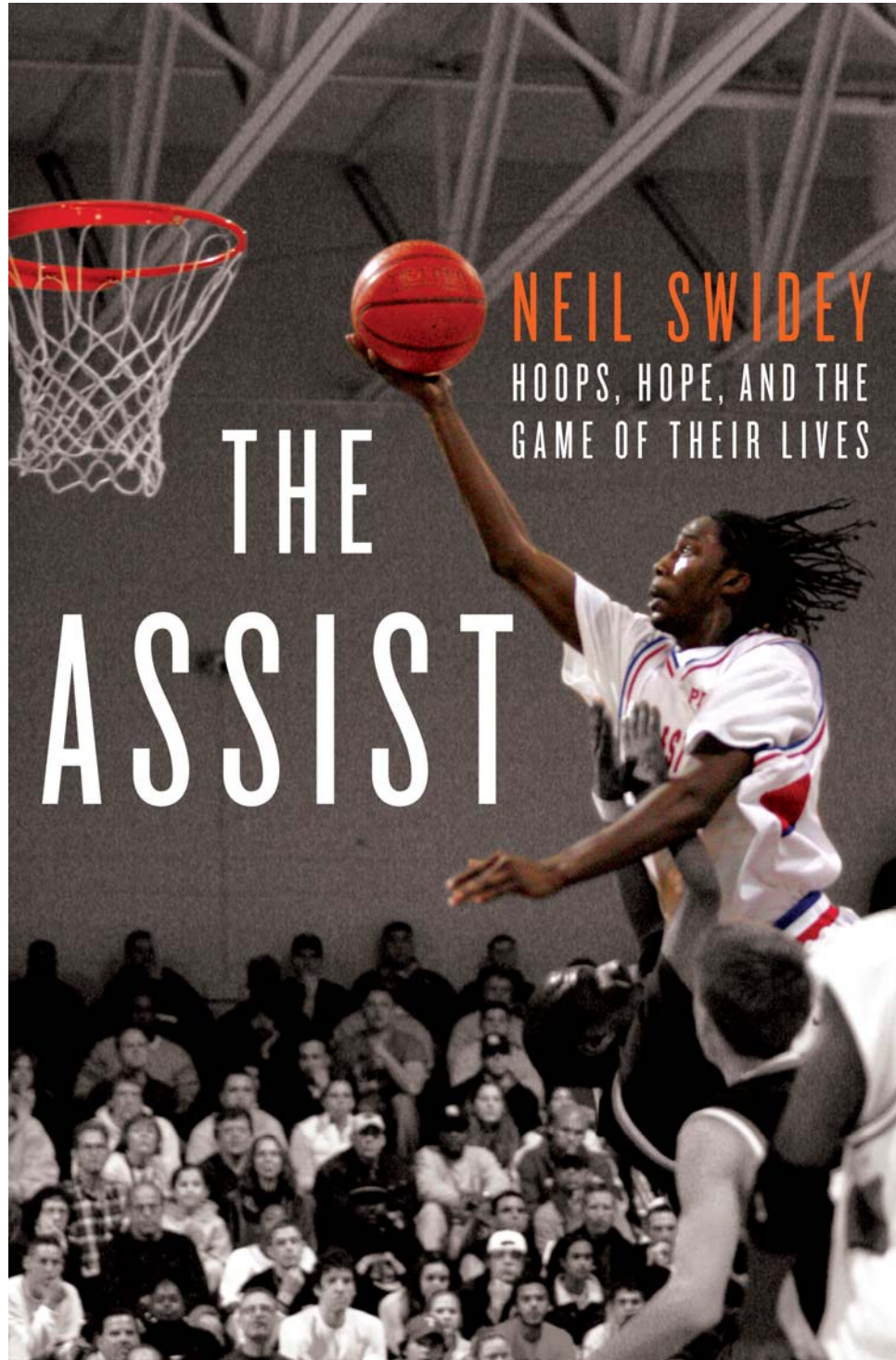




A Reading Group Guide



Praise

“With a powerful, moving narrative, Neil Swidey has delivered the rarest of transcendent sports books. Coach Jack O’Brien and his Charlestown players will bring you to your feet, and they’ll bring you to tears. Most of all, they’ll make you care about a game so much bigger than winning and losing. This is a brilliant book, one that will stay with you.” —Adrian Wojnarowski, author of *New York Times* bestseller *The Miracle of St. Anthony*

“So much of Boston’s history, good and bad, can be seen through Charlestown. So much of our basic humanity can be seen through the games we play. Neil Swidey brings all of that forward with a shrewd eye, a wide-ranging mind, and an uncommon gift for illuminating our common humanity.” —Charles P. Pierce, author of *Moving the Chains: Tom Brady and the Pursuit of Everything*

“Anyone who cares about Boston and race and hope and hoops will take heart from Neil Swidey’s *The Assist*, in which decent kids jockey for a lucky break in a world in which decency and luck are often in short supply. Set in compact, feisty, history-haunted Charlestown, this book is a powerhouse work of literary journalism about a powerhouse basketball program and the coach who wouldn’t take no for an answer.” —Madeleine Blais, Pulitzer Prize-winner and author of *In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle*

“[Swidey] builds narrative momentum and details his subjects with the touch of a skilled novelist. This is a prodigiously reported, compulsively readable book that readers (sports fans or not) will savor.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Like *Hoop Dreams*, this captivating account transcends its time and place.” —*Booklist*

Questions for Neil Swidey

What attracted to you to this project?

Initially, it was pretty basic. I wanted to understand what makes a high school basketball powerhouse tick. This was a team that had made history by winning the state championship four years in a row. But very early on I realized how small a piece of the story basketball was. It's really about an unlikely family and all the effort it takes to get ahead.

What surprised you most once you were on the inside?

I assumed once you've built a powerhouse, life would get easier each year. I was wrong. Inner-city life is full of such distractions, such minefields, that it's like starting from scratch every year. I came to appreciate the enormous energy it takes on the part of both the players and their coach, to open up the window of opportunity, and the constant threat of even tiny missteps slamming that window shut.

How did you conduct your research for this book? Did you have to actually follow the players around? And if so, how did they react to that type of intrusion into their lives?

Unfortunately, I haven't figured out how to do the kind of writing I do without being there, immersed in the lives of the people I'm writing about. So it takes a lot of time, and patience on the part of my subjects. But over time, they get used to my being there, and it becomes more natural. I never want people to change their behavior because I'm there. And I have figured out when to put my notebook away.

Was it tough for Jack and Ridley and the players to open up to you?

I think everyone was justifiably wary at the outset. But it's amazing how quickly that changed. I learned from Jack's example in connecting with the guys. There are huge gulfs in their experiences. But he proved that if you dive in, and become invested in their lives, in their hopes and fears, they'll open up, and you'll find yourself doing the same with them.

What surprised you most about Jack O'Brien?

The fascinating mix that he is. On the court, he's this insanely demanding coach, who paces and pouts along the sidelines, even when his guys are up by 30 points. But off the court, he's this insanely devoted mentor, with almost maternal instincts, whether that's giving his players tips on how to wash their jerseys, or driving them to doctor's

appointments, or picking up plastic produce bags at the supermarket because his guys like to use them to ice their sore joints.

You write that even as devoted as he is, "O'Brien is no saint. He needs his players and his problems as much as they need him." What you mean by that?

For me, this is what makes this story so different, and so much richer than the all too familiar tale about a tough-love white coach helping inner-city black kids beat the odds. O'Brien fills the space in his player's lives, and they fill the space in his. O'Brien needs to be needed.

You followed some guys who did very well, like Ridley, and others that got off track. Why do some succeed and others fail?

Part of it is luck. For example, Ridley lived on the edge of a housing project, rather than in it, which in some ways made him less vulnerable for getting caught up in the turf battles that overlay public housing complexes. But I think a bigger part is the ability to make smart, fast decisions -- hundreds of them every day. Ridley did this, and always managed to look cool.

Can you give us an example?

In the book I describe this scene where Ridley and his aunt are driving through a side street in Charlestown. Three middle-aged public works employees have blocked the street, for no good reason, with their truck, and are taking their time, not caring that they're making it impossible for Ridley to get the car through. His aunt fumes at this, and as she goes to lower the window to confront them, Ridley reaches across the console and puts his hand on hers and says, "It's OK, we're not in a rush." She says, "That's not right!" And he says, "You're right. They're ignorant. I don't blame them." Then he takes a cell phone call. By the time he's off the phone, they've cleared out. Now other kids may have taken the bait out of rage, or backed down out of fear. Ridley managed to float above it all.

You write about the absence of second chances for urban kids. What do you mean?

With a lot of hard work and some luck, these students can get some amazing opportunities. But if things go wrong, the safety net of the suburbs just isn't there. One of the players in this book sees his life pivot on something as seemingly minor as a busted windshield. That would be inconceivable for a similarly talented athlete in a typical suburb.

Is that why you set up a scholarship fund?

Yes. We've found that even after some of these guys get to college, there are so many places where things can go wrong, where little missteps can cascade into something far more serious. And when they do, there is much less support for helping them get back on track. So I've worked with a couple of really dedicated people to put this fund in place. It's called the Alray Taylor Second Chance Scholarship Fund, named in memory of a former Charlestown player and gentle soul, and its aim is helping promising students who suffered a setback get back on the path. For more info, please visit www.theassist.net.

Discussion questions

1. Jack O'Brien immerses himself in his players' lives both on and off the court, leading some people to comment that his method is unconventional, even controversial. Do you support his approach? Do the ends justify the means?
2. Do you think the "choice" system that the Boston Public School administration uses to assign students to high schools around the city works? Are the kids better off staying in their own local school districts?
3. How do you think O'Brien's family history may have informed his career and his interactions with his players?
4. When Michael Fung, the headmaster of Charlestown High, hears that a former student is dropping out of college because he wasn't receiving enough attention on his college team, he asks "Why have others failed once they left Charlestown? I think maybe they're looking for another Jack O'Brien. But in real life, there aren't many Jack O'Briens" (p. 267). How does O'Brien lead so many players to success?
5. In your opinion, what's the right formula for inspiring these kids from rough neighborhoods to graduate from high school and move on to college?
6. O'Brien resigned in part because he felt abandoned—especially after the central school administration didn't help O'Brien when a team from a wealthy suburb requested a venue change in the state tournament. Was this a case of institutional racism? Or was O'Brien overreacting?
7. Why do you think Hood was ready to take the fall for Pookie in the busted-windshield case? Was he right? Would you have done the same thing?
8. Were you surprised when the judge sentenced Hood to serve six months in jail for destruction of property? Do you think this was a particularly harsh sentence? Why or why not?
9. In the last chapter, Swidey says that Ridley's ability to stay cool "explained why Ridley was returning as a success story to Charlestown High a year after graduation and Hood was returning to his jail cell. Ridley knew he had to rise above one world to get to the next. Hood thought he could straddle both." Do you agree with Swidey?
10. When O'Brien tells Fung he's having doubts, for the second time, about leaving Charlestown, Fung tells him, "It's like a betrayal, Jack. Your father betrayed you."

And now you feel like you are betraying your players by leaving, because you are like a father to them" (p. 336). Do you agree with Fung's assessment?

Read more at www.theassist.net