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

The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics by Daniel James Brown

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Summary

The Boys in the Boat by Daniel James Brown is the story of the University of Washington rowing team that struggled through personal and professional battles to become America's unlikely representatives in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Summer Games. They won the Gold!

The Boys in the Boat is the story of an entire Olympic rowing team, but it focuses primarily on the life of Joe Rantz, one of the boys in the boat. Rantz had a particularly difficult childhood with his mother dying when he was only four. His widowed father married a cold, distant woman nearly twenty-years his junior. As a child, Joe was frequently abandoned as his father searched for work in Depression-era America. He was shuttled from one relative's home to another. Eventually, he was left to fend for himself at the age of ten. Although his father would pop in and out of Joe's life for the next few years, Joe was primarily on his own, working for a place to live, food, and very sparse pocket money. He learned to find value in what other people left behind, from foraged food to abandoned wood. Rantz was a farm boy not afraid of physical labor. As he grew, he became tall and strong. Despite the fact that he had been neglected and abandoned nearly his entire life, Joe's spirit was resilient, and he never turned bitter. He continued to love his family, particularly his father, and hoped that one day they would be reunited. When he was seventeen, Joe's older brother summoned him to Seattle to finish his final year of high school, and it was there that Joe met Al Ulbrickson, head rowing coach at the University of Washington. Ulbrickson, who immediately recognized Joe's physical abilities, encouraged the boy to apply to the university and try out for the college rowing team.

Even though Joe was eventually admitted to the University of Washington, he had to take a full year off from school to raise enough money for his tuition. He knew he wouldn't be able to attend without the small stipend awarded to members of the rowing team. When he finally arrived on the university campus, one of his first stops was the rowing shell house. Joe endured a long, arduous tryout process that whittled down a huge number of rowing hopefuls to a select handful. The boys who were chosen as part of the university's freshman rowing team all had one thing in common, tenacity. Despite the fact that the boys were all part of one team, there were clear divisions, with Joe often being singled out and teased for his impoverished background. Joe was extremely sensitive about his poverty and embarrassed by his raggedy clothes. Nevertheless, the boys rowed well together and soon began gaining local and international attention for their breathtaking wins over their major competitor California, as well as the established rowing teams on the Eastern coast.

Time passed, and the relationship between the boys in the boat eventually began to thrive. For the first time in his life, Joe felt that he had found somewhere he truly belonged. By the time Joe was a senior in college, his crew had qualified to represent the United States in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany. By this time, Joe was engaged to the love of his life. After the unexpected death of his stepmother, he reconciled with his father. When Joe set out to Germany in the summer of 1936, he was

on top of the world and didn't want to squander the opportunity. Joe's feeling of hope and resilience was a stark contrast to what was happening in the rest of the world, with the Great Depression nearly crippling American economics, the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, and the impending outbreak of the Second World War. Still, the Olympic Games provided a reprieve from all the stress as families around the world crowded around their televisions and radios to cheer on their national teams. The rowing final was one of the most prestigious events, with even Hitler himself coming out to watch. When the American team won gold, it was a shock to everyone, including the team itself. The boys in the boat had achieved what they had dedicated nearly four years of their life to obtaining, Olympic gold. For a boy like Joe Rantz, who had spent his entire life feeling like an outsider, he had proved his value once and for all. The feeling of accomplishment and belonging stuck with him for the rest of his life.

Prologue, Part 1: What Seasons They Have Been Through, Chapter 1

Summary

In the prologue, author Daniel James Brown explains how he met Joe Rantz, who is the main subject of the book. By coincidence, Rantz had been friends with the son of one of the subjects of Brown's last books and was interested in meeting the author who lived only a short drive away. Brown obliged and was immediately taken by the old man in his mid-seventies who was slowly dying of congestive heart failure. Since Brown knew that Rantz had been part of the rowing crew that won gold in the 1936 Olympics, he began asking the old man questions about his career. After their first meeting, Brown knew that he wanted to write a book about Rantz who replied with misty eyes, "But not just about me. It has to be about the boat" (Page 3).

The book opens on a grey day in Seattle in 1933, four years into the Great Depression. Brown takes great care to describe the abysmal living conditions of those unfortunate Americans living in poverty during this time, as well as to explain the nation's politics. Using almost cinematic descriptions, Brown brings the reader's eye from the derelict ghettos of Seattle's "Hooverville" to the campus of the University of Washington where students sit on green quadrangles "eating their lunch, poring over books, chatting idly" (Page 10). Two young men, Joe Rantz and Roger Morris, both extremely tall and muscular, cut through the crowd walking purposefully toward "Montlake Cut" where the University of Washington is holding the freshman crew tryouts. Present at the tryouts are freshman coach Tom Bolles and the university's head rowing coach Al Ulbrickson. Ulbrickson in particular is eager to find the best of the bunch. The University of Washington had never even come close to qualifying for the Olympics, and Ulbrickson is determined to beat out his main competition in California.

At the same time, thousands of miles away, architect Werner March meets with Adolf Hitler to discuss the largest sports stadium in Germany, one that would hold 100,000 people, for use in the upcoming Olympics. March is surprised by Hitler's request, especially since Hitler had not initially wanted to host the games until being convinced to by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, a propaganda specialist.

Analysis

This opening section of the book sets the stage for the main events. Brown's writing style is extremely descriptive as he creates strong images of the various settings – from the college campus to the boathouse to March's architecture studio in Berlin – with brilliant imagery. The early 1930's was a time of particular interest in American History. The Great Depression was in full swing in America and Adolf Hitler was rising to power in Germany. Brown weaves together these two major events with Rantz's experiences

on the crew team. Readers can expect from the very beginning of the book that all three of these elements will converge at the Olympic Games.

Although the reader doesn't know much about Rantz's back-story yet, it is clear from his initial experiences at The Cut that making it onto the University of Washington's crew team would be life changing. Since arriving on campus, Rantz has never felt like he belonged: "The girls on the library lawn who had glanced appreciatively his way had had to overlook what was painfully obvious to him: that his clothes were not like those of most of the other students – his trousers not neatly creased, his oxfords neither new nor freshly polished, his sweater neither crisp nor clean but rather an old and rumpled hand-me-down" (Page 13). It's clear that Rantz has had a difficult life and that he's not the typical student attending U of W, particularly during the Depression. Given Rantz's background, earning one of the nine spots in the freshman boat would mean the guarantee of a part-time job somewhere on campus, which would provide desperately needed income: "To fail at this rowing business would mean, at best, returning to a small, bleak town on the Olympic Peninsula with nothing ahead of him but the prospect of living alone in a cold, empty, half-built house, surviving as best as he could on odd jobs, foraging for food, and maybe, if he was very lucky, finding another construction job with the Civilian Conservation Corps. At worst it would mean joining a long line of broken men standing outside a soup kitchen like the one down on Yesler Way" (Page 13). Unlike many of the students at U of W, Rantz has never had anything in life handed to him, and from this short paragraph, the reader grasps how desperate Rantz's situation was before coming to U of W. Readers will also understand how life changing the opportunity to join crew would be, even for a young man like Rantz who has never rowed in his life.

Based on the events in the prologue, it's already clear to readers that Rantz will make the team and Ulbrickson will go on to win the gold at the Olympics, as he has always dreamed of doing. In this way, it's clear from the book's opening that the plot will focus more on the characters' emotional growth rather than the big reveal of winning gold. The Boys in the Boat seamlessly weaves together emotional and physical history, with a strong emphasis on the "boys" and their relationship. The reader sees how important this is to Rantz from the prologue. For years, Rantz's family had no idea of the whereabouts of his Olympic gold medal, and it didn't really seem to bother anyone. What was, and is, far more important to Rantz is the memory of his time with the boys on the boat. Brown writes, "Finally, watching Joe struggle for composure over and over, I realized that "the boat" was something more than just the shell or its crew. To Joe, it … was a shared experience – a singular thing that had unfolded in a golden sliver of time long gone, when nine good-hearted young men strove together, pulled together as one, gave everything they had for one another, bound together forever by pride and respect and love" (Page 2). Like the memories that bring the elderly Joe Rantz to tears, The Boys in the Boat strives to memorialize the beauty of those vanished moments.

Vocabulary

Herculean, sallow, attenuate, chiaroscuro, unfurl, parlance, rudiment, demarcation, lithe, regatta, coxswain, rapier

Part 1: What Seasons They Have Been Through, Chapter 2

Summary

Chapter Two delves more deeply into Joe Rantz's childhood. He was the second-born son to Harry and Nellie Rantz, born fourteen years after his older brother Frank. Joe's father was a natural-born inventor with big dreams and a penchant for tinkering. Joe's childhood probably would have been blissful and happy had his mother not died of throat cancer when Joe was only four-years-old. His mother's death signaled the first of many times Joe was uprooted from his home, sent to live with various relatives. He spent a year living in the attic of a cold, distant aunt, feeling terribly frightened, homesick, and alone, before Fred summoned for him to live with him in Pennsylvania. Fred, who was now twenty-one, had recently married Thelma LaFollette, one daughter in a set of twins from a prosperous Washington wheat-farming family. Joe lived with Frank and Thelma for two years until his father, Harry Rantz, married Thelma's twin sister Thula, moved back to the old house in Spokane, and agreed to take Joe – now seven – with him. There were a few happy years after Harry and Thula's marriage, with Harry still dreaming of making it big as an inventor, and the family growing with the birth of two more sons, Harry Jr. and Mike.

Despite the happy appearances, the façade was beginning to crumble. Harry Rantz found himself working long days out of town, leaving Thula home alone with three young boys to care for. While Harry and Joe kept Nellie's memory alive by playing music on her old piano and singing the songs she had loved, Thula, despite being a classically trained violinist, found the music to be crass and disrespectful. Tragedy struck when the family house burned down when Joe was nine, and as the family watched their home burn to the ground, Harry rushed back inside to save Nellie's piano. The family packed up what little they had left and moved to a mining camp in Idaho, where Harry hoped to find work. Although the mining camp where they lived was bleak, especially for Thula, it was a tinkerer's paradise, and Harry and Joe spent long hours working on projects together, much to Joe's delight. Times were tough for the family, and Thula took out her frustrations on Joe, who was growing like a weed and inhaling food. The house grew so tense that Thula finally delivered Harry with an ultimatum: Joe or her. Harry chose Thula, and sent ten-year-old Joe to live at the schoolhouse. Every morning and evening – before and after school – Joe trudged down to the cookhouse to work in exchange for meals before trudging back up the schoolhouse to chop wood in exchange for his bed. In between, he focused on his studies and homework.

Analysis

This chapter shows the tough life that Joe overcame to reach success as an adult. Joe's upbringing was full of discord as he was bumped around from living situation to living

situation. While many children would have floundered in such instability, the constant uprooting built Joe's work ethic and strengthened his resolve. Unfortunately for Joe, the upheaval of his life does not end here. This back-story gives readers extra insight into why Joe felt like such an outsider when he reached the University of Washington and was surrounded by trust fund babies who have lived in the lap of luxury their entire lives. It also helps explain why making crew was so important to him – it would give him a place to belong after feeling like an outcast for so long. As terrible as Joe's childhood was, had he been raised another way, he likely wouldn't have found himself on the University of Washington rowing team. Like most boys at the time, he likely would have gone to work with his father in the mines, or taken over his family farm. Because Joe was essentially abandoned by his family, he was given the freedom to dream big, as his father had once done, only Joe found a way to capture success. Joe could also thank his long hours of physical labor – including chopping wood from the age of ten and working as busboy in a restaurant – for his physical strength, which no doubt helped secure him a spot on crew. Even though Joe was kicked around from house to house, and probably grew up feeling worthless and unwanted, the author ends the chapter with a quote relating to one of the books' themes: finding value in unexpected places: "If you simply kept your eyes open, it seemed, you just might find something valuable in the most unlikely of places. The trick was to recognize a good thing when you saw it, no matter how odd or worthless it might at first appear, no matter who else might just walk away and leave it behind" (Page 37). Even though Joe would grow up as an "unwanted" child, he would eventually go on to prove his value to America, and ultimately, the world.

This chapter also highlights an interesting time in American history: the era of big dreamers. At the time of Joe's birth, America was alight with new technologies, from the Wright brothers successfully flying their first plane at Kitty Hawk, to Henry Ford unveiling his first Model-A. The early 20th century was a time when Americans believed anything was possible – that big dreams could be made into spectacular reality. This American dream swept up Harry Rantz, and ultimately his young wife, Thula. The reality, of course, was crushing. Thula, who had spent her life training as a classical violinist, suddenly found herself raising three boys in a mining camp in Idaho while her twin sister, who had never shown much talent at anything, had married the handsome and successful Frank Rantz and gone on to live a cushy middle-class life in Washington. Jealousy was a large factor in Thula's existence as she felt she wasn't living the life she deserved. She had been swept up in Harry's big dreams, and resented the fact that she was left to raise the children on her own while Harry worked minimum-wage jobs. She was also deeply resentful of the lingering affection Harry had for his first wife, made manifest in his relationship with Joe. Harry's decision to save Nellie's piano in the house fire, rather than memorabilia from his life with Thula, likely pushed Thula over the edge and began her irrational hatred of Joe – the living legacy of Harry's previous marriage.

Vocabulary

auspicious, inveterate, tiller, replete, camphor, filch, fete, behemoth

Part 1: What Seasons They Have Been Through, Chapter 3

Summary

Chapter Three opens with a description of the physical toll that rowing takes on the body, saying that “Physiologists, in fact, have calculated that rowing a two-thousand-meter race – the Olympic standard – takes the same physiological toll as playing two basketball games back-to-back. And it exacts that toll in about six minutes” (Page 40). The sheer physical drain of being a part of the crew team would end the dreams of most of the rowing hopefuls, as few had the physical stamina required not only for races, but for the hours of training and practice. Despite the exhausting physical toll, many of the boys hung on thanks to Coach Bolles heart rendering speeches about overcoming adversity, the life-transforming experiences of crew, and how rowing brings one closer to God: “He held out the prospect of becoming part of something larger than themselves, of finding in themselves something they did not yet know they possessed, of growing from boyhood to manhood” (Page 41).

This chapter also gives the reader background into the life of George Yeoman Pocock, the British ship builder who found himself as the primary shell builder for the University of Washington’s rowing team. Pocock’s family had been in the boat building business for generations. At the age of fifteen, George apprenticed himself to his father working on Eton's (England’s most prestigious university) prodigious fleet of racing shells. George didn’t just build the boats, he also learned how to row them. He was also a quick study of the different rowing styles. He soon developed a unique style that proved to be far more efficient than the style being used at Eton, and it wasn’t long before some of elite students began asking for private lessons. At the same time, George and his brother competed in – and won – a variety of rowing prizes across the country. After his father unexpectedly lost his job at Eton, George and his brother moved to Canada and began their own boat building company. They slowly made a small name for themselves in the industry and were eventually approached by Hiram Conibear, then the head rowing coach at the University of Washington, to build a fleet of racing shells. George moved to Washington and set up shop in The Cut, where he made a name for himself as an expert in rowing.

Analysis

This chapter is important because it showcases how the eventual success of the University of Washington rowing team was not simply due to the physical strength and endurance of the team. The dream of gold started generations before, and it became reality as a result of luck and a variety of people’s lifelong dreams and dedications – from the rowers to the coach to the ship builder. George Yeoman Pocock isn’t remembered as an integral part of the gold medal winning crew, but this chapter makes

clear that the victory never would have happened without him. Over the course of his life, Pocock established himself as one of the lead experts in competitive rowing, and each of the chapters in the books begins with a quote from his biography Ready All!: George Yeoman Pocock and Crew Racing.

This chapter also delves into the physical drains of participating in crew. Many physiologists believe that it is the most physically taxing sport on the human body, and there are long descriptions of how the monotonous, repetitive motions affect the body's muscular and skeletal systems. The second half of the chapter also describes, in step-by-step detail, the process of rowing a racing boat, and how difficult this series of minute details is to master. It is interesting to note that the by the end of the chapter, many of the crew hopefuls have already dropped out of tryouts, with the first of the abdicators being "the boys with impeccably creased trousers and freshly polished oxfords" (Page 51). Life on the rowing team is exceptionally difficult, and for those raised in a cushy existence, the physical toll of the job must have been shocking. However, for someone like Joe who was used to physical pain and hard work, it must have felt like coming home.

Vocabulary

equipoise, echelon, regalia, parlance, gossamer, egregious

Part 1: What Seasons They Have Been Through, Chapter 4

Summary

In 1924, Thula went into labor with her third child. Harry set off to fetch the doctor eighteen-miles away. A storm and broken bridge kept Harry and the doctor from returning for almost the entire night. It was the last straw for Thula. After making it through the delivery of her first daughter, she packed up the family and demanded to move in with her parents in Seattle. Eventually, Harry found work in Sequim and built an apartment for his family over an auto repair shop where he would spend the evenings tinkering with old cars with Joe. He began work on an expansive farmhouse for the family near the river. Over the next few years, Harry and Joe worked tirelessly on the house and moved the family in when it was only half complete. While Joe was in his element – happy to be with his father and siblings again – Thula found life in the wilderness to be just as bleak and depressing as life had been in Boulder City: "Everything about farm life appalled her – the daily milking of cows, the ever-present stench of manure, the relentless collecting of eggs, the daily cleaning of the cream separator, the always flickering light fixtures hung from the rafters. She despised the endless chopping of kindling to feed the woodstove, the early mornings and the late nights. And she was perpetually irritated by Joe and his teenaged friends and their makeshift bands, out on the wide front porch, making a racket day and night" (Page 57).

Things went from bad to worse for the Rantz family when the stock market crashed. Although it took a few months for the horrors of the Great Depression to spread as far west as Washington, the family knew it was coming. Families slowly began leaving Sequim. One day when Joe returned home from school, he saw his family sitting in the packed-up car ready to leave. When he confronted his father, Harry said, "Look, Son, if there's one thing I've figured out about life, it's that if you want to be happy, you have to learn how to be happy on your own" (Page 58). With that, Harry, Thula, and the three young children drove away, leaving Joe to fend for himself in the half-finished farmhouse in the midst of the financial crash. Even though he was just fourteen years of age, Joe learned to become completely self-reliant over the next few months, fending entirely for himself. He fortified the garden and chicken coop to protect his precious food sources from damage, and he made some spare cash by catching salmon and selling it to his neighbors. Later that year, Joe began stealing bootleg whiskey and selling that, too. Between his schoolwork, housework, and illegal selling ventures, Joe also picked up any odd job he could find. He managed to make ends meet and to thrive.

At the same time, Joe met and fell in love with a local girl named Joyce Simdars. Joyce's mother was a vigilant Christian who raised Joyce with an iron fist, but the two lovebirds managed to find time to sneak away together, often at local dance halls where Joe and his band would provide the music. Joyce knew how marginal Joe's prospects were because he was an abandoned boy. But, she was drawn in by his carefree spirit

and self-reliant nature, both of which were completely opposite from the strict, Puritan household she had grown up in. When Joe was seventeen, he received a letter from his brother Frank asking him to come to Seattle to finish his senior year of high school. Frank hoped that under his academic guidance, Joe would be able to secure a scholarship to one of the local colleges, greatly improving his prospects. Although he didn't want to leave Joyce, Joe accepted Frank's offer and excelled in Seattle. While in the gym one afternoon, he was approached by Al Ulbrickson and invited to try out for the rowing team at the University of Washington. Joe held onto Al's card, but he returned to Sequim for a year to save money for college. At the end of the year, Joe proposed to Joyce, and she accepted.

Analysis

Joe's time in Sequim was the turning point for his personal growth. Abandoned for the last time by his father, fourteen-year-old Joe decided that he would never allow himself to be emotionally vulnerable again. Even though he was only a teenager, Joe knew that his father was right, if he wanted to be happy, he had to learn to be happy on his own: "Whatever else came his way, he wasn't gong to let anything like this happen again. From now on, he would make his own way, find his own route to happiness … He would survive, and he would do it on his own" (Page 59). Once again, the tragedies and setbacks of his tumultuous life helped to shape his character into one that would be worthy of success. Rather than fall apart, as many teenagers might have done, Joe fortified his resolve to succeed on his own, and he did. This determination and grit no doubt helped to shape his gold medal winning success.

This chapter begins to show the effects that the Great Depression had, particularly on rural Americans. Although the reader hasn't yet seen the final devastation, the financial crash directly affected the farming community in Sequim making it nearly impossible for anyone to survive in their rural existence. The land that had once been a haven for farmers turned against them. As families picked up to find work elsewhere, they often left their dogs behind. Packs of wild dogs formed, ravaging chicken coops and terrifying milk cows (so much so that many cows stopped producing milk). Minks began attacking what few chickens were left on the Rantz farm, leaving the family completely depleted of both their milk and egg income. After his father left, Joe turned to poaching salmon and selling stolen booze (during prohibition) to make ends meet. Despite the setbacks in his life, Joe proved himself to be resilient and hardworking, two of the main reasons why Joyce Simdars fell in love with him. Joyce's upbringing, although very different from Joe's, was equally tumultuous. Her parents were religious zealots who terrorized their children with hard work and emotionally abusive punishments for misbehavior.

In Chapter Two, the reader begins to see Joe's potential as an athlete form when he raced his homemade go-kart down a hill at Boulder Creek: "Being in motion, outdoors, with wind in his face made him feel alive – it brushed away the anxiety that since his mother's death had seemed to be nibbling continuously at the corners of his mind" (Page 32). These hints of athletic success, particularly in rowing, are returned to with images of Joe working at a logging factory with this beautiful description of the plow

horses, Fritz and Dick: “Charlie would give a signal and in unison Fritz and Dick would squat down on their haunches while he chained them up. He’d give another signal, and the two would rise and pull as if they were one horse, their movements crisply synchronized. And they pulled will all their hearts. When horses pulled like that, Charlie told Joe, they could pull far more than twice what each could pull alone. They’d pull, he said, till the log moved, the harness broke, or their hearts gave out” (Page 63). Similar passages show Brown’s keen writing ability and his unique way of showcasing how, like the boys aboard the rowing boat, all the elements of Joe Rantz’s life seem to be working together in perfect unison.

Vocabulary

vulcanize, purloin, boisterous, tarpaulin, chagrin, austere, illusory, effusive, prodigious, rejoinder

Part 1: What Seasons They Have Been Through, Chapter 5

Summary

By October 1933, the original 175 boys trying out for spots on the University of Washington's rowing team had been whittled down to 80. With the weather turning cold, training sessions became a brutal struggle against nature, as the boys were whipped with freezing rain and rapidly dropping temperatures. Despite the constant obstacles, Joe never lost focus of his goal, and excelled in every practice. Although the tryout experience was bonding for the boys, Joe still found himself struggling to make friends with anyone at the boathouse. His closest companion was Roger Morris, a fellow engineering student from a working class background, but even that relationship was awkward. Many of the boys still teased Joe for his impoverished upbringing and ragged clothes. Although it hurt his feelings, Joe was used to this type of ridicule and used it to fuel his desire for success.

Things weren't all bad for Joe in 1933, especially when Joyce moved from Sequim to join him in Seattle. She took a job as a maid for a local judge during the week and spent time with Joe on the weekends. At the same time, the Dust Bowl began sweeping over the American plains, and dark rumblings of unrest in Germany began leaking into the news. Despite all the change happening in the world, Joe remained focused on his one goal: making crew. In November 1933, Coach Bolles announced the team for first boat. Both Joe and Roger were on the list. During his first ride with the team, Joe could hardly hold back tears as he reveled in what he had accomplished.

Analysis

In this chapter, the reader is given a bit of insight into Roger Morris' background, which also helps to characterize American life at the time. Morris's family ran a clear-out company, moving families from foreclosed homes. The descriptions of Morris's working life showcase how bleak life was for so many American families during the Great Depression. Seeing down-and-out families being removed from their homes no doubt gave Morris ample opportunity to appreciate the stability of his own life and, as it had with Joe, strengthened his resolve to work hard and succeed.

This chapter, which ends the book's first section, highlights a turning point, not only for Joe but also for the nation. The Dust Bowl had begun to unleash its fury on the plains, sending hundreds of thousands of displaced farmers in search of nonexistent work in the West and political tensions were rising in Germany. Back in Washington, Coach Bolles made his final selections for the rowing team. It should come as no surprise that Joe made the first boat. The chapter ends with a beautiful image of the boys in the first boat rowing together on the moonlit water on the night of their selection. Throughout the

tryout process, Joe had felt like an outsider, but something shifted in the boys once they had been officially made a team. The sense of competition was over and they knew they must work together as one unit, like the plow horses from the previous chapter, to accomplish their shared goals. Even on that first ride, Joe felt like he belonged, and he was deeply moved by the beauty of the moment: “The boys sat without taking, breathing heavily, exhaling plumes of white breath. Even now they had stopped rowing, their breathing was synchronized, and for a brief, fragile moment it seemed to Joe as if all of them were part of a single thing, something alive with breath and spirit of its own” (Page 78).

Vocabulary

wane, sporadic, euphemistic, denizen, harbinger

Part 2: Resiliency, Chapter 6

Summary

In January, the new freshman crew returned to campus and were upgraded for the first time into proper racing shells built by George Pocock. The team trained by racing against the JV and varsity crew teams before their big race against the University of California's team in mid-April. Whoever won that race would go to Poughkeepsie in June to race against the elite eastern schools. Nine brutal months of training for the possibility of two major races. In his six years as freshman coach, Bolles had never lost to California on Lake Washington, and he didn't intend for this year to be the first. He raced the boys against each other in three boats, although with the terrible winter weather, many more boys began to drop out and Bolles sometimes struggled to fill the third boat. Ulbrikson was working his varsity crew just as hard, and was shocked one wintry afternoon when, after the boys had already been rowing for two hours, the freshman crew nearly bested his varsity crew in a friendly race.

Brown takes some time to describe the physicality of rowing a racing shell, and what is required of each oarsman. He does this to explain why, in frustrated exasperation, Bolles pulled Joe Rantz from the first boat after seeing that Joe couldn't seem to master the smooth rowing stroke: "He rowed powerfully but decidedly in his own way, and by any conventional measure his own way looked to be largely ineffective" (Page 91). Bolles was flabbergasted when the boat raced markedly slower, speeding up only when Joe was returned to his position.

In early April, California coach Ky Ebright and his team traveled to Seattle for their big race against U of W. Ebright knew he has a strong team, and even went so far as to say in the newspapers that it was the best team he'd ever coached. This statement worried Bolles who, just that morning, realized how lethargic and out of sync his freshman crew appeared. On race day, over 8,000 Seattle residents, including Joyce who had taken a rare day off of work, came down to Lake Washington to watch the race. In the boat, Joe sat nervously in his number three seat, thinking about how he had been training for five and half months for this moment. When the whistle blew, California exploded into the lead, but slowly and steadily, the Washington boys began to catch up, and even to overtake. At the end of the race, Washington rowed to a four-and-a-half length victory, crossing the finish line nearly twenty seconds before California.

Meanwhile in Germany, Goebbels had been promoted to Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, and moved into a sumptuous mansion, which he immediately remodeled and decorated for maximum opulence. Soon, Nazi elite and German celebrities began visiting regularly for extravagant soirees. One young starlet who often attended Goebbels' parties was Leni Reifenstahl, a beautiful and brilliant actress. Riefenstahl began making propaganda films at her production company, including "The Blue Light," which deeply moved Hitler. Goebbels grew jealous of Hitler's

obvious affection for Reifenstahl, but the two were obviously well suited to work together on propaganda for the upcoming 1936 Olympics.

Analysis

The “bad blood” and rivalry between the University of Washington and the University of California stemmed not only from the two schools being the only on the west coast with formidable rowing teams, but also because of the relationship between the coaches. Cal coach Ky Ebright had attended the University of Washington and rowed coxswain for their team. After graduation, he stuck around the boathouse and continued to mentor new boys, but was passed up for the coaching position when it became available. Whether disgruntled or simply looking to continue his career, Ebright took a coaching offer at University of California, whipping the freshman crew into competition shape in a matter of only a few years: “As California continued to improve, other issues surfaced, new resentments arose, and the relationship between the two programs deteriorated further. Before long, the rivalry between them had become, as Ebright later put it bluntly, ‘vicious and blood’” (Page 87). Ebright, who had been longtime friends with shipbuilder Pocock even went so far as to accuse Pocock of sending the Cal crew substandard racing vessels and of favoring the Washington crew with his advice and mentorship.

Bolles appreciated the boys on the freshman crew and immediately recognized their potential because of their background: “The boys who had made it this far were rugged and optimistic in a way that seemed emblematic of their western roots. They were the genuine article, mostly the products of lumber towns, dairy farms, mining camps, fishing boats, and shipyards. They looked, they walked, and the talked as if they had spent most of their lives out of doors. Despite the hard times and their pinched circumstances, they smiled easily and openly” (Page 94). These characteristics would have been important for a crew team at any time in the sport’s history, but it seems particularly fitting that the crew of 1936 would be described as such in the middle of the Great Depression. Not only did these characteristics make them a spectacular rowing team, it also allowed them to be symbols for the entire country that was struggling to survive, to thrive, in the midst of economic collapse.

Vocabulary

acrid, goad, plaintive, dour, flummox, lethargic, burnish, pragmatic

Part 2: Resiliency, Chapter 7

Summary

When the freshman crew returned to Washington, they were sluggish and disorganized. Bolles threatened to rebuild the entire team from scratch for the Poughkeepsie Regatta in June, a threat that Joe in particular found disheartening. Interestingly, when the weather turned sour again, the crew picked up its speed and productivity, which baffled Bolles. Why couldn't they row with such finesse on placid seas? Bolles stopped threatening to switch up the team and simply prepared the boys for their big race. A few weeks later, they excitedly boarded the cross-country train that would take them to New York. For most of the boys, it was their first journey outside of Washington, and for most, Joe included, their first journey on a train. With pride, Joe pulled his guitar out of the case and began playing the happy songs his family had sung in better times, and the songs he and Joyce still harmonized to. He was shocked and embarrassed when his teammates, instead of joining in on the fun, pointed and laughed, calling him "Cowboy Joe" and a "troubadour."

Brown spends some time describing the history of the East-West rivalry, not only in crew racing, but in all sport. In general, in the early 20th century, the east represented old money while the west represented "no money at all." The boys from the west seemed to "embody certain attributes that stood in stark contrast to those of their eastern counterparts. They seemed, as a rule, self-made, rough hewn, wild, native, brawny, simple, and perhaps, in the eyes of some, a bit coarse; their eastern counterparts seemed, as a rule, well bred, sophisticated, moneyed, refined, an perhaps, in their own eyes at least, a bit superior" (Page 113). The Washington crew that showed up for the Poughkeepsie Regatta that year couldn't have been any better cast to play their role in the ongoing east-west feud.

The day of the race is described in much of the same detail as the last race. Thousands of excited fans lined the waterfront to watch the rivalry unfold. Just as before, when the whistle blew, the other teams darted out in front, but the Washington crew rowed steadily, despite the heat and calm waters. Just as before, the Washington crew rowed to national championship with an astonishing five-lengths between them and their closest competitor. Suddenly, the entire nation stood up and began paying attention to the Washington boys. They had always been considered good, but most of the racing world had expected an eastern crew to be victorious in Poughkeepsie, or at the very least, to put up more of a fight. What sports journalists were most impressed by was not only the speed at which the Washington crew had completed the race, but their unique stamina: "From the starting gun to the final salvo, they had rowed as if they could keep going at the same pace for another two miles or ten" (Page 117).

Ten days later, Joe Rantz returned to the train and began his journey back to Washington. After the victory in Poughkeepsie, he had chosen to travel the country, visiting family and seeing new landscapes. As he traveled back home, he noted how

exceptionally hot and dusty much of the United States was. At the time, he didn't realize that it was the onset of the Dustbowl, the next great calamity to sweep across the United States.

Analysis

The train journey to New York was an important journey for Joe. Previously, he had been moved around because he was always in the way, and because no one in his family seemed willing to take care of him for long. He had certainly seen more of the country than many of his crewmates, but his travels were usually under somber conditions. This journey, however, was filled with anticipation and joy, and should have proved to be a great bonding experience for the team. As he had always done with his father and with Joyce, Joe wanted to memorialize the celebration with song, but he quickly found himself ridiculed and ousted by the rest of his team: "His music was what had brightened the bleakest days of his boyhood. It had drawn people to him in high school, made him friends, and even helped him eke out a living in Sequim. It was his special talent, a particular point of pride. Now, suddenly and unexpectedly, it had turned on him, reminding him of how short he fell in matters of sophistication Just when he had begun to feel that he was becoming part of something larger than himself, he was cast out again" (Page 109).

It is interesting to note that the freshman crew struggled to perform on calm waters. They only seemed able to reach their full potential when they were in the thralls of heated competition – whether against another crew or against the weather. It seems ironic that the team would perform better in conflict than in peace, but it is a further testament to their living symbolism. This team was made of boys filled with grit and determination. They had fought for everything in their lives for so long, it was almost as if they couldn't function in peace. They seemed to need conflict to push against in order to perform.

Vocabulary

troubadour, caustic, imbue, derision, rankle, salvo, fetid, calamity, aridity, galvanize, beneficence

Part 2: Resiliency, Chapter 8

Summary

After the victory in New York, Joe returned home to Sequim to continue working on his house and picking up whatever odd jobs he could find to save enough money for the next school year. Joe went back to working with Charlie in the woods. Earlier that year, lumber companies had come through Charlie's woods and purchased chopping rights to his cedar trees. They had taken only the prime middle sections of the trees, leaving large top sections and tall stumps behind. Charlie taught Joe how to read the remnant wood, searching out beautiful pieces of discarded wood to be used for roofing shakes.

When Joe returned to the boathouse in November, there was a visible swagger in the new sophomore team. Not only were they national champions, they were also no longer the "new boys" in the crew house. The nervous, bumbling incoming freshman had obvious respect for the sophomore team, surely encouraged by recent newspaper reports that the Washington sophomore crew team was favored to represent the United States in the upcoming 1936 summer Olympics. Now that the boys were Junior Varsity, they would be coached by Ulbrickson rather than Bolles, and Ulbrickson had plans to mix the crew through with his other JV and varsity boys trying to find the best possible mix of athletes. The next few months were stressful for Ulbrickson as he bounced boys in and out of various ships, and his frustration grew as he struggled to find the best mix.

Eventually, Ulbrickson realized that the national champion freshman crew had to remain intact for best performance, but he struggled to decide where to place them on the lineup. Should they be considered first varsity boat simply based on their potential, or should he drop them down to third or fourth boat, giving the boys with more experience the chance to row first boat – a chance they had earned through three years of dedication. Ulbrickson's stalled decision increased tensions in the boathouse as well, with jealous varsity crewmembers antagonizing the sophomores and agonizing over Ulbrickson's impending decision.

Throughout this process, Joe began feeling depressed, not only about his status in the boat, but also about his increasing poverty and the devastating news that his father and siblings had been living in Seattle since they last abandoned him in Sequim. He was heartbroken to learn that his family, despite being only a short drive away, had never come to visit him or even bothered checking in. One afternoon, Joe and Joyce decided to pay the family a visit so Joe could see his half-siblings, whom he missed terribly. Thula answered the door and, while relatively pleasant in her small talk, refused to let Joe in. When Joe asked if he could come inside, Thula said flatly, "Make your own life, Joe. Stay out of ours," and shut the door (Page 134).

Analysis

Joe's work with Charlie in the cedar woods continues the theme of finding value in what has been discarded. Although readily available, cedar was still an expensive material to purchase for home repairs, particularly during the Great Depression. Joe had thousands of dollars of home repairs to do complete, but barely enough money to keep food on the table. This section also hints at Pocock's growing fascination with cedar as the prime material to be used in racing ships. For Joe, however, the thought that he could find and use luxury materials from his own backyard was mind-boggling, just as the realization that he could find free food in the natural landscape had been: "Joe was fascinated, intrigued by the idea that he could learn to see what others could not see into the wood, thrilled as always at the notion that something valuable could be found in what others had passed over and left behind" (Page 126). This theme, of course, also relates to Joe himself, and Brown never lets us forget it. Joe had been passed over and abandoned so many times in his childhood that it would understandable if he struggled with issues of confidence and self-worth. Yet there was so much value in Joe, both emotional and athletic. So much so, that Joe would go on to win the most prestigious athletic award in the world – an Olympic gold medal.

Thula's rejection of Joe when he comes to visit is particularly heartbreaking. There is little explanation given as to why Thula is so cold to Joe, but it seems clear that her jealousies actually lie in Harry's lingering love for his first wife, Joe's mother, but it is also unclear whether there is a basis for such extreme jealousy. Readers may be surprised to learn that Joe, despite the constant heartbreak, does not blame his family for turning their backs on him, explaining to Joyce on the drive home that his father didn't have a choice. There were simply too many mouths to feed. He goes on to say that "It takes energy to get angry. It eats you up inside. I can't waste my energy like that and expect to get ahead. When they left, it took everything I had in me just to survive. Now I have to stay focused. I've just gotta take care of it myself" (Page 134). This statement shows the reader how far Joe has come in his self-reliance and determination, and also his true character. Joe is hardworking, forgiving, and full of love, unlike his stepmother Thula. In this way, it is probably a good thing that Joe was raised out of her cruel house, lest he be in danger of modeling himself in her unloving ways. Adversity has been Joe's friend whether he realizes it or not, and helped shaped him into a gold-medal winning Olympian.

Vocabulary

malleable, proscribe, keel, deluge, iconography, unfettered

Part 3: The Parts That Really Matter, Chapter 9

Summary

By January 1935, Ulbrickson still had not made his final decision about which crew to name as first boat, so he arranged to have all the crews in JV and varsity race against each other in a mini competition. Sullen rivalries in the boathouse suddenly exploded into all out battles: “Eyes that had been coolly averted from one another before now locked in icy stares. Accidental bumping of shoulders turned into open pushing matches. Locker doors were slammed. Curses were exchanged. Grudges were nursed” (Page 150). All the boys, regardless of their crew, seemed to realized that whichever was named first boat would be the boat challenging for US representation in the upcoming Olympics. Stakes had never been higher. Ulbrickson had hoped that the sophomore crew would easily prove that they were the best in the boathouse, but he was constantly flummoxed as to why they continued to struggle. These boys had snatched the national championship with such ease last year, and now they often struggled to best their own varsity crew. In one final act of desperation, Ulbrickson called a handful of the boys, including Joe, into his office and shouted that if they didn’t shape up, they would be out of the boat. When Joe left the office with the other boys, they blustered and complained about their strict coach, but once he was on his own, the true emotion of the situation set in, and Joe felt nearly overwhelmed with fear: “After all he had been through, it was obvious that he still remained utterly disposable, even at the crew house, the one place he had started to feel more or less at home” (Page 155).

Joe scrounged up enough change to buy a bit of gasoline, and drove down the Golden Rule Dairy and Bakery where he heard his father was working. The two shared lunch and caught up. When Joe asked his father if it would be okay for him to visit his siblings sometime, Harry echoed Thula’s earlier response, but noted that he and Thula sometimes went away on weekends, which would mean that nobody but the kids would be home.

Soon after, Ulbrickson was happy to note that the sophomore crew had snapped back into shape and was once again rowing with the determination they had shown in New York. His pride was short-lived, however, when the sophomore crew continued to struggle in Ulbrickson’s staged time trials. It wasn’t until April 12, after moving the sophomore crew back to their old boat – the one they had won the national championship in – that Ulbrickson finally announced that they would be first varsity crew. Shortly after, all three teams: freshman, JV, and varsity took victory in the western regatta against California. There was a large press conference after the win, with press taking photos of all the crewmembers and interviewing the coaches. There was a ceremony in which all the winning varsity players were introduced to the public, and Joe had to fight back tears before taking to the stage and waving to the fans.

Analysis

This section functions simply to progress the book's plot. Brown goes on for many pages about Ulbrickson's painstaking decision about which crew to name in the first varsity ship and about his selection process. Sections like this may come across as boring and mindless for many readers. It has already been established that Joe's crew will go on to participate in the Olympics (and win gold) so building tension about whether or not he would be named varsity crew could feel pointless. As a result, the narrative tends to drag and some readers may lose interest. Brown attempts to combat the dullness with lively descriptions of life on campus, the weather, and the process of rowing race ships, but now, over a third of the way through the book, even these descriptions are starting to become repetitive and monotonous.

The good news is that life seems to be turning around for Joe, who had recently been faced with a few setbacks: he was poor, jealous, insecure, and once again abandoned. In this section, he secures his spot on first varsity, wins the western regatta, and reunites with his father. For the first time in years, Joe even clings to the hope that he may be able to see his siblings. All of these emotions culminate at the moment Joe walks across the stage to greet his cheering fans and press, who likely already realize that they are cheering the future US Olympic rowing team. It is fitting that Joe should feel a surging sensation of accomplishment and belonging as he crosses the stage with tears in his eyes.

Vocabulary

reticence, garrulous, vociferous, myriad, blotto, prognostication, turgid

Part 3: The Parts That Really Matter, Chapter 10

Summary

Before the freshman rowing team had snatched up the national championship, Seattle – and really Washington as a whole – hadn't had a sports team to rally for, or to unite them. With the prospect of the now sophomore team being touted as the next United States Olympic rowing team, a frenzy of fanaticism swept the state. As a result, every move the team made was covered in local, and sometimes even national, press. But the crew wasn't the only thing making news that year. The term "Dust Bowl" had recently been coined, and newspapers were busy covering "Black Sunday," the day in which a horrific dust storm blocked out the sun. Within two years, two and half million Americans would uproot from their Midwest homes and start traveling west in search of a better life. Additionally, dark stories of oppression were beginning to leak from Germany, but most Americans still hoped Europe could settle the conflict on their own: "The dark news was difficult to ignore. But not impossible. The vast majority of Americans, in Seattle and elsewhere, did exactly that. The affairs of Europe still seemed a million miles away, and that's exactly where most people wanted to keep them" (Page 176).

Back at the boathouse, Al Ulbrickson was still debating which crew would race as the varsity team for the upcoming national championships in New York. Despite always having stellar teams to work with, Ulbrickson had never managed to win the varsity national championships, and he hoped that this year would be his first win. Reporters and fans were flabbergasted to hear that the sophomore team - who had won the freshman national championships handedly the year before – were not automatically named as the varsity crew, and many were outright vocal about it. Ulbrickson began running his time trials again, as he done earlier in the year, and remained frustrated when the sophomore team failed to perform. Most of the time, they lost to the varsity crew, and if they won, it was only by a slim margin. By the time the crews departed for New York, Ulbrickson still hadn't made his decision about which crew would row as varsity. In Poughkeepsie, Ulbrickson continued to run his two-mile time trials with many reporters and other coaches coming out to watch. The sophomores floundered under the pressure and lost one too many times. Ulbrickson announced that they would be racing JV, and the original varsity team would return to their rightful spot. The sophomores were heartbroken, and many of the reporters shocked. They all seemed to notice that by the end of the two-mile time trials, the varsity team was beginning to look ragged while the sophomore team was just starting to pick up steam. They wondered why Ulbrickson didn't seem to notice this.

The weather was dreadful on the morning of the regatta, and as a result, not nearly as many spectators came out as had in previous years. The new freshman team, coached by Bolles, decidedly won their race, with many people proclaiming that this new crew was perhaps even stronger than his previous. The sophomore team, too, easily won

their race, with many spectators shaking their heads at Ulbrickson's decision to pull them from the varsity lineup. The outcry of the people resounded when the varsity team, which started out with a large lead over its competitors, fell apart at the two-mile marker, just as the reporters had predicted, and finished a disappointing third. Once again, the varsity national championships eluded Ulbrickson, and once again, Ky Ebright and his California crew had snatched the victory. After the Poughkeepsie regatta, Bolles began receiving unprecedented offers to coach crew at other colleges, but he turned them all down. For the first time, Ulbrickson began questioning whether he was cut out for his job, and whether the university might be thinking of replacing him.

Analysis

In the midst of such terrible tragedy in America – the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, the impending war with Germany – it is moving and somewhat beautiful to think of the unification found in Washington's shared excitement about the sophomore rowing team. For many Americans at this time, hopelessness filled their daily lives as they struggled to find work, farm their land, and feed their families. Yet there was a group of boys, boys who were hard working and determined, boys who represented the American dream, who had a chance of representing Washington at the Olympics. Despite the heartbreak and depression of the time, the people of Washington found something to cheer for. Not only did the racing crew serve as entertainment for the people, it also served as a distraction from all the hardship. Rather than discussing crops or weather or finances, both men and women found that they could discuss the sophomore crew, and that everyone around them cared as much about the team's success as they did: "Those boys in their boats were – length by length and victory by victory – suddenly beginning to put Seattle on the map, and they were likely to do more of it in the near future. Everyone in town believed that now, and it pulled them together and made them feel better about themselves in a deeply troubled time" (Page 174).

As a result of everyone caring about the team's success, everyone, from reporters to bystanders, became experts in how the team should be coached. When Ulbrickson decided to pull the beloved sophomore team from the varsity lineup, there was genuine outrage. People began discussing how the varsity crew didn't have the same stamina as the sophomores, and that even though the sophomore crew had been performing poorly, it was only because there wasn't enough length in Ulbrickson's timed trials for the sophomore crew to truly excel. The public's fears were confirmed when the sub-par varsity team performed poorly at the national championships while the sophomore team excelled, just as they had done the year before. The public was out for blood, and for the first time in his career, Ulbrickson began to fear his position at the boathouse, especially after learning that Bolles, who had once again coached a freshman crew to national championships, began receiving competitive offers to coach elsewhere. It is interesting to note that Ulbrickson was faced with the same self-consciousness and anxiety that he had caused on the sophomore crew by constantly challenging their varsity position.

Vocabulary

gunnysack, flay, harbinger, lexicon, sabotage, fallible, leviathan, incongruous, audacious, subsume, betoken, asbestos, indomitable, abate, pandemonium, wallop

Part 3: The Parts That Really Matter, Chapter 11

Summary

At the end of the school year, Joe said goodbye to Joyce, packed up his Franklin, and drove out to the Washington scablands where he hoped to find work building the new dam with the Grand Coulee excavation team. Most of the men working on the project had secured a wage of $0.50 per hour, but Joe, determined to make enough money for his next school year, had signed up to work the dangerous job of dangling off the cliff face in a harness, jack-hammering the reluctant rock. This job paid $0.75 per hour. When the job assessment doctor took a look at Joe's body and heard that he rowed for college crew, he gave him the job immediately. Joe, like most of the other dam workers, rented a tiny room in Shack Town, the shantytown for workers that had sprung up near the worksite. The conditions were abysmal, but they provided Joe with a roof over his head, a bed to sleep in at night, and a shower – even if that shower was infested with black widow spiders. Joe worked hard, taking three (and sometimes even four) meals a day at the Shack Town cafeteria, where the quality of food was poor, but servings were large. For the first few weeks, Joe mostly kept to himself, choosing to pass his time writing letters to Joyce, but he soon learned that there were two other U of W crew boys working on the same project – Johnny White, one of Bolles' new upcoming freshman, and Chuck Day, one of Joe's rivals in the JV-turned-varsity boat. Whatever rivalries had formed in the shell house were put aside in Shack Town as the three boys became fast friends. They spent all their spare time together exploring the nearby landscape, and even venturing into B Street, which was teeming with bars, brothels, and dance halls.

Analysis

In this short section, Brown fills the reader in on Joe's life after his second year at U of W. Ulbrickson's decision to demote the boys back down to JV had a deep effect on Joe and he struggled with depression afterward, wondering if his short success freshman year had been a fluke. Despite the depression, Joe allowed himself to buy into the dream of an Olympic medal, and he knew that he would do anything to give himself the opportunity to fight for it: "It surprised him how much it had begun to mean to him. He figured maybe it had something to do with Thula. Or with his father. Certainly it had something to do with Joyce. At any rate, he felt more and more that he had to get to Berlin" (age 196). With all the ups and downs of Joe's rowing career, he knew that a medal would be something that no one could take away from him, which is why he wanted it so badly: permanent proof that he had been the best at something.

For this reason, Joe knew he must stay at U of W, at least for one more year, and to afford that, he had to take on a dangerous job. Yet again, Joe's grit, determination, and physical strength made him the perfect candidate for the task, and as he had done so

many times before, Joe excelled. While at Shack Town, Joe befriended two other boys from the U of W shell house. It is interesting to see the boys become such fast friends, particularly because such strong rivalries had formed between the teams during Ulbrickson's dithering decision making. Nevertheless, Joe and the boys fell into an easy camaraderie, and it's a pleasant change for the reader to see Joe thriving in a social situation, feeling as if he truly belongs.

Vocabulary

ponderosa, sluice, coulee, cofferdam, undulate, acrid, ardent, prodigious, pugnacious

Part 3: The Parts That Really Matter, Chapter 12

Summary

As Joe, Chuck, and Johnny passed the summer working hard on the new dam, so too did thousands of young German men pass the summer working hard on the new Olympic Stadium in Berlin. The difference between the groups was that while the Grand Coulee crew was a wide mix of races and nations, all of the workers in Berlin were "complying, nonunion workers of German citizenship and Aryan race" (Page 207). Fifteen miles to the southeast lay a wonderful rowing community in the town of Grünau. For hundreds of years, this is where the German rowing community was centralized, and there were many small clubs – both public and private – that German citizens of all backgrounds could join. In the fall of 1935, however, great changes were beginning to take place that affected this community as well as the rest of the nation. Hitler had recently imposed the Nuremberg Laws, which, among other things, outlined the new rules for citizenship. On paper, these laws were put in place for the "protection of German blood and German honor" but in reality were put in place to restrict the lives of German Jews "until, in effect, simply being Jewish was outlawed" (Page 216). Word of these outlandish restrictions began to reach America and a strong movement to boycott the 1936 Olympic Games was formed. A few heads of the Olympic committee were sent to Berlin to investigate the claims being made against the Nazi Party, but every member returned with the same decision: reports of anti-Semitism were being blown out of proportion and there was no reason for America to boycott the games.

Back in Washington, Al Ulbrickson presented an uncharacteristically open letter of intent to the Seattle Times announcing his hopes that this year's boys would row to represent the United States in the Berlin Olympic Games. Ulbrickson, who typically kept his cards close to his chest, knew that if he failed to deliver this year, as he had done the past few years, he didn't deserve his coaching position at U of W. He wanted to make his intentions perfectly clear for all the world to see, vowing that if he failed to claim victory this year, he would resign from his post. In pursuit of his goal, Ulbrickson threw all his preconceived notions of the boys out the window, and spent agonizing hours analyzing each boy's strengths and weaknesses. He warned the boys that it was "every man for himself," and that he would be moving them individually from crew to crew, boat to boat, regardless of their previous positions. He would analyze the incoming freshman alongside the new sophomore, JV, and varsity crews, knowing that his quest for Olympic gold "would require finding nine young men of exceptional strength, grace, endurance, and most of all mental toughness" (Page 213).

Once again, Joe was plunged into a position of uncertainly and doubt. Again, he felt depression and self-consciousness creeping up on him. His emotional state was exacerbated by the realization that his father and Thula would regularly abandon their young children at home, often without any food, for days at a time while they gallivanted

around the city. During these times, Joe and Joyce would sneak over to ensure the children had enough to eat while their parents were away. Joe, who was moved around from ship to ship regularly, also found himself lonely. Although it had been difficult at times, Joe was surprised to find himself missing the camaraderie of the crew he had rowed with for two years. He also missed his close friendships with the boys from Grand Coulee. When Joe realized that he was no longer a favored crewmember, he felt jealous of the boys rowing in the first and second boats. His depression threatened to overtake him when he received news that Thula had unexpectedly died from an infection. Although he had never had much of a relationship with his stepmother, she had been the closest thing to a mother Joe had ever known. Also, there were a few years of happy memories from when Thula and his father had first been married. Above all else, Joe worried about what would happen to his father and his now motherless siblings. Through all of this, Joe struggled to stay focused on the crew. As a result, his performances began to suffer. One person who seemed to notice was George Pocock, who took Joe under his wing and began mentoring him in the shipbuilding studio.

Analysis

Looking back, it is clear to see how Hitler manipulated members of the Olympic committee, and in fact, much of the world. News that America would compete in the Games came as a relief to many. The Olympic Games would not only unify the country (as rowing had already done on a smaller scale in Seattle), it would also prove to be a great distraction for the people from the horrors of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. For those few short weeks in the summer, people would be cheering for something. They may even spend a bit of extra money on food, travel, and drink to fully embrace the celebration. The American economy was in desperate need of a boon, and the Olympic Games might provide a small enough stepping stone to start turning things around.

Back in Washington, Joe was hit with a series of emotional setbacks. First, he learned that his position on the varsity boat was not a sure thing, and he was once again plummeted into his depression and anxiety. At the same time, he was forced to face the demons of his childhood when he learned that his father and Thula had been abandoning their young children as they traveled across the city. Thula, who had been trained as a concert violinist in her youth, had finally received some recognition (and income) for her talents, and she wasn’t about to let a houseful of children stop her from fully embracing her lifelong dream of being a celebrity. Many modern readers will struggle to comprehend how a set of parents could leave five young children (at the time, the oldest was only thirteen-years-old) to fend for themselves with no food in the house and no promise of when they would return home, but this is exactly what Harry and Thula Rantz did. When Joe found out, he immediately knew how this must be affecting his young siblings. His father had done the same to him countless times. He felt it was his obligation to protect them. He and Joyce regularly made trips to the family home with sandwiches and ice cream, food they couldn’t really afford to buy, because Joe felt it was his obligation to look out for his siblings. When Thula died suddenly, Joe’s feelings were mixed. He hadn’t really known or loved Thula, but there was a lingering

sense that she was the only mother he had ever really known. The thought that she was dead saddened him. He also knew what it felt like to be a motherless child. Once again, he felt the need to protect his siblings from harsh emotional upheaval. It is interesting to note that Harry Rantz vowed to build a new house for his family, one that would reunite all his children, including Joe, under one roof. He had done the same thing when his first wife had died.

Also in this chapter, Ulbrickson finally realizes what he must do if he wants to achieve his goals of a varsity national championship and, ultimately, Olympic gold. He must put aside all his personal preferences, emotions, and relationships. He must view the boys as chess pieces, objects to be moved around the board for victory. This was a hard realization for Ulbrickson to come to, but he realized the sheer amount of talent he was presented with and he knew that if he couldn't find the perfect combination among such a talented pool of candidates, he didn't deserve his position as head coach. With a newly found and uncharacteristically vocal resolve, Ulbrickson began the arduous process of weeding out the perfect nine boys – boys who were strong individually and flawless in a crew: "They would have to live well together in close quarters for weeks at a time – traveling, eating, sleeping, and racing without internal friction among them. They would have to perform under immense psychological pressure on the most prominent stage in the sport, in full view of the whole world" (Page 213).

Since Ulbrickson was singularly focused on victory, he didn't have time to – nor should he – consider how his decisions were affecting the boys. Joe, who was sensitive on the best of days, really struggled with self-worth in the face of Ulbrickson's ruthless shuffling. Luckily for him, George Pocock noticed and took Joe under his wing. Together, the two men passed many hours in the studio discussing rowing, the childhoods, and even their hopes for the future. Joe found an easy camaraderie with Pocock, which filled some of the void that had been left by his crew and Grand Coulee buddies. Pocock provided a safe environment for Joe to vent some of his emotional hang-ups, and to deal with the upheavals that he had recently been faced with. Their discussions about the wood used to build the racing shells also provides great symbolism for the reader. Pocock discussed how the age rings in the wood not only told him how old a particular piece of lumber was, but also the type of life it had: "Their thickness and thinness spoke of hard years of bitter struggle intermingled with rich years of sudden growth. The different colors spoke of the various soils and minerals that the tree's roots encountered, some harsh and stunting, some rich and nourishing. Flaws and irregularities told how the trees endured fires and lightning strikes and windstorms and infestations and yet continued to grow" (Page 214). This description is a wonderful analogy to Joe's life, particularly at this moment, when he was faced with so many emotional setbacks. The lesson to be learned is one of perseverance, and that, once again, beauty can be found in the most unlikely of places.

Vocabulary

monolithic, congenial, unpalatable, pittance, assiduous, hyperbole, reticent, cadence, prescient, nullify, conviviality, plumb, alchemical, sardonic

Part 4: Touching the Divine, Chapter 13

Summary

On the evening of January 9, 1936, Ulbrickson gathered all the boys in the shell house and warned them that the upcoming season would be more grueling than ever in preparation for the Olympic Games. He and Pocock worked long hours analyzing the boys individually, trying to figure out which combination would make the strongest for first varsity, the boat that would row in not only in the western and Poughkeepsie regattas, but also in the Olympics. One person Ulbrickson knew he wanted to use was coxswain Bobby Moch. Moch was the perfect size to be a coxswain – five feet seven inches tall and weighing119 pounds. He was the optimal size for the ships Pocock built. A coxswain's main job was to steer the boat (they did not row, but controlled the rudder), but they also set the stroke speed and called orders to the oarsmen, meaning that they also had to know how to read a race and a team's opponents in split seconds. Moch was a perfect mix of all these characteristics, and Ulbrickson figured he was one of the most talented coxswains he had ever seen.

Throughout the Olympic training season, Ulbrickson bounced Joe from the first to second to third boat multiple times, giving Joe the uneasy feeling, once again, that he was going to be overlooked. Sensing Joe's growing anxiety, Pocock pulled him up to the studio for a chat. He said that he had been analyzing Joe's stroke for a while, and that while Joe was strong, there were days when it seemed like Joe was rowing alone, "as if it was up to him to row the boat across the finish line all by himself. When a man rowed like that, he said, he was bound to attack the water rather than to work with it, and worse, he was bound not to let his crew help him row" (Page 234). What mattered most, Pocock said, was the way the oarsmen harmonized together, and that Joe wouldn't be able to fully harmonize until he opened up his heart to his crew. Over the next few days, Joe pondered Pocock's words. He understood harmony – he and his band had sung in perfect harmony while he strummed on his banjo, and he had seen Charlie McDonald's horses pulling their plow in perfect unison. He had been able to trust the boys at Grand Coulee and open his heart to them – so why was he struggling so much with the boys in the boat?

The next time Joe was promoted up to first boat, he snatched the opportunity to prove himself to his coaches. Looking around, he found himself surrounded mostly by boys he had come to know and trust: Roger Morris, Chuck Day, Johnny White, Stub McMillin, and Shorty Hunt. Pushing aside all feelings of doubt, unworthiness, and anxiety, Joe picked up his oars: "It felt to Joe like a transformation, as if some kind of magic had come over him. The nearest thing to it he could remember was the night as a freshman when he had found himself out on Lake Union with the lights of Seattle twinkling on the water and the breaths of his crewmates synchronized with his in white plumes in the dark, cold air" (Page 240). It was the last change Ulbrickson needed to make. After watching this crew of boys row together, he knew he had found his Olympic team. The team proved itself for the first time in their new shell, the Husky Clipper, by easily

beating California at the Pacific Coast Regatta that year. It was a special race for Joe because it was the first time his father and siblings had ever watched him row. Ulbrickson must have been excited by the margin with which his crew beat Cal, but he never showed it. His varsity team had beaten Cal in this race for the past three years only to come up victorious where it really counted, in New York.

Analysis

In this section, Joe finally comes into his own by learning an important lesson: how to trust. His entire life, Joe had been self-sufficient and had vowed that he would never make himself emotionally vulnerable to another person's whims. This protective shell strengthened Joe's resolve for personal success and certainly helped prepare him for the vigorous work of crew training, but it wasn't enough. He needed to evolve one more time, to open up what he had closed, to find true success. Now that Joe has run the emotional spectrum, he has reached his full emotional growth and the reader can expect nothing but success in his future. By opening his heart to his teammates, Joe also embraced an unexpected sense of fulfillment, as if every aspect of his life is not complete. He felt fulfilled in his personal pursuits, his romantic relationship with Joyce, and finally, his relationship with his family. His sense of emotional fulfillment is symbolized in the chapter's closing scene of the Pacific Coast Regatta, in which all three of Joe's loves – crew, Joyce, and family – come together in one beautiful moment of celebration when the varsity crew of the University of Washington beats Cal for the first time in three years.

This chapter highlights the way the entire crew, not just the oarsmen, worked together to create the perfect team. Even though Al Ulbrickson is the head coach and ultimate authority figure in shell house, it seems as if George Pocock's advice is most valued. Unlike Ulbrickson, Pocock is able to read the boys' emotions and reach them on a different level than their performance-driven coach. It is Pocock's sympathetic words to Joe, for example, the finally get him to turn around, rather than Ulbrickson's threats and position jockeying. Likewise, it is Bobby Moch's quick thinking and creativity that ultimately wins the team's victory in the race against California. Even though Ulbrickson has laid out a specific plan of attack, Moch reads his competitors and the boys in the boat better, leading the team to an impressive win over California. If it were not for this fluke blending of skills, personalities, and minds, it is unlikely that the University of Washington would have such an impressive team. Just as Pocock had suggested, the team must work in perfect harmony.

Vocabulary

incongruous, nominal, terrestrial, tenacious, morose, buffeted, dogged, winnow, subsume, pallid, taut, synchronicity, dour

Part 4: Touching the Divine, Chapter 14

Summary

At the same time in Germany, Hitler and his Nazi party rolled tanks into the demilitarized Rhineland “in open defiance of both the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Pact to which Germany was a signatory” (Page 251). It was a brazen, military act. Hitler and his party sat back waiting to see how the world would react. While many countries like England and France released statements that they “deeply regretted” Germany’s actions, no one took action against the Nazi Party. Hitler now knew that the West would remain passive to his military pursuits, at least long enough for him to strengthen his allies and army. Furthermore, he knew that the upcoming Olympic Games would provide the perfect opportunity for him to present Germany as a clean, efficient, and peaceful country to the world.

In Washington, the University of Washington boys finished up their schoolwork and prepared to depart for the regatta in New York. If all went well there, they would make their way to the Olympic trials and eventually Berlin, without returning home first. As they packed, the boys eagerly planned for how they would spend the rest of their summer traveling around Europe, even though most of them had no idea what they would do for money. On the train to New York, the boys fattened themselves in the dining car while the coaches formulated their attack plan: Ulbrickson always liked to come from behind, so he plotted for the boys to “stay low for a full mile and a half, then take it up to thirty-one until they got to the two-mile mark. At two miles Bobby Moch would tell Don Hume to gun it and start taking down the leaders, who would by now be starting to tire” (Page 256). Ulbrickson knew the deliberately slow start was risky, but he wanted to see his boys rowing hard at the end of the race.

At race time, Bobby Moch followed Ulbrickson’s directions but seemed to exaggerate them for his own amusement. While Ulbrickson had only wanted the boys to fall two boat lengths behind the leaders, Moch allowed the crew to fall five lengths back. As the race went on, the entire crowd seemed to be murmuring, “Pick it up, Bobby,” but Moch knew he was completely in control. Even Ulbrickson seemed worried that the crew would not be able to make up the distance. Finally, with a mile left to go, Moch shouted for his crew to pick up their speed. With half a mile left, the crowd was groaning with excitement as they watched the Washington crew come from seemingly out of nowhere into contention for the win. Reports would later profess that the boys weren’t rowing; they were flying. In the last 500 meters, the University of Washington pulled ahead and claimed the victory, to many people's shock and dismay. The boys themselves were so proud that they seemed almost afraid to cheer, as if it would jinx their good luck. They knew that Berlin was theirs to lose.

Analysis

The opening of Chapter 14 explores Hitler's early steps in manipulating the world to embrace (or at least ignore) his twisted philosophies. He started small, by stepping a toe over the line of military protocol, waiting to see what the reaction from the West would be. When he received little more than a verbal repercussion for his actions, Hitler knew that the rest of the world was not ready for war and that it was the perfect time for him to advance his political pursuits. Still, Hitler was conscious of the fact that Germany had a lingering reputation for being "barbarians" in the wake of the First World War, so he needed to ensure Germany was presented as a civilized Western nation – one to which countries like England, France, and America could relate. "He needed a PR win – not at home, where the reoccupation of the Rhineland had been immensely popular – but in London and Paris and New York" (Page 252). Hitler recognized the upcoming Olympic Games as the perfect opportunity to present Germany's new face to the world, so he put Goebbels and Riefenstahl to work on international propaganda and ideology. The pair deliberately created a wholesome image of Germany, full of "grace, beauty, and youthful vigor." Their hard work certainly paid off, as history shows that Western forces were weary to start another war with Germany, particularly one with such a civilized appearance.

When the University of Washington boys arrived in New York, the feeling of competition was thick in the air. Reports swirled about the record-breaking times both Washington and California were turning out in their training, and each report rattled the other team. Whatever sense of friendly competition had been present in the years before vanished, and the coaches did what they could to keep their crews separate, fearing that a fistfight might break out. All the boys recognized what was on their line for them, and each was desperate to succeed. Ulbrickson brought the boys to visit with Franklin Roosevelt Jr., son of the United States President and former rower for Harvard. This act showcases to the reader just how big the sport of rowing had become. The boys were treated as celebrities. While thousands of fans scraped together enough money to come watch the races live, millions of others followed the dramatic tension in newspapers and radio broadcasts. Sport gave the American people something to root for during a time of so much hardship. It banded the nation together and distracted families from the stress of their economic lives. In this section, Brown explores the way sports affected all Americans, not just the traditionally white, middle-class fans of rowing (which had previously been viewed as an elite sport), including documenting the African-American community's heartbreak when boxer Joe Lewis failed to defeat German boxer Max Schmeling to qualify for the Games.

Vocabulary

tome, ideologist, conflate, nascent, laggard, derelict, palisade, inexorable, portico, flotilla, berth, abutment, morose, guttural, banshee, insubordination

Part 4: Touching the Divine, Chapter 15

Summary

After witnessing the strength of the Washington team at the Poughkeepsie Regatta, Ky Ebright and the other coaches knew that they would be facing the best team in America at the Olympic trials. All of the coaches knew that they had better bring the best of the best to compete. The trials took place on Lake Carnegie at Princeton University, only a few miles from Poughkeepsie. There were six teams competing to represent the United States at the upcoming Olympics: Washington, California, Penn, Navy, Princeton, and the New York Athletic Club, with the six teams being divided into two groups for preliminary races. Of those races, only the top four would compete in the actual trial. Washington was grouped with Princeton and the New York Athletic Club. Neither was a real threat, and the team felt relaxed headed into the preliminaries. Just as expected, Washington handedly won their preliminary race by two and a half lengths, gliding across the finish line at an impressive 6:17:8. Their confidence was jarred, however, when California took first place in their preliminary finishing the race at 6:07:8, a full ten seconds faster than Washington.

On the morning of the final trial, the Washington boys woke full of anxiety. They climbed aboard the Husky Clipper and rowed nervously out to the starting line. When the starting gun flashed, Washington got off to a terrible start, with a few of the oarsmen "washing out, their oars popping out of the water before they had completed their pulls. The effect was to throw the boat momentarily out of balance and to abruptly check the crucial momentum the crew was trying to build up" (Page 281). Still, Washington slowly but surely began to catch up with and overtake their competitors. At the final 500 meters, Moch once again set the crew loose and they finally pulled into the lead with less than twenty strokes to the finish line. And just like that, the boys in the Washington boat qualified for the Olympic Games. Pandemonium broke out all across Washington as the entire population seemed to stand up and cheer for their boys.

The Washington crew celebrated that night with a huge banquet, but their celebration was short lived. As they were eating dinner, rumors were confirmed that if the boys wanted to go to Berlin, the team would have to fund their own journey. Coincidentally, the man who delivered the news, Henry Penn Burke, was the chairman and major fundraiser for the Pennsylvania Athletic Club (the team that had come in second). Penn had plenty of money and knew that Washington didn't. Ulbrickson was outraged. He knew that U of W had already scraped together the last of their spare cash to send the boys to New York and there was no way they could afford to send the entire team to Europe. Still, he tried not to let his anger show and he immediately began making phone calls. The entire state of Washington banded together for fundraising, and less then 48-hours later, a certified check for $5,000 was sent to Ulbrickson, and the boys were officially funded to travel. A few short weeks later, the boys and 325 athletes boarded the SS Manhattan and sailed to Germany.

Analysis

Despite the fact that Brown has described many different races in the book thus far, he still manages to create a sense of suspense and intrigue with each race. The final race in the Olympic trials is no exception. Even though the reader knows that Washington will emerge victorious and go on to win gold at the Olympics, there is still a thrill in reading exactly how Moch pulled the team from behind to clinch the win. The skill of writing such intriguing scenes over and over should not be underestimated. Brown has carefully researched the history of Washington's crew and its races, and he is therefore able to inject each scene with delicious detail that creates a cinematic unfolding of events. Readers will likely read the race scenes with bated breath, full of nervous excitement, despite the fact that they already know the outcome.

The timing of the Berlin Olympics created particular drama for the Washington boys because it took place during the Great Depression, when there wasn't a lot of money to go around. Athletes across America were given the unfortunate news that even though they had qualified to compete in the Games, their athletic associations couldn't afford to send them to Europe. Many were forced to fundraise their own journeys. In Washington, coeds went door to door with coffee cans collecting spare change for the Washington crew, volunteers sold $1,523 worth of fifty cent lapel tags, and various local companies donated from $1 to $500 to fund the boys. The fact that it took only 48-hours for the state to raise $5,000 for the boys shows just how much the crew meant to them. Meanwhile, the boys' celebrity seemed to stretch as far as New York, with the crew regularly getting stopped for photographs, autographs, and general congratulations wherever they went. The Washington crew was viewed the way movie stars would be viewed today. The sudden fame was unexpected and unprecedented.

The timing of this Olympics also struck some of the boys personally. Even before they qualified for the Games, many of the boys daydreamed about traveling through Europe at the end of the summer. Bobby Moch was one such boy, until he received a letter from his father warning Bobby not to travel because he was, in fact, Jewish. Moch's father had heard that Europe was an increasingly dangerous place for Jews and he knew that he had to share his hidden secret with Bobby before he left: "For decades, his father had felt that in order to make it in America it was necessary to conceal an essential element of his identity from his friends, his neighbors, and even his own children" (Page 289).

Vocabulary

tamp, berth, knickerbockers, luxuriate, caustic, recalcitrant,ineffable, scion, blithely, manifold, cacophony, innocuous, striation, sundry, zeppelin

Part 4: Touching the Divine, Chapter 16

Summary

Chapter Sixteen discusses the boys' journey from America to Germany aboard the SS Manhattan, as well as the outrageous lengths Hitler and his Party went through to whitewash Germany of all the negative Nazi practices. As Joe and the rest of his crew slumbered aboard the SS Manhattan, Nazi police stormed the streets rounding up homeless people and gypsies, marching them through the streets at gunpoint to detention centers out of town. Later, of course, these unfortunate people would be some of the first victims of the Nazi work and death camps. Additionally, all the anti-Jewish signs and propaganda were being removed from streets and storefronts. Banned books were returned to shelves. "Along the railroad tracks on which the visitors would travel into Berlin, grimy buildings had been whitewashed, vacant apartment buildings had been rented out inexpensively, and identical window boxes full of red geraniums had been placed beneath windowsills of even the apartments that remained vacant … The streets had been swept and reswept. Shop windows polished. Trains freshly painted. Broken windows replaced. Dozens of new courtesy Mercedes limousines had been parked in neat rows outside the Olympic Stadium awaiting VIPs. Nearly everyone from taxi drivers to sanitation workers had been outfitted in some kind of smart new uniform" (Pages 298 – 299).

Meanwhile, Joe and the rest of the crew began to explore their surroundings and pass the time for their two-week journey. Some of the boys suffered from seasickness and began to lose weight, prompting Ulbrickson to become heavily involved in their diets. While all of the athletes were designated the same menu each day – whether a thirteen-year-old gymnast or a six-foot-three oarsman – Ulbrickson eventually convinced the kitchen staff that his boys needed more. The boys enjoyed getting to know the other athletes, exploring the first-class accommodations on the upper decks, watching "talking pictures" in the screening room, and playing ping-pong. Because Ulbrickson believed that the only way to train their muscles was in a real shell, they rarely worked out. By the time they landed in Germany, most of the boys were out of shape and feeling it. They barely noticed, however, due to the huge throng of crowds that awaited the team's arrival, and the flurry of cheers and manic applause that resounded as the athletes began to disembark. Wherever the athletes traveled, there were crowds of excited fans screaming, cheering, and asking for autographs. At first, the boys soaked up the attention, but it soon became tiresome.

Soon after arriving, the boys made their way to Kopenick, Germany where their training area was located. They shared the space with the German national team, which was polite but somewhat arrogant. As soon as the boys began training, they and their coach were horrified to see the effects of their two-week journey without training. They rowed terribly, worse than Ulbrickson had ever seen. Each day he hoped they would improve, but the boys were sluggish and out of sync. The rest of the teams watched smugly as America struggled in the water, and Ulbrickson grew more frustrated each day that the

boys failed to improve. On August 1, the opening ceremonies were held. Hitler announced to the world that the 1936 summer Olympics were underway.

Analysis

It is interesting to read about the frantic cleanup that the Nazi Party performed in the weeks leading up to the Olympic Games, especially because the Party managed to pull off their stunt without the Western world's knowledge. By the time the boys arrived in Germany, there were no signs of the dark horrors of the Nazi Party, and the German population had been coached and threatened into exactly how they should behave around foreigners. Already, the Nazi Party was manipulating the German people, but they were nearly seamless in hiding it from the rest of the world. Brown describes Berlin as a sort of movie set, "a place where illusion could be perfected, where the unreal could be made to seem real and the real could be hidden away … When the foreigners arrived, all would be pleasant. Berlin would become a sort of benign amusement park for adults" (Pages 297 – 298). Joseph Goebbels and Leni Riefenstahl were hard at work not only coaching the public, but creating strong images of a unified and happy Germany. Despite their hard work, and the fact that they were both working toward the same goal, their mission was fraught with instability as the pair fought at every turn for Hitler's attention and affection. Nevertheless, the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games were heralded across the world as the most magnificent, spectacular sporting event of all time. Still, there were hints of unrest at even such a glorious event. When each of the nation's team marched past Hitler during the opening ceremonies, each was expected to return the "Heil Hitler" salute. Many teams did, but others, including the United States' team, refused or amended the salute, much to the displeasure of the crowd. For their part, the U of W boys seemed completely oblivious to the political expectations of the time and were generally under whelmed with their impression of Hitler.

This chapter of the novel spends a long time describing the boys' activities while they were aboard the SS Manhattan and in their early days in Germany. This makes for a nice change from the constant descriptions of rowing and competition. Despite the political times, the boys wholeheartedly enjoyed their first trip to Europe, and they acted as anyone would expect a group of teenaged American tourists to act. It may be somewhat surprising, however, to read that Ulbrickson essentially forbade the boys from working out on the SS Manhattan because he feared that they would strengthen the wrong muscles, and that the only way for a rower to stay in ship was to row a proper shell. He didn't even like the boys to work out on the rowing machines that had been installed aboard their ship. As a result, the boys fattened up, lost muscle, and struggled to perform during their training sessions in Germany. Although the reader knows that the team will eventually go on to win gold, the realization that the crew is out of shape is yet another dramatic pull that will keep the reader turning until the very last page.

Vocabulary

contingency, gestapo, swastika, rococo, sartorial, flout, diabolical, sacrosanct, jaunty, quay, desecrate, vaudeville, gascist, quintessential, venerable, ascot, hector, echelon, rostrum, chaplet, lusty, dais

Part 4: Touching the Divine, Chapter 17

Summary

With two weeks left to go before their Olympic trials, the University of Washington boys continued to train every day, with Ulbrickson eventually cutting much of their time for socialization and travel to help keep the boys focused. Ulbrickson was particularly concerned with Don Hume, who had been battling a nasty chest infection and cold since they left America. Rather than getting better in time, he seemed to be getting worse. Ulbrickson was forced to consider the possibility of using an alternate in the final race if Hume failed to recover. Another concern he was dealing with was the layout of the racecourse. The outer two lanes of the lake were completely exposed to wind and weather, and posed a serious handicap to whichever teams were forced to row there. Ulbrickson battled with the Olympic committee to have the racetrack shortened to just four lanes, but they refused to hear his complaints. The boys were growing more nervous, too. As the preliminary races approached, tensions grew between the crews. While the University of Washington boys had once found an easy camaraderie with their international competitors, perhaps the fact that they were suddenly performing so poorly lent itself to mounting tension, a tension that boiled over one afternoon when the American team took exception to a song the Yugoslavian team was singing in the lunchroom. A fistfight broke out between the teams, and it took many strong rowers to pull the scrappers apart. Despite the mounting tension between the teams, the American boys seemed to be growing even closer together. Finally, only a few days before their preliminary race, the team began to perform as they had in America.

The preliminary races were arranged so that the winning team from each heat automatically qualified for the final, with the losing teams being allowed to race again in a repechage for a chance at the final. The Americans were most concerned with the British team, who liked to row with the same tactic – rowing from behind. Don Hume had lost 14 pounds, and his chest was congested, but he insisted that he was fit enough to row. At the preliminary, the Americans got off to a terrible start again, but Hume and Moch managed to keep the boat at a steady pace. With 250 meters to go, Moch called for the boys to kick it up a notch. They just barely sailed into first place at the finish line. Hume collapsed on his oar the moment he learned the race was over. A few days passed, with the boys watching the repechage to see which teams would be joining them in the Olympic final, and Ulbrickson received even more worrying news. Despite the fact that the Americans had the best qualifying time, which traditionally meant that they would be given the best lane in the final, the Germans had reversed the order giving themselves, the slowest qualifiers, the best inner lane, and regulating America and England, the two fastest qualifiers, to the outer two lanes, the lanes that handicapped the rowers by at least two full lengths. Ulbrickson was outraged; but, once again, his complaints fell on deaf ears.

On the day of the final race, Don Hume was sicker than he had been at any time on the trip. The qualifying race had sapped whatever reserve energy he held. Ulbrickson made

the terrifying decision to pull him from the race. He bumped up one of the alternates, extremely worried that the boy had not been training with the rest of the crew. The rest of the crew was outraged, not just because they hadn't had time to learn the new boy's stroke, but because they felt Hume deserved to row the final race. They didn't care about winning or losing, they said. They wanted to finish what they had started together. Ulbrickson, who realized their fate was set either way, eventually relented and allowed the boys to carry Hume down to the shell house for the Olympic final. The rowing final was a huge event in Germany, with even Hitler himself coming down to watch the race. The boys, including Hume, climbed into the Husky Clipper one last time and rowed out to the starting line. With nerves they had never experienced before, they waited for the race gun to sound.

Analysis

Tensions continued to mount in Berlin with the clear rigging the Germany Olympic team put in place to give their national team the advantage in the rowing final, and with Don Hume's mystery illness that just simply wouldn't relent. The American rowing team seemed to have everything stacked against them, yet they still managed to keep their spirits up. The only time the reader ever sees their resolve crack, even when they are faced with their horrific training times and performance, is when they feel the Yugoslavian team disrespects America. The boys have banded together in a way that none of them expected, with the team even willing to forego a chance at the gold medal to finish the Olympic experience together. Don Hume was the team's stroke, meaning that he set the pace Moch called out, which meant that it was unlikely that the team would have performed well with a new stroke put in place for the final race. This was likely why Ulbrickson relented to their pleas and allowed Hume to race despite his decrepit condition. In his mind, and perhaps in the boys' minds as well, the race was lost either way, but at least they could finish with high morale. It is heartwarming to see how close the boys have come, especially since their early days together were often marred with misunderstanding, competition, and alienation (particularly for Joe): "They began to grow serious in a way they had never been before. Each of them knew that a defining moment in his life was nearly at hand; none wanted to waste it. And none wanted to waste it for the others" (Page 326).

The rowing final was one of the most prestigious athletic events of the 1936 Olympic Games, not just in Germany, but across the world. In Seattle, despite the crippling economic depression, electronics stores were selling out of radios. Nearly every family in America had saved enough money to purchase the device that would allow them to listen to Olympic events broadcast in real time. Even Harry Rantz managed to get a radio so that he, the kids, and Joyce could listen to the rowing final together.

Vocabulary

melee, repechage, inverse, rakish

Part 4: Touching the Divine, Chapter 18

Summary

The starting gun fired. For one horrific moment, the American team sat dead in the water. Not only were they in the worst lanes, but they had missed the start and were now even further behind the leaders. The German and Italian teams, who had been awarded the best lane assignments, took an early lead. Moch called for his crew to pick up their pace and was horrified to see that Hume was unresponsive in his seat. Although he was still rowing, Hume's eyes were closed and he acted as if he couldn't hear Moch at all. As the race pounded on, Moch grew more and more alarmed as his screams to pick up the pace went completely unnoticed by his stroke. In the stands, the audience watched as the American team dropped so far behind that no one thought they could recover. Ulbrickson's heart sunk, and he immediately regretted allowing Hume to row in the final race. Not only would his team lose, they would surely be embarrassed. At the halfway point, Moch knew he had no other choice but to appoint Joe as the new stroke and put him in charge of setting the boat's pace. As he called out to Joe, however, Hume seemed to shake himself back into consciousness and pick up the pace. With all the team rowing together again, Moch screamed for the pace to be picked up, and the crew obliged. Digging deep for personal strength none of them knew they had, they eventually began to gain ground on their competitors. Slowly, one-by-one, they started passing the other boats, and in the final 50 meters, just managed to row the nose of their ship across the finish line before the German team. The finish was so close that the crowds all believed Germany had won. Everyone was shocked when the loudspeakers announced that America had won!

Analysis

In this chapter, the novel comes to its ultimate conclusion. The chapter is short and filled with action, which propels the reader through the pages since they already know the outcome. Despite knowing that America will win the gold, the final race is retold with spine-tingling excitement and intrigue. Nothing in life has come easy for the boys in the boat, so it is fitting that they would have to dig deep into their personal strength and resolve to cross the finish line. In a way, it is as if all their life's struggles have been training them for this final moment, strengthening them from the inside and galvanizing their spirits to overcome any obstacle put in their path. Their victory was stunning, well earned, and a complete surprise to everyone involved.

Vocabulary

sinew, spigot

Part 4: Touching the Divine, Chapter 19 & Epilogue

Summary

The book ends with a short description of the medal ceremony. Atop the medal platform, Bobby Moch stood tall for the first time in his life to accept gold on behalf of the American rowing team. The rest of the boys beamed as they received their gold medals. They felt tears prick at the corners of their eyes as The Star Spangled Banner echoed through the awards arena.

The epilogue describes the pandemonium of celebration that overtook Washington after the boys' victory in Germany, particularly in Seattle. Joe decided to return home immediately after the games, probably because he didn't have much money to trave. But, a few of the other boys – including Bobby Moch – spent the next few weeks traveling around Europe. All of the boys returned home with glowing reports of Germany and their time there. The rest of the epilogue discusses what happened to each of the boys in the years after their gold medal victory. Most went on to live happy, healthy lives. They continued to meet regularly on Olympic anniversaries to row together. Those who were still alive met for the final time in 1986, fifty years after their gold medal winning race. From there, all the men sadly only seemed to get together for funerals, with the last of them, Roger Morris, passing away in 2009.

Analysis

After the Olympic Games was complete, whatever whitewashing the Nazi Party had done to blind the world to their sins was reversed, and the persecution of Jews returned in full force. It is interesting to note that all of the boys and, likely, most of the international guests, returned home with glowing reports of Germany, the people, and even their leader. The Nazi Party had accomplished exactly what they set out to do. They had blinded the world to the reality of their crimes. Goebbels and Riefenstahl were successful in presenting Nazi Germany as a civilized, beautiful, and friendly country. In the months and years that followed, however, the world would learn the true nature of their manipulation. The greatest war the world had ever seen would break out. World War II officially began on September 1, 1939. There is no doubt that the success of the German propaganda team is what held war off for three entire years.

All of the boys went on to live happy, healthy lives after their experience in the Olympic Games. Their win didn't change the course of any of their lives – Joe went on to marry Joyce and raise five children with her in their family home in Washington. A few on the team went on to long careers in rowing. In today's society, Olympians often embrace a celebrity-status for the rest of their lives. Back then, the boys simply went back to their everyday lives. The change that happened was inside of them, with each of their hearts

being filled with joy and pride for the rest of their lives. It speaks volumes that the crew continued to meet until their deaths. They rowed in perfect unison even fifty years after they ceased to be an official team. The legacy of the boys in the boat lives on in Washington with the Husky Clipper proudly displayed in the University of Washington shell house. It provides a new opportunity to tell the story with each incoming crowd of hopefuls.

Vocabulary

laurel, lithe, scull, plaudit, congenital, metallurgical, synthetic, inter

Important People

Joe Rantz

Joe Rantz is the main oarsman that Brown focuses on in The Boys in the Boat. Joe is described as being tall, blonde, prodigiously strong, and determined. He had a difficult upbringing, with his mother dying when he was four-years-old and his father remarrying a cold, younger woman who insisted that he abandon Joe. Joe's stepmother was jealous of Joe's dead mother's memory, and she saw Joe as a constant reminder that her husband had loved another woman first. For the first few years, Joe was passed around from relative to relative. Finally, he wa left to his own devices when he was only ten-years-old. Even at such a young age, Joe worked hard to provide for himself, working two jobs while juggling his schoolwork, sleep, and searching for food. Joe was abandoned again, this time in an unfinished farmhouse, when he was fourteen. Joe promised himself that it would be the last time he ever depended on another person to provide for him. He worked tirelessly to finish the house, forage for food, and save up enough money during the Great Depression to make ends meet. All of the obstacles in Joe's life only proved to make him stronger, both physically and emotionally, and it wasn't long before people began to take notice. After graduating high school, Joe was invited to the University of Washington to try out for their rowing team. After an arduous tryout process, Joe was eventually selected as an oarsman. In the beginning, he was teased and ostracized by his fellow crewmates for his impoverished upbringing and raggedy clothes, which had a deep impact on sensitive Joe. As time passed, however, Joe learned to be more comfortable with his crewmates and to open up his heart to them. Along the way, he learned how to trust. Once trust entered the boat, the boys were unstoppable and would eventually go on to win gold in the 1936 summer Olympics.

Roger Morris

Roger Morris is Joe's closest friend on crew. Like Joe, Roger came from a working-class background and feels somewhat out of place amongst the rich elite at the University of Washington. Roger is described as being a "funny sort of fellow – kind of gruff, apt to speak bluntly, almost rudely" (Page 72). Roger's family owned a clear-out company moving families from their foreclosed homes during the Great Depression, which no doubt gave him a sense of appreciation for the stability in his own life.

Tom Bolles

Tom Bolles is the coach of the freshman rowing team at University of Washington. He is described as having "a bland, pleasant face, a bit lean in the jowls, and [being] given to wearing wire-rimmed glasses" (Page 14).

Al Ulbrickson

Al Ulbrickson is the coach of the University of Washington's rowing program. He is a man of few words and an extreme stickler for details and rules. He forbids all of his athletes from swearing, smoking, and drinking, despite partaking in all of these activities himself. Nevertheless, he commands enormous respect from his crews. He is described as being "very tall, muscular, broad-shouldered, and distinctly Nordic in his features, with high cheekbones, a chiseled jaw line, and cold slate-gray eyes" (Page 15). To outsiders, it appears that Ulbrickson is completely devoid of emotion, yet he has the ability to stir deep emotions in his crew.

Royal Brougham

Royal Brougham is the sports editor at the Post-Intelligencer who covers the University of Washington rowing season.

Dr. Joseph Goebbels

Dr. Joseph Goebbels is the propaganda spin-doctor who convinces Adolf Hitler that it would be a wonderful opportunity to soften his image to the world by allowing Germany to host the 1936 Olympics.

Werner March

Werner March is the architect Adolf Hitler hires to design and build the Olympic Stadium in Berlin for the 1936 Olympics.

Ky Ebright

Ky Ebright is the freshman rowing coach at the University of California. He had been a coxswain while in college, and is described as a short, skinny man "with a prominent nose and receding chin" (Page 86). Although he had rowed for University of Washington, Ebright moved to California to begin coaching their freshman team after being passed up for a coaching job at U of W.

Thula LaFollette

Thula LaFollette is Harry Rantz's second wife and Joe's stepmother. Despite a seventeen-year age difference, Thula married Harry Rantz when she was only twenty-two years old, romanced by Harry's big dreams of inventive success. The reality of her life, however, was much different as she found herself raising three boys in a bleak mining camp in Boulder City, Idaho. Tensions in the family eventually boiled over when Joe was nine-years-old and Thula demanded that he be kicked out of the home. She

was clearly jealous of Harry's relationship with Joe, and she also partially blamed the growing boy – who inhaled food faster than she could make it – for the poverty the family lived in.

Harry Rantz

Harry Rantz is Joe Rantz's father. In his heart, Harry always wanted to be a good father to his children, but after the death of his first wife, Harry remarried a coldhearted, young woman who seemed to resent Harry's older sons. They represented to her the love Harry had once had for his first wife. As a result, Harry abandoned his older sons at his wife's request. Joe was three years old when his father first abandoned him. Then, his father abandoned him again at ten and fourteen. Harry was a big dreamer and always hoped that he would strike it rich and have the American dream, but he never did. He finally reconciled with Joe when Joe was seventeen-years-old, after the death of his second wife.

George Yeoman Pocock

George Yeoman Pocock is the rowing expert who builds all the racing boats at the University of Washington. Pocock was born and raised in England, and began his career building boats for Eton with his father. When his father lost his job, Pocock moved to Canada to start his own company and was eventually contracted to build a racing fleet for the University of Washington, where he would work for the rest of his life. Pocock, who is described as wearing "horn-rimmed spectacles behind which lurked sharp, penetrating eyes" (Page 41), was not only expert ship builder, he was also an expert racer who often gave insight into coaching and rowing styles.

Joyce Simdars

Joyce Simdars is Joe's high school sweetheart and eventually, his wife. Joyce, who is described as having "blond curls, a button nose, and fetching smile," first met Joe on the school bus. She fell in love with him when she heard him playing his banjo and singing funny songs. Joyce had grown up in a strict religious household that had nearly suffocated her. Joe, who lived on his own and was completely self-reliant, represented a freedom she had never dreamed of.

Johnny White

Johnny White is one of the boys Joe befriends while living in Shack Town near the new dam. Johnny is a year below Joe at University of Washington and rows on the freshman team after him. Like Joe, Johnny comes from a poor family and has to fight for everything, both at school and in the shell house. This is likely why the two became such fast friends.

Bobby Moch

Bobby Moch is the coxswain on the gold medal winning Olympic team. Standing 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighing 119 pounds, Moch was the perfect size not only for the position, but for the shells Pocock built. Moch, who loved to race from behind, made a name for himself by regularly keeping his crew at a low stroke rate only to ratchet it up in the final leg of a race, which always made his crew exciting to watch.

Leni Reifenstahl

Leni Reifenstahl is the rising filmmaker that Hitler hired to produce propaganda films in the run up to the 1936 summer Olympics in Berlin. Reifenstahl quickly became one of Hitler's favorites, much to Joseph Goebbels' annoyance. During her tenure, she produced a handful of films that are still viewed as some of the most effective propaganda films of all time.

Objects/Places

The University of Washington

The University of Washington is the college where Joe Rantz and the rest of his crewmates attend school.

Spokane, Washington

Spokane, Washington is where Joe Rantz was born and where he lived with his father and Thula until their house burned down when he was nine-years-old.

Boulder City, Idaho

Boulder City, Idaho is where the Rantz family lived while Harry was working in the mines. The weather in Boulder city was terrible, with Thula feeling like she could never keep up with the constantly filthy house. The mining town was isolated, and there were few families with children for the Rantz's to bond with. Despite this, Joe has wonderful memories of tinkering with mechanical projects with his father – including a homemade go-kart – until Thula finally reached her breaking point and demanded that Joe be sent to live elsewhere.

Sequim, Washington

Sequim, Washington is where Harry Rantz moved his family before the Great Depression. He and Joe began building a farmhouse near the river, but Harry eventually moved his family away, abandoning Joe there. Joe, who was only fourteen at the time, learned to be completely self-reliant on the farm, and even began to thrive.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression began in 1929 with the collapse of the stock market. When Rantz headed to the University of Washington, the Great Depression was entering its fourth year: "One in four Americans – ten million people – had no job and no prospects of finding one, and only a quarter of them were receiving any kind of relief" (Pages 8-9).

Montlake Cut

Montlake Cut is the boating house on the University of Washington campus. "The Cut" as the students know it, is where all the rowing equipment is kept. Freshman tryouts take place there, too.

Old Nero

Old Nero is the first racing boat the boys at the University of Washington learn to row. It is described as “a wide, flat-bottomed scow with a long walkway running down the middle and seats for sixteen novice oarsmen” (Page 49).

The Dust Bowl

The Dust Bowl is the second great tragedy to hit America in the early 20th century. It was named as such when, in November 1933, a huge windstorm blew away much of the topsoil in the America plains, making farm life impossible. Hundreds of thousands of rural refugees began streaming westward in search of jobs that did not exist.

Lake Washington

Lake Washington is the body of water where the Washington rowing crews practice each day. It is also the site of the competition race between Washington and California.

The Reichssportfeld

The Reichssportfeld is the massive sports complex that the Nazi party builds for the 1936 Olympics. Goebbels is the head of this project, with March acting as head architect. The finished product sprawls over 325 acres. It consisted of every sporting arena known to man, including “a hockey stadium, a swimming stadium, an equestrian stadium, an enormous and monolithic exhibition hall, a gymnasium, a Greek amphitheater, tennis courts, restaurants, and sprawling administrative buildings” (Page 208). As per Hitler’s request, the entire sporting field was built by German workers using German-made materials.

Shack Town

Shack Town is the shantytown that sprung up near the work site for the dam Joe worked on in the summer of 1935. The lumber and tarpaper buildings were basically tacked together, without indoor plumbing and lit by a single light bulb. Joe lives here while he’s working on the dam. It is where he befriends Johnny White and Chuck Day.

The Nuremberg Laws

The Nuremberg Laws were a series of laws that Hitler and the Nazi Party began enforcing in the years leading up to the Olympic games. Called “Blood Laws” for their desire to protect German blood and German honor, these laws forbade the marriage of Jews and non-Jews, restricted Jewish employment, and restricted housing and public access for Jewish citizens. Essentially, they outlawed being Jewish.

The Husky Clipper

The Husky Clipper is the boat the first varsity crew christened when they were finally assembled in 1936. It is also the ship that they raced for gold in the Olympic Games.

The SS Manhattan

The SS Manhattan is the boat the Washington crew and 325 other American athletes sailed to Germany for the 1936 Olympic Games. The ship was 668 feet long, weighing in at 24,289 tons, with eight passenger decks, and the ability to accommodate 1,239 passengers.

Berlin, Germany

Berlin, Germany is where the 1936 summer Olympics were held. This is where Joe Rantz and the rest of his crew earned Olympic gold.

Themes

Finding Value in Unexpected Places

One of the first lessons Joe Rantz had to learn as an abandoned child was how to survive. He grew up in Depression-era America, where everyone was foraging for survival. Families were barely scraping by and as a result, had nothing to hand out to those less fortunate than them. Joe was forced to think outside the box if he wanted to survive in such a hostile environment, and he found a way by looking at the world a bit differently than his neighbors: “If you simply kept your eyes open, it seemed, you just might find something valuable in the most unlikely of places. The trick was to recognize a good thing when you saw it, no matter how odd or worthless it might at first appear, no matter who else might just walk away and leave it behind” (Page 37). Joe first made this realization when he was ten-years-old and learned how to forage for food in the woods. Later, Joe’s work with Charlie in the cedar woods continued the theme. Although readily available, cedar was still an expensive material to purchase for home repairs, particularly during the Great Depression. Joe had thousands of dollars of home repairs to do complete, but barely enough money to keep food on the table. For Joe, the thought of finding and using luxury materials from his own backyard was mind-boggling, just as the realization that he could find free food in the natural landscape had been: “Joe was fascinated, intrigued by the idea that he could learn to see what others could not see into the wood, thrilled as always at the notion that something valuable could be found in what others had passed over and left behind” (Page 126).

Finding value in unexpected places was also at the heart of the 1936 Olympic rowing team. While rowing had traditionally been viewed as an elite sport, freshman coach Tom Bolles had sought out boys of a different background for his team: “The boys who had made it this far were rugged and optimistic in a way that seemed emblematic of their western roots. They were the genuine article, mostly the products of lumber towns, dairy farms, mining camps, fishing boats, and shipyards. They looked, they walked, and the talked as if they had spent most of their lives out of doors. Despite the hard times and their pinched circumstances, they smiled easily and openly” (Page 94). These characteristics would have been important for a crew team at any time in the sport’s history, but it seems particularly fitting that the crew of 1936 would be described as such in the middle of the Great Depression. These characteristics make them a spectacular rowing team. The team's members were symbols for the entire country that was struggling to survive in the midst of economic collapse.

The theme of finding value, or beauty, in unlikely places is returned to one final time, when Joe began working with Pocock in the shell house. There, Pocock discussed how the age rings in the wood not only told him how old a particular piece of lumber was, but also the type of life it had: “Their thickness and thinness spoke of hard years of bitter struggle intermingled with rich years of sudden growth. The different colors spoke of the various soils and minerals that the tree’s roots encountered, some harsh and stunting, some rich and nourishing. Flaws and irregularities told how the trees endured fires and

lightning strikes and windstorms and infestations and yet continued to grow" (Page 214). The lesson to be learned is one of perseverance, and that, once again, beauty can be found in the most unlikely of places. This theme, of course, also relates to Joe himself, and Brown never lets the reader forget it. Joe had been passed over and abandoned so many times in his childhood that it would understandable if he struggled with issues of confidence and self-worth. Yet there was so much value in Joe, both emotional and athletic. So much so, that Joe would go on to win the most prestigious athletic award in the world – an Olympic gold medal.

Personal Evolution

Joe Rantz probably would have had a very happy childhood if his mother had not died of throat cancer when he was only four-years-old. This tragic event led to a series of uprooted homes and abandonment for Joe. Even though Joe was clearly dedicated to and loved his family, he was forced to take care of himself and learn independence when his father told him at the age of fourteen, "Look, Son, if there's one thing I've figured out about life, it's that if you want to be happy, you have to learn how to be happy on your own" (Page 58). Abandoned for the last time by his father, fourteen-year-old Joe decided that he would never allow himself to be emotionally vulnerable again. Even though he was only a teenager, Joe knew that his father was right, if he wanted to be happy, he had to learn to be happy on his own: "Whatever else came his way, he wasn't gong to let anything like this happen again. From now on, he would make his own way, find his own route to happiness … He would survive, and he would do it on his own" (Page 59). These tragedies and setbacks of his tumultuous life helped to shape his character into one that would be worthy of success. Rather than fall apart, as many teenagers might have done, Joe fortified his resolve to succeed on his own, and he did.

Despite the fact that Joe had been forced to rely on his own determination to survive, he had to evolve one final time in order to reach his maximum potential. On crew, he had to learn, once again, the value of being a team player. This lesson began on his first day of tryouts, with freshman coach Tom Bolles holding out the prospect of the boys "becoming part of something larger than themselves, of finding in themselves something they did not yet know they possessed, of growing from boyhood to manhood" (Page 41). Throughout the tryout process, Joe had felt like an outsider, but something shifted once the boys were officially made a team. The sense of competition was over and they knew they must work together as one unit. Even on that first ride, Joe felt like he belonged, and he was deeply moved by the beauty of the moment: "The boys sat without taking, breathing heavily, exhaling plumes of white breath. Even now they had stopped rowing, their breathing was synchronized, and for a brief, fragile moment it seemed to Joe as if all of them were part of a single thing, something alive with breath and spirit of its own" (Page 78).

Joe's feeling of belonging would be short-lived, however, when he was promoted to JV and then varsity, having to fight continually to maintain his spot on the ship. Sensing Joe's growing anxiety, George Pocock pulled him up to the studio for a chat. He said that he had been analyzing Joe's stroke for a while. While Joe was strong, there were

days when it seemed like Joe was rowing alone, “as if it was up to him to row the boat across the finish line all by himself. When a man rowed like that, he said, he was bound to attack the water rather than to work with it, and worse, he was bound not to let his crew help him row” (Page 234). What mattered most, Pocock said, was the way the oarsmen harmonized together. He went on to say that Joe wouldn’t be able to fully harmonize until he opened up his heart to his crew. The next time Joe was promoted up to first boat, he snatched the opportunity to prove himself to his coaches. Pushing aside all feelings of doubt, unworthiness, and anxiety, Joe picked up his oars: “It felt to Joe like a transformation, as if some kind of magic had come over him. The nearest thing to it he could remember was the night as a freshman when he had found himself out on Lake Union with the lights of Seattle twinkling on the water and the breaths of his crewmates synchronized with his in white plumes in the dark, cold air” (Page 240). It was the last change Ulbrickson needed to make. By opening his heart to his teammates, Joe also embraced an unexpected sense of fulfillment that would remain in his heart for the rest of his life.

Styles

Structure

The Boys in the Boat by Daniel James Brown is divided into four sections of equal length, book-ended by a prologue and epilogue. In the epilogue, the author explains to the reader how he came upon Joe Rantz as his subject. In the epilogue, he fills the reader in on the lives of the boys in the boat in the years after the 1936 Olympic Games. The main body of the book surrounds the University of Washington's goal of competing in the Berlin summer Olympics. The first section of the book, What Seasons They Have Been Through, describes life in America during the Great Depression, Joe Rantz's childhood, and how he came to find himself at the University of Washington. It ends with the turning point in Joe's life of when he made the freshman rowing team. The second section, Resiliency, focuses on the University of Washington's rowing team's various competitions with California and their rise to national success. The section ends with the freshman boys being bumped up to Junior Varsity and being managed by varsity coach Al Ulbrickson. The third section, The Parts That Really Matter, focuses on Ulbrickson's struggle to find the perfect combination of boys to represent the university in the Olympic trials. The section ends with the turning point of Ulbrickson making his final team selection. The fourth and final section of the book, Touching the Divine, follows the boys through their arduous training process, the Olympic trials, and eventually their win at the 1936 Olympic Games.

While the main focus of the book surrounds the University of Washington rowing team and, arguably, the life and evolution of Joe Rantz, Brown intersperses the narrative with American history during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl, as well as the history of Hitler's manipulation of the world in the build up to the Olympic Games. These three important elements all work together to add heightened symbolism and meaning to America's victory at the Games.

Perspective

Tone

Quotes

And Hitler, as he listened to Goebbels, and knowing full well what he had planned for Germany in the days, months, and years ahead, had slowly begun to recognize the value in presenting a more attractive face to the world than his brown-shirted storm troopers and his black-shirted security forces had displayed thus far. At the very least, an Olympic interlude would help buy him time – time to convince the world of his peaceful intentions, even as he began to rebuild Germany's military and industrial power for the titanic struggle to come.
-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph Page 21)

Importance: This passage summarizes Hitler's mindset in the months leading up to the Berlin Olympic Games. It also highlights why this particular games was so important in world history. Hitler and the Nazi Party made a concerted effort to manipulate the world through their presentation of Germany, and they succeeded. The Second World War didn't break out until three years after the games concluded, no doubt delayed by Hitler's successful propaganda.

There seemed to be ore than a schoolroom science lesson in the discovery of the fungus. If you simply kept your eyes pen, it seemed, you just might find something valuable in the most unlikely of places. The trick was to recognize a good thing when you saw it, no matter how odd or worthless it might at first appear, no matter who else might just walk away and leave it behind.
-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph Page 37)

Importance: This passage summarizes Joe's lifelong effort to find value in things other people overlooked. Not only did the mindset benefit Joe personally – he was able to survive on foraged food and resell items that others initially found valueless – it also symbolizes him as a person. All throughout his life, Joe felt worthless, constantly abandoned and neglected. Yet, he knew, deep down, that there was something valuable about him.

Look, Son, if there's one thing I've figured out about life, it's that if you want to be happy, you have to learn how to be happy on your own.
-- Harry Rantz (chapter 4 paragraph Page 58)

Importance: These are the final, cold words that Harry Rantz said to his fourteen-year-old son before abandoning him one last time. Although the words likely would have scarred most teenagers, Joe took them to heart and truly focused on how he would survive on his own. He was able to find food, work, and shelter, and live a self-sufficient life. Although Joe thought he was thriving, it soon became clear that he wasn't truly happy. Joe didn't find true happiness until he became one of the boys in the boat, and learned that, in fact, a man needed to feel like he belonged in order to be truly happy.

The boys sat without taking, breathing heavily, exhaling plumes of white breath. Even now they had stopped rowing, their breathing was synchronized, and for a brief, fragile

moment it seemed to Joe as if all of them were part of a single thing, something alive with breath and spirit of its own.
-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph Page 78)

Importance: In this passage, the reader sees Joe achieving true happiness for the first time in his life. He had previously lived by the mantra that a happy man had to "learn how to be happy on [his] own," but Joe found a new sense of calm and belonging when he was out on the water with the boys in the boat.

To defeat an adversary who was your equal, maybe even your superior, it wasn't necessarily enough just to give your all from start to finish. You had to master your opponent mentally. When the critical moment in a close race was upon you, you had to know something he did not – that down in your core you still had something in reserve, something you had not yet shown, something that once revealed would make him doubt himself, make him falter just when it counted the most.
-- Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph Page 106)

Importance: This passage highlights the basic formula for defeating a foe, whether in sports or another aspect of life. Not only did the boys need to know their opponents deeply, they also needed to know themselves. The needed to be able to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and learn how to use those aspects of their character at just the right moment. This statement is true on the small scale when discussing the boys in the boat, but also on the larger scale, when discussing the West's ultimate defeat of the Eastern powers in World War II.

Perhaps the seeds of redemption lay not just in perseverance, hard work, and rugged individualism. Perhaps they lay in something more fundamental – the simple notion of everyone pitching in and pulling together.
-- Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph Page 123)

Importance: Once again, this passage highlights the importance of working together as a team. All of the boys in the boat came from backgrounds that required personal strength and endurance, but it wasn't until they learned to row together and pull for each teammate's success that they learned how to succeed as a team.

It takes energy to get angry. It eats you up inside. I can't waste my energy like that and expect to get ahead. When they left, it took everything I had in me just to survive. Now I have to stay focused. I've just gotta take care of it myself.
-- Joe Rantz (chapter 8 paragraph Page 134)

Importance: This passage summarizes Joe's motto for life. He had many reasons to be angry at the world, but he recognized that anger would only slow him down. Physically, he needed his energy and strength to get ahead in life, and he knew that holding onto bitterness and resentment for his past would only weigh him down emotionally. He knew that the best way to get ahead in life was to forgive his family of their past sins and focus on the future he could achieve through hard work and dedication.

The wood, Pocock murmured, taught us about survival, about overcoming difficulty, about prevailing over adversity, but it also taught us something about the underlying reason for surviving in the first place. Something about infinite beauty, about undying grace, about things larger and greater than ourselves. About the reasons were all here.
-- Narrator (chapter 12 paragraph Page 214)

Importance: In this passage, Pocock is discussing the beauty of the wood he uses to craft the rowing shells he became famous for, but his words also ring true for the boys in the boat, especially Joe Rantz. Joe, like the trees that survived decades in the wild, bore scars of their pasts but these markings only made them stronger.

If you don't like some fellow in the boat, Joe, you have to learn to like him. It has to matter to you whether he wins the race, not just whether you do.
-- George Pocock (chapter 13 paragraph Page 235)

Importance: Pocock's words to Joe were in direct response to Joe's struggle to row as part of team, not just as an individual. Joe was extremely strong, athletic, and motivated. Yet, Ulbrickson hesitated to add him to the varsity roster but couldn't pinpoint why. Joe had been holding on to his father's advice to "learn to be happy on [his] own" and had allowed that individualistic mindset to affect every aspect of his life. Once Joe let that go, he learned how to truly become part of time and achieved, for the first time in his life, true happiness.

It wasn't herself who mattered. It was the others – and discipline. For that, no sacrifice is too great, no matter how many tears are shed.
-- Joesph Goebbels (chapter 16 paragraph Page 305)

Importance: Goebbels writes this quote in his diary in reference to the disgraced American Olympian Eleanor Holm, who was removed from the Olympic team after drinking excessively aboard the SS Manhattan. Within the context, Goebbels words are somewhat chilling as they conjure up the ideal Nazi mentality – what is best for the Party is better than what is best for the individual. However, the words also ring true for the boys in the boat, who had to put their team before themselves, working as a unit rather than a boat full of individuals.

Topics for Discussion

Being an Oarsman

Do you think you would make a good oarsman? Why or why not? What physical requirements should an oarsman meet? How does Brown's description of crew work shape your belief about yourself and the sport? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your argument.

Joe's Childhood

How did Joe's childhood help shape him to become a gold medal winning Olympian? Do you think Joe would have made it as far as he did in life without having such a troubled upbringing? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your argument.

Fatherhood

Do you think Harry Rantz is a good father? Why or why not? Was he forced into the decisions that he made, particularly concerning Joe's upbringing, or was he simply a coward? If you were Joe, would you have forgiven your father so easily? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your argument.

Value

All throughout his life, Joe was obsessed with finding value in things that others had left behind. Why do you think this is? What does this obsession tell the reader about Joe himself? Choose two "valueless" items that Joe found new meaning for. Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your argument.

Mentors

Which of Joe's mentors do you think had the biggest impact on shaping the athlete he would become? What words of advice did Joe follow from Tom Bolles, Al Ulbrickson, and George Pocock? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your argument.

Nazi Germany

How does The Boys in the Boat portray Nazi Germany during the 1936 Olympics? Do you think Brown's representation of the country is too positive? too negative? historically

accurate? Does Brown's representation reflect the way the west viewed Nazi Germany at the time, or how it is historically remembered? Why is this differentiation important? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your argument.

Propaganda

How did Joseph Goebbels and Leni Reifenstahl effectively whitewash Berlin of all negative press before the 1936 Olympic Games? What contributions did each of them make to promote the propaganda agenda? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Teamwork

When Brown first asked Rantz if he could interview him for a new book, Joe got very emotional and said that it couldn't be just about him; it had to be "about the boat" (Page 3). Why do you think this is? What changed in Joe's life that made him want to focus the memoir of his life on a boat? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.