

**TALKING POINT**

Mark Wahlberg began training for *The Fighter* four years before he shot the film, building a boxing ring and gym in his yard and working with the real Micky Ward and half-brother Dickie.

His pre-fight levitation trick no longer pulled in the punters...

**SEE THIS IF YOU LIKED...**

**ON THE WATERFRONT**  
1954

Another blue-collar drama about a tortured prizefighter (Marlon Brando) whose brother (Rod Steiger) doesn't always have his best interests at heart.

**RAGING BULL** 1980

Scorsese's roiling, boiling biopic of middleweight champ Jake La Motta is still the undisputed alpha male of boxing dramas.

**THE WRESTLER** 2008

Darren Aronofsky was once attached to direct *The Fighter* but decided he didn't want to make two body-bashers in a row.

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'This is a new breed of boxing movie, where flawless naturalism and psychodrama take centre stage'

# The Fighter

★★★★★ Out 4 Feb Underdog sporting biopic punches above its weight...

**A** LONG TIME BREWING, Mark Wahlberg stuck with this pugilistic passion project through the thick, the thin and the comings and goings of Matt Damon, Brad Pitt and Darren Aronofsky. Even Martin Scorsese turned down a chance to direct. Starting out, Wahlberg probably didn't imagine that he'd end up teaming with the combustible talents of Christian Bale and David O. Russell (*Three Kings*, *I Heart Huckabees*) – surely an inadvertent statement of intent that *The Fighter* was going to be a raw, bruising, but deeply memorable encounter. And instead of spilling further rants onto YouTube, the unpredictable duo – invigorated by Wahlberg's never-say-die commitment, no doubt – have channelled their volatile passions into a brawler biopic that manages to find thrilling new ways to spin a punch-drunk genre.

It's a tale of two underdogs. Dickie Eklund (Bale) once sent Sugar Ray Leonard to the mat but is now a crack-addicted hustler clinging to former boxing glories as the unreliable sparring partner for his younger half-brother, 'Irish' Micky Ward (Wahlberg). Once known as "the pride of Lowell", Dickie's also the subject of an HBO documentary, which he boasts to locals is about his comeback but is really about life on the crack-farm. The doc-makers shadowing the sprawling clan are part of Russell's early tapestry, which among other things helps get some awkward exposition out of the way. As for Micky, he's exploited and undermined by his domineering mother/manager Alice (Melissa Leo, bleached-blond and fearsome). If stepping into the ring is daunting for Wahlberg's pensive introvert, the meddlesome toxicity he faces in his own family makes you think he's getting off

lightly with the awful beatdowns he takes to keep them in clover.

## Rocky beginnings

The film's opening scene of a scuzzy, cadaverous Bale, addressing HBO's camera with hollow-eyed urgency, makes your heart sink: is this going to be another one of those wrung-out turns that's more about a feat of physical transformation than making us give a blind toss? It's a foreboding feeling not necessarily abated in the early stretches, which also weave in Micky's hook-up with spunky barmaid Charlene (Amy Adams) and takedown by a boxer who has 20lbs on him. But as Ward's resentment simmers and Bale's manic antics settle into a performance that commands our affection, *The Fighter* starts to spar like a true champion, light-footed, dexterous and disciplined. Russell may be rolling in clichés – the come-from-behind hero who endures pain, humiliation and multiple training montages before pouncing on redemption – but he makes *The Fighter* seem anything but unoriginal.

Call it a new breed of boxing movie, one where flawlessly realised naturalism and family psychodrama take centre stage. From Lowell's cracked pavements and dilapidated housefronts to the showy working-class *Baw-ston* accents on display (this year's Third World orphan – Hollywood's must-have accessory), *The Fighter* reeks of realism, its mood of mean-streets authenticity extending to Mickey O'Keefe, the police sergeant who served as Ward's trainer/mentor, playing himself in the film. The fact that he barely 'acts' makes a nice counterbalance to the in-*yer-face* histrionics swirling around him. If the loud, ferocious Alice can come off as an over-caricatured maternal monster, there's no faulting Leo's awesome performance, or those of Ward's seven tough-as-nails sisters. Answering

Alice's war cry to launch a braying assault on "dirty bar skank" Charlene after Micky dares to declare his independence, they're the Damned-Hair United. (A keen sense of humour is another of the film's priceless assets.)

## Body and soul

Breaking type with a character Russell has perhaps reductively called a "sexy bitch", Adams is a zillion miles away from Disney princess-dom without overselling it, although her tough-chick act gets sidelined after Bale's reprobate hoves back into view following a jail spell. As for Wahlberg, he careens like a battered pinball between family, girlfriend, selfish promoters and damaging opponents. He's the story's sensitive, stalwart, hugely sympathetic heart, demonstrating impressive boxing prowess while charting a thoroughly convincing journey from punchbag to champ. Shooting with handheld immediacy, Russell refrains from wallowing in the sport's blood-spilling brutality, while still painting everything with vivid vibrancy. He hits some bum notes along the way – a puerile dig at film snobs crops up like an unwelcome intrusion from a Woody Allen comedy – but for the most part he's in supreme control, working from a smart, tidy script that churned through the mitts of multiple screenwriters (including, bizarrely, a chief writer on the *Air Bud* franchise).

It's the final rounds when Russell's meticulous machinations really click into gear. The film begins to engage on a heightened level of emotionally charged exhilaration that carries it through Dickie's return from prison, family tensions coming to a boil, and Micky's road to a championship bout in London. By the closing frames, you'll be jumping about punching your own fists in the air. Inspiring, funky, filled with passion, *The Fighter* is a boxing movie that everyone can love. You can even take your mum.

**Matt Mueller**

**THE VERDICT** Like its battered, beleaguered central hero, this boxing biopic takes a few rounds to really get going. But when it does, it's a rousing, compassionate, bare-knuckled ride powerful enough to score a KO, while Bale, Wahlberg, Leo and Adams are all award-worthy excellent.

› **Certificate 15** **Director** David O. Russell **Starring** Mark Wahlberg, Christian Bale, Amy Adams, Melissa Leo, Mickey O'Keefe **Screenplay** Scott Silver, Paul Tamasy, Eric Johnson **Distributor** Momentum Pictures **Running time** 116 mins

