will remain close friends.

Although Donatelli doesn't want him to fight Elston Hubbard because Hubbard is larger and more experienced, Alfred insists that Donatelli let him fight. Alfred knows that this is his last chance to learn what he is capable of and how much he can take in the ring. Even though Donatelli tells him that he doesn't need to prove anything to him, and he understands that if he doesn't risk fighting this stronger opponent he will never know whether or not he actually had the courage to do it. Although he is beaten badly in the first two rounds and knocked down several times, Alfred comes back in the third round determined not to be knocked down again. At one point as he is standing toe-to-toe with Hubbard trading punches, Alfred tells himself that the only way he is going down is if Hubbard kills him, and that he is never going to be knocked down again. Alfred has completely conquered his fear and proven everything to himself that he needs to prove, and after the fight is finally ready to retire.

After Aunt Pearl tells Alfred that James was injured trying to break into Epsteins', he knows the only safe place for James to go is the cave where the two of them had played when they were kids. James looks like a wild animal to Alfred. Even though he is bleeding badly, all he can think to do is ask Alfred for money so that he can get another fix. Alfred, however, knows that he has the strength to help James beat his addiction. He reminds James that they have always been partners. He tells him that even though nothing is promised to anyone – as Mr. Donatelli told him the first night he went to the gym – there is nothing that they can't do together if they try. Because he has pushed himself beyond his own limitations and not quit on himself, Alfred knows that he has the ability not to quit on James either, and will be able to do the hard work that it is going to take to get his friend off drugs and put him back in control of his life.

Discussion Question 1

At one point Cousin Jeff tells Alfred that he has changed a lot. What changes does Jeff see, and how do you think Alfred has changed during the course of the story? Are the changes due to his boxing alone, or have other factors caused him to change and if so, what are they?

Discussion Question 2

How is Alfred's fight with Barnes different from the other two fights Alfred has had? How is Alfred himself different during the fight? What does Mr. Donatelli see during that fight?



that makes him tell Alfred that it is time for him to retire, even though he has never lost a boxing match?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Alfred so determined to go through with the fight against Elston Hubbard even though Mr. Donatelli warns him that he could be hurt? What does he hope to gain by fighting Hubbard, and does he actually gain it? Do you think Alfred would have been as confident about being able to help James if he had quit when Mr. Donatelli first suggested it and not insisted on that last fight? Explain your answer.

Vocabulary

Drumstick, contacts, scrambled, napkin, application, dabbing, clattered, workouts, foolishness, windshield, squinted, sunken, fumbled, clinches, kidneys, unprotected, twitching, sagging, retire, conquered, overstuffed, hypnotized, mimeographed, semester, chatter, addict, abreast, emblem, glinted, ankles, sledgehammers, roaring, vegetable, infected, meek.



Characters

Alfred Brooks

Alfred Brooks is a black 17-year-old high school dropout who lives with his Aunt Pearl in Harlem in the mid-1960s. Alfred's father left when he was very young, and his mother died when he was 13. Alfred works at Epsteins' Grocery Store and spends his evenings at the movies or walking through the streets thinking. For most of his life he had his best friend James to help him deal with the world around him, but Alfred and James have grown apart and Alfred finds himself lacking direction and is confused by the changes happening around him. When James is arrested during a robbery at Epsteins', Alfred blames himself. As walks through the streets trying to make sense of what happened, he finds himself in front of Donatelli's Gym, a place where boxing champions have trained. When he enters the gym he finds the owner, Mr. Donatelli, there alone. Alfred tells Donatelli that he wants to be a boxer so that he can be a champion, and Donatelli tells him that before he can be a champion he will have to become a contender.

Alfred starts training; he gets up every morning at 5:30 to run, and goes directly to Donatelli's Gym every evening after work to work out. After several weeks Alfred becomes discouraged because Mr. Donatelli doesn't think he is ready to spar in the ring with the other fighters. One night he gets drunk at a party at the clubroom and sees James for the first time since he was arrested. Alfred watches James buy a bag of heroin and wants to talk him out of taking it, but passes out before he can say anything. Alfred becomes depressed and goes to the gym to quit, but decides to stay when he realizes that if he doesn't see what he is capable of he will regret it for the rest of his life. Mr. Donatelli finally lets him spar against the other fighters and eventually decides that Alfred is ready to fight for real at a boxing club. Alfred wins his first match by unanimous decision, and knocks his opponent out in his second match. Alfred is deeply affected by the knockout, and can't get the image of his opponent dropping "like a dead man" out of his mind. One evening shortly before his third fight Alfred sees James on the street, but he looks so bad Alfred hardly recognizes him. James asks Alfred for money for a fix, and Alfred reluctantly gives it to him.

During his third fight his opponent leaves himself open to being knocked out, but Alfred doesn't throw the punch. After the fight Donatelli tells Alfred that he doesn't have the killer instinct and it is time he retired. Alfred asks for one more fight to prove to himself that he can go the distance with a fighter who better than he is. Alfred takes a beating and loses the fight but refuses to be knocked out, and knows he can now quit with no regrets. After the fight he learns that James was injured while attempting to rob Epsteins' again, and that the police are looking for him. Alfred finds James hiding in a cave they used to play in and sees that he is bleeding badly. James wants money for a fix, but Alfred convinces him to go to a hospital instead. Alfred tells James that he can help him beat his addiction to heroin and turn his life around. The lessons that Alfred has learned at Donatelli's Gym apply to life as well as boxing, and Alfred knows that there is nothing he can't accomplish if he sets his mind to it.



Mr. Donatelli (Vito)

Mr. Donatelli is a stocky, older white man who owns and operates Donatelli's Gym in Harlem. Donatelli is an experienced boxing manager who lives at the gym for reasons that are never explained and has trained fighters – some of whom have gone on to be champions – for over thirty years. When Alfred shows up at the gym late one night and says that he wants to be a champion, Donatelli says that he will have to become a contender first, that most fighters quit before they ever get into the ring, and that nothing is ever promised to anyone. When Alfred says he wants to try Donatelli sees something in the young man that impresses him. Donatelli cares deeply about his fighters, and believes that their safety and welfare is more important than their winning fights. For the first few weeks he barely pays attention to Alfred, working with the more experienced fighters at the gym. Eventually, Donatelli allows Alfred to start sparring with other fighters, and soon decides that he is ready for some real fights outside the gym.

Even though Alfred wins his first fight, Donatelli tells him that it isn't enough; he has to learn to ignore the crowd. After his second fight Donatelli can see that Alfred is upset after he knocked his opponent out, and when Alfred fails to throw a knockout punch in his third fight Donatelli realizes that Alfred lacks the killer instinct that it takes to be a champion fighter. He tells Alfred that it is time for him to retire before he gets seriously hurt, but reluctantly agrees to let him fight one more time. Although Donatelli has guided Alfred's progress during the months he has trained at the gym, he makes it clear that it is Alfred himself who has overcome the obstacles he faced with hard work and determination. By helping Alfred work out who he is and what he is capable of accomplishing for himself, Mr. Donatelli has given him the tools to succeed at anything he puts his mind to in the future.

Henry Johnson

Henry is a young man from Alfred's neighborhood who works at Donatelli's Gym sweeping up. Henry suffered from Polio when he was a child, and it left him with a permanent limp. Henry's father owns the building where the neighborhood "clubroom" is located. While Alfred knows him, he has never really considered him a friend. He always thought of him as being a little slow. When Alfred starts training at Donatelli's Gym, Henry works with him almost from the start, holding the heavy bag when Alfred works with it and timing his workouts. When Alfred starts having amateur fights outside the gym, Henry replaces Dr. Corey as the third man in Alfred's corner, alongside Donatelli and Bud Martin.

Henry is a friendly, caring individual who helps to fill some of the void in Alfred's life left by James who is no longer being around. Henry and Alfred become close friends. At the end of the novel it is revealed that while Alfred has been training to be a boxer, Henry has been training to be a boxing trainer and that Alfred has been his responsibility since he started working out at the gym.



Aunt Pearl

Aunt Pearl is Alfred's mother's sister. Alfred has lived with her and her three daughters in her apartment since his mother died when he was thirteen. Aunt Pearl is a widow. She loves Alfred like he was her own son and is proud that he works hard at Epsteins' Grocery and doesn't hang out with the neighborhood hoodlums, but worries about him constantly. When Alfred tells her that he is training to be a boxer she disapproves because she is afraid he will get hurt, but doesn't try to stop him. Aunt Pearl tells Alfred that when she was seventeen she was offered the chance to sing on the stage but that she never tried because her mother wouldn't let her, and that she has always regretted never finding out if she could have made it as a singer. Because of this experience, Aunt Pearl understands why Alfred has to see if he can be a fighter, and notices a change in him as he trains. Aunt Pearl is a caring, compassionate person and a consistently positive influence in Alfred's life.

James Mosley

James has been Alfred's best friend and "partner" since the two of them were children. Until shortly before the novel opens the two were inseparable. When they were young Alfred and James found a cave in the park that became their secret place. It was there that James comforted Alfred when his father left home and later when Alfred's mother died. As the story opens James has started spending time with Major and the neighborhood hoodlums. He has drifted further away from Alfred. Alfred blames himself when James is arrested while trying to rob Epsteins' store. James doesn't blame him. He pulls further away from Alfred, eventually becoming addicted to heroin. Although boxing and the people he meets as a result of it have helped to ease the pain he feels over losing James as a friend, Alfred never forgets about him and often wishes he could share what he is going through with him. After James is injured while robbing Epsteins' for a second time, Alfred finds him hiding in their secret cave and promises to help him get off drugs and get his life back.

Major

Major is the leader of a small group of hoodlums in Alfred's neighborhood who hang out in the clubroom. The robbery in which James is arrested is Major's idea and although he manages to get away, he blames Alfred for the robbery going bad and he and his friends beat him up. Later, as Alfred is walking home after seeing the fight at the Garden, Major and his gang corner Alfred and Major demands that he help them rob Epsteins' again, but Alfred refuses even though Major threatens him with a knife. Later, Major invites Alfred to a party at the clubroom where he sees James buying heroin. Alfred comes close to being arrested when Major takes him to Coney Island in a stolen car. Major is a consistently negative and destructive influence. After the Coney Island incident, Alfred has nothing more to do with him.



Spoon (Bill Witherspoon)

Spoon is an ex-fighter who had been ranked the number seven light-heavyweight contender a few years before when his manager, Mr. Donatelli, told him that he was taking too much punishment and needed to retire. Donatelli later acted as Spoon's best man. Now a school teacher, Spoon has never lost his love of boxing and remains close to Donatelli, helping out at the gym with the younger fighters when he has time. Spoon and his wife Betty let Alfred and Henry use their apartment in a different part of the city on the days that Alfred has fights so that he can relax away from his own neighborhood, and he attends all of Alfred's matches. It is Spoon who tells Alfred that he can finish high school at night and makes plans to help Alfred with his night school reading list once his last fight is finished. He also tells Alfred that when James is ready he can get him a place in a narcotics clinic so that he can kick his heroin addiction. Spoon is an example of the positive effect training to be a boxer can have on a person, and he is someone that Alfred looks up to.

Lou Epstein

Lou Epstein owns Epsteins' Grocery where Alfred works. Although Lou is a friendly man who likes and trusts Alfred, he has some doubts about him after his best friend James is arrested for trying to rob the store. After Lou catches Alfred shadowboxing in the back room one afternoon, he says that he was once a fighter. Alfred realizes that he was Lightning Lou Epp, a pro fighter whom Donatelli had trained years before. Lou tells Alfred that he should forget about boxing, but he shows up at the gym one evening to watch Alfred train and offers him encouragement. He goes to Alfred's fights. Later, Lou trains Alfred to run the cash register at the store, showing that he again trusts Alfred completely.

Bud Martin

Bud Martin has been Mr. Donatelli's assistant at the gym for decades. He is in charge of the gym when Donatelli isn't there, and he is in the corner with Donatelli and Dr. Corey (and later Henry) whenever one of Donatelli's fighters has a match. Bud is an experienced cut man who has invented his own concoction to stop bleeding during fights. Bud is all business in the ring, whether the fight is professional, amateur, or just sparring at the gym. Bud also has a compassionate side which he shows by saying that everybody at the gym gets a second chance after a disgruntled fighter takes a swing at him.

Uncle Wilson

Uncle Wilson is married to Aunt Pearl's (and Alfred's mother's) sister Dorothy. Wilson has a good job and owns a nice house out in Queens which Alfred, Aunt Pearl, and her daughters visit occasionally to have dinner. Wilson is a practical man who tells Alfred



that the world is changing for “colored” people, He says that Alfred needs to find himself a job that offers opportunities for advancement. Wilson also likes to brag to Alfred about his son Jeff who is in college. While Wilson means well, he is out of touch with the world Alfred lives in, and Alfred usually finds talking to him frustrating.

Dr. Arthur Corey

Dr. Corey is a dentist whose office is one floor below Donatelli’s gym. Corey normally works in the corner during fights with Donatelli and Bud Martin, but is replaced by Henry when Alfred fights. Corey also makes all of Donatelli’s fighters a custom mouthpiece when they are ready for their first fight. Corey is a friendly man with a dry sense of humor who loves boxing and spends a lot of time at the gym when he doesn’t have any patients.

Jelly Belly (Horace Marshall Davenport, Junior)

Jelly Belly is a heavyweight boxer who trains at Donatelli’s gym. Jelly is a happy, funny young man who encourages and helps Alfred almost from the start, and who often hangs out with Alfred and Henry after they finish working out at the gym. Although he is popular and well liked by most of the other fighters, Mr. Donatelli doesn’t believe that Jelly has the discipline to be a fighter because he can’t control his eating or his weight. Even though he won’t make it as a fighter, Jelly still works out at the gym and goes to Alfred’s fights, and at the end of the novel gets a job at a restaurant where he says that he will be sure to get “six round meals” every day.

Cousin Jeff

Cousin Jeff is Wilson and Dorothy’s son. Jeff is home from college when Alfred, Aunt Pearl, and the girls go out to the house in Queens for Thanksgiving dinner. He is very impressed with the fact that Alfred has won his first two fights. As he is driving them back to Harlem after dinner is over, Jeff says that Alfred has changed and that he doesn’t seem to be as negative about everything as he used to be. After Alfred mentions that some people he knows are trying to organize a recreation center for kids in the neighborhood, Jeff encourages Alfred by saying that with his athletic background he would be a natural. Although only seen briefly, Jeff is a positive, supportive character who immediately notices the changes that boxing has brought about in Alfred.

Willie Streeter

Willie Streeter is a professional fighter that Mr. Donatelli managed. Willie’s eye is badly cut during a fight at Madison Square Garden, and Donatelli stops the fight. Streeter is upset and accuses Donatelli of stopping the fight too early. Spoon later explains to Alfred and Henry that Streeter had “showed some dog” after he was hurt by protecting the eye and not going after the other fighter. He tells them Donatelli stopped the fight



even though Streeter might have won both to keep Streeter from being injured further and to keep him from looking like a coward in front of the crowd.

Elston Hubbard

Hubbard is the boxer that Alfred faces in his fourth – and final – fight. After Alfred takes a savage beating and is knocked down several times during the first two rounds, Alfred stands toe-to-toe with Hubbard in the third round and trades punches with him, refusing to go down. When the fight is over, Alfred has earned the other fighter's respect. Hubbard hugs him and says, "You tough, baby."

Harold and Lynn

Harold and Lynn are political activists who organize civil rights demonstrations and marches in Alfred's neighborhood. When they tell Alfred that because of his boxing experience the kids would really look up to him if he were to work at a neighborhood recreation center they are trying to organize Alfred says he will think about it, but doesn't mean it. Later, he changes his mind and decides that it is something he wants to do and that James can help him.

Sonny, Hollis, and Jason

Sonny, Hollis, and Jason are the members of Major's gang. They do whatever Major tells them to do. Sonny and Hollis take part along with Major and James in the attempted robbery at Epsteins' in which James is arrested. They later beat Alfred up. All three of them go with Major and Alfred on the ill-fated trip to Coney Island.



Symbols and Symbolism

Silent Alarm

A week before the story opens, a silent alarm is installed in Epsteins' Grocery Store. Alfred forgets to tell Major, James, and the others about the alarm when they announce that they are robbing the store. When James is arrested during the robbery Alfred blames himself because he forgot to warn his friend about the silent alarm. Later, Major wants Alfred to disconnect the alarm so that he can try to rob Epsteins' again, but Alfred refuses even though Major threatens him with a knife. When Major asks why Alfred won't do it, he replies that he doesn't have to. This indicates that even though Alfred hasn't started seriously training yet, his association with Donatelli's Gym is already having a positive impact on his life and strengthening his self confidence.

Movies

Alfred spends much of his spare time at the movies, and he also watches old movies on television at home, particularly when he is upset or confused. The movies provide Alfred with a way to escape from reality for a while and lose himself in stories about other people. For Alfred, the movies are a safe place where he can leave the outside world behind and not have to deal with the problems that he faces in his own life.

Heavy Bag/Peanut Bag

The heavy bag and peanut (light) bag are the only things that Alfred is allowed to hit for many weeks after he starts working out at Donatelli's Gym. Although he longs to get into the ring and spar against other fighters, Donatelli has told him that he will only be able to do so after he has the strength to knock the heavy bag around all day long and the speed to make the peanut bag sound like a machine gun when he hits it. Mastering the heavy bag and the peanut bag is a rite of passage at the gym. After proving himself at both tasks, Alfred is ready to take the next step which is sparring.

Cash Register

After Lou Epstein sees the progress that Alfred has made at Donatelli's Gym and notices the increased energy he seems to have at work, he teaches Alfred how to run the cash register at the store and lets him check out customers after they have finished shopping. This gesture not only shows Lou's faith in Alfred as a person, but it also symbolizes the fact that even though he might have had doubts about Alfred's trustworthiness immediately after the robbery, he now trusts Alfred completely.



Custom Mouthpiece

A mouthpiece is a piece of equipment that boxers wear to protect their teeth and gums during fights. While Alfred spars with the other fighters at the gym he uses one of the community mouthpieces that all the fighters use. They are well cleaned after each use, but they do not fit perfectly. They can be uncomfortable. One day after Alfred has a particularly good sparring session in the ring, Donatelli tells him to go to Dr. Corey's office and get fitted for a custom mouthpiece. This indicates that Alfred has progressed far enough in his training to start having real fights in the fight clubs, which is what Alfred has been working toward.

Robe

Just before his first fight, Henry surprises Alfred with a white terrycloth robe with the words "Alfred Brooks: New York" printed in red lettering on the back. Although Alfred assumes that Mr. Donatelli bought the robe, Henry reveals that he actually bought it for Alfred himself. The robe is a symbol of Henry's faith in Alfred as a fighter and a friend. It shows his gratitude to Alfred for helping Henry get his start as a trainer, even though Alfred doesn't realize he has done so.

Heroin

As Alfred progresses with his training and gains more confidence in himself both as a fighter and as a person, his best friend James moves in a completely opposite direction and slowly has his life destroyed by a heroin addiction. The physical deterioration Alfred sees in his friend stands out in sharp contrast to his own peak physical condition as a result of his determined training at the gym. It illustrates how truly far apart the two friends have grown in just a few months.

Knockout Punch

The knockout punch that Alfred throws in his second fight has a profound effect on him. The memory of how it felt when his glove connected with the other fighter's jaw and the sight of him falling to the canvas like a dead man stays with Alfred long after the fight ends. It affects him both in and out of the ring. The punch comes to symbolize a dark side to boxing that Alfred hadn't thought about until now. He has the ability to seriously hurt, and possibly even kill, his opponent unintentionally. This frightens him more than being hurt himself.

Fight Crowd

After Alfred's first fight, Mr. Donatelli tells him that he has to learn to ignore the crowd. He needs to fight his own fight and not pay attention to what the crowd thinks he should



do, since they aren't the ones in the ring getting punched. As Alfred reluctantly accepts the fact that he will never be a champion fighter, he begins to understand what Mr. Donatelli was trying to tell him. The crowd at a fight doesn't care about the fighters at all. The people really don't even care about who wins or loses. They just want to see blood and pain. Alfred realizes that the same is true of those people in the world who try to drag him down, like Major. This knowledge will help Alfred meet the challenges that he will face in his life on his own terms.

Cave in the Park

The cave in the park is a symbol of Alfred's friendship with James and the closeness that they once shared. Near the beginning of the novel, when he isn't certain whether or not James was arrested during the robbery attempt at Epsteins', Alfred waits in the cave for hours. He's still waiting long after it is obvious that his friend is not coming. He is trying to make sense of things. When James is injured and running from the police after the second robbery attempt, Alfred finds him hiding in the cave. The cave represents the last tangible connection between Alfred and James. In the end, the memory of what it once meant to both of them is instrumental in causing James to accept Alfred's help.

Madison Square Garden

Before Alfred officially begins his training at the gym, Mr. Donatelli leaves him a ticket to see one of the professional boxers he trains fight at Madison Square Garden. Madison Square Garden was, at the time, the premier fight venue in New York City and one of the most respected boxing arenas in the world. A fight at the Garden is the goal all boxers work towards when they are starting out, and symbolizes the level of success that Alfred dreams of achieving. Even though Donatelli's fighter loses, Alfred's experience at the Garden impresses and excites him. It helps him to decide that he wants to start his training immediately.

Settings



Themes and Motifs

Change

The story is set in the Harlem section of New York City sometime in the mid-1960s (the novel was first published in 1967) which was a time of great change in the United States, and most particularly in the Black community. Nationalist protesters and civil rights activists are on the streets in Alfred's neighborhood demanding change and preaching new and different ideas, and even Alfred's conservative Uncle Wilson continually tells him that change is coming for "colored" people, and that he needs to be prepared when it arrives. Alfred's own life is changing as well as his best friend James pulls further and further away from him, and he finds it increasingly difficult to fit in with Major and the other boys in the neighborhood James has started to hang out with. Alfred is confused by all of the changes going on around him and rather than try to adapt to them, he escapes by going to the movies. When he first climbs the steps to Donatelli's Gym and says that he wants to train to be a boxer, Alfred is looking for something that will give his life some meaning and help him make sense of the changes that are happening all around him.

As Alfred trains he himself begins to change. He becomes physically stronger as the result of the hours he spends running and working out at the gym, and he also gains a confidence in himself and his own abilities that he has never possessed before. His months of training at Donatelli's Gym help to teach him the importance of discipline and commitment. Even though he finds that he doesn't enjoy actually fighting opponents in the ring and eventually comes to terms with the fact that he will never be a champion, what he has learned from Mr. Donatelli and his experience at the gym has changed him as a person and has helped to equip him for life outside the boxing ring.

Persistence /Going the Distance

Perhaps the most valuable lesson Alfred learns from training at Donatelli's Gym and boxing is the importance of not quitting what you start and going the distance. When Alfred first goes to the gym and says that he wants to be a boxer, Mr. Donatelli tells him that if he gives up and quits before he really tries it will be worse than if Alfred had never started at all. He explains to Alfred that while everyone wants to be a champion, it is the hard work and determination that make a fighter a contender. Those traits truly make the man and define him as a person. When Alfred goes to the gym to one night to quit, he ends up changing his mind, not because of anything Mr. Donatelli says but because deep down inside he understands that if he quits he will never know what he might have accomplished. He knows that he would always regret it. Though he is frustrated with the repetitiveness of his training and the fact that it seems to be getting him nowhere, he understands that he needs to continue to push himself to really find out what he is capable of both in the ring and in life.



When Mr. Donatelli tells Alfred it is time to retire after his third match, Alfred says that he needs to be in one more fight. Although Mr. Donatelli can see that he doesn't have what it takes to become a champion and Alfred himself has realized that he doesn't really enjoy fighting in the ring, Alfred also knows that he hasn't pushed himself as far as he needs to. He understands that if he doesn't push himself to that level it will feel as though he quit before he has gone the distance. Alfred knows that he is risking serious injury by fighting an opponent who is a much stronger and more experienced fighter than he is, but he also knows that if he quits before he sees how much he can take, he will be quitting on himself. Understanding how important it is not to give up and quit even when things get difficult and somehow finding the courage to see things through to the end are lessons that Alfred finally realizes apply not only to boxing, but to everything in life.

Loyalty and Friendship

Although Alfred and James have been friends since they were children, as the novel opens they have started to grow further and further apart as James first starts spending most of his time with Major and his gang, and then later descends into the world of crime and heroin addiction. Even though Alfred rarely sees James around the neighborhood, he thinks of him often and constantly wishes that his best friend were sharing his experiences at the gym and elsewhere with him. Even though James insults him and then ignores him during the party at the clubroom, Alfred continues to think of James as his best friend and longs for things to go back to the way they were. At the end of the novel as James – who is now a junkie and can think of nothing but his next fix – is hiding in the cave from the police and bleeding badly, Alfred's only thought to get his friend to the hospital, and then do whatever it takes to help him straighten out his life. Even though James has pulled far away from him, Alfred has remained loyal to James and still considers their friendship one of the most important things in his life. Alfred's friendship with and loyalty to James is one of the things that defines him as a person and makes him who and what he is.

Henry also exhibits great loyalty to Alfred as he sticks with him throughout his training at the gym, and helps to fill some of the emptiness in Alfred's life that is left as he and James grow apart. Henry thinks of Alfred as a friend even though for much of the novel Alfred doesn't really acknowledge Henry, and is consistently upbeat, positive, and encouraging. When the referee asks Mr. Donatelli if he wants to let his fighter continue after Alfred is badly beaten during the first two rounds of his last fight, Henry takes Alfred's side and tells his boss to let the fight continue. Henry understands how important finishing the fight is to Alfred, and shows his friendship and loyalty by standing by him. The positive – and negative – aspects of friendship, and what it truly means to be a friend, is explored throughout the story and is one of the major themes in the novel.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is written in the third person and the point of view is that of the main character in the story, Alfred Brooks. Alfred is a black, 17-year-old boy living in Harlem in the mid-1960s who is struggling to make sense of his own life and the changes that are taking place in the world around him. Alfred is the main character in every scene in the novel, and all of the action and events in the story are presented as they are seen, experienced, and understood by him. In addition to the third person narration there are also a number of short passages – usually ranging from just a couple of words to three or four short sentences at a time – which express Alfred's thoughts and feelings in the first person, as they are going on in Alfred's mind. These are inserted into the narrative often without warning or explanation, but the reader quickly gets used to this literary device and never becomes lost or confused. The intimate point of view used in the novel is crucial to the story as it allows the reader to understand what Alfred experiences and feels; during the course of the story the reader is able to connect with Alfred on a personal level, and comes to care deeply about what happens to him.

The narration is reliable in that it accurately depicts what is going on around Alfred as he experiences and understands it, and consistently provides insights into Alfred's thoughts and emotional state. The novel is written using a mixture of descriptive prose and dialogue. In both the narrative and dialogue passages the author uses an economy of words, avoiding long descriptions of people and physical surroundings and long speeches by the characters. This tight, economical approach to storytelling allows the author to move from one scene to the next quickly and efficiently, and keeps the action moving forward at an entertaining pace.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written for a young adult audience so the language used is appropriate for that age group and, for the most part, is easy to understand. The novel was first published in 1967 and as a result today's readers will find that the author uses a number of words that have gone out of style (for example, 'hoodlum' and 'wino'), as well as several words that are currently considered inappropriate or even pejorative (for example, "colored" and "Negro" when referring to African-Americans) but which were commonly used at the time the novel was written. However, given that the novel is over 45 years old the plot and story hold up remarkably well and most readers will not find the dated passages to be much of an obstacle to their enjoyment and comprehension of the story.

No profanity or vulgar language is used in the narrative, and there are no sexual situations of any kind in the novel. There are scenes that depict criminal activity, underage drinking, and drug use by several of the major and minor characters, but the



scenes are crucial to the plot of the novel and these behaviors are consistently portrayed as dangerous and destructive. There is some moderately graphic violence, both in and outside of the boxing ring, but these scenes are handled tactfully and will not be upsetting to most young adult readers. There is a considerable amount of slang and “street talk” used in the dialogue portions of the novel and some of the words and expressions will be unfamiliar to today’s audience, but again most readers will have no troubling following the action. A rudimentary understanding of boxing will enhance the reader’s enjoyment and comprehension of the fight scenes but the central themes and the majority of the action in the novel will be easily understood by individuals who know nothing about the sport. Generally, the language and writing style employed by the author fits the story extremely well, and helps to enhance the reader’s enjoyment of the novel.

Structure

The novel is 167 pages long and is divided into twenty numbered, non-titled chapters of varying lengths. The longest chapter is 22 pages long while the shortest chapter is just under three pages in length. Several of the longer chapters are divided into subchapters. In some chapters the action or conversation takes place in the course of just a few minutes, while in other chapters the passage of several weeks is described with just a few sentences or paragraphs. This is particularly true of the second half of the novel (roughly) in which several months pass as opposed to the first half of the book in which just a few days go by. Most of the shorter chapters present a single scene or conversation, while the longer chapters may present multiple conversations or situations. Every chapter contains both dialogue and descriptive prose.

The novel contains one main plot which follows Alfred Brooks, a black 17-year-old high school dropout as he searches for meaning and direction in his life, and finds it as result of training to be a boxer at Donatelli’s Gym. One subplot involves Alfred trying to deal with his guilt over his best friend James’ arrest and his attempts to rekindle their lost friendship and help James get off drugs and turn his life around. A second subplot involves the growing friendship between Henry and Alfred, and how important they become to each other over the course of Alfred’s training. The main plot is brought to a conclusion with Alfred’s retirement from boxing after proving everything he needs to prove to himself, while the subplots are left more or less open, albeit on a positive note.

Quotes

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