

Flesh and Blood Short Guide

Flesh and Blood by Pete Hamill

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Characters

Bobby Fallon is a tough kid who, like most Hamill heroes, faces a test of wits, determination, and endurance in which his own heart and prowess comes to the fore.

His character, formed, in part, by an education in the mean streets and bolstered by rage at his father and a passion for his mother, is marked by a fatal flaw which, like Achilles, Cuchullain, and the nameless berserkers of the Anglo-Saxon epics, engineers both triumph and defeat. He flies into a murderous rage when he fights, a primitive survival mechanism which prematurely ends his amateur career and propels him, unschooled, into the big time before he is ready: "something else was happening: sound was coming out of me, the wild crazy screaming anger, high-pitched against the deeper darker roar of the crowd." Bobby has a good heart, though, and he is generous with his friends and his mother Kate. He also possesses a boyish naivete that is always seen in the context of the ring and that provides an elegiac backdrop against which all who struggle ultimately lose: "Sooner or later in this life everybody loses. It's part of the deal."

Street friends like Kirk, although necessary for survival, often betray Bobby, unlike the faithful Freddie, Bobby's trainer, who sticks with him for the final fight, and his manager Gus, the one positive male mentor in his life. Gus, whose "cranky purity" keeps the rebellious Bobby in training, shows him not only the combinations and moves, but also the beauty and the transcendence of boxing. He teaches Bobby patience, readiness, and the desire to reach for not just victory, but perfection: "Being a fighter is like being a doctor or a lawyer or a writer in general. You gotta be a pro. You gotta be a finished pro. Anybody can be a professional, but not just anybody can be perfect," says Gus, Bobby's mentor and putative father.

It is the shadow of Bobby's real father, Jack Fallon, with his elusive power and flesh and Blood dark presence, that looms over his life and career: Wherever he went, alive or dead, you wished someone would tell him [Jack] about you. Tell him how, through you, he was still beating people in the bars of Brooklyn. Tell him how when you bent someone over a jukebox and hammered him with your hands you were doing it to get Jack Fallon out of the room forever.

The drinking and dark, violent temper come from Jack, as does the sense of wild abandon. Bobby tries to live up to Jack's reputation in the neighborhood: "how good he was with his hands [meaning fighting], and how all the ladies loved him, and what a handsome bastard he was, and Jesus, how he had heart. They never said he had a good heart." Jack Fallon, "who left them all so empty when finally he went away and never came back," is the "ghost of the gambler with the murderous hands" who must be pursued, even by means of incest with his own mother, Kate. When the father's initial abandonment is capped by his second betrayal of Bobby (as Jack and the fight game mob manipulate the ending prizefight, thus denying Bobby the championship), Bobby confronts his father, breaking away from his power.



Kate, Bobby's mother, has also been seeking the missing Jack by means of her son.

Alternately her child's protector and seductress, she is, in one way, an exotically erotic woman because of Bobby's early memories of passionate scenes between her and his father. At the same time, however, she provides a sheltering refuge from the violence of life outside. Waiting for her in the holding room of Kings County Jail early in the novel, Bobby sees her outside, cursing out the guards: [S]he looked more beautiful than you'd ever seen her before... . dark skin, high cheekbones and good teeth.. .. Her hips were a little too narrow and her shoulders a little too wide to look movie star perfect, but when she walked there was a softness and a grace to her that made people look twice. Men and women.

But Kate, pursuing her own demons, chooses Jack over her son at the novel's end, leaving Bobby free of her spell as well as that of his father, leaving the child alone at the dawn of his adult life, heading back to New York.



Social Concerns

By the time *Flesh and Blood* appeared in 1977, Pete Hamill was an established journalist who had already published two novels. In *Flesh and Blood* he calls again on the urban jungle of Brooklyn, the violenceridden lives of its inhabitants, and the brawling panorama of the fight game, set within a context of family obsessions which move beyond the ordinary. Boxing and baseball are Hamill's major interests, and he has written about both subjects as a journalist and also as a novelist. Hamill describes boxing on his Digitalcity website as an exercise in savagery, calling it the antithesis of the grace, beauty, and redemption he finds in baseball, epitomized in his coverage of the McGwire-Sosa home run saga of 1998.

The naturalistic backdrop of the novel is Brooklyn's waterfront in the rain, when Bobby Fallon, a tough Irish kid, and his black buddy Kirk stumble into a bar fight with a bunch of racist toughs in a bar called the Shamrock. Justice is swift and not so impartial, and Bobby and Kirk are given time upstate, probably at Attica, for their part in the brawl. In the prison, Bobby's boxing career begins. He competes first as an amateur and becomes polished enough to secure the young pair's early release after a successful season. Bobby eventually becomes a professional, after his habit of going berserk in the ring gets him banned from Golden Gloves competition. Hamill presents an uncensored look at prison life, focusing on the alliances between prisoners, based on ethnic lines and hard time and easy time, and the world of the fight game, which includes sleazy gyms, the struggle to move up from being a street touch to a real fighter, and the crime lords' turf on which the game is played. Irish Bobby, with his shamrock robe, is viewed as a Great White Hope and pitted against blacks and Puerto Rican adversaries in epic melees which evolve into street fights and riots.

In addition to the struggle, Hamill also reveals the friendships that exist between Bobby and Kirk, Bobby's manager Gus, as well as between adversaries in the ring who become allies during the morning runs in Central Park and in the training room. In Hamill's initiation, membership in a brotherhood demands pain, sacrifice, and perfection, but it also creates a community out of those who would otherwise destroy one another in bloodthirsty competition.

It is in the world of the family, however, where the most intimate struggles between loyalty and love, conflict and betrayal, are played out. The intense mother-son relationship between Bobby and his singleparent mother, Kate, is the filial and erotic center of the novel, as is his search for the powerful, compelling, but absent Jack Fallon, his father. Jack is also Bobby's rival for Kate's affections and his antagonist, as Bobby fights for control over his own rage and destructive impulses. Bobby and Kate become not only lovers, but partners in a mutual search to reconnect with Jack Fallon, whose betrayal and abandonment set in motion the son's quest to discover and destroy his father and possess his mother.

Kate appears not so much as a mother as she does a feminine extension of Bobby, with the same fighting spirit and the same will to both self-destruct and survive.



As Bobby and his entourage leave the familiar streets of New York for "the road," the threads of Bobby's search lead to his final struggle against his bete noire, the black fighter Walter Lewis, and his other, more primal opponent, the shadowy figure of Jack Fallon himself. Jack is Lewis's manager and has been pulling the strings both on the game and on his own son.

Techniques

As always, Hamill's forte is gritty realism—the street, bars, prisons, and the fights.

"I'm. on the ground, my back against a wall.

I hear rain, making a drumming sound and see the tall cop standing over me, blood leaking from his nose. The rain is hitting his rubber coat. There's a streetlight a hundred yards away, at the far end of the alley." The voice alternates between Bobby's straightforward first person, used for action in the present and for recollections of scenes in the same time frame but outside the main action, and second person, used mainly to relate Bobby's view of himself: "The place seemed strange now, and you felt more alone than ever." This gives the narrative a flat, distanced quality, and portrays him as a stony bystander, observing his own pain and confusion. The tone is moody and elegiac, reflecting Bobby's constant sense of himself as a loser, someone who has never quite been able to experience things spontaneously or with a sense of joy in the moment. "She gave you a cold smile and started to move past you. Who the hell were you to call her beautiful. You were a nobody, babe. A fighter without a name. A kid without a rep."

The setting, Hamill's beloved Brooklyn, is realistic, giving way to a more mythic sense of the road, the freedom of escape as Kate and Bobby drive cross country to Vegas, only to be entrapped again in the entangled, film noir world of gambling and prizefighting, where no one and nothing are as they appear, and even the most modest of illusions are stripped. The style is that of the taciturn, anguished Bobby, as well as the hard-boiled journalist creating a dispassionate portrayal of street life. The scenes are peppered with real people from the mid-century media—the fight world, with Muhammed Ali and the others, and the denizens of Manhattan nightlife, including many musical people like the Clancy Brothers, Bob Dylan, and Hank Williams.

Themes

The hero's development is the major theme of Hamill's novel. Bobby moves from a blind, confused state of adolescent selfsabotage to a more considered, self-aware vantage point. From here, he, although putatively defeated, is able to triumph over the dark forces of his father and the Darwinian world of the fight game. He becomes the type of Celtic warrior embodied most fully in the story of the hero Cuchulainn, the Hound of Ulster, with his legendary thirst for battle, fame, and fits of anger, in which he literally "sees red," destroying whatever blocks his path.

Bobby's struggle is an emblem not only of his own solitary quest, but also that of all immigrants—the dispossessed newcomers in every land who must fight to establish their dominance in the streets and in society at large. Bobby, whose green fighter's robe is emblazoned with a shamrock, inspires Irish pride among the working-class fans who cheer him on in the ring and in the street fights. His mother Kate, a Native American, is one whose presence and demeanor suggests another lost world of valor and doomed beauty. The fight itself, the boxing motif which informs the novel, reinforces the theme of struggle and combat, in which fighters compete with one another for dominance and with themselves for perfection, both in technique and in their ability to control their own fears and weaknesses.

The struggle to control and comprehend one's own sense of dispossession, loss, and alienation by training, testing, and triumph in the ring transforms the initiate into a sort of urban gladiator, struggling constantly against the forces, both personal and environmental, which threaten to overwhelm him. The theme of mother-son incest heightens the sense of darkness and fated mystery that permeates the novel. Both Kate and Bobby are drawn into a convoluted world of coercion where the hidden yet always powerful figure of Jack Fallon is able to control and manipulate the fight game and the personal destiny of both Kate and Bobby. This continues until Bobby is at last able to know and free himself from his godlike father who requires the son's struggle, suffering, and ultimate defeat. Religious symbolism of sacrifice, communion, and transformation in an archetypal search for the absent yet potent father is present in the title and also in the structure of Hamill's novel.

Key Questions

The theme of intense, erotic family relationships and the noire atmosphere present in *Flesh and Blood* would make it an interesting, if unusual, choice for a reading group.

Some readers may be interested in the boxing background in itself, especially since the fighter seems to have become a sort of urban icon in our century's popular culture.

1. In some ways, *Flesh and Blood* is the story of a single mother and her son.

How does the intense relationship between Kate and Bobby contribute to the story line and to the hero's quest?

2. How does the image of mother-as-lover fit with current portrayals of the mother, especially the mother as seducer and betrayer, as in the movie *The Grifters*, starring Angelica Huston and . John Cusack?

3. How does the picture Hamill presents of the world of professional boxing fit the current contemporary view, the history of boxing, and the use of the fighter as an icon of popular culture by writers and commentators?

4. Race relationships and friendships between groups in conflict is a frequent theme of Hamill's. How does it work in *Flesh and Blood*?

5. Compare the image of prison life with those you find in literary history, popular culture, and current discussions.

6. How do the male role models in Bobby's life influence him, including his father, Gus, and others who act as guides or tyrants?

Literary Precedents

The tough kid from the streets who makes good is a staple of American immigrant and realistic fiction, and even the incest theme, especially between a young, single mother with a history of relationships with no-good men, and a son, appeared rather often in the realistic fiction of the seventies, as in Earl Thompson's *Garden of Sand* (1971).

Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates, as well as Hamill wrote about fighters in the media and in fiction. Simon and Garfunkel released an elegiac, moody song called "The Boxer" that captures the same mood of loneliness and defeat ennobled by a determination to endure. In another vein, the story of the Brooklyn boy who escapes to Manhattan is also a staple, present in Bobby's joy at being in Manhattan, "You hated the Galway Bay bullshit you heard in the Brooklyn saloons," and dramatized in John Travolta's *Saturday Night Fever*. Sylvester Stallone, of course, was the Italian Stallion in *Rocky*, the 1976 award-winning sleeper in which another ethnic tough kid makes it as a fighter.

Related Titles

Although the Brooklyn setting of *Flesh and Blood* appears in many of Hamill's other novels, prose pieces, and memoirs, no other title is directly related. Hamill's heroes often have a mother similar to Kate, and often she is Irish; the remote, distant father is a fictional staple for Hamill. Sexual initiation of a young man by an older woman is a frequently recurring theme as well, although the older woman isn't usually the boy's mother. The incest theme in *Flesh and Blood* makes psychological implications inescapable, along with the shadows of Oedipus and Hamlet. In Hamill's novel, however, the son seeks to know, not kill, his father, and the impetus is not psychological but naturalistic, a pain-induced response to the barrenness of the characters' surroundings and their emotional prospects.

Bobby Fallon is, in fact, the antithesis of the Hamlet prototype, since Bobby is almost entirely a creature of impulse and action, however misdirected. He is guided by his feelings and by the determining pressure and stress of his environment and his own loneliness. Although the heroes of Hamill's bildungsroman stories are often tough Irish kids, Bobby Fallon does not have the sweet, artistic side the others often possess. More closely related are Hamill's accounts of the world of boxing, organized crime, and urban night life found in his freelance reporting.

The film noir parallels, which are difficult to escape as one reads the novel, are evident in the disillusioned, insecure loners that people the novel. This tradition is most notable in characters played by Humphrey Bogart, in Jules Dassin's *Night and the City*, Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*, and, more contemporary with Hamill, *Chinatown* (1974), and *The Long Goodbye*. James T. Farrell's mean streets come to mind, as do those of Nelson Algren, Raymond Chandler novels, and the moody, fatalistic urban crime films of the forties. The setting is dark, the love scenes anxious and fated, and the plot revealing of a chasm between appearance and reality, where a hidden or mistaken identity can manipulate events and other's destiny.

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