

## Discussion Guide

*Strings Attached*, Joanne Lipman and Melanie Kupchynsky

### Introduction

Praised as a book that “makes me believe that one man can make a difference,” (Yo-Yo Ma) *Strings Attached* is the moving memoir of a tough teacher who made a real difference to generations of students. He is Jerry Kupchynsky, Mr. K., an irascible and revered public school music teacher. Joanne Lipman—former student-turned-award-winning journalist—and Melanie Kupchynsky—student, daughter, and Chicago Symphony Orchestra violinist—collaborate to offer two separate and overlapping perspectives of the man who over the years brought a profound experience with music to thousands in and around East Brunswick, New Jersey. Despite traumatic boyhood experience in the Ukraine, decades of caring for a wife with MS, and even the tragic loss of a daughter, Mr. K worked over the years to teach hundreds of students not just to play an instrument or be part of an orchestra, but to be disciplined, develop confidence, and to believe in themselves.

### Discussion Questions

1. Who was your Mr. K? Who were important mentors for you? What made these people different from the other teachers/coaches/mentors you experienced?
2. Lipman and Kupchynsky share their view that Mr. K’s most valuable lesson might be resilience. What was the valuable lesson you learned from your mentor? Describe it, and how it makes a difference in your life.
3. As we read in *STRINGS ATTACHED*, Mr. K did not believe that there were untalented children; there were only children who failed to work hard. Do you agree? What are the pros and cons of this perspective? Did reading *STRINGS ATTACHED* make you redefine “talent?”
4. If you are a parent, how would Mr. K’s approach be viewed if your child was his student? Would the long-term perspective the book provides make you change your mind, given that his students seem to have been very successful?
5. Did you ever study a musical instrument? What was the experience like? What role does music play in your daily life? Did you find that this book made you think more about the importance of arts and music programs in our schools?
6. Throughout his life Mr. K strongly emphasized the importance of discipline. Why was it so important to him? What are possible dangers of such discipline?
7. Did your perspective on Mr. K change as you read the book? How?
8. At the heart of this book are several mysteries. One narrative thread involves the disappearance and fate of Stephanie Kupchynsky. Another is Jerry Kupchynsky’s own life story—a mystery that is answered in great part by the authors’ exhaustive research. Did you like how these suspenseful stories were woven throughout the book? What surprised you about this?

9. Thinking about co-author/child prodigy Melanie Kupchynsky: did you have a reaction to the rigorous training she experienced? What are the benefits and risks of rigorous training for very young children?
10. How are the two narrative voices of the two authors different? What does each bring? What was your reaction to reading their different accounts of the same event?
11. Discuss Joanne Lipman's statement to Mr. K. about why she wouldn't pursue music professionally: "I love music. That's why I could never do it for a living."
12. Listen to "Meditation" from *Thais* by Massenet (you can listen to Melanie Kupchynsky performing this piece by visiting the website [stringsattachedbook.com](http://stringsattachedbook.com)). This was Mr. K.'s favorite piece of music, one he had Melanie play at her mother's funeral, her sister's memorial, and for him when in the hospital. What does the piece suggest or reveal about him?
13. After reading STRINGS ATTACHED, did you think about contacting the person who was your mentor? What would you say to him/her if you could today?
14. What does the title STRINGS ATTACHED mean to you now?