

TOWN&COUNTRY

A Most Beautiful Thing Documents the U.S.'s First All-Black Rowing Team

In the 1990s, a group of high school boys from rival gangs in Chicago's West Side broke barriers in the sport.



BY CHLOE FOUSSIANES — JUL 1, 2020

Back in the 1990s, America's first all-Black high school rowing team was formed at a school in Chicago's West Side, bringing boys from rival gangs together in the same boat. It's a little-known story—but with the imminent arrival of a new documentary, that's about to change. Here's what you should know about *A Most Beautiful Thing*.

It's inspired by a memoir.

Arshay Cooper, the captain of the original Manley rowing team, laid out the story in his self-published 2015 book *Suga Water*. (For those interested, it's being re-released under the title *A Most Beautiful Thing* in anticipation of the film.) "When we were on the water, we were in a place where we couldn't hear the sound of sirens or bullets, and that allowed us to shape a different vision for ourselves, of who and what we could become," Cooper said in a statement. "And that was a beautiful thing."

A MOST BEAUTIFUL THING

The True Story of America's First All-Black
High School Rowing Team

ARSHAY COOPER



The documentary not only revisits the team's formation in the 1990s, but documents how the group reunited for one more race 20 years later, following the death of a coach—and what happened after Cooper invited members of the Chicago Police Department to join them.

It was directed by a seasoned documentarian and Olympic rower.

Mary Mazzio was on the 1992 Olympic rowing team, and has since become an award-winning filmmaker. Her independent production company, 50 Eggs, Inc., is dedicated to impactful movies like *A Most Beautiful Thing*.



Members of the Manley team on location in Oakland.
RICHARD SCHULTZ/COURTESY 50 EGGS FILMS

Some big names are attached.

Rapper and actor Common narrates the film, while NBA stars Grant Hill and Dwyane Wade serve as executive producers alongside Grammy-winning producer 9th Wonder.

The movie is set to premiere this summer.

It was originally set to debut at this year's SXSW, but the festival was canceled due to the coronavirus. Now, the documentary is getting a limited release in select theaters (a list of those available [here](#)) on July 31.