



# *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown Discussion Questions & Activities

Explore a powerful moment through found poetry

- Locate examples of found poetry with a quick online search or by reading from Georgia Heard's book, The Arrow Finds Its Mark: A Book of Found Poems
- Choose a powerful moment in the text (e.g. Joe's realization that he was "sick and tired" of being scared and ready to find "his own route to happiness" (p. 52); or the moment the boys found their swing for the first time and rowed in "perfect unity" (p. 148); or when Joe felt a deep "sense of pride" for the first time (p. 107)
- You might also choose to explore a cause and effect relationship (e.g. How the crew's life experiences affected their strength for crew (p. 54, p. 81)
- Create a found poem that captures the power of the moment or idea you chose. Pull out key words and phrases right from the text and play with their arrangement. Repeat a word or phrase for effect. Set a word in a line all by itself for power.

Use dramatic reenactment to explore relationships among events on the timeline

- Locate the timeline on pages 216 and 217 in the back matter of the text
- Organize into small groups and choose an event from the timeline
- Work with your group to create a short scene that communicates the importance of the event for the story and for history. If the event is described in the text, incorporate key words, phrases, and quotes from the text into your scene.
- Groups enact the scenes in chronological order
- Discuss the relationships of events as a class: How was your chosen event impacted by the event that came right before it? By even earlier events? How does your scene impact the events that come after it?

Become the character by writing and speaking a monologue

- Choose a character or an object (e.g. *Husky Clipper*) and write a monologue as if you are the character or the object.

- You might try writing and speaking from the point of view of a character that grew and changed. (e.g. Joe’s transformation from “Mr. Individuality” (p.87) to learning to trust (p. 136) to “*knowing* that the other boys would be there for him” (p. 206))
- Or, you might choose to locate a powerful quotation to inspire your monologue such as the following examples:
  - “They are,” he said, “the finest I’ve ever seen in a shell” (p. 205). (regarding Coach Ulbrickson)
  - “She had no intention of living a life like her mother’s, where endless housework limited the horizons of her worldview. She wanted to live a life of the mind, and the university was her ticket to that life” (p. 60). (regarding Joyce)
  - “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” (p. 43) (regarding Joe’s father)
- Practice speaking the monologue with power. Use a digital tool such as Audacity to record and rerecord in order to practice delivering the monologue with meaning and power.

#### Poetry for Two Voices: Exploring Class

- The 1934 regatta highlighted the “clash of rich and poor” (p. 78). Explore this issue of class and socioeconomic status that runs throughout the story by writing a poem for two voices.
- Start by investigating sample poems for two voices with a quick online search (ie. ReadWriteThink.org).
- Locate passages in the text that reveal the issue of class. For example, you might find the following pages helpful: p. 46, 62, 69, 77, 147, 155, 156, 160, 174, 194.
- Try writing from the voice of “eastern privilege and prestige” (p. 78) and from the voice of “western sincerity and brawn” (p. 78). Or, choose characters of differing classes and write from their perspectives.
- Try writing a poem for two voices to think deeply about other ideas in the book; for example, you might explore Joe’s life of independence vs. Joyce’s life of supervision (p. 55, p. 57)
- For extra thought: Discuss how rowing provided Joe with opportunities for upward mobility (see p. 75).

#### What’s the power of a chant?

- The coxswain chanted rowing mantras such as M-I-B (“mind in boat”) p. 67 and “Save, save, save” p. 150. The crowds chanted, “Ray! Ray! Ray! For the USA!” p. 170. The Germans chanted “Sieg Heil!” p. 192 when Hitler entered.
- In small groups, investigate the meaning and power of the chants. Try writing your own.

### “I am From” Poetry

- Read the poem “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon as a mentor text
- Choose a character from The Boys in the Boat (e.g. Joe, Joyce, Don Hume, George Pocock, Bobby Moch, Al Ulbrickson, etc.)
- Mine the story for particular moments, people, things, ideas, and sayings that influence the character
- Gather additional details from primary sources including photographs, interviews, radio shows, and obituaries.
- Write an “I am from poem” from the character’s point of view

### Explore the Role of Music in the life of Joe Rantz

- Discuss the power of music in Joe’s personal life and rowing life. How did music “brightened the bleakest days” (p. 76) of Joe’s childhood? Find examples of the role music played with his friends, his father, his survival, his girlfriend, and his feelings about himself. How and when did music let him down?
- Investigate the “camp tunes” and “cowboy songs” (p. 76) of the time period (e.g. by using the Library of Congress website). In what ways might Joe have connected to the lyrics? Do the lyrics capture the time period of the Depression?
- Listen to the national anthems and fight songs mentioned in the text. Consider the beat, rhythm, and mood of the songs. What words or phrases speak to you? In what ways do the songs reflect the big ideas of the text?

### Represent central ideas in the text through tableaux (statues that do not move or speak)

- As a class, brainstorm the central ideas or themes in the text and locate passages as evidence. For example, students might infer the following themes: unison, teamwork, humility, finding their swing, adversity, trust and grit.
- Invite students to locate passages that highlight these ideas; for example check out the following pages: unison p. 63, 67, 95, 148, 201; teamwork p. 133, 134, 136, 180; humility p. 140; finding their swing p. 148; adversity p. 46, 111, 160, 183, 189, 194; trust p. 136, 139, 157
- Organize students into small groups and invite each group to choose one of the ideas. Using an online dictionary and thesaurus, have students further explore the meaning of the terms.
- After discussing the central idea within their group, have students create a group tableau (silent and still statues that visually represent the idea). Students might choose to organize themselves to represent a scene in the book that highlights the idea or take it a step further and create a symbolic representation of the idea
- As each group poses in their tableau one at a time, invite the classroom audience to record words and related ideas that come to mind as they view it.

What's your opinion?

- On page 140, Joe and his crew are described as “tough,” “skilled,” “determined,” and “good-hearted.” Challenges in life led to their “humility” and rowing “for one another” (p. 140). Yet, Joyce was determined to “make up for the way the world had...treated Joe Rantz” (p. 57)
- Would you change the way Joe grew up if could? Include evidence from the text to support your stance.
- You might consider Joe’s physical strength (p. 81) and his emotional strength (p. 68).

Connecting the past to the upcoming 2016 Olympic Games

- The 1936 Berlin Olympics highlighted the strength of individuals from the Depression Era in addition to the political atmosphere of Germany. During the Olympics, the “brutal reality of Nazi Germany was nearly invisible” (p. 187).
- Discuss the quotation: “Americans realized that there was more at stake in these Olympics Games than a few medals. A way of life was at stake. Basic fairness was at stake” (p. 195).
- Conduct research to investigate the Olympians and the location of the Games of 2016. What might be at stake for individuals of the upcoming Olympic Games? What country is hosting and what might it mean for them?

Job Description: Seeking a *great* oarsman

- Discuss the meaning of the following: “A *great* oarsman needed a rare balance of ego and humility” (p. 87).
- Invite students to locate additional passages in the text that reveal what it takes to be a great oarsman. Ask them to consider if they agree with the criteria. (For example, see pages 87, 124).
- Choose one of the following:
  - Draft a job advertisement for an oarsman
  - Draft an entry for an advice column entitled, “Advice for an Olympian”

Examining a Comparison

- When talking about the wood he uses to craft boats, Pocock told Joe that “the ability to yield, to bend, to give way...was sometimes a source of strength in men as well as in wood” (p. 126).
- Have students reread pages 126-127. How would you use words, pictures or movements to explain the meaning of this comparison?

### Read Across a Text Set: The Great Depression

- In order to gain a sense of the historical time of the Great Depression, invite students to read across a variety of primary sources including songs and photographs such as those suggested here on the Library of Congress site: [http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/dust-bowl-migration/pdf/teacher\\_guide.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/dust-bowl-migration/pdf/teacher_guide.pdf)
- Have students brainstorm words and phrases that speak to them as they read across texts and display them in a class word cloud or use <http://www.wordle.net/>
- Reflect on the different texts. Which ones provided you with new information? Which ones sparked additional questions?

### Personal Narrative

- Invite students to reread “A Note from the Author” on pages x and xi. The author tells the reader, “it’s really a story about you” (xi).
- Choose one or more of the following problems found in the story and write a personal narrative to explore the ways in which you can relate: “family problems, making the team, succeeding at school, fitting in with other kids, learning whom you can and can’t trust, finding a way to make some money, figuring out how you feel about the opposite sex, deciding who and what you want to be a few years down the road” (xi).

### Recreating the Story: How did the author do it?

- Conduct a research project to investigate the processes involved in retelling this true story
- Examine the back matter:
  - What websites did the author use to gather information?
  - What primary sources were used?
  - Why do you think the author chose these particular sources?
- Search online for additional information: View the videos on Youtube, check out the Facebook page, locate the scholarship fund; Find out: Who is Judy and what is her role in retelling the story?
- Evaluate: Given the information you have learned, do you think this is an authentic retelling of the story? In your opinion, was anything left out? What would you have focused on? Done differently?

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