ForeWord Reviews

SPORTS & RECREATION

Facing Ali: 15 Fighters, 15 Stories
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Today's heavyweight boxing world is but a shadow of its glory days, when colossal figures such as Smokin' Joe Frazier, George Foreman, and Ken Norton pummeled their opponents. Their lengthy careers, however, are invariably capsulized by their fights with the one opponent they all had in common—Muhammad Ali.

Ali won the heavyweight championship in 1964 from Sonny Liston and is considered the greatest boxer of his era, if not all time. His flamboyance and refusal to enter the Vietnam-era draft cost him his title and made him a hated man to many, yet today he is widely regarded as a hero, even by most of the men he taunted and ridiculed before their bouts.

Much is known about the popular Ali, but the author wondered what had become of some of the men he fought during his twenty years in the boxing spotlight. This book presents the story of fifteen of the fighters who clambered over the ropes to take the canvas against Ali, from Tunney Hunsaker, the first opponent of a young professional then known as Cassius Clay, in 1960, to Larry Holmes, his former sparring partner, who ended the thirty-eight year-old Ali's career in 1980.

The stories are as varied as the fighters. Perhaps surprisingly, most of these men speak favorably of Ali, such as the "Bayonne Bleeder," Chuck Wepner (Sylvester Stallone's model for the movie, "Rocky"), whose business card today is emblazoned with a picture of him standing over Ali in the ring, after he had either knocked down Ali or tripped him, depending on one's perspective. They understand that Ali's pre-fight antics were designed to build public interest in what were often lopsided bouts, and they regard Ali with great admiration and even gratitude for agreeing to fight them. Some of the foreign fighters in particular are immensely popular in their countries simply because they fought-and lost to-the incomparable Ali. Others, in particular Joe Frazier, whom Ali called a "gorilla," and Larry Holmes, have few kind words to waste on him. Regardless of their viewpoints, the stories of these men are compelling and range from heartwarming to utterly tragic (such as the case of George Chuvalo, who lost three sons and his wife to drugs and suicide).

The author is Canada's premier sportswriter and commentator and is the author of

several books about sports. He won the Michener Award for his 1988 series on negligence and corruption in prize fighting. He writes with incredible skill and deep knowledge of the complicated world of professional boxing. Love him or hate him, Ali left a permanent imprint on all the fighters he faced, and Brunt superbly tells their tales in rich detail.