

## *The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music*

by Steve Lopez

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Reviewed by:

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There is great potential for personal development in interpersonal relationships. *The Soloist* is a book that delves into the impact that relationships and human interaction can have. The novel centers on the interaction, growth, and an eventual close, personal relationship that develops between Steve Lopez and Nathaniel Ayers. Lopez, the author and a newspaper columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, is keenly aware of how the world around him can intersect and lead to his next story. After decades in the newspaper industry, Lopez's life takes an interesting turn after a chance meeting with Nathaniel Ayers—a homeless, African American man in his fifties, skillfully playing a violin in the midst of chaotic Los Angeles. Lopez is intrigued by the oxymoron of a talented musician who is also homeless. Assuming that this is a story waiting to be told, Lopez introduces himself to Ayers, and their journey begins.

This chance meeting with Ayers as Lopez makes his way to work ultimately alters both their lives and expands the author's sense of self beyond what he could have imagined. It is revealed that Ayers, a native of Ohio who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, is an accomplished musician who once studied at the Julliard School. His life slowly began to unravel under the grip of a worsening mental disorder which initially went unnoticed but was later diagnosed as schizophrenia. The intense pressure of the competitive Julliard environment of the 1970s only exacerbated his mental condition. The story explores his downward spiral and the collateral damage that ensues upon his friends, family, and dreams.

Throughout the novel, Lopez's interactions with Ayers pique the former's curiosity and challenge his worldview. The author spends an inordinate amount of time trying to understand how he can help him. Through a series of newspaper columns, attention is brought to Ayers' plight and the mentally ill and forgotten ones trapped in similar circumstances. The experience also reacquaints Ayers with the broader family of other musicians. The power of music to connect, heal, and educate is masterfully communicated in this novel. Ayers' life is explained in the context of his passion for music. It creates a place of solace, and music is the one thing in his life that he feels he can control.

Lopez tells Ayers' story through the dual lens of observer and ultimately close friend. The novel illustrates the dynamics of friendship and how people change one another in relationships. The author frames for the reader the impact that mental illness can have on lives and relationships. While other characters are very much a part of the plot, their importance is situated neatly in the folds of the two men's friendship. Lopez's supportive relationship with his wife and Ayers' changing relationship with his sister are woven throughout the story. Various other characters representing the mental health realm and the city and state

government are interspersed throughout the novel, but their importance is indicated in terms of how they influence the direction of the relationship between Ayers and Lopez.

One important aspect of the plot is Lopez's personal growth. He acknowledges the duality (self-promotion and humanitarian) in his desire to help Ayers. Lopez realizes that he has gained more from the journey of their relationship than he ever could have hoped. While Ayers exhibits growth and change throughout the process, the text illustrates that the power and impact of mental illness is immeasurable. As the two men's friendship is ongoing, there is not necessarily a point of closure to the novel; however, the glimpse into the evolution of the main characters is profound.

When placed in the context of higher education, this novel connects with multiple points of the curricula and can challenge students to apply the information in a variety of ways. Disciplines within the social sciences, humanities, arts, education, business, science, and journalism and mass communication can easily establish connections with this novel. The multiple discussion points would allow an institution to challenge students' current levels of reasoning and promote critical thinking around the cognitively complex aspects of the story.

Students in fine arts may evaluate how the power of music affects their own lives and performance. Critical discussion can occur on how students can balance the demands of the discipline while continuing to grow. Opportunities for interaction with upper-level students in fine arts may be an option for preparing students for adjusting to the pressure of performing at the next level.

Mental illness and society's treatment of those affected are critical aspects of discussion for students in the social sciences, education, and humanities. Students may discuss what society's response and responsibility should be to those impacted and displaced by mental illness. Depending on the students' area of study, additional conversations can occur on aspects of treatment options and patient rights for the mentally ill. Public policy aspects of the novel can be discussed within the disciplines of social sciences (e.g., political science, public policy) and business. While big industry is not a major component of the text, discussion on gentrification, urban development, and economics can blend well within business disciplines.

Analytical discussions on the areas such as testing and the role of the K–12 school system can occur within the education disciplines. Potential educators may contemplate the role and responsibility of the school system in serving the diagnosed and undiagnosed students. Since this debate is not a new one in education, new perspectives can be presented to students based upon changes in law. Consequently, the role of the higher education in supporting and serving students with mental illness can be addressed.

Mass communication and related disciplines may utilize this text in a number of ways. Topics include discussing the impact of media on the characters' lives and how that power is harnessed to bring about change. Roles and responsibilities of those in the media can be tackled based on the dual role of Lopez as newspaper columnist and friend.

Students may be challenged to reframe their thinking or understand how to articulate their stance on issues presented in the novel. The dialogue that ensues can foster civic engagement and community service activities. Lopez's gifts of his time, energy, and resources ultimately have an impact on the community. Establishing the importance of service in the community is a lesson that many institutions attempt to instill in their students.

This novel can serve as a conversation starter. Because there is an accompanying film, opportunities to discuss how the film portrays and interprets the text is an option. Having guest speakers in a more discipline-specific aspect will allow students to connect the information and

understand the novel in a personal and meaningful way. Promoting critical thinking and discussions close to their academic discipline may also assist students in processing the multiple layers that can exist in literature. Most importantly, institutions can communicate to students the importance of understanding the diversity and circumstances that their peers bring to the campus.