

A CONVERSATION WITH AUTHOR DR. GERARD GIBBONS

1. In the book's introduction, you recall sitting on your grandfather Tommy's lap as your earliest memory. How did that moment fuel your decades-long journey to write this book?

That earliest memory—sitting on my grandfather Tommy's lap, feeling profoundly safe and loved—planted the seed for *Fight for Glory*. The sense of refuge I felt in his presence never faded, and it became the first doorway to this book. But the key was placed in my hand years later by his son, my father, Tommy Jr. Not long before he passed, Dad entrusted me with several sealed “mystery boxes” filled with clippings, photos, and letters. He left no instructions, no explanation. I believe now he knew I would one day feel their pull.

The deeper spark, however, may trace back to a conversation with my father as I was graduating from university in 1978. We were driving a dark Mojave Desert highway when I spoke of missing my older siblings, who had scattered across the West after my mother's death eight years earlier, when I was just fourteen. After listening quietly, Dad shared something my mother had told him in confidence before she died: she believed I was meant to honor family in some lasting way. My parents never played favorites, so his words startled me. I tucked them away and, in time, forgot.

Decades later, in August 2016—forty-six years after her passing, and nearly twenty years after my father's death—I finally opened the boxes. Inside, I found the threads of a much larger tapestry than I had imagined: my grandfather's boxing career, the Gibbons family's immigrant story, and the broader saga of early twentieth-century America. Those artifacts compelled me to write: not simply about boxing, but about how love, faith, and family endure through hardship.

As I pieced the story together, I saw how my grandfather and father mirrored each other in kindness, resilience, and devotion. Writing became both tribute and discovery: honoring their legacy while exploring how history lives in us. And in the quiet moments, I could not help but wonder: Was my mother's vision a prescient glimpse of the path I would eventually take? Over time, I've come to believe it was.

2. How did writing this book bring you closer to your family and yourself, and what moment led to a profound personal discovery?

Losing my mother at fourteen left me with a deep sense of incompleteness—an early encounter with mortality that shaped my voice with empathy and authenticity. Decades later, as I wrote *The St. Paul Phantom*, I began to understand how that loss, and later my father's passing, had quietly prepared me to recognize grief not only as

pain but also as a teacher. The Eastern idea of “suffering into truth” resonated deeply with me, and I saw how the Gibbons brothers’ losses—personal and professional—had forged their own resilience. Their struggles mirrored my own, and weaving that perspective into the narrative gave the story a universality that speaks to anyone who has faced hardship.

The most profound discovery came while reading Tommy’s letters to his wife, Helen. In his words, I felt the devotion of a man balancing glory with family sacrifice. Across a century, I forged connections with grandparents I never knew, and in that process, my own wounds of loss began to heal. This journey revealed that resilience is often inherited, carried through generations, and that the American story itself is one of perseverance. Writing this book offered me not just history, but a sense of wholeness I never expected.

3. When did the project pivot from family memoir into a broader American saga?

Although my father’s archive gave me a starting point, I knew little about my ancestors or the worlds they inhabited. Years of research—genealogy, census records, letters, and newspaper archives—changed that. What began as a family memoir quickly expanded into something larger. The Gibbons brothers’ journey from Irish immigrants to American boxing stardom reflected a universal immigrant narrative: risk, resilience, redemption, and opportunity.

As I reconstructed their lives and the world around them, the story grew into a mirror of the broader American saga—ordinary people striving for extraordinary chances in a land of promise. That evolution convinced me the story could speak far beyond family and deeply connect with contemporary audiences, as stories like *Rocky*, *Seabiscuit*, *Cinderella Man*, *A River Runs Through It*, and *The Boys in the Boat*.

4. You call boxing “a looking glass into the soul of the American Dream.” How did the sport offer a path for immigrants and the working-class? What does that mirror still reveal about social mobility today?

In the early twentieth century, boxing was America’s premier sport and a mirror of its aspirational spirit. For immigrants and the working-class, it offered one of the few avenues to rise. Fighters carried their heritage into the ring—Irish, Italian, Jewish, African American—and their communities rallied behind them, seeing in each bout a reflection of hope.

Mike and Tommy Gibbons, sons of Irish immigrants, embodied that promise: through skill, grit, and perseverance, they turned hardship into opportunity, mirroring the American Dream itself. Boxing’s appeal cut across race and class, suggesting that talent could transcend circumstance. Today, that same mirror reflects both aspiration and inequity—the Dream remains possible, yet fragile, and still worth fighting for.

5. Your prose reads very cinematically. Discuss this approach to storytelling on the page.

My first degree was in film and television production with a focus on cinematography, and that training shaped how I write. I've always believed strong prose should fire the imagination in visual, aural, and sensory ways. On the page, I try to write through the camera's eye: wide shots to frame historical context, close-ups for emotional intimacy.

Fight scenes unfold like tracking shots, capturing movement and rhythm, while shifts in perspective resemble "rack focus," moving fluidly between characters' thoughts and actions. For instance, Mike's ordeal at Brighton Beach is written with a shallow depth of field, narrowing to his illness and anxiety. This cinematic approach lets readers not just observe history, but inhabit it—making the story vivid, immediate, and immersive.

6. Ken Burns says writing history is about "waking the dead." Which character was hardest to bring to life? In telling Mike and Tommy's story, did you find the ancestral chain healed, or simply better understood?

Both brothers fascinated me, but they woke at different speeds. Tommy surfaced first: open-hearted, quick with a grin, sounding uncannily like my father. His warmth and plainspokenness made him easy to hear on the page, and the kinship—the way he constantly reminded me of my father—made him simpler to write and more resonant. Many days, it felt like I was palling around again with Dad.

Mike—the St. Paul Phantom—was harder. He lived in the margins: economical with words, precise in action, private by instinct. To coax him out, I became a detective—reading his letters, combing sports pages, tracing the observations of writers, and listening for his echo in Tommy's memoirs. The breakthrough came in understanding his "sweet science." His style—angles, feints, hand speed, foot speed, side-stepping, rhythm, distance, discipline—wasn't only boxing technique but temperament. Once I saw that, his voice emerged: measured, exact, fierce in thought more than volume.

Mike's mantra, "I make 'em miss, then I make 'em pay," revealed a philosophy of intellect and resilience over brute force. It minimized damage, extended his career, and mirrored a broader ethos of thriving through adaptability. Balanced with Tommy's warmth, Mike's cool intelligence gave the book its heartbeat: distinct voices, bound in shared purpose.

Ultimately, this process did more than help me understand the ancestral chain; it began to heal it. By inhabiting their triumphs and tragedies, personal wounds were mended and history transformed into a living legacy. Waking these ghosts affirmed my belief that the past is not truly dead. It still has profound gifts for the living—chief among them, a roadmap for mending our own broken connections.

7. What wisdom or roadmap for purposeful living did you take from Mike and Tommy Gibbons' lives?

From Mike and Tommy, I gleaned that true purpose is built on character. Though fighters by trade, they lived as men of faith, resilience, and service. They placed family first, were devoted husbands and fathers, loyal to friends, and generous to their community. They worked hard, carried themselves with humility, and faced adversity with courage and forgiveness. They took risks, learned from mistakes, and never quit—earning the nickname “Shining Knights of the Ring.” Their example taught me that a purpose-driven life rests on resilience, love, and commitment to something larger than oneself—benchmarks that remain timeless today.

8. Often in sports stories, female characters are given short shrift. In *Fight for Glory*, figures like suffragettes, activists, and mothers stand equal to the men. How did you shape Mae Walsh, Mike's wife, and use their relationship to explore gender expectations of the era?

Mae's early insistence that Mike quit boxing reflected traditional gender norms, where women sought stability over risk. Yet her own suffrage activism, sparked in part by Mike's determination, revealed how women of the era pushed against such boundaries.

Her journey—from resisting his career to respecting it while pursuing her cause—allowed me to explore evolving gender roles and the tension between tradition and progress. Their compromise, rooted in mutual respect, became a portrait of true partnership. Mike recognized Mae's conviction and strength, while she honored his craft. Together, they embodied the idea that marriage is not submission, but teamwork.

9. Faith is a central theme in the book, from the family's Catholicism to Father Dunphy's “Muscular Christianity.” How did writing those religious dimensions clarify or complicate your own faith?

Writing about the Gibbons family's faith, especially Father Dunphy's powerful call to “keep the faith,” became an unexpected journey back to my own Catholic upbringing. Immersing myself in their trials—their poverty, devastating losses, and profound moral tests—I found my own belief clarified. It reaffirmed faith not as an abstract idea, but as a vital source of resilience and strength, a discipline I had perhaps taken for granted in my own life.

At the same time, exploring these dimensions deeply complicated my views. I found myself wrestling alongside my great-grandfather, Thomas John, who, after renouncing his violent past as an Irish rebel, clung fiercely to the biblical call to “turn the other cheek.” This conviction created a powerful rift, putting him at odds with his sons and his priest. Father Dunphy's “Muscular Christianity”—his pragmatic belief that “it must please the Lord when a man knows how to end a fight”—forced me to confront

the difficult tension between radical forgiveness and righteous force.

The writing didn't offer easy answers, but it deepened my appreciation for faith as an active, often challenging dialogue—with God, with family history, and ultimately, with oneself.

10. Comment on the transformational early twentieth century in America and the cyclical nature of history. How has the world changed since the *Fight for Glory* era? How is it the same? Why does history matter?

These questions lie at the very heart of *The St. Paul Phantom*. After spending nearly a decade immersed in the early twentieth-century world of my ancestors, I've been struck again and again by the truth that history does not simply repeat—it *rhymes*, as Mark Twain observed.

The *Fight for Glory* era, with its bare-knuckled ambition and comet-lit dreams, was a crucible of transformative change, a momentous period of upheaval, much like our own today. It holds up a mirror to the present, reflecting struggles that, while not identical, feel deeply familiar. That resonance was impossible to ignore in 2020, as I was deep into the writing of the book. The headlines—civil unrest, political corruption, widening inequality, resurgent bigotry, international conflict, and a global pandemic—echoed the darker verses of the previous century with unsettling clarity.

On the surface, America today seems worlds apart from 1910. Then, most people lived and died within a few dozen miles of their birthplace; now we relocate frequently and communicate across continents in seconds. Where the nation was once 88 percent white, it has become a beautiful, complex mosaic. Homes once cloaked in darkness after sunset are now illuminated and connected around the clock. The sixty-hour workweek has yielded to forty, and a high school diploma—rare then—is nearly universal. Poverty persists, but its grip has been reduced by more than half. The civic ritual of reading a daily newspaper has given way to an overwhelming digital torrent, where information flows faster but truth is often harder to discern.

Yet beneath these staggering changes, the heart of the human story—the why we fight—remains constant. In 1910, as now, people wrestled with who belongs, who deserves a fair chance, and how to balance freedom with responsibility. As I wrote in the introduction: “Everyone had a dream, so everyone had a fight.” That remains as true today as it was then.

The seismic shifts of the early twentieth century—urbanization, technological leaps, mass immigration—found their perfect metaphor in the boxing ring. No sport makes time's consequences more visible. A boxer's half-life is brutally short, a frantic race to make his mark before talent and opportunity fade. In that way, the ring embodied the era's relentless march of progress, creating natural tension and drama.

This is why the past can serve as a lighthouse. On this writing journey, I learned that history matters. Renowned American historian David McCullough said it this way, “History shows us how to behave. History teaches, reinforces what we believe in, what we stand for, and what we ought to be willing to stand up for.” The vow the Gibbons brothers made under Halley’s Comet was never only about titles; it was about carving out lives big enough to carry the hopes of those they loved. Their story reminds us that heroism belongs not just to champions, but to ordinary people who show uncommon valor in daily life. It crystallizes in the family credo that threads through the book: What matters most is what we do next. A fighter’s prayer. An immigrant’s anthem. A dreamer’s north star.

The comet will always return. Progress will press forward. Hearts will break. Chaos will, at times, prevail. And still, we go on. Through stories like this, we can do more than remember the world as it was—we can rehearse who we might become. My hope is that readers finish the book inspired not only to understand the past, but to shape the future. We cannot change where we have been. But we can always decide where we are going. Better informed, more enlightened by the lessons of history, including our own historical heritage, we are better positioned to decide what we stand for.

11. After the extraordinary journey of researching and writing this book, what does the “Gibbons family legacy” mean to you now?

For me, the Gibbons legacy is defined by choices and character—by resilience, faith, and the courage to learn from mistakes. My great-grandfather’s wisdom, “What matters most is what you do next,” has become a guiding truth, one that has profoundly shaped my life both personally and professionally. Embracing his conviction that we can always be better than we were—living purposefully, facing challenges with courage and kindness, and carrying forward with faith and love, no matter the obstacles—has helped me become a better man.

It has also led me to reflect on my daughter, who has never heard these stories or met the remarkable people in them, yet carries their power in her own blood. In many ways, this book is a message in a bottle to her: a valentine, a postcard from yesteryear, and a thread to draw her closer to the clan, to her father, and, most importantly, to herself.

Family legacy is meant to be shared—for connecting, healing, and elevating. It is meant to bring greater truth into our lives and, through that truth, a deeper and more enduring love.

12. What is the single feeling you most hope stays with readers after the final page?

Above all, I hope readers leave the book inspired to live with purpose—continuing to learn, staying resilient, and leading with kindness. I want them to value stillness, those quiet spaces where the spirit enters, and where wisdom and guidance so often

emerge. The Gibbons story is one of triumph, loss, and perseverance, and my hope is that it encourages readers to face their own challenges with courage and grace. If the door to what you want is locked, find the window—or even the chimney—because there is always a way forward. Most of all, I hope readers feel strengthened to embrace failure, knowing it is the forge in which character is made.

DEAR READER: You are invited to visit my website for the Complete Q&A.

A full transcript of “A Conversation with Author Dr. Gerard Gibbons”—featuring additional questions and answers about *The St. Paul Phantom* and the *Fight for Glory* trilogy, including insights on the research, writing, characters, and story—is available at:

www.FightForGloryStory.com.