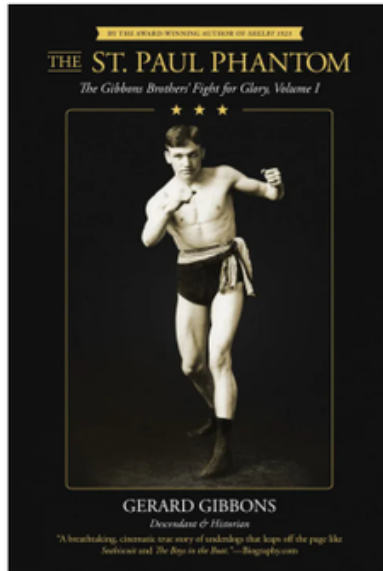


Review: The St. Paul Phantom by Gerard Gibbons



An epic American odyssey, *The St. Paul Phantom: The Gibbons Brothers' Fight for Glory, Volume I* by Gerard Gibbons is an exhilarating look back at the guts, glory, and fiery spirit of the early 20th century through the lives of two brothers and boxers.

Recounting the story of his larger-than-life grandfather, Tommy Gibbons, and his brother Mike, the author gives readers ringside seats to their meteoric rise and unforgettable careers as heavyweight boxers and living legends. The two brothers with seemingly impossible dreams climbed out of obscurity in St. Paul, Minnesota to become titans of the ring in their corner of the world.

The story begins with the boys as children, a pair of easy Irish targets surviving on the streets of St. Paul, dodging bullies and beatings while dreaming of a different life. The narrative then moves through Mike's early career, where he joins secret sneak fights on rooftops, and stashes away cash

from random barroom brawls. Defying his family's wishes and alienating the woman he is determined to marry, Mike doesn't love boxing, but his skill is undeniable, and it's one of the only games in town.

When his younger brother Tommy joins the fight game, the pair become nearly infamous, chasing their own intertwined paths to stardom and success. From the screaming crowds of New York City and quixotic quests to knock out Chicago's champ to fleeting fame during the dawn of Hollywood and gradually becoming a hometown hero, this biography launches readers on a riveting journey of determination, fraternity, wild grit, and unwavering pride.

In a story squarely centered on boxing, an author must be able to capture the balance of frenetic energy and delicate intensity that defines a memorable bout, and Gibbons has a masterful way with words, transporting readers effortlessly to the mat, where pugilists "slam to the canvas in a quagmire of blood and rain" and "search the mirror... finding only demolition and catastrophe, an atlas of anguish." When language is used with such grace and passion, regardless of the subject matter, even the staunchest pacifist will keep flipping the pages.

The timeline jumps, from Thomas John's brutal experiences after first arriving in the New World, to his sons' relentless battle to make their mark on the early 20th century, highlights the relatable potency of immigrant dreams, and the nostalgic allure of American potential that has faded in recent years. There is undeniable romance in the underdog path to greatness, and this familial biography is spilling over with the archetypal and empathetic tale of grit, determination, and ultimate success. Laced with unforgettable characters, epic slugfests, and fascinating historical cameos, this is far more than a touching ode by a family member, but a full-fledged work of sports history.

The illustrations that accompany each chapter help set a visual mood for the story, although some of the less refined images feel too rough around the edges, particularly given the actual photographic records and reference materials available, so certain images could have been used more sporadically through the text to add authenticity and impact. That is a minor quibble, however, as these "Shining Knights of the Ring" are provocative and fascinating historical figures; Gibbons' obvious reverence for his family line, as well as skill with the pen, bring this detailed history to vivid and well-deserved life.

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