

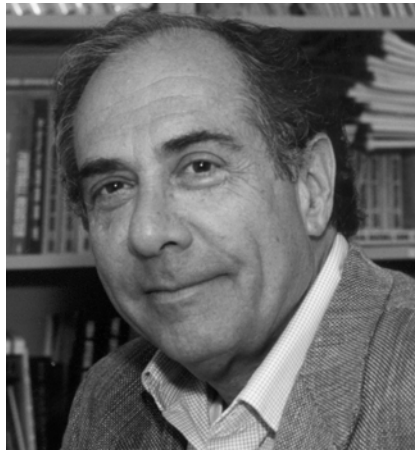
## Interviewing the Interviewer:

Talking with Robert Lipsyte

Intimidating. As a sportswriter, Robert Lipsyte covered beats ranging from NASCAR to high school football for *The New York Times*. His 40-year career has taken him into the locker rooms of professional athletes, out to dinner with coaches, and behind the scenes of the American sports machine. His successes as a journalist and young adult novelist are well documented. Just outside of the 2006 ALAN Conference, I sat across the table from him and felt myself slipping out of my comfort zone. Suddenly, the legend I eagerly agreed to interview was interviewing me.

In talking about his latest book, he asked about my experience playing and coaching high school football. I talked about much of the jock culture that I had witnessed firsthand, the steroids and the pressure to perform at all costs. He understood; he had seen it before. Just as his new novel, *Raiders Night*, is making some of the high school sports establishment uncomfortable, I started feeling a bit uneasy. After all, I had sworn secrecy when my teammate decided to take steroids in high school. He wanted to be bigger, faster, and stronger as our weight program proclaimed we should be. I, too, was part of that jock culture, but I had escaped.

Lipsyte asked why I hadn't taken steroids. He asked what had happened to my friend that had. He asked if the coaches knew. He followed up when I



gave half answers. He pried. All at the same time, his soothing voice and warm manner made me feel comfortable sharing with him, a man I had just met who proved anything but intimidating.

The topic of this interview deals in part with Lipsyte's thoughts and experiences with writing and young adult literature. Additionally, we discuss his latest novel, and he shares experiences unique to the high school sports culture. It was an honor to

interview an author I have admired for many years. His frank, realistic, and forthcoming voice can be heard in his words and stories.

**TAR:** What inspired you to be a writer and how much of your writing relies on your contact or former experiences with people as a reporter?

**RL:** Writing is the only thing I have ever wanted to do. I was lucky. Emily Dickinson, whom I always liked a lot, never left her room, and I don't know how many people she talked to. I don't know if that is the only thing, but I think it has always been necessary for me that journalism is where I got my ideas. That is really where I got my training.

**TAR:** How often are you still writing for the newspapers?

**RL:** Whenever I need instant gratification. Whenever I think nobody's listening to me. I sporadically write editorials for *USA Today*. I do a lot of work for ESPN and occasionally for ESPN.com. I'm starting now to write these long pieces every other month; *The Nation* has a blog called Tom Dispatch ([www.tomdispatch.com](http://www.tomdispatch.com)). I just did one on why the Republicans didn't win; it's because they alienated NASCAR fans. That's my whole theory, but it's really kind of about NASCAR. I spent a lot of time covering NASCAR. But at the time I'm kind of writing semi-sports political pieces. I write for *USA Today* and ESPN just to keep my hand in journalism. The day-to-day work is fiction.

**TAR:** What's a typical day look like? Do you have a typical day?

**RL:** You've got to keep hours. I get up at eight o'clock, something like that. My wife and I, we split our time between Manhattan and we have a house on Shelter Island. We have exactly the same setup. We each have the same desktop in each place. So, at both places, I get up around eight o'clock, get a cup of coffee and go to work. If it's warm enough I don't put clothes on. It's my house. My office is like ten steps away from the bedroom. If it is the first draft, I write it in long hand in pencil. After that, I write on the computer, and I generally can fit in a good six hours. In the afternoon, I'll do journalism or answer mail. If I'm in the city, I'll go to the gym. If I'm in the country, I'll go bike-riding. That's the day. I see my kids, see friends and laugh.

**TAR:** You mentioned your son is a writer and has published books of his own. Do you see yourself in his writing? How?

**RL:** Yep, he's a wonderful writer and his name is Sam Lipsyte. He's written two novels and a book of short stories. He's a professor of creative writing at Columbia. I don't see myself in his writing style. He writes very darkly comic novels, every so often I cringe because I see myself in his stories. Something I did or parts of myself. I wonder how he knew about that. Uh, he's absolutely honest, has no shame in using anything in his life. His mother, my former wife who's deceased, was also a writer,

so he grew up in a household with two people who were writing and that kind of demystified the process. He got the idea that it was something not all that difficult. These people whom he had seen bleary eyed or picking their noses were writers, so anybody could be a writer.

**TAR:** Is there something that's happened in your career as a young adult author that nobody or not as many people know about that you consider a highlight? Is there like a single letter, maybe that you've gotten back from a student?

**RL:** There have been a lot of things. I guess the thing that's in my mind happened about an hour and a half ago. I was signing, and this guy came up and said "I don't want to make you feel old, but I read *The Contender* 30 years ago and it changed my life. I was a really reluctant reader; people thought I was retarded. Then I read that book and I'm going to have my first young adult novel published next year." Something like that kind of gives you shivers. Every so often, you hear something like that and it's thrilling. I think that there are a lot of young adult writers that would tell you the same story, and I think that I was just lucky to hear that story about *The Contender*.

But I think that's what empowers young adult literature. It's not about *The Contender*, it's about people who are still open to new ideas, the process of becoming, and some really smart teacher put the right book in his or her hands and made the difference. That's what young adult literature can do; that's what keeps us going.

---

**It's not about *The Contender*, it's about people who are still open to new ideas, the process of becoming, and some really smart teacher put the right book in his or her hands and made the difference. That's what young adult literature can do; that's what keeps us going.**

---

**TAR:** How does your career as a journalist compare to your career as a young adult novelist? Is the writing process greatly different for you when you are working on a young adult novel compared to an article?

**RL:** Actually what happened was I was a pretty fast typist. In the Army they sent me to clerk typist

---

**In the army they sent me to clerk typist school. Which is great for deadlines and journalism, but it really gives a staccato beat to my writing. When I was writing *The Contender*, the first long fiction I wrote, I began to realize that every sentence looked and sounded the same. That is when I started writing in long-hand.**

---

school. Which is great for deadlines and journalism, but it really gives a staccato beat to my writing. When I was writing *The Contender*, the first long fiction I wrote, I began to realize that every sentence looked and sounded the same. That is when I started writing in longhand. There is a real difference when I am writing in longhand, and ever since that, I have written all first drafts of all fiction in longhand and all journalism I do completely with the computer. That is mechanical. I have always needed both. I enjoy the journey of getting out, seeing places, and meeting

people with journalism. Almost everything fictional I have written has either come out of my personal life or out of journalism.

**TAR:** What is the best book you've written?

**RL:** I don't know. Every book has something that might make them first. *One Fat Summer* was the closest to my own life. I have a soft spot in my heart for a book that really went into the toilet: *The Chemo Kid*. It may not have been a good book; that is always a possibility. I think people just didn't get it. It was about a kid who got cancer and during his

chemotherapy treatment lost all of his hair, turned slightly green, gained a lot of weight, and had superhuman powers. The evolution of that was that about thirty years ago I had cancer, lost all my hair, though I didn't turn green or get superhuman powers, my kids were small. During the treatment I was sitting around the house; I was pretty sick. If I was sitting in a chair, my wife would have to help me out. I started telling them these stories about this kid who had cancer and superhuman powers. At the end of the book his cancer is cured and he has to face this enormous problem, should he keep taking the chemotherapy or give up his superhuman powers. I have always written realistic fiction and there was an element of fantasy in this; I don't think people ever quite got it. Or, as I said, maybe it was a bad book, but I liked that book. I don't know about the best one I have ever written, but I have the softest spot in my heart for it.

**TAR:** Do you have a colleague in young adult literature that is your favorite or that you look up to the most?

**RL:** Yeah, there are a lot of people out there that I admire. Personally, Judy Blume, Walter Dean Myers, Chris Crutcher, Francesca Lia Block, M.E. Kerr, and I think the all-time best is Robert Cormier. I think he is the man, I really do. One of the books is *After the First Death*. Actually maybe the best book on terrorism I have ever read. It captures the whole sense of terrorism from both sides. It captures the terrorists and the victims. He is an amazing guy. I found him very inspirational because he was a newspaper columnist and a really nice man. I think that of everything in young adult fiction, *After the First Death* is really the most powerful. I remember the first time I read it, I read it on a plane, a long flight. I just finished it as the plane landed and I couldn't get up. Finally the flight attendant came over and said "Sir, is there a problem?" It is the kind of book that makes me glad to be part of this genre.

**TAR:** What do you see as the biggest obstacle for young adult literature in the next twenty years?

**RL:** Well, I think there is an awful lot of crap being

published, pandering series with books that don't seem to be in the best interest of kids, books that seem to be commercial projects. It muddies the waters. The problem seems to be that teens are reading less, and I think the pressure is on teachers, writers, librarians to get better books into kids' hands. YAL, as a genre, it has a great responsibility to not lie to the youth. It is a real responsibility of young adult literature to tell kids the truth no matter how complex and painful it might be to get the truth in a book. We can't lie to them.

There is a teaching element to these books. There is kind of a reaching out from one generation to another telling people that you can survive. Other people have done it, and here are some tips on how to do it. Adolescents must understand they are in the process of becoming. It is like the neurobiology of a brain that is vulnerable to steroids. For the same reason I wouldn't give steroids to high school kids, I really don't want to give them bullshit, false values, lies, sentimental, and manipulative stuff. I want to give them the real literature. Some of the stuff out there is as harmful as giving the kids dope. You may be screwing up their lives worse or at least as surely as if you were giving them dope.

**TAR:** *Raiders Night* certainly takes a realistic look at high school sports. You mentioned that it is causing some controversy. Are you surprised that this book is a subject of censorship efforts?

**RL:** Censorship is too strong a word. It is more insidious than that. I have been invited to school by librarians and English teachers and then uninvited by the coaches, athletic directors, and principals. It is not the language. It is not the sex and drugs. It is kind of like Friday night darks. It is seen as a negative look at jock culture that these guys are really invested in. That has been different and interesting to me.

**TAR:** Do you have previous experiences with censorship?

**RL:** Not really. So much of censorship is not like *Fahrenheit 451*. There was a case in Tacoma,

Washington, where some families wanted to have *The Contender* banned just a couple years ago because there were no middle class black role models in the book. It turns out they had not read the book because there were middle class black role models in the book. It actually became a case and there was a hearing. An educator flew out from Harvard University, from their education school to testify. For a time *One Fat Summer* was briefly taken off the shelves in Levittown, New, York. A mother reading over her son's shoulder had seen a masturbation scene that I do not remember writing. That was a case where the teachers revolted and made a case out of it. They were not going to be pushed around. In both those cases, it seemed like small stuff.

But with *Raiders Night*, I sense something different happening. It is not ideological. It happened in Tennessee, it happened in Texas, and it happened in the District of Columbia, that I know about. I really think it is about money. I really think there is now an understanding that high school sports, particularly football and to a lesser extent basketball, are going to be major money makers for school districts. When you've got Texas high school ballparks selling their naming rights for a million dollars: Tyler, Texas, went for 1.9 million. When you've got ESPN televising games nationally and Gatorade, Pizza, and cell phone companies waiting in the wings to sponsor national tournaments (if they ever get that off the ground), you're talking about a billion dollar industry so this is not something you want to mess around with. When

---

**The problem seems to be that teens are reading less and I think the pressure is on teachers, writers, librarians to get better books into kids' hands. YAL, as a genre, it has a great responsibility to not lie to the youth. It is a real responsibility of young adult literature to tell kids the truth no matter how complex and painful it might be**

---

your school district stands to benefit from that, you don't really want anybody saying, "So, do your boys take steroids?"

**TAR:** My feeling is that this book would and should create those questions. What is the central issue at hand here?

**RL:** I wrote an op-ed piece just a couple of days ago in *USA Today* about mandatory steroid testing for high

school athletes. Right away the paper got these email responses from organizations saying "very good idea to a point, but here are the five reasons that it can't work." There are all of these kinds of financial, privacy reasons. Right away, you know that their skin is itching. It is no violation of privacy at all. Don't play. If you don't want to be tested, go play softball.

You've got to make a stand to stop it (steroid use) somewhere. With a case like Barry Bonds, the

## ***Raiders Night***

Reviewed by Chris Goering

Only a handful of high school athletes are considered to be blue chip prospects, top recruits good enough to play at the collegiate level. They have NCAA Division I scholarships waiting and often the local fan following reserved for heroes. Between the hype and fanfare, they must deal with pressure beyond their years. What Matt Rydek, senior co-captain of the Nearmont High School Raiders football team, did not realize before practice started was that he would be the underdog this year. It would be left up to him to stand for what was right, even if it cost his team the entire promising season.

The pressures facing protagonist Rydek are at a boiling point as the novel begins. Using the steroids, pain killers, and sleeping pills to deal with a handicapped brother and an incorrigible father, he tries to balance responsibilities of school, football, a failing romantic relationship, and steering clear of his co-captain, Ramp. Coach Mac's cliché speech as the team heads to camp resonates throughout the novel. "You are heading into Raider country now, a band of brothers going to eat, sleep, breathe football for the next five days. Your coaches will be putting you through the meat grinder, and if you make it—not everybody does—you will be a Raider (42)." Matt's world is upset as he and the other seniors witness a sexual assault on transfer sophomore standout Chris Marin during Raiders Night, the traditional hazing event that gets out of hand under Ramp's control.

As the novel progresses, Matt struggles with what he has witnessed and whether or not he should help the sophomore and reveal the truth. Sarah, a strong female character and love interest, befriends Matt and becomes a confidant, eventually helping him toward understanding what has happened and what he must do. As he nears a decision, his teammates and community turn on him and "not everybody" makes it to be a Raider. Lipsyte effectively captures the results of the mounting pressure on high school athletes to entertain the public through Rydek, the story of a Mr. Everything who becomes a true underdog.

This book would appeal to anyone who deals with high school athletes—teachers, romantic interests, parents, students, coaches—from the perspective of understanding the participants of high stakes high school athletics. Lipsyte, himself, cautions teachers and librarians against using this book with younger readers without reading it carefully—this is not *The Contender* (1967), a book often used in middle schools. Though it does contain violence, profanity, and some sexual content, it is handled thoughtfully. I would not hesitate to give it to high school students and feel the book's appeal reaches far beyond the boundaries of a male high school athlete.

Lipsyte, Robert. *Raiders Night*. HarperCollins Children's Books, 2006, 232 pp. ISBN: 0-060-59946-4. \$15.99



genie is out of the bottle. When you think of the neurobiology of 15-16-17-year olds, you don't want to mess with that. We are putting the pressure on them to entertain us.

**TAR:** If you could address the administrators, athletic directors, and coaches that rejected your visits, what would you tell them?

**RL:** I would like to know what is on their minds. They are the ones that are holding the cards. What is it in the book that disturbs them? What don't they want these ball players to be thinking about? And then if they ask me what I have learned, I would tell them that when I do talk to their ball players, they are talking about the profound distrust they have for adults, especially their coaches. Players really feel trapped in this situation. They feel like the coach doesn't care about them because he is playing them hurt, exploiting them, manipulating them against each other. On the other hand, they really want to play ball. They love the game; they love the contact; they love being with the guys, but there is no way out. What are they going to do? They are stuck.

**TAR:** In your preparation to write this book, did you interview specific high school athletes or was it based more on an overarching experience? Also, what were your experiences working with a partner?

**RL:** Two things. One, I started out as a high school reporter with the *New York Times*. That was my first beat for a couple of years. I have always liked high school, and I have always over the years gone back to high school for stories. Two, I had some real serious help from a sports psychiatrist, Dr. Mike Miletic, who really opened his files and we talked a lot. I was a little out of my area psychologically, and I wanted to make sure I connected with the problems.

I worked with a historian once on a history project and my wife and I have written newspaper stories before. As far as Miletic goes, it was interesting because he didn't do any of the writing, but I really kind of passed everything through him to make sure it was medically and psychologically accurate.

**TAR:** How long did the process of writing *Raiders Night* take?

**RL:** I think that maybe the mechanical process was a year, but the gestation of it was a number of years. It really all started out when Mike Miletic and I had met on a panel. We did a panel on sports for the American Psychoanalytic Association. We were both on the panel. We'd never met before. And we really liked each other a lot and went out to supper afterwards and became friends. He was a psychiatrist, and in the course of the friendship, we realized that we both had very similar attitudes towards jock culture. We decided that we wanted to write a book together about the impact of jock culture in America. He, from a psychological point of view, and I, from a journalistic point of view. And we found out that our views were seen as radical. About steroids, about the idea that there was a clear line from the field house to the white house, about the use of shame and humiliation by coaches, the sexism, the homophobia. This stuff pervaded the culture.

We actually learned about it playing sports—you're on the team; you're not on the team, black and white. We found that there was so much resistance to the book that nobody wanted to touch this subject. Particularly male editors would cross their legs when we talked. The more we thought about was even if we wrote such a book the people who read it, it would be preaching to the chorus. We wanted to get the teens, to get to the boys, to get to the athletes. So that was the process when we said we probably should write a novel. So, it

---

**When I do talk to their ball players, they are talking about the profound distrust they have for adults, especially their coaches. Players really feel trapped in this situation. They feel like the coach doesn't care about them because he is playing them hurt, exploiting them, manipulating them against each other.**

---

---

**I spend a lot of time at signings, through email warning teachers that this is not *The Contender*, that you should not be giving this to your eighth-grade and ninth-grade class. It is a tough book.**

---

kind of evolved differently than any other book I've ever done in that sense.

**TAR:** If you could talk to the teachers out there for a minute thinking about bringing this book into their classrooms, schools to use, what would you say?

**RL:** I would tell them I saw it used very creatively in a high school outside of Chicago. It was taught by a psychology/ sociology teacher. The kids, seniors, read the book and they talked about moral choices. I thought that was an interesting way. It wasn't being taught as a unit per se. That was where I had interaction with a lot of those kids, spent a day in the high school talking to the football players. They were the ones who started, though now it has really mounted up in emails and letters, they were the first ones that told me about

how they distrusted coaches. I thought it was interesting how the teacher approached it. I spend a lot of time at signings, through email warning teachers that this is not *The Contender*, that you should not be giving this to your eighth-grade and ninth-grade class. It is a tough book. It should be hand carried to ballplayers, and to their girlfriends. I enjoy hearing from kids that have read it. I don't mind spending an hour or two each day answering email; it seems like an extension of the book, part of the process, but I don't kid myself, my parents were teachers and I know what the life is like—very intense—this is like being a grandfather and giving the kid back at the end of the day.

**Bob Lipsyte** invites teachers, librarians, and students to contact him about their experiences reading *Raiders Night* and other books of his. He can be reached at [robert@robertlipsyte.com](mailto:robert@robertlipsyte.com) and through his website at [www.robertlipsyte.com](http://www.robertlipsyte.com).

**Chris Goering** is a doctoral candidate in curriculum and instruction at Kansas State University, where he teaches and serves as a Co-Director of the Flint Hills Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project. He is currently in his seventh year in education.