The Secret Winners Club by Donna Galanti

Teacher Guide : Grades 3-8

About The Secret Winners Club

Thirteen-year-old Sunny Whitlock is tired of being known as the bald kid with alopecia. Determined to change how others see her, she forms The Secret Winners Club with her best friends—kids who also stand out for their autoimmune skin conditions. Their mission: win big in school competitions, no matter what it takes. But as success grows, people get hurt, and secrets pile up, Sunny must decide what kind of winner she really wants to be—and what friendship truly means. This heartfelt, humorous, and empowering story explores friendship, identity, competition, and the courage to accept yourself exactly as you are.

Genre: Contemporary middle grade fiction **Age Range:** 8–13 years

Core Themes

- Bullying and empathy
- Inclusion and belonging
- Teamwork and friendship
- Courage and integrity
- Understanding autoimmune conditions
- Healthy competition vs. "winning at any cost"

Discussion Questions by Theme

Use for whole-group discussion, literature circles, or journaling:

1. **Being Labeled**
   - Why doesn't Sunny like being known as "the bald kid"?
   - How can labels hurt people, even if they aren't meant to?
2. **Bullying vs. Competition**
   - What's the difference between wanting to win and being unkind?
   - Can competition ever turn into bullying? How?
3. **Friendship and Teamwork**
   - How do Sunny, Trev, and Vee change when winning becomes their main goal?
   - What makes someone a good teammate?
4. **Understanding Autoimmune Conditions**
   - Sunny, Trev, and Vee all have autoimmune conditions. How are they alike? How are they different?
   - Why is it important to understand what someone else might be dealing with?
5. **Courage and Kind Choices**
   - What was a brave choice Sunny made near the end of the book?
   - Why is choosing kindness sometimes harder than choosing to win?

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General Discussion Questions

Content Warnings: Gentle discussion of chronic illness, bullying, and self-image handled sensitively and age-appropriately.

- Why do you think Sunny feels that winning the junkbot competition will change how others see her?
- How do Sunny and her friends support each other? How do they challenge one another?
- What are some of the "rules" of *The Secret Winners Club*? Do you think they are fair or kind?
- How does keeping secrets affect their friendships?
- When do you think Sunny begins to question whether winning is worth it?
- How do the characters' differences make them stronger as a team?
- What does Sunny learn about winning and losing by the end of the book?
- How does Sunny's view of herself change from the beginning to the end?
- What role does empathy play in the story?
- If you could add a new "rule" to *The Secret Winners Club*, what would it be—and why?
- Discuss a moment in the story that made you laugh, cringe, or cheer. What made it memorable?
- How do you think Sunny's story might inspire someone facing their own challenge?
- What makes a real friend?
- How do you embrace what makes you different?
- Winning vs. Integrity: Is being the best worth hurting others?
- What happens when trust is broken?
- How can challenges become sources of strength?

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Discussion Questions For Older Students:

Designed for deeper reflection and written responses

- **Identity and Visibility**
  - How do Sunny, Trev, and Vee each struggle with being seen only for their conditions?
  - How does this connect to real-life experiences of feeling different?

- **Winning at Any Cost**
  - What lines do the characters cross in order to win?
  - At what point does ambition become harmful?

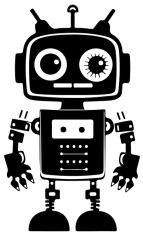
- **Ethics in STEM Discussion**
  - Explore how innovation and competition can create ethical challenges. When is creativity crossing the line?

- **Stress and Health**
  - How does stress affect the characters' autoimmune conditions?
  - Why is mental and physical health important in competitive environments?

- **Trust and Honesty**
  - Was Jolie wrong to lie? Why or why not?
  - What does this reveal about loneliness and belonging?

- **Redefining Success**
  - What does success look like at the beginning of the book vs. the end?
  - Why is second place still a meaningful win?

- **Encourage students to share:**
  - A "secret win" they're proud of (something small but meaningful).
  - A "rule" they would live by in their own personal "Winners Club."
  - A quote from the book that inspired them—and why.



Activities: Elementary (Grades 3-5)

"More Than What You See" Identity Shields
Purpose: Reflect on inclusion, self-worth, empathy

- Students draw a shield divided into sections:
  - Something they're good at
  - Something they love
  - A challenge they've faced
  - A way they help others
- Discuss how everyone has more to them than what others see.

Bully or Boundary?
Purpose: Recognizing bullying behavior

- Read short scenarios inspired by the book.
- Students decide:
  - Is this bullying?
  - Is it competition?
  - Is it setting a healthy boundary?
- Discuss how to respond kindly and confidently.

Kindness Counts Chart
Purpose: Reinforcing empathy

- Track acts of kindness in the classroom for a week.
- Connect to how Sunny learns that helping others feels better than winning alone.

Create Your Own Secret Club!
Purpose: explore the importance of kindness, inclusion, and positive group values

- Design a positive "secret club" that promotes kindness or teamwork.
- Create a club name, motto, and three rules.

Character Trading Cards
Purpose: encourage practicing empathy, perspective-taking, and character analysis.

- Make trading cards for Sunny and her friends.
- Include their "strengths," "weaknesses," and "super skill."
- Have students discuss what makes a good friend.

Junkbot STEM Group Challenge
Purpose: builds collaboration, creative problem-solving, and communication skills.

- Provide paper and art supplies. Have students bring in recycled items.
- In small groups, build a "junkbot" or invention using all provided materials.
- Present your junkbot to the class and why your group chose its design.
- Display the junkbots in class or library.
- Ask: How did your group work together? What happened when someone didn't listen?

ACTIVITIES: MIDDLE SCHOOL (GRADES 6-8)

Ethical Dilemma Debate
Purpose: Critical thinking and courage
- Debate: Is winning ever worth hurting someone else?
- Students must use examples from the book to support their arguments.

Autoimmune Awareness Mini-Lesson
Purpose: Education and empathy
- Students research autoimmune conditions mentioned in the book.
- Create:
  - A fact card
  - A short presentation
  - Or a poster correcting common myths
- Emphasize: conditions are part of someone—not all of them.

"Reach Club" Design Project
Purpose: Inclusion and leadership
- Students design their own inclusive school club:
  - Mission statement
  - Who can join
  - How it helps others grow
- Connect to the creation of the Reach Club in the story.

Character Reflection Journals
Purpose: Self-reflection and empathy
- Write from the perspective of:
  - Sunny after the junkbot competition
  - Trev choosing to let his understudy perform his role in Grease
  - Vee realizing the pressure her swim club rival faced
- Discuss how courage shows up in different ways.

Stress and Balance Check-In
Purpose: Wellness awareness
- Students list:
  - Healthy ways to manage stress
  - Unhealthy pressures they notice at school
  - Connect to how stress worsened the characters' health.

Activities: Middle School (Grades 6-8)Cont'd

Debate: What Does It Mean to Win?
- Hold a classroom debate: "Is it okay to bend the rules to win?"
- Use examples from the story to defend your viewpoint.

Personal Reflection Essay
- Write about a time you felt pressure to fit in or win.
- What did you learn about yourself?

Character Hot Seat
- One student plays Sunny, others play supporting characters like Vee, Trev, and Jolie.
- Classmates ask them questions about their choices and feelings.
- This helps dive deeper into character motivation.

Ethics in STEM Discussion
- Explore how innovation and competition can create ethical challenges.
- When can technology and creativity cross the line?

Extension and Cross-Curricular Connections
- STEM: Robotics and engineering concepts—research real-world robotics competitions for kids.
- Health: Discuss autoimmune conditions and representation in children's books.
- SEL (Social-Emotional Learning): Focus on empathy, inclusion, and self-acceptance.
- ELA (English Language Arts): Character development, point of view, and theme analysis.

Closing Reflection
Prompt:
"You don't have to be the best—just try your best."
What does this quote from the book mean to you after reading The Secret Winners Club?

IN CONVERSATION WITH DONNA GALANTI

Q: What inspired you to write The Secret Winners Club?

A: As I get older, I've found that we can still struggle with identity like young people do. And our perception of who we are changes as we grow and evolve and experience life—and experience life challenges, including mistakes made. Being adopted, I felt as a kid that I didn't fit in. Because no one else I knew was adopted—no one in my family or my friends. I felt like an outsider then although I don't now.

And since becoming an adult, I've acquired five autoimmune diseases that can make me look different. My conditions made me think: how would it be if kids had these health issues and had to deal with them in middle school?

With this idea, came the inspiration for writing a middle grade book that is about seeking identity, especially related to self-image and self-acceptance. This is something I struggled with as a kid, and I know many kids do. The story explores how personal challenges shape one's self-perception and can influence the journey toward self-acceptance. And I especially wanted to highlight the importance of recognizing individuals for their talents and character rather than their physical appearance.

Q: Do you have a favorite moment or character in this story? If so, what makes it/them your favorite?

A: This is such a hard question! In the story we have three alternating points of view with Sunny, Vee, and Trev and I love them all for different reasons. However, a favorite moment is when Trev reconnects with his father who he's been estranged from. After my mom died, I got to know my own emotionally-distant dad much better and that was a gift before he died.

On a side note, Sunny's name is a tribute to my mom who passed away many years ago. My mom had an unusual name with being called Suneil (all one word and no middle name) and Sunny's nickname is short for my mom's name, Suneil

Q: What kind of research or preparation did you do while writing this story?

A: There were so many fun elements of this story that I did research on. This includes, the musical Grease junior high version, dance training, creating junkbots, wood working, living in a mobile home park, and of course autoimmune disorders.

Q: You repeat a theme that echoes agency over our choices and our actions. Why does that idea have particular significance to you?

A: I believe that incorporating the theme of agency—the state of acting and having power—into this story not only resonates with the experiences of young readers but also equips them with valuable life skills. Knowing they have the power to make their own choices and take their own actions can ultimately shape them into more thoughtful and engaged individuals.

IN CONVERSATION WITH DONNA GALANTI

Q. Why did you choose to feature characters with autoimmune conditions, and how did you decide which autoimmune conditions to include?

A. As mentioned, I wanted to write a book for kids with visible conditions like I have—and hope that young readers with the same conditions will be empowered to accept themselves just as they are. And since they needed to be visible conditions, I gave two of the three characters my own autoimmune conditions.

Vee has vitiligo like me, which is where I have patches of missing pigment on my skin and is much more visible in summer when I tan. Trevor has psoriasis like me, a skin condition that can affect the scalp and all areas of the body from minor dry, itchiness to painful red patches. I'm lucky to have my psoriasis mostly under control, which is something that Trevor struggles with in the story. The main character, Sunny, has alopecia—a very visible disease where she suffers hair loss and is completely bald.

With this story, I also wanted to bring awareness about autoimmune conditions and hopefully show that they can be part of us, but they are not ALL of who we are. We can be many other things: a friend, a son, an artist, a singer—and more.

Q. Why did I choose to include pop culture in The Secret Winners Club?

A. In the story, I include a production of Grease Jr. musical and also the music of Frank Sinatra. This is a tribute to my love for musicals and Sinatra that goes all the way back to when I was a middle grader. Call me an" old soul but I always adored music and movies from the 1940s and 1950s!

My parents took me to many musical productions at this beautiful, historic theater, Proctors Theater, in Schenectady, New York, near where I grew up. I even saw a production of Camelot with the actor Richard Harris from the 1967 movie, Camelot. Who you might know as playing the original Dumbledore in the Harry Potter movies!

Q: What's an element of craft you explored in writing The Secret Winners Club and what tips can you share with young authors for using this element?

A: I told the story from three points of view. When you write a story with three points of view, the most important thing is to keep it clear for your reader. Make sure each character sounds different by using their own thoughts, feelings, and way of talking. Switch points of view only when it helps the story move forward, not just because you can. Keep chapters short and focused so readers don't get confused. Give each character a clear goal or problem they care about, and show how they each see the same events in different ways. If each point of view adds something new, your story will feel stronger and more exciting.

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Q. The characters in this book are all focusing on achieving their ambitions no matter the cost. What aspect(s) of this perspective did you feel was/were important to include.

A. I wanted to include the pressure of competition in connection with society's expectations and the consequences of ambition. I think that the desire to be seen as "normal" or to fit in can reflect pressures on young people. I hope it resonates with readers who understand the weight of expectations in school environments. The story also illustrates how the pursuit of success can sometimes lead to unintended—and even negative—consequences, emphasizing that the competitive journey is just as important as the destination.

Q: The story sprinkles in lots of information about autoimmune disorders. Was there anything specific that you'd like to share?

A: Understanding about autoimmune disorders can lead to empathy, and better support for people who suffer. Here are three things that most people don't know:

1. **Autoimmune symptoms can flare and disappear without warning:** Someone may seem "fine" one day and completely wiped out the next. Stress, illness, or even weather changes can trigger sudden flares.
2. **Autoimmune diseases can change over time:** The immune system may attack different parts of the body at different stages, making diagnosis slow—and often misunderstood.
3. **Many autoimmune diseases are invisible:** Chronic fatigue and pain don't always show on the outside, but the body is constantly working overtime inside.

Q: What do you hope readers come away with after reading your book?

A: I hope readers connect with the characters over the challenges of dealing with peer pressure, identity, and self-acceptance. I also want to encourage them to embrace their power to make choices, understand the implications of their actions, and foster a sense of responsibility and empathy toward themselves and others as they navigate their life journey.

ABOUT DONNA GALANTI

Donna Galanti is the children's book author of the *Unicorn Island* series, *Joshua and the Lightning Road* series, and *Loon Cove Summer*. She has lived in fun locations including England, her family-owned campground in New Hampshire, and in Hawaii where she served as a U.S. Navy photographer. Donna is an avid outdoor adventurer and nature lover. She volunteers for the Old-Growth Forest Network and the National Audubon Society. For details on her books, events, and school programs, visit her at donnagalanti.com.