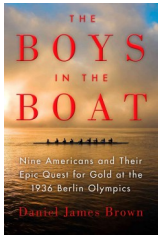


The Boys in the Boat



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Even if you seldom follow sports, this story of the 1936 Olympic rowers will excite you and touch your heart. Eight young men—most tall and scraggly, nearly all from poor, working-class backgrounds—beat the elite British, the powerhouse Germans, and the determined Italians to win gold as Nazi hysteria took over Berlin. But even though we know who wins the 1936 Olympics from the beginning, Brown ups the ante with dramatic descriptions of the racing with a filmmaker's eye for visual details, practical rowing crew experience, and extensive interviews and research.

The book brims with history: personal, cultural and factual. It begins with the author's neighbor, Judy, inviting the author to meet her father, Joe Rantz, one of the Olympic winners who, with only a few months to live, is in hospice. Over many interviews, he shares his story, but insists that Brown also write about all the men on his crew who, working as one, bring home the gold against impossible odds.

Joe has suffered several personal tragedies: his mother died when he was very young, forcing his family to constantly relocate as his dad, Harry, struggles to make a living for the family. When his dad marries his son's sister-in-law, Thula, major trouble brews. Though Joe is a smart and kind child, Thula hates having a constant reminder of her husband's deep love for his dead wife; when Joe is just ten, she refuses to let him live in the house with them any longer. Harry doesn't speak up for him, emotionally wounding Joe even more. Soon he finds himself living at school at night, working at a mining canteen for his meals. After moving to the backwoods town of Sequim on the Olympic Peninsula, Thula finally relents. During this period, Joe relishes family life with his half-siblings and playing music with his Dad. But Thula, a frustrated violinist herself, decides that they must move yet again so Harry can make a better living for her brood. Then, in one of the most heartbreaking scenes in the book, Joe returns from school to find his family driving away from the half-finished farmhouse, leaving Joe totally on his own with no money and little food. He's just beginning high school.

Joe survives by doing hard manual labor, taking down trees, illegally fishing, and selling stolen hooch. But just before his senior year, his older brother offers him a room in his Seattle home, telling him, "If you go to a good city school, University of Washington will take you." Even though his girlfriend, Joyce, has just returned to the peninsula, Joe jumps at the offer; he does enroll at UW, and falls in love with rowing there.

For the rest of the book, Brown focuses mainly on the arduous sport and the lives of the other young men whom Joe will eventually go with to Berlin. The rowing scenes in Seattle, Poughkeepsie, Princeton, and eventually Germany will set your heart racing. Each chapter begins with a quote from George Yeoman Pocock, the maker of the extraordinary cedar shells that the young men row. Although not their coach, Pocock, who also lost his mother at a very young age, became a mentor and inspiration to Joe, encouraging him to trust in people again.

However, Brown also reveals how the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl bring poverty and suffering to millions of Americans of that time. In a parallel story, he also documents Germany's move toward Nazism, and the efforts of its people to present a false view of their society to the world. This book makes a fine, exciting read, and one you should not miss.

Posted by Dory L. on November 16, 2017

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[The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics](#)