

Teacher's Guide

THE BOYS IN THE BOAT



**The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic
Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics**

BY DANIEL JAMES BROWN

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel James Brown grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and attended Diablo Valley College, the University of California at Berkeley, and UCLA. Brown taught writing at San Jose State University and Stanford before becoming a technical writer and editor. He now writes narrative nonfiction books full time. Brown's primary interest as a writer is in bringing compelling historical events to life as vividly and accurately as possible.

Brown lives in the country outside of Seattle, Washington with his wife, two daughters, and an assortment of cats, dogs, chickens, and honeybees. When he is not writing, he is likely to be birding, gardening, fly fishing, reading American history, or chasing bears away from the bee hives.

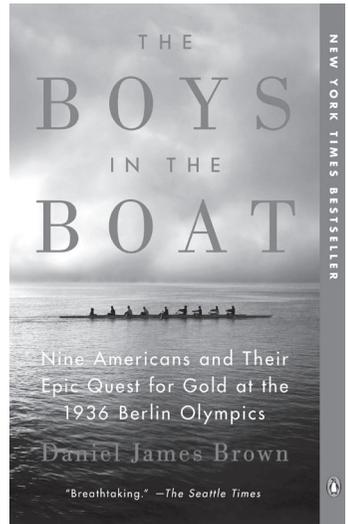
ABOUT THE BOOK*

The Boys in the Boat celebrates the 1936 U.S. men's Olympic eight-oar rowing team—working class boys who stormed the rowing world, transformed the sport, and galvanized the attention of millions of Americans.

The sons of loggers, shipyard workers, and farmers from the American West, the boys took on and defeated successive echelons of privilege and power. They vanquished the sons of bankers and senators rowing for elite eastern universities. They defeated the sons of British aristocrats rowing for Oxford and Cambridge. And finally, in an extraordinary race in Berlin they stunned the Aryan sons of the Nazi state as they rowed for gold in front of Adolf Hitler.

Against the grim backdrop of the Great Depression, they reaffirmed the American notion that merit, in the end, can outweigh birthright. They reminded the country of what can be done when everyone quite literally pulls together. And they provided hope that in the titanic struggle that lay just ahead, the ruthless might of the Nazis would not prevail over American grit, determination, and optimism.

And even as it chronicles the boys' collective achievement, *The Boys in the Boat* is also the heartwarming story of one young man in particular. Cast aside by his family at an early age, abandoned and left to fend for himself, Joe Rantz rows not just for glory, but to regain his shattered self-regard, to dare again to trust in others, and to find his way back to a place he can call home.



CHARACTERS:

- **Joe Rantz** — the protagonist, Washington University crew member
- **Joyce Simdar** — Joe Rantz's girlfriend and future wife
- **Harry Rantz** — Joe's father
- **Nellie Rantz** — Joe's mother who passed away of cancer when Joe was four years old
- **Fred; Harry, Jr.; Michael; Rose; Polly** — Joe Rantz's siblings
- **Thula LaFollette Rantz** — Harry Rantz's second wife; sister of Thelma LaFollette, who was Fred's wife
- **Al Ulbrickson** — Joe's rowing coach who takes Washington's team to the 1936 Olympics
- **George Yeoman Pocock** — a renowned British oarsman and boat builder who immigrates to Washington and sculpts shells in his workshop at the University boathouse; Joe's mentor
- **Tom Bolles** — University of Washington's Freshman rowing coach
- **Ky Ebright** — rowing coach of the rival University of California
- **Royal Brougham** — journalist who followed the rowing team throughout their journey to the Olympics

The crew members who competed in the Olympics with Joe:

- **Bobby Moch (coxswain), Don Hume, Shorty Hunt, Roger Morris, Stub McMillin, Johnny White, Gordy Adam, Chuck Day**

THEMES:

Sports, competition, teamwork, perseverance, U.S./world history, poverty, economic distress

BEFORE READING:

DISCUSSION

- 1 Describe qualities people need in order to work cooperatively on a team. Does one have to maintain a group mentality, or can one maintain an individual mentality while being a part of a team?
- 2 How can a person's social and economic status affect the way he/she views and lives his/her life? Elaborate on your response with examples.
- 3 How do personal experiences in one's life influence how one approaches challenges? Explain your answer with support.
- 4 Are people's motivations to survive internal, external, or both? Explain.

BEFORE READING ACTIVITIES:

SETTING

- *The Boys in the Boat* is set during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when millions of Americans lost their homes and jobs due to the economic downfall. Require students to research several aspects of this financial depression and the impact it had on Americans, and more specifically, college and professional sports at that time. One option is to divide the students into groups

and have them research various categories of the teacher's choosing, such as the impact on different regions of America; household incomes; types of jobs available for men/women; speakeasies/Prohibition; or education of youth (beyond eighth grade).

- Through research, have students compare and contrast how the Olympics were regarded in the 1930s to how they are regarded now. Consider such aspects as the impact of World War II, and later, the Cold War. What political significance do the Olympics Games hold today?
- Students should have background knowledge of the rise of Nazi Germany, the Holocaust, and Hitler's reign; however, if the students need to brush up on this background, have them research these topics and share with the class.

THE SPORT OF ROWING

- Share the following links with students in order to familiarize them with rowing terms and parts of the rowing shell.

www.usrowing.org/about/rowing101/glossary

www.rowinghistory.net/

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_rowing_terms

- Many students will not be familiar with the sport of rowing or the shells. In order to familiarize them with the images about which they will read, create a flipped lesson where the students research crew teams, the parts of the rowing shell, the history of rowing, and the history of University of Washington's crew teams. The following are some links to share with the students if necessary:

www.huskycrew.com/1930.htm

hereandnow.wbur.org/2013/07/04/berlin-olympics-rowing

www.seattletimes.com/outdoors/wooden-boat-heritage-gets-a-boost-with-revival-of-historic-pocock-shell/

www.olympic.org/rowing-equipment-and-history?tab=history

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6APZND4WCd0

- Have students research how the sport of rowing has changed now that synthetic materials are being used for the boats rather than the handcrafted cedar shells used in the 1936 Olympics.

PROLOGUE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Prior to the Prologue, Daniel James Brown references a quotation from Homer: "But I desire and I long every day to go home and to look upon the day of my return...for already I have suffered and labored at so many things on the waves." How does this set the tone for the story? Why do you suppose the author used a quotation specifically from Homer?
- How does Brown's use of imagery in the Prologue add to the mood? Choose one specific image and discuss it in regards to the mood it creates for the reader.
- What is the deeper meaning of "the boat" to Joe Rantz, and why is this significant to learn about in the Prologue (p. 2)?

PART I

1899 – 1933: WHAT SEASONS THEY HAVE BEEN THROUGH

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 1

- What are some examples of economic turmoil in the first two pages of the book? How does this depiction of the setting (time and place) set the stage for Joe's story thus far (p. 9)?
- What is the purpose of the author using President Hoover's quotation after presenting the audience with a description of the deplorable conditions of 1933?
- Brown describes a cartoon from *The American Weekly*, published on October 8, 1933 (see it at link: www.delanceyplace.com/view_archives.php?2465). Discuss the images depicted in the cartoon, the caption, and the overall impact of art that is used to express societal concerns during trying times.
- At the bottom of page 11 through page 13, the reader is presented with a description of the protagonist, Joe Rantz. List specific examples of diction that the author uses to portray Rantz in order to support what overall image the author wants to relay to his reader.
- How is the depiction of the University of Washington head coach, Al Ulbrickson, similar to that of a mythical figure? Why would Brown present him as such (pp. 15-16)?
- What is the effect of Brown juxtaposing the "new freshman at the shell house in Seattle" with the architect Werner March who is "hunched over a drafting table in an office somewhere in Berlin?"
- When Adolf Hitler came into power in 1933, the Nazi Party controlled less than 150 of the 4,700 German newspapers; however, by the end of World War II, no more than 1,100 remained in print. Of the enduring newspapers, "[a]pproximately half were still in the hands of private or institutional owners, but these newspapers operated in strict compliance with government press laws and published material only in accordance with directives issued by the Ministry of Propaganda." How did the influence of the National Press Law, as referenced on page 20, change the true intentions of journalism nationwide? What other forms of propaganda did Nazi Germany utilize? Predict what the journalistic restrictions and German propaganda could possibly foreshadow in the book.

Source: "The Press in the Third Reich" www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007655

Chapter 2

- Discuss the technological developments of the early 1900s and how Harry Rantz contributed to those progressions during that time period. How do you think Harry's tenacity and success impacted Joe as he was maturing? Provide specific examples for support.
- What impact did Nellie Rantz have on Joe? Explain with details.
- Discuss Harry and Thula's relationship as described by the author. Would this description change if Joe were narrating the story? If so, how?
- How did Joe use his ingenuity to survive? Do you think children today would be able to survive at such a young age?

Chapter 3

- The first line of Chapter 3 states, "Competitive rowing is an undertaking of extraordinary beauty preceded by brutal punishment," which is a seamlessly-written juxtaposition of two images that set the tone of the chapter. After reading the whole chapter, discuss the tone this quotation sets and how the concept comes full circle.

- In this chapter the audience is introduced to George Yeoman Pocock, whose quotations introduce each chapter. What do we learn about Pocock? How does knowing his background add thematically to the various anecdotal stories in the book thus far?
- Describe the “Conibear stroke” and its origin, drawing parallels to Joe Rantz’s story.

Chapter 4

- Why is Sequim “shaping up to be near paradise” for Joe (p. 56)? Is this “paradise” something that others would see as such? Why or why not?
- What do the events surrounding the Rantz family reflect about the country’s financial calamities? Do these events affect Joe’s outlook on life as a child? How do you know?
- Discuss how you would feel if you had to fend for yourself as a young teenager during an economic crisis. How does the author create empathy for Joe in this situation?
- How and why is Joe “the very embodiment of freedom” to Joyce (p. 65)?

Chapter 5

- Throughout the book, Brown uses figurative language in order to allow the reader to visualize Joe’s experiences in a vivid and imaginative way. For example, in Chapter 5, Brown writes “Joe gulped huge drafts of the frigid air and sat staring at the scene, watching it turn into a soft blur of colors as, for the first time since his family had left him, tears filled his eyes” (p. 78). What is the effect of the phrases “gulped huge drafts of the frigid air” and “watching it turn into a soft blur of colors?” What do they help the reader envision and feel? As you read Chapters 6-8, list other examples of figurative language and the effect of each example.
- What does Joyce’s job reflect about the extremes between social classes in the 1930s? Does Joyce fit the stereotype of a young woman of that time period? Support your answer with specific details.
- Throughout the book, Brown occasionally utilizes second person amidst third person point of view. For example, the author states: “At places like that, you could dance all night to the likes of the Dorsey Brothers and Guy Lombardo” (p. 75). And earlier in the story: “There seemed to be more than a schoolroom science lesson in the discovery of the fungus. If you simply kept your eyes open, it seemed, you just might find something valuable in the most unlikely of places” (p. 37). What is the purpose of Brown subtly altering the point of view from third to second in various places in the story? What is the effect of the second person pronouns?
- Brown describes the Dust Bowl in November 1933 and juxtaposes it with Hitler’s reign in Nazi Germany. Compare and contrast the choices of diction used to create an effect on pages 75-77. What tone is established through these specific images and diction?

PART II

1934: RESILIENCY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 6

- Compare and contrast both physical and personality traits of the two rival rowing coaches, Al Ulbrickson and Ky Ebright. Briefly highlight their qualities that reflect strong leadership.
- Discuss the team’s issues with synchronization and how this positively and negatively affects the freshman team.
- Why does Joe continue eating in the cafeteria when his teammates are gibing him? What does this tell the reader about his character?

- How does Brown build suspense during the description of the race between the University of California and the University of Washington? Provide examples for your response.
- Who is Joseph Goebbels and how does he reflect the ideologies of the Nazi Party?

Chapter 7

- After finishing Chapter 7, consider the following quotation: “Like so much in life, crew was partly about confidence, partly about knowing your own heart” (p. 106). Discuss how this quotation reflects Joe’s life thus far.
- What is a legacy and what qualities are needed to create one? According to the information in this chapter, how was the University of Washington’s rowing legacy created? [If necessary, students can research U of W’s legacy on their own, in groups, or with the whole class and discuss their findings.]
- Describe the attributes of an Easterner versus a Westerner. Do these stereotypes fit Washington’s rowing crew? Use support for your response.
- List historical/natural events that occurred as Joe Rantz watched “a fresh new American calamity begin to unfold” (p. 119), and discuss the impact they had on his character.

Chapter 8

- Why did the game warden hit Joe over the head with a piece of driftwood? What is the significance of the outcome for Joe?
- In this chapter Brown describes the cedars that are a major part of Westerners’ lives. What is the effect of the simile “...and their stumps...rose like ancient monuments from a dense tangle of salal, huckleberry...” (p. 125)? What is the more significant meaning of this comparison?
- In reference to learning how to “read wood,” Brown states that Joe was “thrilled as always at the notion that something valuable could be found in what others had passed over and left behind” (p. 126). Why is this a significant belief coming specifically from Joe?
- Why did Joe enjoy cutting wood? Can you apply this satisfaction to anything you do or appreciate in your life? Provide specific examples to support both answers.
- What is somewhat ironic about Joe’s nickname in regards to rowing (p. 129)? Does this nickname fit him thus far? Why or why not?
- What is Joe’s reason he gives Joyce when asked about his feelings surrounding his family? Describe a time where you felt this way about a person with whom you were close.
- What did Brown mean when he stated “He [George Pocock] didn’t just build racing shells. He sculpted them” (p. 136)? Elaborate on your analysis.
- What metaphorical meaning does the shell have? Why is this metaphor significant to the reader?
- Discuss the content of the film *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl. Establish why this is considered “the most successful propaganda film of all time,” and the impact it had on Nazi Germany. [The following YouTube link is the film in its entirety. Teachers should pick a few scenes to show students: www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHS2coAzLJ8]

PART III

1935: THE PARTS THAT REALLY MATTER

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 9

- What began to happen to Washington’s crew team after Ulbrickson declared the nine of them

“were going to be on the medal podium in Berlin in 1936” (p. 150)? Predict possible psychological outcomes of the rowers as teammates and as individuals.

- When the struggling boys were called into Ulbrickson’s office “for a talk,” the author expresses the coach’s comments with choppy, abbreviated sentence structure: “It looked to him like a case of laziness. They weren’t pulling hard enough. They had no pepper. And they were sloppy.... Their spacing was all off” (p. 153). What is Brown’s purpose for using this syntactical structure? What is the effect on the reader?
- Shorty Hunt is compared to a Cesar Romero, a famous actor and dancer who made his film debut in the early 1930s. How does this comparison (and other comments) make Shorty and Joe particularly odd companions? What similarities exist between the two? Support your response with specific examples. See picture and biography of Cesar Romero: www.zbiography.com/people/cesar-romero-9542350
- What mood is reflected throughout this chapter regarding the successes and failures of the sophomore team? Provide examples for support.
- In what scene of the chapter does the overall mood change? Why does Brown create this shift in mood?
- When Joe sees his father for the first time in years, Brown offers the reader Harry Rantz’s point of view about his relationship with Joe. Does knowing Harry’s feelings cause you to feel sympathetic toward him? Why or why not?
- Reread the paragraph on page 161 about “swing” and discuss the significance of the metaphor Brown creates at the end of the paragraph. Write your own metaphor or simile for “swing” based on Brown’s description of it.
- What is the “dance of doom” (p. 164), and what does it tell us about the rival coaches?
- Why was Joe humbled at the end of the chapter? What does this tell the reader about his character?

Chapter 10

- Discuss the three “fundamental paradoxes” in rowing. Where do we see these paradoxes in other areas of our lives? In society?
- Why should all teams have a good “blend of personalities?” What type of personality do you have, and how do you balance out a team?
- Why does Ulbrickson feel as though he failed the public? Do you believe he failed? Why or why not?

Chapter 11

- What is Joe’s summer job? What is the significance of his actually enjoying specific aspects of the job?
- What does the reader learn about many of the women who resided in Grand Coulee on B Street? How does this depiction of them reflect the economic strife of the time?

Chapter 12

- Why is the description of the city of Grünau significant to this story? Provide specific details for support.
- What happened at Joyce’s previous job, and how did she benefit from this wrongdoing?
- How is Pocock’s information about a tree’s life a metaphor for something more significant (p. 214)? What do you suppose it might represent?

- Pocock discusses how the craft of building a boat was like religion: “You had to give yourself up to it spiritually; you had to surrender yourself absolutely to it. When you were done and walked away from the boat, you had to feel that you had left a piece of yourself behind in it forever, a bit of your heart” (p. 215). What does he mean by this analogy, and how is this significant to Joe’s life at that time?
- What are the three laws that Adolf Hitler was marshalling during the Rally for Freedom? What historical impact did these laws have on Germans and German Jews?
- What two very significant events occur in Joe’s life, and how does one become the catalyst of his father’s actions? How does Joe deal with these events?
- What are the arguments that both Avery Brundage and Charles H. Sherrill present to the United States? How and why are these arguments illogical?

PART IV

1936: TOUCHING THE DIVINE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter 13

- What are the duties of the coxswain? Why do you think Brown introduced this information late in the book?
- What was George Pocock’s advice to Joe? How did this advice impact Joe’s actions and thoughts with his teammates? With his family and those he loved?
- How does the quality of humility contribute to the boys’ success? Provide an example of when you or someone you know had to show humility in a specific circumstance in life.

Chapter 14

- Why is it significant to know what Goebbels wrote about the reaction of other countries about the rise of Nazi Germany? [“The Fuehrer is immensely happy...England remains passive. France won’t act alone. Italy is disappointed and America is uninterested” (p. 252).]
- On page 252, Brown includes information about Germany’s “masquerade” surrounding the 1936 Olympics. Provide examples of some of the things the Nazis were hiding from the rest of the world. What tone does Brown establish when explaining these events?
- Why is the news reporter Brougham “worried” about the boys and their “cheerful determination and optimism” (p. 255)?
- According to Pocock, what was so “beautiful” about their night rowing (p. 259), and what is the effect on the reader here with his imagery and diction?
- Brown recounts American boxer Joe Louis’ second fight with Schmeling, and then he juxtaposes Louis’ victory with Goebbels’ “charred body” being “pulled out of the smoldering rubble of the Reich Chancellery...” (p. 261). What is the effect of these events being juxtaposed?
- Discuss the details of the boys’ adventure to Hyde Park Station. Does it seem plausible for this to happen? Could something like this happen in today’s world?
- Right before the account of Washington’s varsity national championship, Brown describes the setting in detail (p. 266). Choose several examples of the author’s description and establish the mood that is depicted in this paragraph.
- Why did Brougham call Moch’s leadership on the boat that day “positively cold blooded” (p. 272)?

Chapter 15

- Research images and the background surrounding the “Don’t Tread on Me” flag. Why did Brown say Moch “might as well have raised” this specific flag over his stern that day (p. 276)?
- Brown states that because the boys were going to the Olympics, “For the first time ever, Seattle was going to play on the world stage” (p. 282) and that “they were now America’s crew” (p. 288). Choosing any one of the boys in the boat, write a one-page journal entry from that crew member’s point of view. Include how he might have felt that day when he realized he was “on a world stage” and reflect that person’s character traits through details in your entry.
- What trouble does the University of Washington team encounter after winning the race? How is this trouble resolved?
- What does Joe realize while at the top of the Empire State Building? Why is this realization significant?
- What are the values that the crew members shared? Why are they significant values one should hold when being a part of any team?

Chapter 16

- Describe the “movie set” transformation Berlin undertook before the Olympic Games. Why did Brown choose to include these details?
- While on the *Manhattan* on the way to Berlin, Joe ventures to the first-class decks and is “mesmerized by his peek at how the other half still lived” (p. 302). What universal theme(s) can be derived from this statement, the images he describes, and other similar experiences he has throughout the book?
- Research Eleanor Holm’s “scandal” and how she impacted society’s view of women and/or athletes during the mid-1930s. Share findings with the class.
- What is ironic about Brundage’s statement, “No nation since ancient Greece has captured the true Olympic spirit as has Germany” (p. 308)?
- Reread the reporter Richard Wingate’s letter to the sports editor of *The New York Times* and discuss why Brown deemed this letter “prophetic” (p. 308).
- How did Washington’s boat crack? Why do you believe they were not rowing well? Could you empathize with Al Ulbrickson’s emotions during this time of uncertainty? Explain.
- Research and watch a YouTube video of Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” from the piece titled *Messiah* that was playing when the Olympic flame was lit. After listening, discuss how this piece of music moved more than 110,000 spectators in the stands that day (p. 319). Be sure to research the meaning of the piece’s title.

Chapter 17

- Who are the SS officers, what were their responsibilities, and why are they described as “neat, severe, and ominous” (p. 322)?
- Why did a fight break out? Are you surprised this is the first actual fight the boys experienced? Why or why not? Prove your response.
- What were the boys’ internal fears? What larger message does this tell about human beings?
- How does Brown describe the ugly side of Germany? Why do you believe he includes images of Germany that “the boys could not see” (p. 332)?

- Why was it so significant to the boys that Hume was rowing with them, even though he was terribly ill? What does this request of the boys tell Ulbrickson about his crew team? What does it indicate to the reader?
- What is the effect of the cliffhanger at the end of the chapter? What emotions does it create for the reader?

Chapter 18

- What does Bobby Moch do to get the boys on track during the race? What else occurs during the race that requires Moch to make some immediate decisions? What was the outcome due to those decisions, and ultimately, Moch's leadership qualities?
- Why is the boat repeatedly compared to living things, such as animals (p. 348)? What is the purpose of this imagery throughout the story?
- Describe the reaction of the onlookers of the race and of Joe's family back in Seattle. Then describe your emotions as you experienced Washington's win.

Chapter 19

- What was the boys' reaction to winning the race? Was Ulbrickson's reaction and comment what you expected? Why or why not?
- What life lessons does Joe learn about himself after this race? What universal message can the reader take from Joe's experiences?

EPILOGUE & FINAL ANALYSIS QUESTIONS OF THE BOOK

- In the midst of the despair Americans felt during the Great Depression, the Olympics were a major distraction for everyone. How did sports, and the story of the 1936 University of Washington crew in particular, offer a sense of hope and escape for the athletes and for everyday Americans?
- Look back at each chapter's epigraph featuring quotes from George Yeoman Pocock. Choose the one that you most closely relate to and analyze how it is significant to your life and to today's society.
- If you were starting your own business from the ground up, what leadership skills or qualities could you teach your employees from lessons found in this story? Compile a list of skills/qualities, and then provide contextual support for each related lesson that was learned or taught in the book.
- What moment do you think was the most suspenseful in the book? Reread the moment you chose and discuss how Brown created suspense even though the audience knew the outcome of the 1936 Olympic Games. Provide specific examples for support.
- Throughout the book, the reader becomes familiar with various sportswriters of the time, such as Royal Brougham, Clarence Dirks, and George Varnell. How does this type of reporting compare to or contrast with sportswriters in today's society? Do you think the sportswriters' goal was to simply report the events, or was there more to it? Provide examples to support your answer.
- According to George Pocock in the quotation at the beginning of the Epilogue, "harmony, balance, and rhythm" are the "three things that stay with you your whole life" (p. 357). Is there truth to this statement? Are there any other qualities that you believe would stay with a person his or her whole life after an experience such as winning the Olympics? Elaborate on your response.



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