

THE YEAR *of the* BOAT

BEAUTY, IMPERFECTION,
AND THE ART OF DOING IT YOURSELF



LAWRENCE W. CHEEK

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but about life in all its leaky complications."

—*The Seattle Times*

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SASQUATCH BOOKS
SEATTLE

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**For Patty
who may have doubted
but never spoke of it**

CHAPTER 1

DEEP BEAUTY



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 western 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 darkskinned man stood on a small wooden platform propelling it 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 are 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 quickly 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 is 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 the 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.



Early in my adult life I settled in Tucson, which would seem to be just as unlikely as my hometown of El Paso 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 a eroded channel up to eight hundred feet wide, and at the peak of this flood chocolate-brown water boiled through it so savagely that it gobbled acre-size 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 hour 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 friend Curt Green, 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—twelve 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 line would have terminated abruptly, right there. With the help of

boats, people cheerfully 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. J. White, a lifelong sailor, explained such "crazy things" with eloquent rationality: "For 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 boatshaped mind, and the boat, a man-shaped soul."



I paid little attention to boats and water through the decades I lived in Arizona. Mountains and canyons formed a more obvious and practical attraction. I never had the nerve to try climbing with ropes and carabiners, but I came to love hiking in steep, spiky places. The last of the three addresses my wife, Patty, and I occupied in Tucson was a house at the northeastern edge of the city where the Santa Catalina Mountains spilled into the desert basin in a tumble of canyons. I was working from home by then, and I fell into a routine of hiking those canyons for two or three hours every morning before settling into the day's research and writing. I could no more envision living in an environment without mountains than one without oxygen.

In 1995, unexpectedly, we moved to Seattle. It was a career move for Patty, who was recruited into a nursing management job at a colossal hospital. There were mountains on the horizons whenever the rain and fog relented for long enough to see them, and it was no coincidence that we bought a house in the one suburb that has a halfway decent mountain right in it.

Patty had grown up in Houston, forty miles from the Gulf of Mexico, but this was the first time I had ever lived near ocean or lakes. Less than four months after moving, we got ourselves seduced by the lavishly abundant water of Washington. On a weekend trip to the San Juan Islands, we spotted a sign in the waterfront village of Eastsound: "Sea Kayak Tours—No Experience Necessary." Well, why not? Something about being on an island, even for a weekend, overwrites the default-mode inhibitions. The tether to solid ground, to mainland personal histories, is temporarily slack. An hour later, bobbing on the wavelets of Doe Bay, we knew we were having a life-altering experience. Since then we've logged thousands of kayak miles—mostly close to home in Puget Sound and British Columbian waters, but also off the coast of Maine and in Mexico's Sea of Cortez.

We felt no urge to graduate to any larger type of boat. Sea kayaking appeared to present more than enough challenge and adventure to last us the rest of our lives. A sea kayak can go anywhere, as long as one is patient enough to do it at a speed of 3 knots, and cultivating that patience (along with the physical conditioning that necessarily accompanies it) is a virtuous goal. A kayak, in fact, is not only a boat, but also an extension of the human body; the paddler morphs into a kind of honorary sea mammal. You're intimately connected with the marine environment, and you learn to appreciate it—and deeply respect it—at many different levels.

Then came a magazine assignment to do a roundup of the Northwest's wooden boat shows. We first hit the Center for Wooden Boats' July festival on Seattle's Lake Union, then the September Wooden Boat Festival in Port Townsend. Between them we saw more than two hundred watercraft of every possible description: sailboats, motor cruisers, speedboats, tugboats, rowboats, canoe kayaks. Most of them, if not quite all, were beautiful. Their owners also shared a common quality: a devotion that bordered on fanaticism. I talked with several.

"People come aboard, shake their heads in amazement, and ask, 'How can you possibly keep up with it?'" said the skipper of a stunning seventy-eight-foot schooner named Sugartime, based in Honolulu. "I say, how can you not keep up with it? How can you ignore the responsibility of maintaining a thing of such beauty, fifty-two tons of the finest wood ever grown?"

Another owner told me he'd just cast off his Seattle dental practice because it was demanding time that his boat, a seventythree-foot tug built in 1909 but now undergoing renovation into a pleasure cruiser, needed more urgently. "Three mangled fingers, four lost girlfriends, five lawsuits, and close to half a million dollars—and here I am," he said. "But I know people who've spent more on psychiatry and therapy than I have on this boat, and I'm a lot happier."

The owner of a 1928 salmon troller converted to cruising confirmed that a staggering amount of labor goes into rebuilding and maintaining such a boat. "There aren't too many successful conversions like this," he said. "But there are a lot of failed dreams."

I asked directly about obsession. "A wooden boat will take every bit of perfectionism you can throw at it," said the owner of a thirty-three-foot sloop. "It's real easy to get obsessive—to go overboard, so to speak. You have to constantly

remind yourself to keep looking at the big picture, and quit obsessing over the flaws that only you will ever see.”

I wasn't prepared for what happened next—it came out of nowhere, as unlikely as an iceberg in the Gulf of Mexico. We were studying an exquisite forty-year-old forty-five-foot, teakplanked sloop, recently restored to within an inch of her life with a sign offering her for sale at \$189,000.

“That's how much equity we have in the house,” Patty said evenly. “It's big enough we could live aboard.”

Some moments back I linked boats and wild-ass dreams, but I never would have imagined my wife contriving one of the latter. She is wise, logical, prudent, and impulsive only to the point of adopting a homeless cat that might show up at the door. We knew absolutely nothing about sailing, living aboard a boat, or maintaining any watercraft more complicated than a kayak. I waited for her to toss off this freak whim with a laugh, but she didn't. She was staring at the boat with a glint of steel in her eyes. The vision of owning this boat, fusing our entire lives to it, had started as a shiver in her spine, bypassed the Rational Judgment Department, and lodged with electric intensity in her cortex. She was boatstruck—a phenomenon that Michael Ruhlman, in his excellent chronicle *Wooden Boat*, says occurs only infrequently among women. But none of us is immune: woman, man, architect, zoologist, El Pasoan.



We humans, no matter our gender or culture, crave to be around beauty. This is another quality that seems to be genetically imprinted, and it has to do with recognizing and feeling comforted by certain recurring patterns in nature. The swirl of a spiral galaxy and the concordant curl of a nautilus shell both evoke feelings of pleasure or even awe. We see in their similarity an underlying order to the universe, which is a warming reassurance in the midst of the mess and unpredictability of human society—and of my office desk, for that matter.

A wooden boat is a more plausible object of desire than most man-made creations. It's an architectural form that pays respect to nature in a direct and honest manner. Its shape is determined by the nature of its material and the need to carve as efficiently as possible through water and air. It extends roots deep into the human story, connecting cultures throughout recorded history, and before. Remnants of an Egyptian riverboat from 2600 BC and a Viking ship of AD 800 have eerily similar forms, and any five-year-old in deepest Nebraska today would recognize them both as boats. A wooden boat in particular forms a retort to the prevailing pattern of intentional obsolescence and throwaway cheapness that has infected practically every other thing we buy and use today, including our houses. The only reason to throw away a well-crafted wooden boat would be if the owner has let it deteriorate beyond a reasonable feasibility of repair—and when that

happens, half the time some swooning fool will try an unfeasible restoration anyway.

The swooners may be giving in to an urge to connect with something more powerful than the beauty of surface and line, something that comprises the qualities of authenticity and integrity. For easy reference, I'll call this deeper beauty, and I plan to go into it more extensively later. But briefly, an object that has it would exemplify respect for materials, so that it does not mask or distort the essential nature of its component parts. Its design would precisely fulfill the need of its user. And its form would not only follow function, but also relate in a deeper sense to the environment where it's created and used.

How many of the things that we own might qualify? In a typical American household, practically nothing—including the house itself. Almost nothing mass-produced will fulfill all three conditions. (The classic Gem paper clip, which cannot be improved, is an exception.) Many people own beautiful antique furniture, but how well, if at all, can a Chippendale armoire adapt to the functional needs of a twenty-first-century household? If we do happen to own something whose value and usefulness actually transcends generations, we are, I believe, blessed by it. Essayist Scott Russell Sanders once described a hammer, a saw, and a framing square that his grandfather and father had used in succession, then passed on to him. The tools functioned as well as they had two generations back, because they had been built to last and the work they had to do had not changed. More importantly, Sanders had inherited the fiber of their users through them. "I was taught early on that a saw is not to be used apart from a square," Sanders recalled. "If you're going to cut a piece of wood,' my father insisted, 'you owe it to the tree to cut it straight.' " His tools had been sharpened, permanently, with the morality of good workmanship.

The implausible success of *WoodenBoat* magazine testifies to our longing for these qualities. It's deeper than romanticism or nostalgia. When a New England boatbuilder named Jon Wilson launched the magazine in 1974, only a small, hard-core of enthusiasts was thinking about—or building or restoring—wooden boats of any kind. Fiberglass, invented in the 1940s, had made the mass production of small boats possible, and the consequence was the democratization of pleasure boating. Who could argue with that? Wilson, though, believed that wooden boats still resonated with something at the heart of human culture, or even the individual human soul, something that would not become obsolete. In a retrospective five years after launching the magazine, he wrote:

Wooden boats remind me a lot about what we've forgotten—or perhaps never knew. With rare exception, their shapes and structures reveal the accumulated experience of thousands of years. They have pleasing shapes for the most part; the material itself demands it. As if the grace of the forest trees were bequeathed in abundance to every plank sewn. And each plank, in turn, has carried with it the duty to lie gracefully in place, resisting to the end any move toward the awkward and angular. That duty was once well understood. Designers, builders, and just plain lovers of boats could

respond in awe to the nature of wood and let their hearts and hands be guided by it.

WoodenBoat started with exactly two subscribers and an office that consisted of a corner in Wilson's Maine cabin, which incidentally lacked electricity, phone, and plumbing. In 2007 its paid circulation nearly touched 80,000, which is surely more than the number of functional wooden boats in the country. Organizations and museums dedicated to the revival have blossomed. There are at least two dozen annual wooden boat festivals in North America. The one at Port Townsend, which by 2007 had blossomed into a three-day weekend blowout of music, art, food, workshops, and some two hundred boats, attracts 25,000 people every year.

In some people's minds the wooden boat revival has assumed moral dimensions. A few years back, a letter to the editor in WoodenBoat laid it bare: "The mass production of fiberglass boats is solely responsible for the unruly and discourteous crowds that we find on the water today."

The ripe whiff of elitism wafts from that dock, and I don't share it. I've never had any antipathy toward fiberglass boats, but I've never quite felt rapture in their presence, either. At that first wooden boat show I found I loved the visual warmth of wooden boats, sailboats in particular, and also the fact that every one of them—even a simple dinghy, contained a story. At the same time, I had serious reservations about my suitability to become one of those stories. All my life I've enjoyed building things, but I hate maintaining anything. I avoid gardening, fence painting, window washing, gutter cleaning, furnace filter replacing, and most other essential chores associated with home ownership. I run the "spring cleaning" program on my computer once every three or four springs, and clear out the obsolete accumulations in my filing cabinets only when the drawers refuse to accept another scrap of paper. This is something more than garden-variety procrastination. It's a deep-seated impatience with repetitive work that merely preserves a status quo rather than adding value. I'm not sure whether it's a character defect or a personality type, but I know I've got it—and that it would be a deadly liability in wooden boat stewardship.

I visited a friend who lives aboard a thirty-seven-foot sloop in a Seattle marina. "It's really no different than maintaining a house," he explained. "Except that you put things off, your home sinks." Or as still another owner at the Lake Union show told me, "You've got to be very dedicated and very anal."

For a few days I actually considered Patty's startling proposition. Technically, it was feasible: we could convert our dry-land equity into this wooden boat and live aboard; the \$400-a-month moorage fee would substitute for the interest we were paying on our mortgage. The sloop was breathtakingly beautiful. It promised a steep but exhilarating learning curve. It would rip us out of the ruts of predictable routine, and as the artist who scooped up the Chinese junk put it, sometimes in life we are well-advised to do crazy things. On the other hand: abandoning home and plunging life savings into a forty-five-foot sailboat when you don't know how to sail, don't even know whether you might like to sail, goes beyond crazy—it's reckless.

An embryo of an idea, not as precipitous but just as ridiculous and impulsive
stirred in my mind: I could build a sailboat.

CHAPTER 2

WHY BUILD A BOAT?



A PEASANT FISHERMAN IN Mexico or Malaysia has every reason in the world to build a boat, but a middle-class American in the suburbs may have to go to some trouble explaining and convincing.

If you live alone, no problem. You don't have to justify building a boat any more than you would making crab-and-gouda enchiladas for breakfast. No one needs to see you or be affected by either, and if you choose to report your adventure to your friends, they can just write it off as one more charming eccentricity. Four years after that transfixing afternoon at the wooden boat show, however, Patty was dubious, and not without cause. Over the last several months I had been talking about building a sailboat with gradually increasing frequency, like a Geiger counter approaching a cache of plutonium. Every time I brought up my latest idea she would nod silently, her head bobbing in a small and noncommittal arc, neither asking questions nor supplying encouragement. I knew what this meant; no one married for thirty-five years remains oblivious to nonverbal communication.

I couldn't blame her. My history is littered with grand plans and colossal efforts that dribbled into inconsequential scrap heaps.

Through most of the 1970s I studied piano, first with Patty and then with a demanding concert pianist. I was a serious and dedicated student. I would come home from my job as a newspaper reporter around five most afternoons and hit the Yamaha grand for two hours of rigorous practice while Patty taught her young piano students in another room. I looked forward hungrily to that daily practice session because I loved the music I was playing, and because it provided mental release from the stresses of newspaper work.

Eventually, though, the piano imposed its own form of stress. I hit a plateau—felt more like a concrete wall—where I couldn't seem to make any more progress. I'd made it into the minor leagues of the serious classical piano repertoire, playing the lesser Mozart and Beethoven sonatas, Chopin nocturnes and waltzes, and—personal favorite—the Schubert C minor Impromptu. But I couldn't break through to the next level. I ached to play big Beethoven, like the fiendishly difficult Waldstein sonata. And I increasingly realized I wasn't going to get there, ever. I had enough musical ability to read a score and hear precisely the interpretation

wanted in my head, but I couldn't make my fingers realize it. I daydreamed about taking a yearlong sabbatical and practicing four hours a day, the standard for concert pianists, but I knew even at that level of effort I would never be good enough to play anything like the Waldstein in public for paying customers. If I couldn't satisfy an imagined audience, it was equally unlikely that I could even satisfy myself. And so I became a piano dropout at the age of thirty-five.

Periodically, the piano returns to haunt me, a nagging ghost of desire—and guilt. A few years ago Patty played the Waldstein, among other red-meat pieces by Bach, Brahms, and Brubeck, in a dedication recital for a new grand piano at her church. I assisted by turning pages and, when asked, coaching her practice sessions. This latter was a delicate balancing act, as anyone knows who's ever dared to critique a spouse's or lover's artistic work. The task became particularly tricky with the Waldstein because I was playing the son of a bitch, vicariously through her. I wanted to take control, to make it my performance. But we both understood what was happening, she put up her usual stiff resistance to letting anyone push her around, and I throttled back on the suggestions that were arising essentially to satisfy me. And we stayed married.

Over dinner one evening, I tried to explain why I wanted—needed, even—to try building a boat.

I've been feeling more and more frustrated with my magazine work, I said. The assigned articles are getting shorter and shorter—most editors seem to think readers' attention spans expire in three minutes—and the pieces are predictable and flimsy. The work is just income—most of it doesn't mean anything to me.

"I know," she said.

"I've figured out a plan," I continued. "If I just discipline myself to work more efficiently, I can compress the same amount of shallow magazine reporting and writing into a shorter work day. I can finish by two or three in the afternoon and go out to the garage to work on the boat, and it'll be like a daily sabbatical. I need that different kind of fulfillment, creating something tangible with my hands, and something that isn't trivial."

She listened. She didn't counter, as many spouses might, that a sailboat was trivial. She understood that this would be something more than a grown-boy toy and that what I was proposing was very different from going to a dealer and buying a factory-produced boat. I wanted to go deeper with her at this critical moment, to explain how I felt that building a boat could be an exercise in building character, but the concept was still too loosely formed in my mind to shape into words, even with my most intimate and trusted friend.

She decided to trust me, even with my checkered history of failed plans and imploded ambitions. "Well," she said, "you're not quite a boatbuilding virgin."



Four years earlier, acting on a weekend whim, we had taken the ferry over to Port Townsend, the fetching little Victorian seaport on the Olympic Peninsula that aspired in the 1880s to become the Boston of the Northwest. Planted conveniently where the Strait of Juan de Fuca turns the corner into Puget Sound, Port Townsend appeared to be the perfect port of call for sailing ships. Westerly winds in the strait would blow the vessels right to it, while if they had to continue up the calmer sound to Seattle or Tacoma it could add days to the sailors' voyage. Unfortunately, these ambitions were blossoming in the twilight of commercial sailing. The advent of steam-powered shipping scuttled Port Townsend's plans. A few generations later it would become the B&B capital of the Northwest, the only plausible modern use for all those overblown Victorian houses. The town also still harbors quite a few maritime cottage industries, one of which is a highly respected kit-kayak manufacturer, Pygmy Boats.

We hardly needed another kayak. We already had two factory-built fiberglass kayaks, and our only beef was that they were heavy lumps to heave onto our ta Subaru's roof rack. But to upgrade one's flotilla, any excuse will serve. A wooden kayak could be substantially lighter—around thirty-five pounds instead of fifty-five—and much prettier as well. We walked into the Pygmy world headquarters and arranged to paddle several of their demo models around Point Hudson Harbor conveniently right outside the shop. After an entertaining hour on the water switching among five different boats, we bought the smallest model, the Arctic Tern 14. Its parts—precut pieces of 1/8-inch-thick marine plywood, a bolt of fiberglass cloth, and a few bits of hardware—all fit into a long, skinny box that might have been used to pack a tall floor lamp. I thought at the time, Inside this scrawny box is a boat that's supposed to venture out on the Pacific Ocean! It seemed no less preposterous than buying a forty-five-foot sloop that we wouldn't know how to sail: just cheaper.

When we got home I methodically swept the garage, cut open the box, and laid all the pieces out on the floor. It didn't look like a boat or a prayer of becoming one. I remembered a TV interview with Bill Clinton between his 1992 election and inauguration. "I feel a little like the dog that chased a pickup and actually caught it," he'd admitted. "Now what am I gonna do with it?" I felt like the dog-elect. I dug into my flimsy magazine assignments instead of the boat project, and didn't even touch the pile of plywood for the next three months.

What was going on? I wanted the kayak, and I wanted the challenge of building it. I had no rational reason to fear it—I had built a two-manual French baroque harpsichord from a kit in 1978, and it had turned out decently. The harpsichord's construction manual was a two-hundred-page book; the kayak's instructions barely ran forty pages. I fashioned a joke-excuse for my procrastination that seemed to have some plausible whiff of truth. "Nobody ever drowned because a harpsichord came apart in a concert." The real reason was darker than fear of trusting my life to inexpert craftsmanship. I was drinking at the time, but trying to closet it in a daily window of time that didn't compromise either my writing or my marriage. I feared that I couldn't squeeze both the drinking and boatbuilding into the same three- or four-hour weekday afternoon window.

After three months I ran dry of too-busy excuses and plunged into the project. Almost immediately I enjoyed a modest rush of success. Like most kit kayak Pygmy uses the stitch-and-glue method of construction, in which the builder “stitches” precut panels of the hull and deck together with wire, then solidifies the joints with thickened epoxy. It’s a straightforward way to build a kayak, requiring no great skill. Occasionally a step in the instruction manual would be unclear, and somewhat to my own surprise, I felt no reluctance to call the Pygmy factory several times to ask for guidance. The employees I talked with were invariably helpful, clear, and they didn’t charge anything for answering questions. The computer industry could learn something here, if it cared to.

The first serious test was fibreglassing the interior. To do this, you have to fit a rough-cut layer of fiberglass cloth fourteen feet long into the banana-shaped chamber of the hull, mix the liquid epoxy and hardener, ladle it evenly onto the glass to saturate the fibers, then squeegee away the excess, leaving no gaps, air pockets, or wrinkles; and complete the entire procedure in the thirty minutes before the epoxy begins to congeal. Panic is obviously not helpful. And panic, it seemed as I closed in on the last five minutes of the epoxy window, was the only rational response. The cloth wouldn’t lie snug in some of the corners, and there was a panoply of wrinkles that seemed determined to survive. I’d had a drink to blunt the anxiety, and it wasn’t working. Decision time: Jerk out the whole epoxy-saturated cloth, throw it away, clean out the hull, and try again the next afternoon—or let the blemishes stand and deal with them as well as possible later, with filler and sandpaper?

I let them stand.

Patty drove in from work a few minutes later. I was still tinkering with the cloth, delicately prodding it with brush and squeegee, trying to coax out the worst of its misbehavior. The wet epoxy was spectacularly glossy, and the mahogany of the hull was resplendent. Patty was enormously impressed.

“It’s stunning,” she said.

“Well, yes, but there are some problems.”

For years she has been trying to retrain me to accept compliments without swatting at them, as if they were flies. She points out, correctly, that doing so deflates the person offering the compliment, that it insults her judgment. I’ve always felt that accepting an undeserved compliment is a moral lapse, like pocketing the benefit of a waiter’s mistake on a restaurant check. I suspected that was going to be a recurring issue when I finished this kayak and began taking it out in public.

By this time I had completed enough steps successfully to convince myself that I could build the boat, but could I build it well? Could I lay the exterior fiberglass and epoxy smoothly, with no pimples or wrinkles? Could I make the hatches watertight? (Leaky hatches are the bane of countless kayaks, even many factory-built models.) Would the chine and sheer seams be strong enough to survive an unplanned beating? This last issue was, and is, critical: I wasn’t planning to bank this boat by paddling only on calm lakes; the world—well, Puget Sound, at least—would be its oyster.

I have never been a notably sloppy craftsman, but neither am I meticulous good. If you were to size up a room I've painted, a bookcase I've refinished, or a car I've just washed, you would probably issue the same grades my high school teachers did: B average. Unrealized potential, could do better. Attitude problem. That "attitude" actually is a kind of value judgment, which I think is defensible in some circumstances. Let's say it takes an hour to do a Grade B car wash. Grade A would require another hour of detail work. Is the extra time worth it? For some people (and some cars), yes—and I wouldn't argue with anyone who consciously made that choice. To me, it isn't. I like my car, I don't love it. The B wash is enough to preserve the car's value and respectability. I'm constantly aware that time is a nonrenewable resource, and I want to slot the extra hour it would take to make it an A somewhere else. I had the same attitude toward high school, although I couldn't have articulated it like this at the time. Back then, a mousy B average was enough to gain admission to most state universities. (Things have changed, not necessarily for the better.) That was my goal; I did just enough work to get there, and no more. There were too many other interesting things in high school that were begging for time. There still are.

The trouble with rationalizing mediocrity is that you can get used to it. The B average, or even the C, becomes the default mode. It feels so comfortable and normal that the effort to do A-level work on anything seems, by contrast, abnormal. Maybe so abnormal that it's impossible. We forget how to push ourselves to the highest level, how to muster all of our resources of imagination and concentration and patience to bear on a task. That's the tragedy of William Loman, aching to be recognized for greatness without ever being great. Which is "what most of us are doing, or dreaming about doing," as Arthur Miller later claimed in an interview. He might be right. Why else would *Death of a Salesman* resonate so deeply in our culture?

I dreamed of a Grade A slam dunk on the kayak, which deserved the effort. I also doubted I could pull it off. As the weeks passed, workmanship issues arose. Some of them were impediments of my own making. To keep some of the clutter off the deck, I decided to fit the hatches with a hidden system of bungee cords that would hold the lids down tight with tension from below. This simple concept proved phenomenally difficult in execution. I was no longer following instructions in the manual; I was creating something new. I carved a handful of L-shaped oak brackets to hook the bungees, but they had to be strengthened with sheaths of fiberglass and epoxy. That was a job for expert hands. I struggled for a week and inexpertly cobbled the system into existence. It worked adequately but looked awful—if you were to open a hatch and peer inside.

The boat's inside, in fact, was thoroughly blemished with pimples and wrinkles in the fiberglass. Outside, from a dozen feet away, she looked spectacular. And once I got fully acquainted with her after a few sessions on Puget Sound, she performed spectacularly. Our two factory kayaks, both substantially larger and heavier, suddenly seemed about as responsive as bathtubs bobbing on the waves. The ultralight Pygmy accelerated faster, turned more crisply, and demanded more alertness if her occupant cared to stay upright in a churning sea. The hatches

leaked only a little, and the hull seams showed no sign of distress when big waves lurched and kicked the little boat around. In a fond nod to her tiny dimensions, I named her Plankton.

Empowerment, inadequacy. I felt a considerable glow of accomplishment for building a boat that was not just seaworthy, but remarkably capable. But was that really such a big deal? Someone else had designed her, written the instruction manual, and pre-cut all the critical pieces. All I had done was follow the instructions, imperfectly but not disastrously. I had assembled a kit, nothing more. The Pygmy catalog, in fact, goes out of its way to minimize the home builder's middling contribution: "The building process takes no special skills. Hundreds of men and women with no prior woodworking experience build Pygmy boats each year." Apparently true. In the first year I paddled Plankton I saw dozens of Pygmies and other kit kayaks in the waters of Puget Sound, and most of them looked at least as good as mine. In the hidden recesses of the hull and under the hatches, I feared that they all looked better, and the few that I had a chance to inspect up close, in fact, did.



A year later I signed up for a ten-day course in kayak building at the Northwest School of Wooden Boatbuilding in Port Hadlock, another coastal town on the Olympic Peninsula fifty miles northwest of Seattle. This time it wasn't on a whim. The tuition was \$850, and rental for a one-room cottage a few miles from the campus another \$500. We would be learning how to build a wood-strip kayak, a quantum leap in complexity and beauty beyond the Pygmy kits. I had seen a couple of professional builder Joe Greenley's wood-strip kayaks, and they were floating sculptures. Greenley was the course's instructor.

My enduring memory from the first day of the course is: linguine. Immediately following introductions, we watched and sort of helped Greenley mill a stack of cedar planks into strips $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch wide, $\frac{1}{16}$ of an inch thick, and 18 feet long. They seemed as limp as wet linguine and just about as elegant, and it was impossible to imagine how this nest of noodles was going to become a serious seagoing boat.

Wood-strip construction is an ingenious but labor-intensive technique for building small boats. Its origins are murky, but it may have been devised by frugal Maine fishermen as a way of using the free offcuts tossed out by sawmills. To strip-plank a hull, you cut out plywood cross sections of the boat's shape at intervals of a foot and set them up along a spine called a "strongback." Then you bend the strips around the cross-section forms, glue them together, take out the forms, and sheathe the boat inside and out in fiberglass. Like an airplane fuselage, it's a lightweight, frameless structure in which the stressed skin provides all its strength. It's deceptively strong and rigid. I asked Greenley if such kayaks could

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