

**THE WASHINGTON POST**

**“YES, THERE** are families that don't have brothers who flunked everything in school but could recite the beer commercials for every brewery between the Appalachians and the Rockies,” thinks Crosby, the self-created “normal, all-American” narrator of Susan Saiter's fine first novel. “Families that don't move every time the carpet gets a dirty footprint.”

---

**CHEERLEADERS  
CAN'T AFFORD  
TO BE NICE**

By Susan  
Sullivan Saiter  
Donald I. Fine  
313 pp. \$19.95

---

But that is not the Rawsons, an offbeat, peripatetic family moving through the midwestern suburbs of the 1950s and '60s and always falling short of the American dream. Crosby's father, aspiring to a cultured, middle-class life, is repeatedly defeated by his insecurity and his hot temper. Her beautiful mother, the world's worst housekeeper, defies pretension and has a lively charm. Then there's her vulnerable younger brother Ben, a budding schizophrenic, who is both sweet and capable of outrageous lies:

Cheerleaders Can't Afford To Be Nice is a funny, compassionate, and often painful account of the ways eccentricity and failure conspire to shape Crosby and threaten to shipwreck her conventional life. She becomes the only success in the family, an A student, a cheerleader, a college graduate. Although she loves Ben, she pushes him away. But after spending her adult life apart from her family, she is drawn into a search for a homeless, injured, and missing Ben in New York.

The novel alternates chapters on the streets and in the shelters of New York with flashbacks of Crosby's and Ben's growing up. Although both storylines deal honestly with difficult themes—loneliness, rootlessness, loss and mental illness—Saiter's touch is light and her characters amiable and engaging. She accurately depicts the heartbreaking ties that bind us to those we somehow love, even though we don't know how to help or change them.

**Cheerleaders Can't Afford to Be Nice** by Susan Sullivan Saiter (Donald I. Fine, \$19.95) is a rollicking first novel about what shrinks call a dysfunctional family. Crosby Rawson tells her story on two tracks: In the present, she leaves her boyfriend behind in California, postpones plans for law school, and jets to New York City to locate her "troubled" and recently missing brother Ben. Meanwhile, the past engulfs her in memories of growing up in a middle-class family that is the underside of the American Dream.

Crosby is a heroine who immediately captures our sympathy: she's a survivor and though she's tempted by more selfish goals, she's overtaken by a need to do the right thing and rescue Ben from his demons.

# Three cheers for Saiter

**Cheerleaders Can't Afford To Be Nice**  
By Susan Sullivan Saiter  
Donald L. Fine: \$19.95

**T**his is a story of pathos, love, fear, all set in a time when the American family disintegrated.

It took a generation for the words "nuclear family" to appear in common speech but those who endured the life quickly learned that constant moves, elimination of extended family and personal upheaval were things to be endured if not enjoyed.

Crosby Rawson wanted so much from life. As the story opens, she is leaving her successful California job to go to New York. Her quest is a missing brother, a man who has been nothing but trouble from the moment he was born.

As she heads East, she remembers the upheaval that marked most of her life.

Her parents moved several times a year; her dad drank, changed jobs a lot and fought with everyone.

Her mom always talked about becoming a student nurse, wore only one shade of lipstick and kept a slovenly house that was always in a state of chaos.

The parents dragged the children from one eerie place to another.

Crosby struggled to be normal, to enter classes with a big smile and a hope that the life she saw on television would somehow be hers.

She was saddled with a brother who was possibly insane. The reader never knows for sure if Ben is really nuts or just incredibly angry. He ruins parties, turns destructive and always manages to do something so stupid that

## BOOK MARKS



*Rima L. Ferrone*

the urge to kill him is close.

Underneath it all is a sweetness that she can't forget and that always makes her forgive the lad.

Now, he is lost in New York, a junkie who is battered and missing. She is endangering a personal relationship and her whole career to roam through shelters as she searches for the little brother she remembers as the one constant in her life, even if he was a pain.

"Cheerleaders Can't Afford To Be Nice" is the kind of book no one will ever forget. It's about the end of innocence and the loss of family. It's about a group of people who were thrown together because of a biological accident and damaged each other without intending harm.

It is a condemnation on modern life and an explanation of the misfits in today's world. It is just short of brilliant as it chronicles the ageless search for the great American Dream — the one that always manages to remain out of reach.

2/2

# The dream gone tragically awry

CHEERLEADERS CAN'T AFFORD  
TO BE NICE

SUSAN SULLIVAN SAITER

*Fin.* 313 pp. \$19.95.

By Ann G. Sjoerdsma

As they crisscrossed America's heartland with their screaming, combative parents, Crosby and Ben Rawson dragged along a "big box of disappointments and confusion" that everyone tried to ignore.

Dad, the emotional time bomb, worked for a tire company and burned a lot of rubber chasing a better job, a better town to live in, a better life. Mom, sexy, young Mom with her bright Cherries in the Snow lips, hungered for the same, but wouldn't give Dad any satisfaction, taunting him with dirty dishes, cigarette butts, frozen dinners, idle hours.

But who's to blame for Ben?

When teachers said Ben had musical talent, Mom scoffed, Dad tried to be encouraging — still, why wasn't the boy interested in football? When they said Ben needed

psychiatric counseling, Mom still scoffed. Ben just tuned into his transistor radio and the voices in his pretty head and smiled. As for Crosby, the "intelligent child" who wanted to be a cheerleader with a normal family, she endured, planning her escape.

But, as former Chicago Sun-Times reporter Susan Sullivan Saiter shows so smartly in her captivating first novel, *Cheerleaders Can't Afford to be Nice*, Crosby has nowhere to go. Until she forgives her parents for having no love to give and stops pretending that Ben's psychosis doesn't exist, the divorced California real estate agent on the verge of law school can't enjoy peace of mind. When

she receives an alarming letter about Ben from a New York shelter for the homeless, Crosby, now 40, must go in search of her lost brother to find herself.

Heartrending and sharply ironic, Crosby's journey alternates between memories of a disjointed past, related convincingly in a young girl's ingenuous, and a teenager's calculating voice, and the events of a disjointed, hazardous present. Love and anger clash as Crosby struggles to reconcile with Ben and to confront reality, as her parents, fleeing from their own families, never could. This is a powerful, well-drawn portrait of the American Dream gone tragically awry. //

*Ann G. Sjoerdsma is a Baltimore writer with strong ties to the Outer Banks.*

M

**SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS**

## Cheers, for real

Susan Sullivan Saiter, author of "Cheerleaders Can't Afford to Be Nice" (Donald Fine, \$19.95), restores a reader's faith in women novelists whose intelligent, innovative writing reaches a tad above the Krantz or Collins genre.

Saiter makes an impressive fiction debut with her book's narrator, Crosby Rawson, whose '50s upbringing gives way to a West Coast



SAITER

Mom is no rock of Gibraltar, and brother Ben is more than a crazy, mixed-up kid. He's a lunatic.

Ben is also the subject of Crosby's attention, as she flies to New York from her successful career, panting lover and affordable condo to ferret out Ben, by now homeless and jobless — a lost man of the streets.

It's not as it sounds. Saiter paints a portrait of real life through her credible characters who, like most of us, are merely reaching for that sweet bird of happiness.

— BLAIR CORNING

... good but ...

co  
pa  
C  
fr  
th  
B  
H  
st  
de  
Si  
fa  
fo  
th  
on  
th  
W  
M  
N  
we  
M  
na  
Pr  
Da  
"T  
ing  
wh  
pu