Reader Response Questions: The Soloist

A key idea or theme is touched on for each chapter and the reading can easily be grouped in chapters of three. Questions should be used as key topic/issue identifiers and reading checks.

1) Preface – Chapter 2
   a) PREFACE Lopez says that he —fishes the city for inspiration for his writing, whereas Ayers stands near a statue of Beethoven for inspiration when playing music. What do these methods show about each person?
      i) Is there an —effective way to find inspiration?
      ii) Where do you find inspiration for writing, music, or creative pursuits?
   b) Why doesn't Ayers trust Lopez when they first meet? What do you think it will take for Lopez to gain his trust?
   c) How do Ayers' friends and relatives react when Lopez calls them? How would you react if you got the news that a long-lost friend or relative was homeless?

2) Chapters 3 - 5
   a) By writing about Ayers—and, by extension, making money off of him—does Lopez have responsibility for Ayers' well-being? And if so, how much?
   b) Describe the homeless people Ayers interacts with.
      i) What do you think about this community?
      ii) What does Lopez think?
   c) What would Ayers gain by living at LAMP? What would he lose?

3) Chapters 6 – 8
   a) Ragin works with his mentally ill patients to establish in —concrete ways|| that they —have a life worth living. Does Ayers have a life worth living? If not, what does he need?
   b) How about in Lopez's life?
   c) How about your own?
   d) What does his night on Skid Row trouble Lopez?
      i) Why doesn't it seem to trouble Ayers?
   e) What is the purpose of this interlude? Why does Lopez choose to tell the story of Russo and Ayers without including himself as a character?

4) Chapters 9 – 11
   a) Ayers says that there were —none of [his] people|| at Julliard.
      i) Who does he consider —his people||?
      ii) Who do you consider your people, and how might it affect you if you were separated from them?
   b) Do you think Alexis Rivera is exploiting Ayers by having him play at his club?
   c) How about Lopez having him meet with doctors? Is that exploitive?
   d) How about Lopez having him meet with doctors? Is that exploitive? To quote Lopez, do you think Ayers is really any (88)? Would it be right to force a —gravely disabled person like Ayers into treatment?

5) Chapters 12-14
   a) Why does Lopez cut out of his family responsibilities to help Ayers?
      i) Do you agree with his reasons?
   b) Why is it so hard to solve the problem of Skid Row?
      i) Which approach is better a)solving it top-down through the Mayor’s office, or b)helping one person at a time like Lopez?
c) Just as Lopez asks (126): Is Ayers happy? Who knows best what is best for Ayers—himself, or Lopez?

6) Chapters 15 – 17
   a) Why does Ayers resist moving into the apartment?
   b) Why does Lopez wait until now—halfway through the book—to tell us about Ayers’ childhood?
      i) How does this affect our understanding of Ayers?
         (1) Lopez believes that—“Nathanial plays music that silences the voices in his head” (154). To what extent can music heal or help a person?

7) Chapters 18 – 20
   a) Why is Lopez so angry about what Mr. Ayers says about his son?
   b) Why does Lopez ask for Ayers to give him music lessons?
      i) How might it change their relationship?
   c) Why does Ayers ask about recording music or giving a recital?
      i) What does this show about him?
         (1) Do you think these hopes are realistic?

8) Chapters 21 – 23
   a) Why did Ayers finally choose to stay overnight in his apartment?
      i) What reasons beyond the ones given in the book can you think of?
   b) Is Lopez and Ayers’ relationship a friendship?
      i) How does Lopez react to Ayers’ wish to have children of his own?
         (1) Do you think this is appropriate?

9) Chapters 24-26
   a) In Lopez’s own words: —”Have I exploited [Ayers]? Is it possible for me to keep writing about him without doing so?”
      i) In what ways might Lopez be exploiting his friend?
      ii) What would make their relationship equal?
   b) Why does Lopez’s attempt to help Ayers via Dr. Prachal fail so miserably?
   c) Why is there no record of Ayers’ strange behavior in his school record at Julliard? Why might the school have ignored his problems?

10) Chapters 27-31
   a) What triggers Ayers’ outburst at Lopez?
      (1) Has Lopez helped or harmed Ayers here?
      (2) Lopez says: “I can’t save [Ayers] and I don’t have to keep trying” (246).
         (a) Is Lopez justified in his decision?
            (i) When can we stop trying to help somebody?
   b) How does Ayers feel about Yo-Yo Ma? What does this show about him?
   c) Does Lopez believe he has helped Ayers?
      i) What has Lopez learned about himself in the process of helping his friend?