

Mothers and Their Children

(Essay on Mark Salzman's *The Soloist*)

There are a number of main themes in Mark Salzman's *The Soloist*, such as the search for perfection in the US justice system, and the thin line between sanity and insanity. I would not call a mother-child relationship a main focus, but it is a motif that shows up repeatedly. It is clear that the author wants to say something about the topic to the reader. I believe he tries to show various ways how a mother's love, care for her child—or lack of these—influences her decisions. And at the same time how the interests of looking after herself and her child may conflict with each other.

This paper focuses on the protagonist and his mother, but before going there, I would like to outline to some extent the three other parent-child relationships that are sketched in the book. All three of them are dysfunctional in some way. The center theme of the plot revolves around a trial of a man accused of killing his master in a Zen Buddhist retreat. Practically the only thing we are told about the mother of the defendant is through the testimony of his father: "Nancy was always in and out of hospitals. When she was home, she was pretty much helpless, so she was n't much of a mother" (148). On one hand, this element helps the reader to understand the circumstances of the defendant's upbringing. On the other hand, it is by no accident that the author chose to depict a killer who lacked motherly love in his formative years. Furthermore, because the son inherited the mother's genetic condition of schizophrenia, she determined in a more direct, although not intentional, way his son's path. Thus, a mother's double negative influence on her son is shown here.

We know even less about the relationship between Maria-Teresa, one of the jurors, and her daughter. Marie-Teresa says of her: "I feel sorry for her, having to salute all fucking day. Poor kid. She'll do OK, though" (161). These sentences show a somewhat detached attitude of the mother towards her daughter. We learned earlier that the "daughter was getting into trouble" (161) at her mother's side, so the mother took the easy way out by sending her to the military school. We, the readers, should not judge Maria-Teresa though because we do not know what kind of trouble her daughter was in. However her tone, her troubled relationship to other people—hinted about elsewhere in the book—suggests that Maria-Teresa may have problems with having and expressing feelings in a more general way. To her credit though she may not show love towards her daughter but acted in the faith that she is doing what is right for both of them on the long term. This shows that one can act on one's child assumed interest, even if there is no deep emotional connection between them.

The protagonist, Renne Sundheimer, another juror in the trial, is a cello teacher. He was once a prodigy but apparently lost his musical gift in his teenage years. The book devotes considerable attention to the dynamics between him and his young, nine year old Korean student Kyung-hee. Kyung-hee comes from a proper nuclear family, having a sister and both parents living in the same household. Kyung-hee's mother is referred to only as Mrs. Kim. This choice of words from the writer helps to emphasize the traditional family values this family lives by. Mr. Kim, the head of the house, has the last word on all important issues, such as whether Kyung-hee should study music or not. She understands that Kyung-hee has talent, but would like to see profiting from this talent as soon as possible. She asks from Renne right after the first hearing: "When he can make concert?" (38). With this short sentence the author introduced two stereotypes. There is a notion in America that

Asian people are pushy, aggressive. And similarly to some other ethnic groups, they do not know proper English grammar. Despite that these two characteristics describe Mrs. Kim's manner in every English communication, we get a slightly subtle picture of her position. She seems to be bowing under her husband's will but tries to influence him behind the scene. She is in the unfortunate position of being between the strict father, who wants his son to make money soon—, and who himself is under economic pressure—and the talented, withdrawn son who would probably prefer to play music than doing anything else. Overall, she negotiates rather well within the constraints for her son's behalf and future.

This fictional book is written in first person, from Renne's point of view. The reader knows relatively a lot what Renne thinks and thought of his mother, and how he remembers some of her actions. He looks back to events from 20 years later. Thus what we learn about his mother comes through the double distortions of time—one may remember differently than it actually happened—and personal feelings, attitudes. Renne feels like a victim of his mother's decisions in his early life. He is just an object in sentences like “my mother took me down” (4), “my mother sat me down” (282). These examples show the dominant role the mother played in Renne's life.

The sociological definition of “significant other” is slightly different compared to the everyday use. It refers to the person whose care, affection, and approval are especially desired, and who is the most important in the development of the self. In this sense, Renne's mother was a very significant other for him. For instance his mother's highly influential words haunt him for the rest of his life: “your stock's gonna keep going up” (6). Renne internalized this unquestioned “wisdom” so much that he has difficulties living in the present. He was always looking for the future and when that his talent—and the hope for a better future—leaves him he sinks into the shadow of the path. Renne's mother mentioned at least 11 times on the first 30 pages and maybe four or five times in the rest of the book. Her character is used extensively by the author to introduce Renne and the way he sees himself in the world.

Later in his life his decisions digress from his parents'. He says “I had come to resent my mother for isolating me from other young people and for giving me such an exaggerated sense of entitlement” (10). Despite this change in his attitude, he is still under her influence seen from such details that he is staying in a motel because his mother liked it (22). He has strong but ambivalent feelings toward her mother who gave him so much but in a sense also ruined his life.

Let's try to look into the mother's head for a second, although we got glimpses of her motives only from the outside. She believed in his son's talent from the bottom of her heart. She did everything she thought was right to provide the best possible life for him. However, there are quite a few hints that her decisions were for her benefits as well. She certainly enjoyed more the social aspects of his son's fame than his son himself. The strict rule she enforced on her son ensured that he would stay closer to her than most kids or teenagers. On the unconscious level she was driven to follow her own interests just as much as his son's.

We saw four different mother-child relationships: the nonexistent, but genetically important; the unloving, but caring; the loving, but strictly practical; and the devoted, but misguided. What's common in them? Not much, but they are variations on the same theme. They show how the different types of dynamics between two persons affect differently their lives particularly the younger ones.