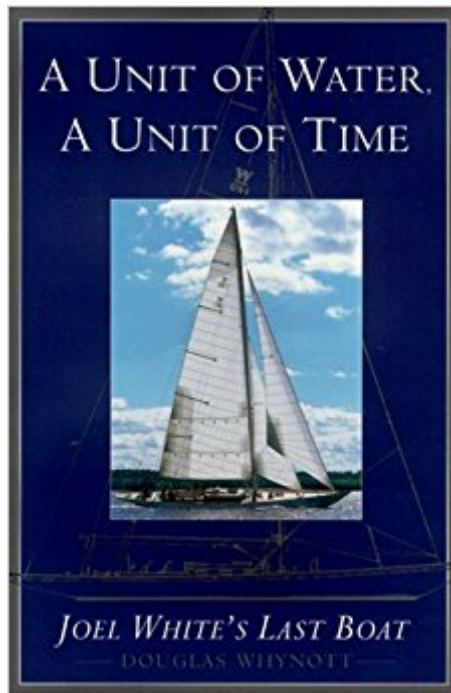




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A Unit Of Water, A Unit Of Time



Synopsis

Gentle and timeless, this is a lyrical portrait of men who still practice the timeless art of designing and building handcrafted wooden boats at the Brooklin Boat Yard in Maine.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

E.B. White and his son Joel both had a respect for beauty, simplicity, and practicality when it came to their work. For E.B., it was writing. He talks about these qualities in *The Elements of Style*, the classic guide to English-language usage, and he demonstrates them in works like *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. For Joel, it was building and designing boats that are "simple of line yet sound in engineering, traditional above water and modern below." *A Unit of Water*, a Unit of Time is a touching, engaging look at the life, work, and influence of Joel White and the craft of boat making. Whynott spent a year (June 1996 to July 1997) at White's boat yard in Brooklin, Maine. At the time, White was battling cancer, nearing the end of his life, and designing what would be his last boat, the W-76, a wooden racing yacht with "sublime lines and exquisite rigging." *A Unit of Water*, the result of that experience, traces White's life from his birth in 1930 to his childhood spent in New York and Maine, his naval architecture studies at MIT, and his eventual move to Brooklin, where he began working at the small boat yard that eventually became his own. In the early '80s, White and his crew stopped making fiberglass boats in favor of wooden ones; Brooklin, headquarters for *WoodenBoat* magazine and the WoodenBoat School, became the center of the wooden-boat revival and White something of a boat-building guru. The book looks closely at the art of boat making--shaping deck

beams, making bronze chocks, boring holes through sternposts--and the many characters in the Brooklin boat-building community. It's very interesting stuff, and Whynott tells the story simply and thoughtfully, emulating White's philosophies. He also describes White's health battles with respect and poignancy and without getting overly sentimental. Joel White was a man of few words who tended to downplay his accomplishments, but they shine through in *A Unit of Water*. One Brooklin boat builder, describing the "soul" of boats, could have been describing White: "Boats are live. They talk. The more poorly made boats talk more. The best-made boats don't talk as much. They're quiet--quiet soldiers, they call them." --Andy Boynton

Even readers with no special interest in boats are likely to be caught up in this elegant homage to Maine boatbuilder Joel White (son of E.B. White), who pursued his obsession with the time-honored craft of designing wooden boats while battling cancer. Whynott (*Giant Bluefin*) made 17 trips to the Brooklin Boat Yard in Maine, where the meticulous Joel, his son Steve and a yard crew spent two years designing and building the W-76, a grand and graceful racing yacht. While Steve runs the yard, Joel, with a section of his lung removed and walking on crutches after a bone graft, undergoes chemotherapy and learns to walk again, enduring metastatic lung cancer with stoic fortitude. Whynott, who traces his own love of boats back to his Pilgrim ancestors, indelibly captures such laconic New England types as boat painter Raymond Eaton, who, whenever asked how a job came out, always replied, "It could be better." Old-timers mingle with boat-loving transplants from Wall Street, Oregon and England. With understated grace, the author evokes a sense of maritime community as well as a fierce devotion to boats and a love of the sea, which emerges as an almost mystical form of communion with nature and the cosmos. His father, who sailed a 30-foot cutter, instilled in Joel not only his love of sailing but also, according to Whynott, a clarity of line and economy of style that resonated in Joel's boat designs and in his essays for *Wooden Boat* magazine. Joel's death in 1997, months before the launch of the W-76, is heartbreaking. E.B. White would have approved of this quietly profound book: it's a real beauty. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Douglas Whynott hung around the Brooklin Boat Yard for a year or so, and faithfully recorded the goings on. Much of the book is like a diary, however (today the garboard strakes were attached), and it does not really give insight into the people involved. Nor does it get very much into the gorgeous W-76, which it is purportedly about. For a good book on Joel White, which really shows his evolution as a designer and builder, splurge for *Joel White: Boatbuilder/Designer/Sailor*, written

by two of his closest friends.

Excellent review of the Maine boat builders and poignant rendition of the individual, especially Joel White, who create the fantastic sailing vessels; time has not diminished the relevancy of this book.

Great Book!!

A very well written and interesting book.

It is hard for me to imagine how Douglas Whynott was able to so skillfully capture the subtleties of the lives of the people he met in Brooklin, Maine. Without overly romanticizing his subjects, he shows these boatbuilders and boat owners as they are. At times the structure of the book seems to imitate the way life is approached Down East: things wander off sometimes, but eventually whatever is supposed to happen, does happen. I envy that Whynott got to go sailing on some of the most beautiful boats sailing those waters. Good job, Doug.

As someone who has spent time scraping and painting the bottom of a large sailing boat, this book brought back all the sights and sounds of a boatyard. I could smell the dust and paint fumes, feel the smoothness of varnished rails, and sense the excitement when each boat was hoisted into the water. This book should interest all aspiring boat builders, and prepare them for the painstaking work of boat design, construction and restoration. Whynott does a superb job describing the interpersonal dynamics of a boatyard's personnel and the importance of good management. Though I found myself irritated at Steve, Joel White's son, for spending his winter in the Caribbean during his father's last year, Steve's management style is instructive for leading a group of talented artisans, be they boat builders, scientific researchers, or writers. I savored every page of this short book, sometimes reading each section twice as not to miss the rich details. It made me laugh, such as the passage about novice sailors who they ended being towed into port and decided to buy a boat anyway, and cry -- Joel's death. I recommend it highly for all who find satisfaction in "messin' around with boats." This book squarely dispells what every boat owner already knows: Boating only looks romantic!

I picked up "A Unit of Water, A Unit of Time" hoping to find a great combination of literature and boating, and was not disappointed. Using a yard that builds wood boats as his setting, Whynott has

produced real literature of his own. In doing so, he has woven a literary legend, E. B. White, father of the boat yard owner, into his story in a fashion that shows real respect for the elder White and avoids exploiting his work. The owners and the men who work in the Brooklin (Maine) Boat Yard develop gradually and consistently to become truly multidimensional, technicolor, and human. Meanwhile, the storyteller keeps himself skillfully in the background, well behind his subject. In addition to the inspiring humanity that is clearly evident (albeit with characteristically "down-home" understatement), the lessons for people who operate businesses are extensive and meaningful. Those authors who pedantically shout the lessons of organizational behavior from their unsubtle and all too shallow "how-to" books for business operators would do well to read "A Unit". They could find every one of their lessons demonstrated in ways that respect the reader's ability to draw his or her own generalities from a proper selection of real events honestly described.

This book combines information about designing and building wooden sailboats in Brooklin, Maine, with the story of three generations of the White family: E.B. White, the writer who sailed in his spare time; Joel White, the boat designer and builder who wrote about boats in his spare time; and Steve White, who expanded and runs the boatyard his father started. The book appeals to readers on many levels but had too much detail and too many technical terms about boat building for a lay person like me. As the story of the comeback of wooden sailing boats in the 1990's and a peek into the life of the White family in Maine, it succeeds very well. Readers who liked this book might also enjoy "The Survival of the Bark Canoe" by John McPhee.

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