



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

by Steve Lopez. New York: Berkley Books, 2008. Paperback, 289 pp., \$15.

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For much of his professional life Steve Lopez has been a newspaper columnist, calling it like he sees it in eight hundred- to one thousand-word bunches for the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Oakland Tribune*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and lately the *Los Angeles Times*. By definition, Lopez is obligated to inject personality into his work and take liberties by putting himself in the story. It is the columnist's prerogative.

Grinding out column after column is wearying, so a writer might find a compelling character to write about. Then, upon receiving appropriately impressive positive (or negative) feedback, he might turn said subject into a recurring character, someone the reader might get caught up with now and again. Such were the cards Lopez was dealt when he stumbled across Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, a fifty-something, black street musician standing on a corner playing Beethoven passages on a violin with two of its four strings intact. Ayers was definitely column-worthy—a paranoid schizophrenic who had played in an orchestra with Yo-Yo Ma in the early 1970s at New York's Juilliard School. His story became so popular with readers that Lopez wrote a book based on his original columns, and so popular with Hollywood that Robert Downey Jr. played Lopez to Jamie Foxx's Ayers in a big-time buddy flick (not the usual buddy flick, of course, but one nonetheless).

What relates *The Soloist* to literary journalism—aside from the writer's comparison in passing of Lopez/Ayers to Joseph Mitchell/Joe Gould, and the name-checking of Mike Royko and Jimmy Breslin as his two favorite writers—is that Lopez transformed Ayers's story into a legitimate non-fiction narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end. In other words, Ayers's is a true tale told in classic storytelling mode. It is also very much a search story: Lopez delves into Ayers's past in order to discover the true nature of the young Cleveland native's precipitous fall from the vertiginous heights of prestigious Juilliard. Lopez's search becomes our search—we need to know why Ayers broke down on the cusp of performing classical repertoire at the highest level of difficulty, and Lopez parcels out of this information in judicious fashion, like a good mystery whodunit.

Inevitably, given Lopez's penchant for writing in columnist mode, *The Soloist* is also the story of the writer's ongoing and developing interpersonal relationship with his subject. That he breaks one of the conventional rules of journalism, if not the cardinal rule, by getting too close

to his subject—buying replacement strings and sheet music and instruments, coaxing him off the streets and into a residence for street persons called Lamp Community—is questionable for a columnist but unremarkable for a literary journalist. That Lopez does his research into the lack of civic political will and the brave if nearly futile medical response to the homeless problem in east downtown Los Angeles is commendable. That Lopez's story has a feel-good ending is why Foxx and Downey spent time perfecting their Ayers and Lopez impersonations for mass entertainment consumption.

Where Lopez falls short, from the literary journalism point of view, is the insistent, almost belligerent interjection of his every ponderous bit of fretting and his every *pensée* on every little setback his new friend encounters, at nearly every juncture in the story. While this might be expected of a newspaper columnist who has no trouble getting in front of a story being told, over the course of two hundred eighty-nine pages the technique of worrying out loud becomes an irksome narrative impediment. There is a pinch of empathy for the writer's position—Ayers is an unpredictable man, after all. Yet it is Lopez the columnist who decides to write about Ayers. It is Lopez the journalist who controls the setting of the prose. And, alas, it is Lopez the worrywart who poses repeated, fatuous questions. This forces the reader (well, this reader), to see Lopez's grovels—Woe unto me, what if my latest ploy should fail?—as an appeal to pity the poor journalist's plight. Wherever these passages occur, the narrative spine slips a disc.

This disturbing weakness in what is otherwise a good story inflicts a nagging ache on the reader early. Lopez writes, "Getting sick at Juilliard was a subject I didn't know how to bring up with Nathaniel, nor did I know whether I should. Is it too personal? Will it upset him? Can I trust the answer of a man who has mental problems?" (14)

Aside from the low-rent soul-searching, this sort of cutaway is disingenuous—of course Lopez is going to ask, and of course we're going to find out! Allow me to add just three exclamation points (there are so many more), to this criticism:

"Every time the phone rings at night, my stomach does a flip. I'm always sure it's the police, calling to say Nathaniel is hanging by a thread after a mugging, and nice going Mr. Columnist. Along with giving him two brand-new instruments, why didn't I paint a bull's-eye on his back?" (59)

And:

"Is this the worst idea I have ever had? ... Have I exploited Nathaniel?" (92)

And:

"Once again I wonder if I'm the one, not Nathaniel, who needs to have his head examined." (125)

And so it goes. Just before wondering whether he himself needs a shrink, when he is writing a column about the horror show that exists after dark just a few blocks east of City Hall, Lopez clues in the reader to some advice he has received from his editor:

"Don't sweeten it, my editor, Sue Horton, tells me. Serve it up for breakfast raw and unfiltered." (124)

Lopez followed Horton's first rule, but not her second. In many scenes he does indeed serve it up raw. In others, he covers the rawness of Ayers's predicament with the shawl of the angst-ridden columnist's interpretation. We're treated to the filter of how the writer feels about situations, leaving little room for readers to interpret. By providing this running touchy-feely commentary, Lopez plays it cute and comes dangerously close to insulting the reader.

Moreover, as the conversational tone of the writing bogs down every time Lopez jumps out

of the narrative to ask himself whether he is doing the right thing, the underlying structure is exposed to reveal a lack of layers to the enterprise. What you read is what you get. There are no underlying themes; there is no grand metaphor about Los Angeles, or California, or America; or the political establishment; or the medical institutions. There is a sense of the beleaguered, but that is all. Lopez takes the reader through a downtown no-man's-land to witness the zombification of poor urban dwellers, but then leans on the heart-warming response of Ayers's small victories. For all his grit, he chooses the saccharine. Accentuating the positive, Lopez's glass remains half-full, not half-empty. The reporting is solid, but he overdoses on cheerleading for Ayers. Should this not have been left for the reader to decide?

The Soloist flirts with the realm of literary journalism, yet never commits. If the writer had resisted the temptation to turn away from the narrative and toward the reader to fuss at every available moment, the result may have been different.