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Ruth Doan MacDougall, The Cheerleader (1973)

b. March 19, 1939, Laconia, New Hampshire.

The Cheerleader opens with a scene resonant with nostalgia and anxiety for most Americans: “The dance had begun. The gym was darkened now, and sawdust-wax had been sprinkled on the floor, but the smell of hot sweat from the basketball game still lingered. Down the darkness echoed record-player music.” Fifteen-year-old Henrietta “Snowy” Snow in her cheerleading blouse bluejeans brushes her hair into a ponytail and remarks, “How disgusting!” This New Hampshire girl’s life in the mid-1950s captures the live of towns like Laconia as they provided a stage for a very American girl’s story. The book brings us deeply into a New Hampshire place in time, but it also presents universal themes about coming of age. The title itself encodes the many meanings of the book, for it evokes young women’s lives on the sidelines of male and adult culture, but it also reveals the powerful arena of cheerleading for self-development, athletic excellence, and ambition.

Ruth Doan MacDougall grew up on a chicken farm near Laconia, where her father hoped after graduation from Dartmouth to farm and write, not unlike the aspirations of chicken-farmer Robert Frost. She began writing early, helping her father, and in later years, took over updating his New Hampshire hiking guidebooks and his history of the Indian Stream Republic in northern New Hampshire. Like Snowy of The Cheerleader, MacDougall attended high school in Laconia and Bennington College, graduating from Keene State College with her husband, Don. MacDougall has published eleven novels. The Cheerleader is her most popular work, selling 300,000 copies when first published in 1973, a Book-Of-The-Month Club selection, optioned to Twentieth-Century Fox, and a sitcom pilot for NBC. As Ann V. Norton writes in her foreword to the novel, MacDougall’s father advised her to “write about what you know,” and when an editor planted the idea about a high school book, “In a flash I saw the book in my head” (7).

The plot of The Cheerleader involves the life of Snowy and her Gang of cheerleading friends from the spring of their sophomore year, 1955, at Gunthwaite High School to May of their senior year in 1957. She and her best friends, Bev and Puddles, present different personalities, aspirations, and interests as they take classes, join clubs, date and experiment with sex, and, of course, make the varsity cheerleading squad. Their boyfriends capture the male tracks through high school cliques and hierarchies, from honor society to varsity football, but the center of attention for Snowy is Tom Forbes. The novel follows two tracks, Snowy’s growing ambitions as a student and her romance with Tom, with its attendant heartbreak as they break up prior to his departure for teachers’ college. This simple plot permits MacDougall to paint a wonderfully attentive picture not only of high school life and friendship but also of post-World War II Gunthwaite, or Laconia. The high school classes, teacher personalities, lunch-room

antics, including the placement of a frog leg from biology lab in Snowy's ice cream, and the intensity of sports competition. We see Gunthwaite's thriving downtown, the popular teen hangouts in restaurants and diners, the range of homes, jobs, and factories, and the back-stage areas where teens go parking. The book is drenched in the popular culture of the 1950s, from pop music and movies to clothing styles and etiquette. Even as she succeeds in her high school world, Snowy begins to yearn for something more, and her senior year is a poignant portrait of longing for and anger at Tom offset by a growing conviction that she wants to express herself as a writer. The book does not avoid some of the rough edges of 1950s life, as we see teen pregnancy, alcohol abuse, a paralyzing sports injury to Snowy's earlier boyfriend, and a prejudicial remark about French Canadians.

The Cheerleader provides insights and raises questions about two periods in history, the 1950s New Hampshire in which the book is set and the early 1970s when it was published. Women's coming-of-age stories in America have been popular since the nation's first best-seller, Charlotte Temple in the 1790s, Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, Lucy Larcom's A New England Girlhood and the harder-edged books of Edith Wharton, such as Summer. It is hard to imagine Laurie "getting fresh" with Jo March in the back of a sleigh, but The Cheerleader updates Alcott's presentation of an American girl's conflicts over ambition, duty, passion, marital responsibilities, and being true to oneself. These books share common scenes of social, intellectual, and sexual awakenings, at once personal and typical stages of development, and they use the individual's experiences to explore the structures and values of a given society. The 1950s, with the surge of domesticity, prosperity, and suburbanization associated with the Post-WWII era, created social conditions that seems to constrict the possibilities of many women's lives. Stirrings against this era of conformity are seen in Grace Metalious's Peyton Place, Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963), and in later works, such as Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar and Marge Piercy's Small Changes, which captured the spirit of Second-Wave Feminism of the late 1950s through the 1970s. We see these developing pressures in the lives of Snowy and her Gang, who are caught between their own ambitions for possible careers and an individual identity in addition to or instead of that of wife and mother, and their desire to conform, with getting pinned, or "engaged-to-be-engaged," in high school, or working just long enough to marry a millionaire.

This Snowy is fully engaged in the rituals and emotionally vortex of high school. "She wanted to be one of those fabulous Varsity cheerleaders cheering at a game that mattered, for the boys who mattered, the crowd caring passionately, and she herself one of those who led them" (56). She and her friends are desperately aware of their appearance in the eyes of each other and of the boys who are carefully ranked on a scale of popularity and desirability. It's a world of theme dances in a gymnasium decorated with Kleenex carnations, National Honor Society carnivals, gossip columns in school newspaper, Smoke Signals, and a local teen radio show. The world of parents, their jobs, politics, and adult responsibilities seems far away. When she sees her parents reading the Gunthwaite Herald and the Manchester Union, "To her, they could have been on the moon" (145). When her Modern European History teacher recommends more knowledge of world affairs, she "had begun dutifully listening to news on the radio and reading Time and U.S. News and World Report. She found it all very boring, none of it so important as

the affairs of Gunthwaite High School” (38).

Unlike the Our Town world on stage at Gunthwaite High School, Snowy does begin to see there is a world beyond her town. On a bus trip to Washington, DC, Snowy “leaned against the window and looked out at the lights of the night towns they sped through and thought about all the different people who didn’t live in Gunthwaite, New Hampshire.” She tells a friend’s mother, “I think I’m suffocating” (258) in reference to all the academic, club, cheerleading, and social expectations of a successful high school career. This friend recommends that she apply to Bennington College, and Snowy determines she wants to be a poet in the aftermath of James Dean’s death and her first reading of Emily Dickinson. Her intellectual awakening is traced through the English curriculum of classic texts, some humorously detached from the girls’ lives, such as William Cullen Bryant’s “Thanatopsis,” or experienced through the Classic Comics version, like Jane Eyre. After finally having intercourse with Tom and witnessing his expert trick of knotting a used Trojan, decides to break up with him rather than “going backwards” in her personal development.

And then there is the sex of parking, drive-in movies, and beer parties. Snowy and the Gang wrestle with the etiquette of dating and going steady as they wrestle with their boyfriends who “get fresh” or “out of control” in their Chevys. Sexual experience is feared and desired, and Snowy, like her friends, eventually throws the etiquette book out the window to experiment with oral sex and intercourse. Her ignorance of both male and female anatomy and birth control is typical, comic, and appalling at once. Throughout the dos and don’ts of dating a sound track of 1950s pop music plays as early rock and roll mixes with Do-Wop and pop, with all the yearnings for love and the brash sexuality the music invokes. The sexual revolution is gathering its recruits even in New Hampshire.

A recent story, “50 years young,” in The Boston Globe (August 18, 2005, B8) recalls that 1955 was the publication date of another story of American sexuality, Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita. The article notes, “Nabokov’s novel presented final, definitive proof that youth had conquered the culture” and that 1955 was “the turning point, the year demography became destiny.” It’s the year that saw the debuts of Annette Funicello in “Mickey Mouse Club” and of another 12-year-old, Dolores Haze, the ancestress of another Disney product, Britney Spears, and today’s generation of adolescent pop tarts.

The book questions how place shapes identity even as an individual develops ambitions and expectations beyond it. What really was life like in 1950s New Hampshire, and what is at stake culturally in the answer? In the 1950s, New Hampshire was on the cusp of great changes. The loss of factories in towns like Laconia meant the loss good jobs for high school graduates like Snowy’s and Puddles’s fathers and the fracturing of communities. The automobile and shopping centers would soon drain downtowns of activity, and the hardening of class, ethnic, and racial lines would undermine public high schools as the American cultural melting pot. The right to sexual privacy and birth control and the availability of the Pill would fuel women’s educational and career aspirations freed from the baby track. To claim, as did a reviewer in the Detroit Free Press that it is “one of the truest portraits of an American girl ever written”

surely explains the book's appeal, but what does it mean to call Snowy, of Gunthwaite, a representative American girl? Kansas City Star "If future historians and sociologists are ever impelled to find out what it was like to be a high-school student in America at mid-twentieth century, they will need go no further than The Cheerleader for documentation and enlightenment." The Little Rock Nine in September 1957 surely had a different high school experience. Snowy wears is one of three Democratic students with a Stevenson button in the high school mock election of 1956, but we wouldn't know from the book that the issues of the Cold War, Rosa Park's refusal to sit on a bus on December 1, 1955, roiled the tranquilized 1950s. This is not to criticize the novel because the book reminds us that cultural change occurs unevenly, inflected by region, tradition, and personal circumstances. The high schoolers listen to pop music, and some early rock, but no Black rhythm and blues or rock except through Elvis and other white cover versions, or Harry Belafonte, and they still dance to the music of their parent's generation. Other New Hampshires of the 1950s and 1960s can be found John Knowles's A Separate Peace, and J. D. Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye, John Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany, and Joyce Maynard's stories and novels.

The second question about the book and the image of New Hampshire has to with the era of its publication, the early 1970s, when America, including New Hampshire, was beset with conflicts over the Vietnam War, Watergate, civil rights, and women's liberation. If national audiences were yearning for stories of a simpler time before all these changes, and if others were part of a developing backlash against these movements, The Cheerleader may have been a most satisfying read. New Hampshire would be seen as one of those places in the 1950s where the white middle class and its values stood for something since lost in America. Indeed, some places in America may not have changed all that much, or a new generation of people moving from Massachusetts sought to reconstruct in the state that community ideal. The use of New Hampshire in such cultural debates continues in more recent books, such as Danzy Senna's Caucasia and Elizabeth Strout's Amy and Isabelle.

The Cheerleader's value lies partially in its ability to sustain rereadings two generations after the events of the book, to hold up a mirror to American experience. However, its primary value is in the pleasure of reading a story well told about believable characters who embody our lost youths and the hopes and dreams of America. It is such a good story that the author has answered the call of her fans about what happened to Snowy and the Gang. Snowy (1993) asks, "What happens when ex-cheeleaders grow up?" It takes Snowy through college at Bennington, into the world of publishing, and finally to the tragic end of her marriage, in 1987. Henrietta Snow (2004), brings the story into the new century. The sequels attest to the staying power of Snowy's story, especially in the ways in which it seems to speak to a generation of women who came of age in the 1950s, and now to their daughters and granddaughters.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Gunthwaite High School compare to your high school experience? What is the same and what is different?
2. Discuss Snowy and her friends. How do they represent the choices available to young women then and now?
3. Discuss the cast of male characters, especially Tom Forbes and Dudley Washburn. What do they reveal about American manhood?
4. How do the popular songs and movies recall an era? How do they reflect and shape attitudes about love, about male and female roles, and about American life?
5. If you could relive high school, what would you do differently?
6. Does The Cheerleader present an accurate view of life in New Hampshire, or what is it about the image of New Hampshire that seems to appeal to people reading the book today?

References and Suggestions for Further Reading:

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www.ruthdoanmacdougall.com