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The Contender
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Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Chapter 1

1. The title of this novel consists of an article and a noun. Look up the noun, *contender*, in a dictionary and copy the definition. Then, using a thesaurus, find synonyms for *contender*. Using the definition, synonyms, and cover of the book as evidence, write a paragraph predicting what will happen in the book.
2. At the start of the story, Alfred is waiting for James, his best friend, who is very late. Alfred shows his impatience by checking the time and telling himself that James will be there in just five more minutes. James, however, is still not in sight after the extra-allotted time.

Recall a time when you were waiting for someone who was very late. What emotions did you feel? Were you anxious, angry, worried, frustrated? List at least three emotions you felt and explain your reasons for feeling this way.

3. Alfred has had some tough times in his life, such as his father leaving and his mother's death. Through these times, James has been with him to give him comfort. Alfred remembers the exact words James said to him, "Gonna be all right, Alfred. I'm gonna stick by you. We're partners, right?" These words brought relief in some very hard times in Alfred's life.

Think of a difficult time in your life. Describe a person who comforted you during this time, and explain what this person did or said to help you.

Chapter 2

6. At the beginning of this chapter, Alfred sits in bed and remembers his night. He feels safe in bed, despite all of the dangerous occurrences last night. Alfred tastes the baloney sandwich and warm milk. He hears the children playing in the street. He feels the pit in his stomach as he thinks about James. And he sees the crowded, cluttered apartment.

Write a descriptive paragraph about a place where you feel safe. What does it feel like, smell like, sound like, look like, and taste like?

7. Alfred, the main character, finds himself linked to the character of Henry again in this chapter. Alfred is battered, bruised, fearful, and heartbroken as he walks the streets. But, even though Henry is crippled, he seems to think positively about the neighborhood and his life. The two boys have very different perspectives of life in Harlem. Contrast how Alfred feels about life in the neighborhood to how Henry feels about life in the neighborhood.

Generate a list of more adjectives using a T-chart, or write a contrast paragraph.

Chapter 8

25. Throughout this chapter, Alfred is scared. His legs quiver and he is constantly preparing to be hurt. Despite this, he still stands his ground in telling Major that he will not help him rob the Epstein's Grocery Store.

Recall a moment when you were scared, but you stuck to your convictions. How did you feel during the confrontation? How did you feel when the moment was over? Write a narrative paragraph describing your moment.

26. Alfred has finally stood up to Major. At the end of the chapter it says,

“Alfred closed the door behind him just as his knees sagged, shuddered violently. Then he straightened, and all the way home he wanted to raise his right arm to the ringside crowd on the stoops.”

Explain to your teacher why the author uses a boxing reference when Alfred is nowhere near a boxing ring. The explanation should be at least one paragraph long.

Chapter 14

42. At the beginning of this chapter Alfred breaks from his regular routine. He is going to fight in his first boxing match. Though this is what he has been training for, he has “a cold spot” in his stomach. Henry, however, has “butterflies in his stomach” in anticipation for his friend. Drinking tea and talking at Spoon’s house helps to ease their nerves before the fight.

Recall a time when you had “butterflies in your stomach.” Describe your experience. What did you do to calm yourself? Was anyone else nervous with you?

43. When Alfred returns to boxing, he cuts all ties to Major and the clubroom. While his boxing career is flourishing, his old friends are falling apart. Though he somewhat expects it, Alfred is bothered to hear Henry tell him how the clubroom was shut down.

Using the conversation between Alfred and Henry, write an editorial for your school newspaper about the closing of the clubroom, which is in your neighborhood. The editorial should focus on your opinions on the club’s closing, supported with facts.

44. Alfred points out a deep contrast between his old friends and his new friends. His new friend Spoon will settle an argument by researching in books to find the answer. In contrast, James once settled an argument by throwing a bottle at the person disagreeing with him.

Make a list to describe other differences between Alfred’s new and old friends. Then, write one sentence only that explains what person you would prefer to have as a friend.