



Dispatches From Puerto Nowhere

AN AMERICAN STORY OF ASSIMILATION AND ERASURE

by **Robert Lopez**

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Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion
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1. As a group, try to define the term “the American Dream.” Discuss these ideas in relationship to *Dispatches From Puerto Nowhere*: do you believe the Lopez family achieved the American Dream? Why or why not? What clues do we have as to how the author feels about this question?
2. In *Dispatches From Puerto Nowhere*, the author states: “**I appreciate what my father did for me and what his father did for both of us. But sacrificing our language and culture, our heritage and history, didn’t have to be part of the bargain**” (p. 121): do you think it is possible to make gains in a new culture without suffering losses of some kind? Make a list of the pros and the cons of intentionally letting go of one’s previous culture when permanently living within a new one.
3. Talk about what it means to be a first-, second-, and third-generation American, using Sixto, Robert’s father, and Robert as a case study: how did the three generations’ concerns and goals differ? In what ways were they similar to each other? Why might a later-generation American yearn for the family’s previous culture that they are aware of but have never experienced?
4. Talk about the American government and Puerto Rico: what recent political discourse related to the island territory is investigated in the book? In what ways might moving from Puerto Rico to one of the mainland states be similar and different to moving within one of the 50 states? Do you think Puerto Rico benefits from being a territory of the U.S. government?
5. Discuss how a lack of a familial memory is central to *Dispatches From Puerto Nowhere*: how important do you think generational storytelling is? What would have been different if Sixto Lopez had recorded or recounted his origins for his descendants? As a group, discuss your knowledge of your own family histories and how it has affected you.

6. Of his family, the author says: “**All of it dies with me**” (p. 198): what does he mean by this? Do you think the concern of his family dying would remain even if he did choose to have children and a new generation of the Lopez family name?
7. Consider the author’s paternal grandmother: how would you describe the relationship between grandmother and grandson? What was Lola’s relationship like with the rest of the family? Discuss the effect that family dynamics can have on the sharing of family history.
8. In the memoir, the author has largely focused on his paternal lineage, starting as far back as he can go, with his grandfather Sixto Lopez, who left Puerto Rico. But we also learn about the author’s Italian maternal lineage, “**the culture we indulged in at home**” (p. 77), as well as Spanish and Cuban ancestry: Why is the lack of knowledge of his Puerto Rican heritage in sharper focus than the others?
9. In what ways has the author’s Puerto Rican heritage affected him in a positive way? In a negative way? How has his level of awareness about this changed throughout his life?
10. The author has only recently started to examine the disconnect he feels to his heritage: what has changed for the author as he’s aged? Why do you think the topics of heritage and language have taken on more significance now? What do you believe might have contributed to this awareness being absent in the author’s youth?
11. The author is enamored with the game of tennis, which he taught himself to play at middle age: what descriptions are used to depict his tennis playing? Juxtapose the self-teaching of tennis with the possibility of self-teaching the Spanish language: what is different between the two subjects?
12. Throughout the book, the author portrays scenes with his Brooklyn tennis friends: what are these descriptions like? Why do you think the tennis community is so important? Do you think it’s fitting that the memoir’s cover features a tennis racket?
13. Running throughout the book are descriptions of the author’s first experience watching the New York City Puerto Rican Day Parade: what does he do while watching the parade? In what ways is the parade described? What emotions do you think are present during these scenes?
14. The author reflects: “**I grew up surrounded by white people and never thought of myself as other... No one ever told me that teachers and coaches and employers and policemen might treat me differently**” (p. 7): do you think this decision by the adults in his life was right or wrong? How did the setting of his childhood affect his self-identity later in life?
15. Discuss the author’s relationship with term “spic” and how it changed over time.

16. What was it like for the author to be raised on Long Island, both during childhood and as an adult thinking back on that period? What do you make of his decision to settle in Brooklyn in adulthood, back to where his parents had intentionally moved him and his sister away from? As a group, share whether or not you feel a disconnect now to the place in which you were raised, and the reasons why.
17. When the author says: “**I think about language and history and people who can speak a language that for me should’ve been a birthright**” (p. 184), what connection can be made between being able to speak a language and feeling a sense of belonging? As a group, share any similar experience you or your family has had on the topic of language and belonging.
18. What effect might it have on someone to repeatedly have experiences like this one with strangers, based solely on appearance: “**I can’t count how many times someone has spoken Spanish to me and I’ve had to say, I’m sorry, I don’t speak Spanish**” (p. 95). What do you believe are the origins of the author’s expectation that he ought to be able to speak Spanish in addition to English?
19. When the author recounts working in restaurants, how would you characterize his relationships with his coworkers? How do you think these experiences affected him?
20. Of another passenger on an airplane trip, the author concludes: “**Maybe she isn’t Puerto Rican or maybe she’s Puerto Rican like I am**” (p. 194): what does he mean by this? Do you think he feels like he is being equally observed?
21. Various surveys are pointed to discuss how Americans feel about identity: do you believe language ability is mandatory for inclusion in a cultural identity? What do you think is important in order for a person to feel they belong? Discuss the term “LINO” that is used in the book: what does it mean, and how does the author feel about it? Do you think that it is possible to be Latino—or any other identity—in name only?
22. During a university opportunity as a guest writer that brings the author to Utah, a fellow attendee repeatedly refers to him as “Roberto” instead of his name, Robert. Why do you think he did not correct this mistake?
23. Talk about diversity in higher education faculty and programming: if you aren’t part of academia yourself, what conclusions do you draw from the author’s experiences? If you do have personal insight, were his experiences in line with what you already believed, or different?
24. The author, in his role as a college professor, describes utilizing a famous Milosz quote with his students “**to give them license to let it fly, to destroy themselves and their families**” (p. 18): what do you think this means? What purpose does this objective serve? Do you think that *Dispatches From Puerto Nowhere* achieves this goal?