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Outliers



THE STORY OF SUCCESS

MALCOLM
GLADWELL

#1 bestselling author of *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*

By:
Malcolm Gladwell

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What people Say:

Rebecca

Gladwell argues that success is tightly married to opportunity and time on task. He states that it takes approximately 10,000 hours to master something and that gives me comfort. It helps me feel better about my many failures at initial attempts to master things (like glazing pottery, algebra, Salsa dancing, skiing and sewing... to name a few). I kept thinking, "I've just got to put in more hours if I want to do better."

While I can see a different way of spinning the data provided to support Gladwell's argument, I didn't care. In a rare moment, I found myself not wanting to argue. :) Instead, I found myself reflecting on things that have felt like lucky opportunities in my own life. This reflection was very humbling.

Moreover, I felt the text tugging at the need for greater equity. What could all the people with limited opportunities do if given greater opportunities? Think Darfur. How many people who might have come up with the cure for pancreatic cancer been forced to spend their time standing in lines waiting for clean water or food?

My own personal experience as a teacher of refugees reflects Gladwell's primary thesis. Many of my refugee students are pre-literate. They have not been given the opportunity to gain a formal education. As a result, there are many well-intended, but misinformed people who place these students in special education courses or deem their I.Q. low, diminishing their opportunities even more.

The students I teach are hungry for skills and spend hours outside of class practicing. They make huge gains despite earlier opportunities denied them. While many will not go on to big colleges out of high school, I feel like given enough opportunity and time they could make it there. Sadly, many have families who depend on them to work to help financially support the family. (Yet, another limited opportunity to spend time focused on developing skills.)

In the past week, I have shared Gladwell's thesis with my students. We have applied the 10,000 hours to master a task to reading and writing. I remind students that if we don't get our 10,000 hours this year together, they must continue on their own. I remind them that it IS possible to move forward

if they are focused and keep adding hours of work to their reading and writing. We even write on the board how many hours left before we are masters.

"2 hours down, only 9,998 left to go."

Friday, I had a student from Somalia smile and ask, "So it's not true that white people are smarter than black Africans? They just get more chances to read?" Imagine my pleasure when I could respond, "YES! That's correct. You are just as smart as any white kid in this school. It's just that some of them have been reading for years and you are just getting started."

Bill Kerwin

When I think about Malcolm Gladwell, the first phrase that comes to mind is "less than meets the eye."

At first glance, his work seems thoroughly researched, even visionary at times. Beginning with a few maverick, counter-intuitive insights, he often ends with an affirmation of consensus, but it is a consensus that has been broadened by investigation and enriched by nuance.

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On second look, however, I'm no longer sure any of this is true. What first appeared to be new insights are nothing but familiar landmarks, previously unrecognizable because of the adoption of a deliberately mannered perspective; even the once apparent breadth and nuance now seem triumphs of language over logic, the apparent inevitability of his arguments an illusion conjured by the spell of his limpid prose.

Take one small example from "Outliers." With a flurry of standardized test statistics, Gladwell makes the case that the traditional summer vacation--however rewarding it may be for the middle class--is just not working for the poor. (I'll concede the point, for the sake of argument, but any high school teacher will tell you how suspect conclusions drawn from such statistics can be.) He then presents a sustained anecdote about a successful all-year-round secondary school in a poor neighborhood. His

conclusion? We should go to school year round.

Sounds reasonable, right? But what about a more obvious solution: as a society we could decide to work together so that summer can be a learning experience for the poor by instituting a myriad of basketball camps, music camps, art camps, chess camps, traditional summer camps, etc., held at schools, community centers, and city parks, and staffed by college students, artists and teachers from the neighborhood.

Gladwell often reminds me of the last panel of a Dilbert cartoon: two panels of plain-speaking criticism, followed by one panel of resignation. And no real insight, no real hope for the future.

Trevor

I know, you don't think you have the time and there are other and more important books to read at the moment, but be warned, you do need to read this book.

There are a number of ways I can tell a book will be good; one of those ways is if Graham has recommended it to me (how am I going to cope without our lunches together, mate?). And there is basically one way for me to I know that I've really enjoyed a book, and that is if I keep telling people about it over and over again. Well, not since

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(also recommended to me by Graham) have I gone on and on about a book to people. First to Ruth over lunch, then to mum on the phone, and then the kids after they had just gotten out of bed in the early hours of the afternoon "my poor children, I've told them virtually the entire book.

Now it is your turn.

As a culture we tend to believe that people who are successful (people like Mozart, Bill Gates, The Beatles) all are "self-made-men" and have risen to the summit of achievement on the basis of some incredibly special power they have and that we do not. It is a comforting thought, in some

ways. If we have not done as well we are hardly to blame, because we just didn't have that certain something. We don't have the thing that sets them people apart from the crowd. And in this cult of celebrity we even get a chance to live vicariously in the reflection of their glory. Perhaps we can never all be Lady Di, (at least, not in public) but we can all attempt suicide with a pate knife and get into colonic irrigation. John Safran talks somewhere about a guy he knows saying to him that the only reason John made it and he didn't was because John was Jewish. John then talks about how much hard work he had to put in to becoming successful, none of which relied on the mythical leg up he would have gotten from some secret Jewish conspiracy.

This book isn't about Lady Di, but it is about a series of biographies of people who have become incredibly successful. The biographies are generally told twice. The first time in a way that confirms all our prejudices about self made men and then in a way that makes sense of the success in ways we may find much more uncomfortable. I really struggled with this book " I loved every minute of it, but I still felt remarkably challenged by it. It was very hard not to think of my own life while reading this book. And this did not make me feel comfortable.

I guess we are all fairly predictable, and one of the things that makes us especially predictable is that we generally like to have our prejudices confirmed. We buy books that tell us over and over again what we already know and believe. The Left Behind series is just one such example, as are most self help books. And I'm as guilty of this as anyone else. But there is a much better sensation we can get from a book, although this is much more rare. It is when the person you are reading starts telling you the deeper reasons why your beliefs are valid and not just based on prejudice. I have always believed talent is another (although, less apparent and all too vague) word for hard work. I've also believed that we are products of a range of different variables too complex to know in any real detail. This book confirms those prejudices.

First he talks about ice hockey and a fascinating fact about the birthdays of the best players. They are all born at around the same time of the year. It is as if there is a cut off date for when you will be a professional ice hockey player " and, in fact, there is. The short version is that if you are born on the wrong side of the date they use to group kids into age levels you are likely to be a year younger than the other kids you are playing ice hockey with and therefore a year smaller than them too. That is going to make them look like they are better players than you are " and they will be too. A year at 10 is a huge difference, a huge advantage. And then we compound that advantage, by giving the older kids more practice, more experience in games and then more experience and more practice until there is no way the kid who happened to be born on the wrong side of the cut off date has any chance of catching up.

Allie

Didn't exactly read this book - Joe and I listened to it in the car on the way home from visiting family for Christmas. I really enjoyed it, and was very fascinated by certain parts of it, especially the sections about the Beatles, computer programmers and Korean co-pilots.

But my enjoyment of the book was marred by the glaring absence of any well-known female "outliers." By chapter four or so, I noticed it and mentioned it to Joe, and then it just kept getting worse to the point that it was comi

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But my enjoyment of the book was marred by the glaring absence of any well-known female "outliers." By chapter four or so, I noticed it and mentioned it to Joe, and then it just kept getting worse to the point that it was comical and distracting. Man after man after high-achieving man was featured. Any time a woman was mentioned, it seemed she was a wife or mother helping to boost a high achiever to success - or, in one case toward the end of the book, a somewhat slow female math student that a male professor had videotaped trying to figure out a math problem. By the time we got to that vignette, it was so ridiculous that Joe and I both started laughing, and Joe joked that "the only woman in the book is dumb - but persistent."

When we got home, I Googled "Gladwell Outliers sexist" or something like that and found that several female bloggers and columnists also were ticked off about it and had taken Gladwell to task for it. Gladwell doesn't strike me as a raging sexist, so my guess is that he is so used to being a male in this world and constantly hearing about and identifying with male high achievers that maybe he didn't even realize what he was doing. I noticed that he gave a pretty weak response when questioned in an interview about his omission of women - he claimed that he had not omitted women because he mentioned his grandmother's story at the end of the book, in the epilogue, I think. Um, okay.

Steve

Occasionally insightful, but Gladwell's science is pretty junky. His reasons for success change by the page. And he cherry-picks examples to exactly fit the scheme under consideration. Plus, he's obsessed with callbacks and summary statements that only showcase the faulty connections between ideas.