



# The Boys in the Boat (BNBF) Reader's Guide

**BY DANIEL JAMES BROWN**

Category: Sports |  
20th Century U.S. History

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## READERS GUIDE

### Questions and Topics for Discussion

#### INTRODUCTION

*The Boys in the Boat* tells the mesmerizing tale of Joe Rantz and the 1936 Olympic eight-oar crew from the University of Washington. But it is much more than a story of athletic endeavor. It's about a child abandoned by indifferent parents, Americans' struggle to survive during the Great Depression, a young man's love of a young woman, and the amazing physical and psychological demands of rowing. It's about loss and redemption. It has drama and pathos and moral scope. And it culminates on an extraordinary international stage in Berlin in 1936, with Adolf Hitler looking on.

With incredible attention to detail and poetic insight into the sport of rowing, author Daniel James Brown follows crew member Joe Rantz from his difficult early childhood through to his last days, and along the way paints a vivid portrait of a remarkable boy through his personal quest to find his place in the world. Joe's story is told in such heartbreaking detail that readers cannot help but root for him as he meets and ultimately overcomes one devastating setback after another.

*The Boys in the Boat* is also the story of legendary boat designer George Pocock and famed coach Al Ulbrickson, as well as all the boys of the University of Washington's legendary rowing team, including Roger Morris, Don Hume, and Bobby Moch. Brown shows tremendous respect for the memory of all the individuals, arguably one of the greatest crews of all time, and their underlying determination to be a part of the number-one boat—the one that would go on to face off against the world's elite for

gold in Berlin. Moreover, Brown captures the historical significance of the boys' efforts by taking readers inside Hitler's Germany during the Olympic preparations, into Joseph Goebbels's powerful Ministry of Propaganda, and behind Leni Riefenstahl's cameras as she captures images for her imposing propaganda films.

A testament to the power of sacrifice, hope, and trust in oneself and others, *The Boys in the Boat* speaks beautifully to what improbable feats can be accomplished when we look beyond ourselves.

#### ABOUT DANIEL JAMES BROWN

Daniel James Brown is the *New York Times*–bestselling author of two previous works of nonfiction, including *Under a Flaming Sky*. He has taught writing at San Jose State University and Stanford. He lives near Seattle.

#### A CONVERSATION WITH DANIEL JAMES BROWN

Q. How did you discover the story that became *The Boys in the Boat*?

A: One day about six years ago, my neighbor, a lady in her midsixties whom I knew only as Judy, came up to me after a homeowners' association meeting. She said her father, who was in the last weeks of his life and under hospice care at her house, was reading one of my earlier books. He was enjoying it and she wondered if I would come by to meet him. Of course I said yes. A few days later I sat down with her father, Joe Rantz, and after a while the conversation turned first to his experiences growing up during the Great Depression and then to his experiences rowing for a gold medal at the 1936 Olympics.

As I talked with Joe, I noted that tears came readily to his eyes at certain junctures. Men of his generation don't generally cry easily, so I knew immediately that there was something extraordinary going on. As he unfolded more of his story to me, I began to see that all the elements of a great tale were there—intense competition among individuals, bitter rivalries between schools, a boy left alone in the world, a fiercely demanding coach, a wise mentor, a love interest, even an evil stepmother. But I think what really clinched it for me was the simple fact that the climax to his story played out on an enormously dramatic stage—the 1936 Olympics in Berlin—and it played out under the gaze of Hitler himself. Really, what more could a storyteller ask for?

Q. *The Boys in the Boat* is an incredible combination of history and the personal heartwarming story of Joe Rantz and the rest of the boys who made up the gold medal boat at the 1936 Olympics, as well as a history of crew in the United States. It's a lot of areas to cover. How did you do your research?

A: The core of the research into Joe's personal story was the countless hours I spent with him, and—after he was gone—with his daughter. Judy had spent most of a lifetime listening to stories and collecting materials to document the crew's accomplishments. Much of the "heart" in the book comes straight from her. Beyond that, though, I had a lot to learn about rowing, about the other boys in the boat, and about the history of the mid-1930s. I read a lot, of course, but I also talked to many rowers and many rowing coaches, particularly at the University of Washington. I went out in the coaching launch on cold mornings. I interviewed dozens of the offspring of the original crew. I pored over hundreds of news accounts from the 1930s on microfilm. I went to Germany and explored every corner of the rowing facilities at Grünau, still largely unchanged since 1936. Then it was a matter of sitting down and distilling thousands of facts and anecdotes into a coherent narrative.

Q. What did you discover in your research that most surprised you?

A: There were quite a few surprises, but I'd say three stand out. The first was the degree of absolute devotion these nine men had for one another, literally to the day the last of them died. Another was the extraordinary physical demands of rowing. There's nothing else quite like it in sports or in life in terms of sheer endurance and pain. (There's also nothing else quite like it in terms of the comradeship and teamwork it demands.) And the third surprise was quite different—a big historical revelation for me. I think we all know that the Nazis used the 1936 Olympics as a propaganda tool, but until I did the research I had no idea of the scope of the Nazis' endeavor to deceive the world. It's really staggering when you bore down into the details of it. They basically turned all of Berlin into an elaborate movie set to sell a completely fabricated version of reality to the press and the thousands of foreigners who visited the city that summer.

Q. You include a lot of details that seem personal to each character, whether it is Joe Rantz; another one of the boys; Pocock; or many others. Were you able to interview any of them or people close to them? If the boys in the boat were alive today, how do you think they would receive your book?

A: Only Joe and one other crew member (Roger Morris) were alive when I started. I interviewed both, of course. But a great deal of personal information about the others came from letters, diaries, news clippings, scrapbooks, and photos that their families saved. I also interviewed more than a dozen of the children of the nine men. They were in many cases able to give me deep insights into not only what their fathers had done in Berlin, but what kinds of people they had been, both before and after the Olympics. I've tried to be as faithful as possible to the spirits of the men as their kids revealed them to me, and, I think, based on the feedback I've gotten from them so far, that I've got their individual stories "right." As to whether the boys would approve of the book, my honest guess is that they would. Most of them preferred not to talk a lot about the Olympics during their lives; one of the things that distinguished them was that they were, for the most part, very modest men. But when I asked Joe, in his last days, whether he wanted me to write the book he said yes quite eagerly. Then he added a qualifier—only if it was about "the boat." By "the boat" he meant the whole crew and the strands of affection that bound them together. That's what I set out to do, and I think they would all understand the book is a monument not just to what they accomplished, but also to what they became together.

Q. *The Boys in the Boat* is set during the financial depression of the 1930s, when millions of Americans lost their homes and jobs. Yet, in the midst of this despair, sports provided an avenue of success for athletes and a major distraction for the public at large. Why do you think sports, and the story of the 1936 University of Washington crew in particular, provided a sense of hope and escape for their fellow Americans?

A: I think this story is much like the Seabiscuit story in that regard. These nine boys were ordinary, working-class Americans from the rugged Pacific Northwest. They were the sons of loggers and fishermen and dairy farmers. Almost any ordinary American could identify with them, particularly in economic terms. Like everyone else, they were struggling simply to feed and clothe themselves. So in that sense they served as a model—something you could identify with if you were struggling yourself. This perception grew even more acute when they began to compete against the often very wealthy boys at Ivy League schools in the East. And then even more when they began to compete against the aristocratic British boys from Oxford and Cambridge. And most of all, of course, when they competed against the handpicked Nazi oarsmen in Berlin. It's hard to imagine a starker representation of good and evil brought face-to-face than these nine American kids dressed in ragged old sweatshirts and mismatched shorts racing against regimented blond oarsmen in crisp white uniforms with swastikas on their chests.

Q. Working as a team of nine, how did the group mentality come to shape each individual's perception of himself outside of the boat?

A: Rowing is unusual in the degree to which it demands that very strong-willed young men and women must lay down their egos and put the needs of the crew ahead of their individual wants and needs. This experience totally redefined Joe Rantz's view of life, and I think it did the same for many if not all of the boys. To succeed at the level they did, they had to become bonded in a way that is almost impossible to describe except by telling the whole story—indeed, that is what the book attempts to do. I think all nine of them would have told you that the experience defined the way they viewed work and competition and life in general for as long as they lived. They wound up being unusually capable, but also unusually humble men.

Q. There's an interesting dichotomy between the rowers of the East Coast who came from well-to-do families and were at elite Eastern schools and those members of the University of Washington crew who became the 1936 gold medalists. How do you feel the background of the West Coast boys helped them become the champions they were? Why does this particular team stand out as one of—if not the—best of all time?

A: Certainly because they hailed from the West they felt that they had something to prove, both to the long-entrenched rowing establishment and to the press in the East. That helped them forge their identity. It painted them as underdogs even though in some ways their natural surroundings—plenty of ice-free rowable water all year long—actually probably favored them. Because they were seen as somewhat rustic, their accomplishments attracted all the more attention in the East, and that in turn helped fuel their success and their confidence.

I do think you can make a very good argument that they are the greatest collegiate crew of all time, and I base that on two things in particular. For one, they had to row and win at both very short (two-thousand-meter) and very long (four-mile) distances. There's nothing like that today, and this crew, both in 1936 (their gold medal year) and in 1937, was simply unbeatable. No one defeated them over that two-year stretch. Second, they were not recruited from all over the world, as today's crews are. They had no modern erg (rowing) machines or specialized training routines or psychological support. They were just incredibly tough and incredibly good and incredibly fast.

Q. Were you a fan of crew and the Olympics before you starting work on the book? How did your conversations with Joe change your perspective on crew or the Olympics or team sports in general?

A: The only awareness I had of the sport growing up was that in the 1930s my father had been a huge fan of Ky Ebright's crew at the University of California at Berkeley, where both he and I went to school. Ironically, Ebright turns out to be one of the principal antagonists for Joe and the boys in the boat, as Cal was Washington's main rival through much of their story. But I had little familiarity with the sport beyond that. In a way, I think that unfamiliarity might have helped me write the book. Because I wanted to make sure I got everything right on a technical level as well as on a psychological level, I immersed myself in rowing lore, interviewed oarsmen and coaches, went out on the water with the freshman crew from the University of Washington, and generally learned everything I could about the sport. I don't think I've ever researched anything so thoroughly in my life.

And I also have to say that while I've never participated in team sports much—too short to be an oarsman and too fat to be a coxswain, for instance—the experience of writing this book has really opened my eyes to some of the positives that can come out of team sports. I honestly believe that crew saved Joe's life, or at least redeemed it and made it worth living. If he had never been on crew I don't think there's any doubt but that he would have remained somewhat damaged goods—something of a loner and somewhat dysfunctional—all his life.

Q. How has the sport of rowing changed now that synthetic materials are being used for the boats rather than the handcrafted cedar shells used in the 1936 Olympics?

A: Two things have fundamentally changed, really: The shells have gotten lighter and the rowers in them (both male and female) have gotten *much* larger. Many oarsmen now weigh more than 200 pounds; in Joe's day most were 160 to 175 pounds. The net result, of course, is that boats go much faster.

That said, there's no doubt that something beautiful was lost when the last hand-built cedar shells disappeared from crew races. They were really objects of art as well as utilitarian objects. A very large theme in the book is how the craftsmanship of George Pocock, who built the best cedar shells in the world, affected Joe and all the boys in the boat. From him they learned to strive constantly for the ideal and to respect the spiritual side of life.

Q. There are similarities between the time frame in the book and now—a poor economy, disastrous weather wreaking havoc—yet many differences such as a president who was able to push through public works programs that helped lift the economy and enabled the boys to get summer jobs to pay for college. And the

president of the 1930s was accessible—the boys rowed up the Hudson to FDR’s house in Hyde Park and got out and knocked on the door and were welcomed in. Do you think the boys would have the same success today?

A: It’s hard to imagine, isn’t it, just walking up to the president’s door and knocking? I think it says a lot about how we’ve changed as a country, and for me part of the appeal of a story like this is that it takes us back to a time when we trusted one another a bit more. And that’s actually an important theme in the book. It’s really about trust. The Depression (and later, the war) taught a whole generation of young Americans humility. It taught them that they needed one another. They learned to cooperate, literally to pull together as if they were all in the same boat. And that’s exactly what Joe and the other boys had to do in the boat. So for me, the story is very much a metaphor for what that whole generation managed to do.

Q. What is your favorite part of being able to share this incredible story?

A: I think really it is the satisfaction of seeing the boys’ accomplishments brought to light after all these years. As I say, they were a pretty humble bunch, not much disposed to talk about what they had pulled off. But their kids have held the story close to their hearts all their lives, and I can’t tell you how excited they are to see it coming out now. For Judy, Joe’s daughter, in particular, the book is the realization of a lifelong quest to share her father’s story. She has shed many tears during the time we have worked together, but I think perhaps the sweetest were the tears she shed when I first presented her with an advance reading copy of *The Boys in the Boat*.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Did you know much about rowing before reading *The Boys in the Boat*? If not, what aspects of the sport surprised you most? If so, did you learn anything about rowing that you didn’t know before? And if you don’t generally follow sports or sports history, what made you want to read this book?
- Compare how the Olympics were regarded in the 1930s to how they are regarded now. What was so significant about the boys’ win in 1936, right on the dawn of the Second World War? What political significance do the Olympics Games hold today?
- Thanks to hours of interviews and a wealth of archival information from Joe Rantz, his daughter Judy, and a number of other sources, Daniel James Brown is able to tell Joe’s story in such fine detail that it’s almost as if you are living in the moment with Joe. How did you feel as you were reading the book? What significance does Joe’s

unique point of view have for the unfolding of the narrative? And why do you think Joe was willing to discuss his life in such detail with a relative stranger?

- While *The Boys in the Boat* focuses on the experiences of Joe Rantz and his teammates, it also tells the much larger story of a whole generation of young men and women during one of the darkest times in American history. What aspects of life in the 1930s struck you most deeply? How do the circumstances of Americans during the Great Depression compare to what America is facing now?
- Brown mentions throughout the book that only a very special, almost superhuman individual can take on the physical and psychological demands of rowing and become successful at the sport. How did these demands play out in the boys' academic and personal lives? How did their personal lives influence their approach to the sport?
- Despite how much time Joe Rantz spent training with the other boys during his first two years at the University of Washington, he didn't really form close personal relationships with any of them until his third year on the team. Why do you think that was? What factors finally made Joe realize that it did matter who else was in the boat with him (p. 221)?
- Joe and Joyce maintain a very loving and supportive relationship throughout Joe's formative years, with Joyce consistently being his foundation, despite Joe's resistance to relying on her. How did their relationship develop while they were still in college? In what ways did Joyce support Joe emotionally? What about Joyce's own challenges at home? How do you think her relationship with her parents affected her relationship with Joe?
- Al Ulbrickson's leadership style was somewhat severe, to say the least, and at many times, he kept his opinions of the boys and their standings on the team well-guarded. Even with this guardedness, what about him inspired Joe and the boys to work their hardest? What strategies did Ulbrickson use to foster competition and a strong work ethic among them and why?
- George Pocock and Al Ulbrickson each stand as somewhat mythic figures in *The Boys in the Boat*; however, they were very different men with very different relationships to the boys. Discuss their differences in leadership style and their roles within the University of Washington's rowing establishment. What about Pocock enabled him to connect with Joe Rantz on such a personal level?
- At one point, Pocock pulls Joe aside to tell him "it wasn't just the rowing but his crewmates that he had to give himself up to, even if it meant getting his feelings hurt" (p. 235). How do you think this advice affected Joe's interactions with the other boys?



How do you think it might have affected Joe's relationship to his family, especially after the deaths of Thula Rantz and his friend Charlie MacDonald?

- What was Al Ulbrickson and Ky Ebright's relationship to the local and national media? How did they use sportswriters to advance their teams' goals and how did the sportswriters involve themselves in collegiate competition? Were you surprised at all by the level of involvement, especially that of Royal Brougham? How does it compare to collegiate sports coverage today?
  - When Al Ulbrickson retired in 1959, he mentioned that one of the highlights of his career was "the day in 1936 that he put Joe Rantz in his Olympic boat for the first time, and watched the boat take off" (p. 364). Why do you think that moment was so important for Ulbrickson? What about Joe was so special to him and how did Joe become the element that finally brought the boys of the *Husky Clipper* together?
  - Later in the book, it is noted "all along Joe Rantz had figured that he was the weak link in the crew" (p. 326), but that he found out much later in life that all the other boys felt the same way. Why do you think that was? And why do you suppose they didn't reveal this to each other until they were old men?
  - What was your favorite hair-raising moment in *The Boys of the Boat*? Even knowing the outcome of the 1936 Olympic Games, was there any point where you weren't sure if Joe and the boys would make it?
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