

A Most Beautiful Thing, Indeed

Mary Mazzio's latest takes on the inspiring story of the first all-black rowing team in the country.

One day at Manley Career Academy, a high school on Chicago's West Side, an African-American teenager named Arshay Cooper noticed a long, skinny white boat in the lunchroom and a TV showing people racing in the same shell. He looked more carefully and saw nothing but white people rowing; he moved on. The next day there was a sign saying that anyone who came to the gym to learn about rowing would get free pizza. Cooper and a few other boys decided to check it out. A "curly-haired Jewish guy" stood up and said that he wanted to start a team at Manley. "There are no all-black crew teams. You will be the first." Cooper decided to give it a shot despite the number of people who told him it was a crazy thing for a black kid from Chicago's toughest neighborhood to try.

Mary Mazzio, the documentary filmmaker who cut her teeth with a rowing movie about the Yale women's crew rebellion, *A Hero for Daisy*, is back 20 years later with another rowing film, Arshay Cooper's story. His 2015 book, *Suga Water: A Memoir*, is the basis for Mazzio's new film, *A Most Beautiful Thing*. Mazzio knows rowing, having rowed at Mount Holyoke and on the U.S. lightweight and open weight national teams in the '80s and '90s; her rowing apex was competing in the Olympic double in 1992. She also knows great stories, and this one is both important and wonderful.

A friend told Mazzio that she had to read *Suga Water*. She read it, loved it, and tweeted about how awesome it was. Thirty minutes later she got a tweet back from the author himself. Over the next 18 months, Cooper and Mazzio hatched the plan for what would become the film. They found big-name people who wanted to help, NBA stars Grant Hill and Dwayne Wade. The rapper Common agreed to narrate. The filming took place from January 2019 through July 2019 in Chicago and with trips to Oakland, New York, and Philadelphia. At press time, they were doing final editing and polishing, but I was lucky to see a rough cut.

Cooper has become a tireless promoter of rowing because of what it did for him and the guys in his crew. "It literally saved my life," he says. If you were young and black from the West Side of Chicago, you joined a gang; that's just the way it was. A moving moment in the film comes when the five guys who reunite answer a question that we don't hear. "Eleven." "Twelve." "Ten and a half," they reply. The viewer wonders what the question might be and discovers what it is a moment later: "When did you see your first person murdered?"

After Mazzio contacted Cooper, the idea of having a 20th reunion and filming the guys training and then racing was born. They were excited. But they were also scared to race after two decades away. "You mean we've got to give up eating junk food (and get in shape)?" Each of them had his own personal reasons: Preston Grandberry to go back in time and undo his mistakes—he had done jail time; Malcom Hawkins to show his son that there's another way besides the gang life; Alvin Ross to celebrate that he's still alive; and Cooper to show kids that they can't move forward until they break the cycle of violence and move together. They also wanted to show their mothers, their friends, and relatives just what rowing had been for them. None of those people had ever seen them row back in the day.

I spoke with Arshay Cooper soon after watching the film. I asked him what drew him to rowing after the initial free pizza. "I was a loner with an older brother who was in a gang. I didn't want to go that way. Being part of a sport where there were no cheerleaders, nobody making money, where guys showed up just for themselves and each other. I realized these are the people you want in your life."

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Malcolm Hawkins Arshay Cooper on the water in Chicago.

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It's a film that shows the importance of connection, of belonging. These guys stayed away from the dangerous attractions of the gangs and forged their own brotherhood in a boat. It also highlights the possibility of reaching across to others who are not like you. When Cooper was in college and working as a barista, a Chicago police officer who had once arrested him came in for a coffee. Cooper served him and said, "That coffee and scone are on me."

A friendship developed between the gregarious black ex-rower and the white policeman. They played poker together; the cop came to Arshay's wedding. And when the Manley guys got together last summer,

Arshay invited four Chicago cops to join them and row in an eight. Mazzio captures the rich scene. The police look as nervous about getting into the shell as the Manley guys must have 20 years ago. As they begin to row and the cops need instruction, one of the Manley guys shouts out, "Yelling at cops. I could get used to this." Everyone dissolves in laughter.

Those of us who row take for granted the things that made rowing such a special and wonderful experience for this "first-ever all-black crew"—there are no sirens on the water, no gunshots, no distractions. Arshay calls being on the water "a place we could go to download." It is indeed a most beautiful thing. 