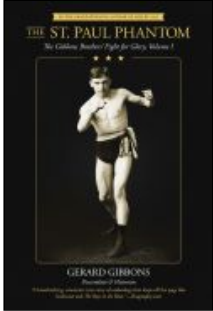


THE US Review of Books



[The St. Paul Phantom: The Gibbons Brothers' Fight for Glory, Volume I](#)

by Gerard Gibbons

Fight For Glory

book review by Mihir Shah

"If you're small in this world, Tommy Boy, you're always wrong," Mike whispers to his kid brother. "That doesn't mean you always have to lose."

On the surface, Gibbons' work could simply come across as a riveting boxing novel. However, peering beyond the St. Paul Phantom's battles in the ring, something far deeper emerges: the resolve of the human spirit to survive and thrive in the midst of darkness, and to do whatever it takes to make that happen. Named after the warrior Archangel Michael, Mike Gibbons is ferocious from the get-go, with unparalleled intensity and devotion to his craft, a man far ahead of his time whose story is long overdue for the masses.

In one of the opening scenes, the author reminisces about his time with his grandfather, Tommy Gibbons (Mike's brother). However, the commitment to unearthing the story transcends Mike and Tommy. In fact, the author employs a wide-angle lens to examine the Gibbons family as a whole, shifting from Mike's electric journey toward earning his inevitable identity to the story of Thomas John, the brothers' father. When Thomas John's earlier life in Ireland unravels, it becomes evident that the fighting spirit is ingrained in the Gibbons' family—not to back down from the darkness, but to turn over every stone to reach the light.

Tuesday nights in St. Paul are doused in a fight-club-esque aura, where the secret society of fighters simultaneously tries to earn a name for themselves while keeping their names out of law enforcement's ears, which is determined to clean up. Even in the early days, against all odds, Mike Gibbons is defiant, even when cornered by goliath Herb Catherwood and beaten to a pulp. The author seamlessly integrates early players, such as Father Dunphy and George "Kid" Barton, Mike's first mentor, to give audiences a clear idea of how Mike Gibbons took the first steps toward transforming himself into the St. Paul Phantom.

In particular, Gibbons executes the time-jump narrative style with perfection. Although readers go from the present day in the early 1900s to 1850 Ireland, for example, the flow is uninterrupted because of the shared themes. While their father, Thomas John, goes to great lengths to oppose the British-imposed atrocities during their reign over the Irish, that same fighting spirit is apparent in Mike and Tommy. What makes this overlap between the family even more riveting is their understanding that fighting is not a first option but rather a path out of their own darkness.

Themes of the American Dream run rampant despite Thomas John separating the two brothers—sending Thomas to an academy for further education, and putting Mike to work as a tinsmith at the railroad for a dollar a day. The fire within Mike only intensifies, however, as he sees the job as a dead end, paving the path for the next phase of training with Kid Barton. From Kid Barton to Joe Gans—the mentor that unlocks Mike's potential—an entire journey in and out of the ring takes place that will test the Gibbons brothers' faith and resolve, both in themselves and their circumstances. Following this road, a path to New York and boxing immortality is forged in a way that is both endearing and relatable.

While the story behind what gets Mike in the ring will keep readers glued to the page, it would be a disservice not to shed light on the boxing scenes themselves. The author does a commendable job of transporting his audience ringside, electrifying them with every movement, each jab, each landed punch, and each missed opportunity, brought to life with frenetic pacing and imagery. Above all else, it's Thomas John's philosophy, infused into the work, that captures the reader's attention and becomes a source of exhilaration: being knocked down and facing adversity can no longer control you if you have a complete understanding that "what matters most is what you do next." A delectable balance of action, character development, and a relatable why is blended together to create an electrifying and inspiring rendition of the American Dream.

RECOMMENDED by the US Review