

The Story Behind 'The Book'



Author Daniel James Brown

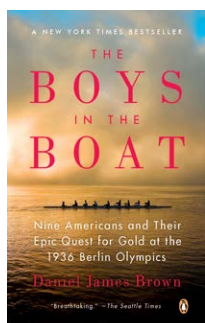
The *New York Times* bestseller *The Boys in the Boat* has captured the hearts and minds of millions of people and has cast a spotlight on the sport of rowing and Washington Rowing in particular. “The Book” as it is affectionately known, has generated a tremendous amount of interest in our program. Recently we asked author Daniel James Brown for his impressions on what makes this story so wildly popular.

Q: Why did you decide to write *The Boys in the Boat*?

A. Well, the story came to me and I just couldn't resist it. My neighbor Judy came to me and asked me to come down to her house to meet her father. He was in the last couple of months of his life, living under hospice care at her home. He was also the #7 man in the boat that won gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. That was Joe Rantz. When I sat down with Joe and he began to tell his story I was just mesmerized by it. It wasn't just that these guys won a gold medal against a German boat in front of Hitler. It was so much more, beginning with Joe's own heartwarming and heartbreaking personal story. By the end of that first visit with Joe I asked him if I could write about him and he said, “No.” But then he said, “But you could write a book about “the boat.” And of course by “the boat” he meant what all of them—those nine young men—had done together and what they had become together seventy-five years before in Berlin.

Q. What is the true essence of this story?

A. On one level it's the personal struggle and ultimate redemption of Joe's incredibly difficult personal and family life. That is really the emotional heart of the story and in many ways his story stands in for the stories of a whole generation of both young men and young women, I think. Though Joe's circumstances were particularly challenging, the cruel circumstances of the Great Depression really presented nearly everyone in his generation with huge obstacles they had to overcome. In that way Joe, and the other eight guys as well, are representatives of their generation. Beyond that it is really a story of how great teams come together—the qualities that made them great. Among these qualities were their incredible perseverance, their focus, their earnest belief in what they were doing, and above all the extraordinary humility they displayed and how that enabled them to build strong bonds of trust. It's those last two things—humility and trust—that I think most defined them and got them to their goal.



Did you know?

The Husky Clipper raced at the 1936 Olympics was made of spruce and northern ash and was built by George Pocock. It weighed approximately 235 pounds and cost \$1,150. Today's carbon fiber racing shells weigh approximately 211 pounds and cost about \$45,000.

Q. You've said that you had a series of revelations while you were writing *The Boys in the Boat*. What were they?

A. There have been literally dozens if not hundreds of revelations. One of the most important I think was the huge role that the boat builder—George Yeoman Pocock—played in the story. He was really the spiritual guide for these young men as they set out on this audacious quest to win a gold medal and it's hard to overstate how much his wisdom meant to everyone on the crew. (And indeed how much it meant to legions of young men who rowed for UW in those years.) And of course, each of these boys in the boat was a revelation as I got to know him, mostly through his children and grandchildren.

Q. What surprised you most while researching the story?

A. I was somewhat surprised by the extent of the Nazi efforts to deceive the world at the 1936 Olympics. I had always known that the games were a propaganda coup for the Nazis, but I had no idea how cynical and sweeping their efforts to create an alternate version of Germany were in the years before the war. We all know, of course, what happened shortly afterwards in Germany, but the way in which the Nazis turned the truth on its head in the mid-1930s was staggering. And that's really the context in which the gold medal race at the end of the book becomes not just a boat race but a clash of two very different ways of looking at the world.

Q. What are the similarities between the 1936 crew and the current program? How about the differences?

A. I'm far from any kind of expert on the contemporary rowing scene, but there are some obvious differences and similarities I suppose. The boats are lighter now that they aren't made of wood, and the men and women who row them are bigger overall so the boats go faster. Rowers at UW and at other major programs tend not just to be local kids from the farms of Western Washington. They are recruited from all over the world. But Washington crew is again at the forefront of American collegiate rowing just as it was in the mid-1930s. And in many ways, the sport is the same—the mechanics evolve and techniques improve but ultimately it's still all about nine young men or women pulling together with their whole hearts. It's still one of the toughest things in the world you could choose to do. And it's still one of the most beautiful, especially when a crew finds its swing.