



# THE YEAR OF THE BOAT

*Beauty, Imperfection, and the Art of Doing It Yourself*  
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THERE ARE PLACES in North America where no one thinks about boats. I come from one of them, El Paso, a city stuffed into the acute wedge of Texas between Mexico and New Mexico. The only local body of water is the Rio Grande, which farmers have sucked down to a miserable mocha dribble by the time it reaches El Paso. A hundred miles upriver are a couple of reservoirs that technically qualify as boating destinations, but to me they've always looked as bleak as the windswept Chihuahuan Desert around them. In the seventeen years I lived in El Paso, I never met anyone who owned a boat nor, as far as I knew, dreamed of one.

A painting of a boat somehow imprinted itself on my childhood memory, however. It hung on a wall of the Club Zaragosa, a restaurant-nightclub just across the Mexican border. My parents frequently went there to eat, drink and dance — *cerveza* was ten cents a bottle, and there was a brass orchestra on weekends that to my twelve-year-old ears sounded respectable. The painting depicted a serene lake somewhere in central Mexico. In the background was a volcano, and in the foreground a dark-skinned man stood on a wooden pram, propelling his small boat with a pole. There appeared to be no practical reason for the man to be in the boat — no fishing gear, no passengers, no larger boat he might be approaching as a tender. It appeared that the boatman might simply be wasting time, and I wondered why an artist had chosen to celebrate such a thing.

Today I'm wondering about the chain of events that has braided my recent adult life with a boat, and whether I may have just wasted a precious year. I'm building a boat — a modest wooden sailing dinghy that fits, barely, in my suburban Seattle garage — and I'm in trouble. I just discovered, thanks to the scrutiny of a boatbuilding friend in another suburb, that four months ago I left out a piece of its structure. A sprinkling of minor mistakes, scattered across the course of a year, appear to have mated and multiplied into swarms. Neighbors continually drop in and practically swoon over the boat's graceful lines, but all I see is mistakes and misjudgments, some cosmetic, some possibly fatal to its safe functioning. I'm depressed and discouraged. I don't know whether I'll have a respectable and usable sailboat when I finish it, or a learning experience that's too deeply flawed even to give away.

My work has been incomprehensibly slow, stumbling, often incompetent, plagued by doubt and at the same time infected by too much pride to ask for help. I

started out knowing I was fully unqualified to build a boat, but buoyed by the belief that *every* first-time boatbuilder is unqualified, by definition. Building a doghouse or a gazebo doesn't *begin* to prepare you for the complexities of a boat, nor for the emotional surf you're headed into.

Throughout the project, I've had a continuing struggle not so much with perfectionism – “perfect” was never my goal – but with finding a level of imperfection that seemed reasonable and comfortable. A boat must be built well enough to shield its occupants from an environment that will shortly kill them if they're fully exposed to it, must be able to sail efficiently and maneuver reliably from point A to point B, *and* return a tangible dividend of joy to its owner, balancing the inevitable grief it will also bring. A handmade wooden boat is an organic creation, nearly a living thing in itself, and the beauty designed and built into it has a direct correlation to its lifespan. “A wooden boat must be loved if it's to survive,” wrote Jenny Bennett, a British editor who commissioned a professionally-built daysailer about the size of mine, “and that's considerably more likely to happen if it's pretty to look at.”

Over the last year I've done almost nothing *but* think about boats, building this one and learning to sail on bigger ones and trying to discern whether there is any deeper meaning in the process. I never expected any of this.

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Early in my adult life I settled in Tucson, which would seem to be just as unlikely as my home town as a venue for anyone to entertain boat thoughts. The river that used to trickle through the southern Arizona desert, the Santa Cruz, literally dried up in the 1940s as agriculture and urban growth drained down the water table. The Santa Cruz riverbed today is a dry channel flanked incongruously with mesquite-and-cactus city parks and occasional homeless encampments pitched in the shade of sprawling tamarisk trees. But Arizona, land of audacious schemes, has substantial boating destinations: Lake Roosevelt, created by a dam on the Salt River northeast of Phoenix; and Lakes Havasu, Mohave, Mead and Powell along the Colorado River. Among the urban legends I heard on arrival in Tucson was that Arizonans owned more boats per capita than residents of any other state. I swallowed it – Arizona seemed so exotic that any cultural perversity might be plausible – but this statistic, at least, turned out to be spurious. One in every thirty-four Arizonans, according to current registration figures, owns a boat. In Minnesota, one in six.

I came to know a handful of people in Arizona who had boats – wealthy folks who kept sailboats in San Diego or the Sea of Cortez, or working stiffs who would trailer their speedboats to Lake Roosevelt for grim weekends of beer and sunburn. I have one memorable boat story, which involved a friend in medical school at the University of Arizona in the early 1980s.

In October of 1983 it rained furiously and freakishly for three days in Tucson and even more in the mountains heaped like a collar around the city. The Santa Cruz and its normally dry tributaries, most notably the Rillito, suddenly reawakened as real rivers.

The Rillito (ironically “Little River” in Spanish) is an eroded channel up to 800 feet wide, and at the peak of this flood, chocolate-brown water boiled through it so savagely that it gobbled acre-sized bites of riverbank, one after another, like a dog devouring meatloaf. I stood among a knot of saucer-eyed spectators on a hilltop and watched as one of the acre-bites collapsed into the Rillito’s maw, the house on it splintering like a popsicle-stick model. At exactly this same time Michael Collier was in a Saturday morning pediatrics lecture at the medical school, looking out at the rain and daydreaming about the kayak languishing in the shed behind his house. As soon as class ended he phoned a friend, a fellow kayaker who was typically “up for anything,” and the pair lashed their kayaks to Collier’s ’66 Volkswagen bus and headed for a possible launch spot upstream on the Rillito.

“When we got there and saw it, our jaws dropped,” Collier recalled later. “It was just awesome. It was running at 20,000 cubic feet per second. We didn’t hesitate for a minute.”

Collier and his friend launched into what amounted to a five-mile-long brownwater maelstrom and rode it halfway through Tucson. “We were in trains of waves that were higher than the kayak was long – 12 feet,” Collier recalled. “We passed condos that were actively falling in. At one point I pulled into a nest of branches to rest, and shared it with a rattlesnake.” He insisted it wasn’t all that dangerous. “I’d been kayaking for twelve years at that point, and I had a bombproof roll. I’d do it again today if those skills were intact.”

I thought then that Collier was certifiably insane, but he graduated from medical school, completed his internship and residency, and is today a respected practicing physician. *Conditional* insanity, induced by the poorly understood reaction of water, human, and boat, is a more likely diagnosis.

It is possible that boat mania is somehow genetically encoded in the human brain. Our distant ancestors built boats to extend their foraging range and populate new lands when the natural resources at home grew scarce. Natural selection would therefore seem to favor those with the more adventurous genes. (The earliest evidence for human travel in boats is the settlement of Australia and New Guinea at least 40,000 years ago – around the time that Neanderthals, who apparently built no boats, vanished from the earth.)

If boats aren’t imprinted in our atavistic makeup, it seems provably certain that the craving to visit or inhabit new environments is. And a boat – a raft made from logs, a kayak, a luxury yacht, a battleship – is the most practical way of adapting ourselves to a natural environment for which we are physiologically unsuited. Collier wasn’t quite crazy enough to *swim* the raging Rillito, and if he had been, his genetic lineage would have terminated abruptly, right there. With the help of boats, people cheerfully will accept preposterous risks or hardships to be out on the water. I recently toured a sailboat that the owners had lived on for several years. They were a family of five. The boat was twenty-seven feet long.

A substantial fraction of our wild-ass dreams involve boats in some way or another. A travel writer named Paul Bennett explained in *National Geographic Adventure* magazine how he and his wife Lani decided over martinis one evening in 1999 to chuck their jobs, buy a sailboat, and set off on a transoceanic voyage with no goal other than staying afloat and alive. Neither had any substantial sailing experience. But they did it, and lived to tell. Around this same time, Jerry Joslin, an Oregon bronze sculptor, noticed a seedy-looking Chinese junk docked on the Columbia River, a couple of kids living on it for cheap rent. He bought it and spent five intense years restoring it. "Sometimes we do crazy things," he told a local newspaper. "Sometimes it turns out in life you are well advised to do that; it's called chasing a dream."

In a gemlike piece titled "The Sea and the Wind That Blows" essayist E. B. White, a lifelong sailor, explained such "crazy things" with eloquent rationality: "If a man must be obsessed by something, I suppose a boat is as good as anything, perhaps a bit better than most. A small sailing craft is not only beautiful, it is seductive and full of strange promise and the hint of trouble." John Steinbeck, reflecting on a 1940 expedition in the Sea of Cortez, suggested something more mystical: "Some have said they have felt a boat shudder before she struck a rock, or cry when she beached and the surf poured into her. This is not mysticism, but identification; man, building this greatest and most personal of all tools, has in turn received a boat-shaped mind, and the boat, a man-shaped soul."