

Ruth Doan MacDougall was born and grew up in Laconia, NH, the town that inspired the fictional Gunthwaite. (A virtual tour of Laconia can be done on her Web site.) She attended Bennington College and graduated from Keene State College. She and her husband, Don, live in Center Sandwich, NH.

In addition to writing novels, she also updates her father's hiking books, *50 Hikes in the White Mountains* and *50 More Hikes in New Hampshire*. In 2005 she received the New Hampshire Writers' Project's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Ruth says, "When *The Cheerleader* was published, so many readers wanted to know 'What happened next?' that I found myself writing a series. I too wanted to know what happened next! I'm now completing the fourth novel in the series, with two more planned."

Cheers for the Sequels!

SNOWY

"MacDougall's sexy, painfully true story illuminates what an endless process growing up is."—*Booklist*

HENRIETTA SNOW

"A 'girlfriend novel.' Funny, sad, unsentimental and wise, *Henrietta Snow* is a delight."—Rebecca P. Sinkler, former editor of the *New York Times Book Review*



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## A Discussion Guide for Ruth Doan MacDougall's

# *The Cheerleader*

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## Forming a Discussion Group

Over the years since *The Cheerleader* was published, author Ruth Doan MacDougall has received notes of appreciation from readers of the book, answered their questions, and continued occasional correspondence with many of them. As a result, she knows that the book's readership includes both women and men, of all ages and from a variety of life experiences. *The Cheerleader* has continued to attract new readers of all ages, even though the book was first published more than thirty years ago.

Thus, when thinking about whom you might ask to join a new discussion group, or when considering *The Cheerleader* as a selection for your ongoing group's next choice, you will probably find that your group, regardless of composition, will find the book engaging.

*The Cheerleader* is often a choice of college professors looking for books that accurately represent the attitudes, mores, and culture of mid-twentieth-century America. If you are considering *The Cheerleader* for such a literature or women's studies course, please contact Frigate Books (frigatebooks@earthlink.net) if you would like to speak with professors who have used the book in recent course work. Mention "college course work" in your subject heading.

Multigenerational groups especially enjoy a discussion of *The Cheerleader*, coupled with the sequels *Snowy* and *Henrietta Snow*. Each person in such a group brings a unique perspective that enriches the conversation.

If you have been a part of a discussion of *The Cheerleader*, the author would be interested in your comments. You may contact her at the book club address (bookclubs@ruthdoanmacdougall.com).

### If you have also read *Snowy* and *Henrietta Snow*:

18. Discuss the culture and mores of the 1950s and compare them with those in the following books' decades.

19. Research with members of your discussion group, or discuss if you have a multigenerational group, the key themes of women's history in the decades from the 1950s to the year 2000.

How do the events in the lives of the characters in these three novels parallel this historical timeline?

Where do you see divergence from the historical record? Does it seem important to you that there is a parallel or divergence?

Does it seem that the fictional characters are among the trendsetters or do you see evidence that the characters' lives are instead reacting to the changes in the United States during these decades?

From the decades that are most familiar to you, what additional trends and events would you have included in order to place the characters more firmly in the time span? Or would you have preferred that the characters' lives were not so identifiable with the time span?

Snowy's generation was called "The Silent Generation," and in *Henrietta Snow* she calls its members "the disappeared." How does this compare with other generational labels?

The last question:

20. Have you ever tasted Moxie?!

“known for saying out loud what everyone else was thinking” (page 9) and the twins as “clutchers” (page 27).

15. *The Cheerleader* is taught in college-level course work as both a bildungsroman (a novel about the education and development of the protagonist) and a kunstlerroman (a novel about the development of an artist). How do these aspects intertwine?

16. What other “coming-of-age” novels have you read? What do you think accounts for the similarities and differences between them? Are the differences caused by the characters’ personalities or by the century/decade in which they are set? Do you see differences that can be explained by how close the date of the writing is to the era in which the novel is set?

17. If you have not yet read *Snowy* and *Henrietta Snow*, try making some predictions! What do you think Snowy and the Gang might be doing in five, ten, fifteen or more years? What clues do you find in *The Cheerleader* that shape your predictions?

## A Discussion Guide for Ruth Doan MacDougall’s

# *The Cheerleader*

Prepared by Ruth Doan MacDougall  
assisted by earlier book discussion participants

1. Did you enjoy the clothes in the book? If you have personal knowledge of the era, do the descriptions of the clothes match your recollections?

Sometimes reading groups dress up in clothes from the 1950s for their discussions. (Ruth says that she didn’t put a poodle skirt in the Gang’s wardrobes because she could only recall one girl who had one at her high school and this girl was two classes behind her class of 1957.)

2. Although *The Cheerleader* is a novel centered in the lives of emerging adults, it is not Young Adult (YA) Fiction and is not classified as such, even though many young adults love it. It was written as an adult novel and became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and a national best seller as an adult novel, General Fiction. One of the distinguishing characteristics between Young Adult and General Fiction is that YA nearly always tells a story from only one (usually the main) character’s point of view and most of the action relates directly to the effect that the fictional events have upon this character. In *The Cheerleader*, however, the story is told from the points of view of several of the characters. How is your perception of characters influenced by reading about events from various points of view? Can you provide examples for discussion?

3. Which character do you most identify with and why? Discuss the differences among Snowy, Bev, and Puddles. What do you think about the triumvirate's friendship and chemistry? Would Bev and Puddles have been best friends without the "glue" of Snowy?

4. Many readers have commented that Snowy is an "unforgettable character." How many characters from novels that you have read and loved (or enjoyed thoroughly) can you list in, say, five minutes? Looking over your list, can you tell which characteristics or plotlines cause a character in a novel to become unforgettable to you?

5. What are the effects of the conflicts in Snowy's personality? Although she strives "to conform" (page 12), she is also outside the group, observing: "Snowy standing wide-eyed watching" (page 10).

6. What are the conflicts between Snowy and her parents, who always appear "to be posing themselves for a portrait of family life" (page 57)? Are such conflicts specific to Snowy's situation or are they typical of family conflicts?

7. In the foreword, Professor Ann V. Norton writes that a cheerleader is a "symbol of a girl's simultaneous success and subordination." Why was this so in the 1950s? Has the attitude changed with the changes in cheerleading? What were your experiences with cheerleading in high school? Did you try out, and if so or if not, why?

8. "Mentor" wasn't a term in use in the 1950s, but can Julia be described as Snowy's mentor? Sometimes, at some stage, girls get along better with a friend's mother than with their own. Why? Did this happen to you?

9. How do the decisions that Snowy, Bev, and Puddles make about their future after high school reflect the 1950s?

10. Did you or a friend have a hope chest? What was in it?

11. Every generation thinks it is the first to discover sex. What surprised you about sex in the 1950s? That there was any?

12. If you could go back to high school knowing what you now know, what would you do differently?

13. What do you think of the ending of *The Cheerleader*?

14. Did you enjoy the way the novel was written? Ruth's writing has been praised for its simplicity, for conveying in a line or two what otherwise might take a paragraph, such as the description of Puddles who was