**Robert Lipsyte Biography**

I've always had two writing lives, one as a journalist and one as an author of fiction. I love them both. They complement each other.

My professional journalism life started in June, 1957, when I answered a classified ad in the New York Times for an "editorial assistant." I needed a summer job. I was 19 years old and had just graduated from Columbia. I was going to California to seek my fortune as a book and movie writer.

I never went. I hated my new job - copyboy in the sports department - but I loved working at the paper.

At 21 I became a reporter. I covered the New York Mets' first spring training in 1962, and in 1964 I was sent to Miami Beach to cover the heavyweight championship fight between Sonny Liston and Cassius Clay. Because most people thought Liston would knock out the kid in the first round, the editors didn't send the real boxing reporter. Why waste his valuable time? So they sent another kid - me.

Cassius Clay whipped Sonny Liston and guess who became the new boxing reporter?

And I started my professional fiction writing career. I got the idea for my first YA novel, "The Contender."

Two nights before the fight, I took an old boxing manager out to dinner. His name was Cus D'Amato. He told me about a gym he once owned in a tough neighborhood in Manhattan. It was at the top of three dark narrow twisting flights of stairs. He often slept at the top of the stairs, with a gun and German Shepherd. But he slept with one ear open - listening for a kid who would come up those stairs alone, at night and scared, but willing to conquer his fear to become somebody, a fighter, a contender.

When I got back to New York after the fight, there was a letter waiting for me at The Times from Ferdinand Monjo, an editor at Harper & Row (now called HarperCollins.) He had enjoyed reading my boxing stories. Would I like to try my hand at a novel with boxing as its "milieu?" I had to look up that word - it means "setting" - before I answered his letter. You bet, I wrote. And I have a title - The Contender.

Soon after the book came out, I became a sports columnist, and got very busy traveling and writing for the paper. I left in 1971 to write novels and movies (although in New Jersey not California) and didn't write another YA novel until 1977.

It was called "One Fat Summer," and it was sort of about me.

I was a fat kid growing up in Rego Park, Queens, New York City. Not an athlete. Read alot. Started writing so I could make up stories in which thin kids died horribly. I think my parents were happy I was a reader and too fat to get into trouble. My Dad, Sidney I. Lipsyte, was a principal and eventually director of all the New York City schools for emotionally-disturbed kids. He died in 2004 at the age of 100. My Mom, Fanny Finston Lipsyte, died in 1998, at 90. She had been a school teacher and guidance counselor in New York city public schools.

I finally lost my weight at 14 when I lied about my age to get a job cutting the lawn and tending the yard of a nasty old man who worked me thin. I think I lost forty pounds that summer, but I'm not sure - I always used to jump off the scale when it rolled up near 200.

I had wanted to write about that summer since I'd lived it. But I was afraid of writing about it truthfully - how I had hated my body, was ashamed of myself for being different, in my case for being fat. It wasn't until I was writing an article for Mother Jones magazine about books I had read as a kid and saw the words "in the prison of my fat" that I got the courage to face the painful truth of those years. And once I did, the book rolled out. I made up the characters and the adventures of that book, but not the emotions.

There were two sequels to "One Fat Summer" - "Summer Rules" and "The Summer Boy" - which were also based on my life, but most of my YA novels came out of my experiences as a journalist, either for newspapers (I've also written for the New York Post and USA Today) or for television (I've been a correspondent for CBS and NBC and had a nightly public affairs show on the PBS station in New York, WNET Channel 13 for which I won an Emmy.)

The three sequels to "The Contender" - "The Brave," "The Chief," and "Warrior Angel" - all came from stories I covered on Indian reservations.
In 1991, when my generation of copyboy became the top editors at the Times, I was invited back to write columns again - a sports column and a cityside column called "Coping." I loved that, too, especially when the all-stars Joe Lelyveld was the executive editor and Neil Amdur was the sports editor.

That was a great decade, lots of fun, great stories and even some prizes. In 1992 I was runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize in commentary for the sports column and in 1996 I won the Meyer Berger Award for Distinguished Reporting from Columbia University for the Coping column. (In 1966 I had won that same award for the sports column!)

In 2001, I won the Margaret A. Edwards Award from the American Library Association for lifetime contribution to Young Adult Literature. That one sent me back to the computer (actually, I write first drafts in pencil) to write more, faster.

I left the paper again after 2002 and got back to writing fiction (although working occasionally for ESPN keeps my sports knowledge current.)

The best new prizes have been named Alfred Lipsyte, Sylvia Lipsyte, and Daniel Nachumi, my three grandchildren. Alfred and Sylvia and the children of Ceridwen Morris, a birth instructor and writer, and her husband, Sam Lipsyte, an associate professor of creative writing at Columbia and author of four books, including the best-selling novel, "The Ask."
His sister, Susannah Lipsyte, is a terrific writer, too, but she mostly writes in legalese - she's assistant general counsel at the New York City Housing Development Corporation. Susannah is married to Ben Nachumi, who writes mostly in math in physics. Daniel is their son.

Although we don't get to see her as much as we'd like, there's also my sister, Gale, a psychotherapist, who did make it to California.

In 2006, I published two new books - "Heroes of Baseball" and "Raiders Night," a novel about a high school football star who has to make some tough decisions after a brutal hazing incident. It came out in paperback in 2007.

In September, 2007, "Yellow Flag," a novel with stock car racing as its "milieu" will be published. It was inspired by several years writing about NASCAR for the Times. The hero of the book, 17-year-old Kyle Hildebrand, is torn between love of the trumpet and duty to his famous racing family to continue the tradition by climbing into a fast car.

Also exciting and fun, I've been to China three times in the past four years with my wife, Lois B. Morris, researching stories for the New York Times about classical music, especially opera, which we both love.
Lois is best known as a writer of books and magazine articles on mental health and psychology. But my favorite is her newest, "Along the Roaring River: My Wild Ride from Mao to the Met" with Hao Jiang Tian, an opera singer. A page-turning tale of the Cultural Revolution.

A new YA novel,"Center Field," was published in March, 2010. My memoir, "An Accidental Sportswriter" came out in 2011, from HarperCollins.

My first middle-grade novel, "The Twinning Project," was published in October, 2012, by Clarion, which is part of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. The excellent Dinah Stevenson was my editor. The sequel, " Twin Powers," came out two years later.

By that time, I was the ombudsman at ESPN, a fascinating 18-month hitch in the belly of the sports beast.

These days, I'm back in the basement on Shelter Island, New York, where we now spend more time than in Manhattan, writing every day.

Well, that's the rundown on my life - so far.