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THE book arrives on a mini forklift. It measures 50cm x 50cm, has 792 pages and weighs 34kg. As Muhammad Ali says, "You may not be able to lift it, but you will want to buy it."

Only 10 000 copies have been printed and a single copy costs R56 000 — which probably explains why I find a pair of white cotton gloves taped to its silk-covered box. Once gloved up, it quickly becomes apparent that this is not a book one easily goes the distance with in a single sitting.

It is an exhaustingly definitive tribute. And it shows in vivid detail, as Tom Wolfe put it, "how on sweat-stained canvasses in faraway places, with lightning quick strokes, Ali painted some of the greatest masterpieces the world has ever seen."

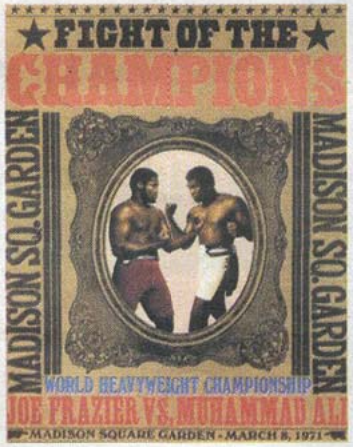
The early years, when Ali was regarded as "Nureyev in boxing trunks", have been painstakingly mined. In pictures taken at the time, you can see the glow that made Dick Schaap say that "Even at 18, Clay was the most alive figure I'd ever met." And ring doctor Ferdie Pacheco that: "If God sat down to create the perfect fighter, he'd have created Ali: Perfectly proportioned, handsome, lightning reflexes, and a great mind for sports. Even when he got a cold it went away the next day."

Surprisingly, given today's training emphasis, Dundee reveals that Ali "never lifted a weight in his whole life, never did a push-up, never did a pull-up." In fact, Ali once told a young photographer that the reason he was the fastest heavyweight in the world was because he trained underwater. The training session was shot as an exclusive cover feature for Life magazine, even though Ali had never thrown a punch underwater in his life, and couldn't even swim.

Indeed, Ali's humour is stamped on almost every page. It's in the self-effacing outbursts of ego: "I'm so great, I impress even myself. I'm a perfect role model for children; I'm good-looking, clean-living, cultured, and modest."

But you also find it in many of the personal recollections, like this one by friend Dick Schaap: "There was a moment when I really fell in love with this kid. It was when we were driving down the main street in Louisville. We stopped for a traffic light, and there was this very pretty girl standing on the corner. A white girl. I turned to Cassius and said, 'boy, she's pretty'. And he grabbed me, and said, 'you're crazy man. You can get electrocuted for that; a Jew looking at a white girl in Kentucky.'"

And perhaps the most impressive thing about this book is the sheer weight of its amassed detail. It's the picture of the cigarette that Ali plucked from promoter Hank Kaplan's mouth because smoking was bad for him. He signed it and it later fetched $2 000 dollars at Christie's. It's the curiously ambivalent picture of Ali towering, almost protectively, over his fallen hero, Archie Moore. And it's the picture of a young Ali eyeing his first Cadillac, with the white salesman in the background laughing at the young negro.



'I'm so great, I impress even myself. I'm a perfect role-model for children; I'm good looking, clean-living, cultured, and modest'

It's in the way this book relates Ali's meeting with the Beatles. Apparently he said to John Lennon, "You're not as stupid as you look." To which Lennon replied, "No, but you are."

Ali checked to make sure Lennon was smiling, and then proceeded to clown around with the band in the ring — but in such a way that Lennon later told manager Harry Benson, "That man made a fool of us," and refused to speak to him for a month.

Sonny Liston's reaction to the Beatles was quite different: "Are these mutherfuckers what all the people are screaming about. My dog plays drums better than that kid with the big nose."

And this is all part of how the book represents the build-up to a world championship fight that few people thought Ali could win. Until, of course, the ring announcer said at the end of the second round: "I think we've just seen one of the greatest rounds we've ever seen from anybody in a long time. I think Clay completely outclassed Sonny Liston." By the end of the third round Liston was "walking around like a man lost in a wilderness of snowflakes, blood trickling down his face."

And Ali didn't just do the impossible once. He did it three times. How? Perhaps we'll never know, but through it all shines a superhuman self-belief.

"When you want to talk about who made me," he said, "You talk to me".

He never listened to critics, claimed Dundee. "If he'd listened to Red Smith, Jimmy Cannon and Dick Young . . . he would have slugged it out with Sonny Liston in Miami beach and danced against George Foreman in Zaire. He'd have gone to the army, and been shipped off to Vietnam."

Refusing the draft made Ali more than just a boxer and had much to do with him becoming what Mailer called "the very spirit of the 20th Century.

"Even as the years slip by," writes Ishmael Reed, "Ali reminds us of the turbulent decade of the Muslims, Malcolm X, Rap Brown, the Great Society, LBJ, Vietnam, General Hershey, dashikis, afros, Black Power, Martin Luther King Jr, Robert Kennedy . . . He was the new Black of the 1960s: glamorous, sophisticated, intelligent, international, and militant."

Ironically, because of the three year enforced layoff for refusing conscription — "the best Ali," Angelo Dundee tells us, "is the one we never saw."

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