

Book Reviews

The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. By Daniel James Brown. (New York: Viking, 2013, Pp. 1, 416. \$28.95.)

Daniel James Brown's book, *The Boys in the Boat*, tells the story of the U.S. rowing team which competed in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. The team, oarsmen from the University of Washington, stunned the world by capturing the gold medal in front of 75,000 Germans, including Adolf Hitler. With exceptional narrative talent, Brown weaves together a tale about the world of collegiate rowing and boat-making, the difficulties facing working-class Americans in the Pacific Northwest, and the propaganda-driven dreams of Adolf Hitler in the build up to the Second World War.

The book centers on the development of the team, first as a collegiate crew competing against teams from the States, then as a national team competing on the world stage. Each race is depicted with thrilling excitement, each setback with emotional devastation. Characters, such as Joe Rantz, Al Ulrickson and Bobby Moch, are well-developed; their personalities shine through the pages.

Interspersed with the history of the team from Washington is the account given by Brown of the affairs in Germany during the years leading up to the Olympic Games. Hitler saw the 1936 Olympics as an opportunity to "portray Germany to the world as a civilized and modern state, a friendly but powerful nation that the larger world would do well to recognize and respect."¹

One of the book's strongest points, beyond the thrilling narrative, is its ability to create the world around Joe Rantz as he grows up during the height of the Great Depression. Left to fend for himself by his family at the age of fourteen, Joe does all sorts of things to stay alive. He fishes illegally. He steals moonshine from bootleggers and then resells it. He dynamites giant stumps the logging companies left behind in fields. For many readers, these sorts of details can create a window into a world not often seen—the world of the survivors of the Great Depression.

In comparison to many scholarly works on the history of the period, however, *The Boys in the Boat* might leave much to be desired. Many of the aspects which make the book so readable, also make its historicity suspect.

¹ Pg. 21

On his website Brown writes, “My primary interest as a writer is in bringing compelling historical events to life as vividly and accurately as I can.” The “vividness,” which seems to be of primary importance, sometimes might get in the way of the “accurateness.” At times it seems the author’s desire to provide a vivid story caused him to take liberties unavailable to the typical historian.

In a similar vein, Brown’s biggest problem is his lack of primary sources. Clearly Joe Rantz, the elderly man who first told the author the story, is the main font of information. The author relies on his memories to describe much of what happened. A few diaries are used, as are newspaper clippings and newsreel footage, but Rantz’ interpretation of the events form the structure of the story. Brown was not able to interview the entire team and relies heavily on the point of view of one elderly man recalling events of nearly 70 years prior.

On the whole, the book is a stellar read-and worthwhile for someone interested in the time period, the sport of rowing, or simply looking for a positive story about the triumph of the underdog. The epic story of triumph, set against the backdrop of the Depression, is thrilling, emotional, and thoroughly compelling. While academics might be suspect of some aspects of its methodology, the book, on the whole, deserves its place on the medal stand.

Ryan Bigney
Texas Woman’s University