

SOUNDVIEW Featured Book Review

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How to Rise Above and Beyond the Norm

Review by Chris Lauer

OUTLIERS The Story of Success

by Malcolm Gladwell

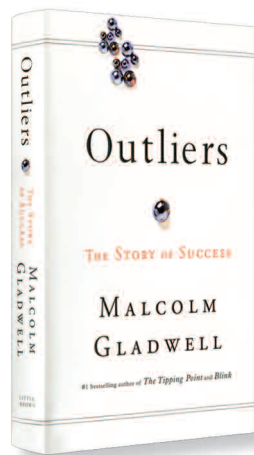
© 2008, Little, Brown & Co., 309 pages, \$27.99,
ISBN 978-0-316-01792-3

Imagine a gifted storyteller who has the ability to succinctly sum up the lessons he has learned as a groundbreaking journalist and turn those lessons into stories that transform his readers into devoted fans. First he hones his craft by writing dozens of newspaper columns, then he expands his range into magazine stories. Next, he widens his scope again by writing books that capture all of the reporting skills he has gained over a journalistic career built while working for some of the most respected publications on the planet. Over that time, he has been accumulating the thousands of practice hours needed to make him one of the most exciting and celebrated writers of our time. He has cultivated his career to the point where he finds himself head and shoulders above his peers. This outlier — a man whose experiences and accomplishments have elevated him to the top of his profession — is Malcolm Gladwell.

After many years as a venerated reporter for *The Washington Post* and *The New Yorker*, Gladwell has spent the last few years at the top of many lists of best-selling book authors. He has earned his fame by telling stories that captivate his readers and help them make sense of the tangled complexities of life. With his clever wit guiding the journey, Gladwell ventures into the hidden realms of our civilization. Along the way, he untangles

our ignorance and delicately exposes the access points that allow us entry into the world of intelligent information gathering and exploration. The path he clears leads to intellectual breakthroughs of the most surprising kind.

After the success of Gladwell's first two international bestsellers, *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*, *Outliers* completes his triumvirate of classic yet timely books that help us get to know ourselves better and understand how the world works. Gladwell's rational, guiding voice draws readers through each of his three books. A master writer executing his craft, Gladwell gives his readers a plethora of fresh ideas to carry around with them for the rest of their lives. After reading his books, readers find themselves comparing all of their experiences that follow to the vast concepts and minute details brought to life throughout these marvelous tales.



No One Gets There Alone

One of the magnificent revelations that emerges frequently throughout *Outliers* is the premise that no outlier reaches a pinnacle of success without the help of his or her own legacy. For example, Bill Gates might be a genius, but it was the fact that he was given access to one of the first modern computer systems at an early age that gave him the edge he needed to rise above the norm and become the billionaire entrepreneur he is today. Likewise, The Beatles might have been astounding musicians, but they achieved their record-breaking success with their long stints in Hamburg, Germany, as a young band performing every night for eight hours, for months on end.

One of the premises Gladwell pursues throughout *Outliers* is the commonality of successful people and

organizations. Although he often veers into other connected revelations made by some of the most cutting-edge researchers of our day, Gladwell proposes the theory that successful people, such as The Beatles, Bill Gates and dozens of others have each practiced at least 10,000 hours at their craft before becoming the successes we recognize today. The Beatles weren't simply genius musicians who took the world by surprise with their innate ability to perform and write songs in a vacuum, Gladwell points out. Instead, they succeeded because they practiced endlessly in Hamburg's breakneck performance culture, which allowed them to play so often and accumulate so much experience that, by the time they entered the mainstream, they were seasoned performers who were able to rise above the competition and become the success we recognize today.

Thousands of Hours of Practice

Similarly, Gladwell explains, while Bill Gates was a privileged son of wealthy parents who was given all the benefits of a top education and exceptional upbringing, these advantages alone were not enough to make him one of the world's wealthiest men. Gates' family life was only part of the puzzle. Gladwell points out that several other factors must be explored to understand who Bill Gates is today. One of those factors was the purchase of a time-sharing computer terminal by the "Mothers' Club" at his school that allowed him to turn his interest in computers into a way of life during his most formative years. The thousands and thousands of hours he spent at the new computer terminal in his elite Seattle junior high school's computer club helped to prepare him for the changing world that he would be entering after high school and college. Gladwell's revelation is that Gates' experience writing code during his early years, plus his natural skills and ability to take advantage of the opportunities that came his way, added up to the man we now recognize as one of the most successful people of our era. Going even deeper into Gates' legacy, Gladwell also describes the importance of the place and time of Gates' birth, which turned out to be crucial in that he was able to drop out of Harvard after his sophomore year to start Microsoft.

Explanations like these, fleshed out in highly researched detail, are the hallmark of Gladwell's work. As a writer, he's clearly fascinated by the

minutiae that lead to the giant revelations that aptly define life and reality well beneath a first glance and initial tagline. Sure, some people at the top of their game can claim that they got to where they are by sheer chutzpa and determination, but the power of cultural legacy cannot be ignored. That's why Gladwell looks deeper into the phenomenon of success to reveal the underlying truths that are often obscure at the outset but that with additional determined study and examination, can be exposed.

Logical Numbers

For example, since Gladwell is searching for the methods by which successful people have achieved their success, one question he asks is, "Why are Asians better at math than their U.S. counterparts?" Some might brush this question off with the terse assertion that Asians simply have higher IQs, and therefore people from China, Japan, Korea and other Asian countries score better on math tests than Americans do. But that answer doesn't go to the real heart of the matter, and Gladwell's inner investigative reporter will not be appeased by such a shallow, if not stereotypical, response. After examining the latest cultural research, he comes to some very provocative answers that might just hit the nail on the head.

For one, Gladwell writes, the Chinese, Japanese and Korean languages have numerical systems that are much more logical than those of English. Since the number-naming systems of Asian languages gave the words for their first 10 numbers much shorter, one-syllable names, such as the Chinese "si" for four and "qi" for seven, the memorization and understanding of their patterns is much easier and faster than is possible with their English equivalents. In addition, Gladwell explains, the Japanese, Chinese and Korean languages have more logic in the ways their words for numbers are formed. For example, in English, we say numbers above 10 as teens, so they start with the number and add "teen," such as "seven-teen." But when we get to the 20s, we say, "twenty-seven." Think about it: Why does the number "seven" move from the beginning of the number in the teen to the end of the number in the 20s? This makes the English numerical system much more complex than the Korean language, for example, that expresses its numbers in a much more rational way. The word for 22 in Korean is equivalent to "two-

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tens-two” and 12 is “ten-two.” This simplicity, Gladwell reasons, helps give Asian students an advantage when it comes to math, and makes mathematical ideas much easier and faster to grasp for Asian students than for those unfortunate English speakers whose numerical system forces them to take longer to calculate numbers simply because of the length and complex construction of those numbers. But, as usual, that is not the end of Gladwell’s reasoning on why Asians score higher on math tests than Americans do.

The other reason why Asians excel at math gets to one of the main points driven home throughout *Outliers*. This is the concept of cultural legacy. Our histories, and those of the great success stories, are driven by the idea that we are more than simply our individualistic selves. Each of us, instead, is the product of all of the people in our family and life who have contributed to our history and environment. The cultural legacies of the Asian nations, Gladwell asserts, have a commonality that contributes to the high math scores of their students, but these legacies have largely gone unnoticed by researchers. One cultural legacy, according to Gladwell and some of the world’s top anthropologists, is the rice paddy.

Mathematics and Rice Paddies

How does a culture that revolves around the cultivation of rice lead to higher math test scores? Although at first glance this assertion might seem somewhat preposterous, Gladwell once again digs deeper into the issue with insight based on the latest facts about cultural identity and cultural norms. Part of that connection is built on the fact that rice paddies are farmed year round. Because land can be scarce in Japan and China, many farmers must grow their crops on tiny plots of land that require constant attention and work. This labor-intensive crop forces its farmers to work long hours every day to ensure a successful yield and to keep hunger and poverty at bay. Gladwell explains that rice farmers have to work harder “than almost any other kind of farmer.” Thanks to complex irrigation systems and cultivation needs, a successful rice farm requires 10 to 20 times more labor than a similarly sized corn or wheat field does.

So where do Asians’ high math scores come in? Gladwell explains that the culture of people who must work 3,000 hours a year on a farm has helped to create individuals who naturally value the hard work it takes to master and complete complex tasks. This has led to the

creation of students who spend more time on math problems than everyone else does.

Working harder than his peers was one way that Bill Gates rose above them to become a successful entrepreneur. It is also how The Beatles’ long stints as a house band in Hamburg clubs gave them a distinct advantage over other bands at the time. Therefore, Gladwell concludes, it makes perfect sense that people from cultures that value the hard work it takes to cultivate rice would spend more time on math problems than those from other cultures would. And since the number systems of these cultures makes doing math somewhat easier than the number systems of English-speaking cultures, Gladwell writes, the students from these cultures naturally excel at mathematics, in part because of their common cultural legacy of rice farming.

Hard Facts From Modern Research

Asking hard questions about success and then answering them with hard facts from modern research is only part of the beauty of Gladwell’s writing strategy. In addition to his skills as a weaver of pertinent stories that make complex ideas more approachable, Gladwell has an inviting style that puts him as the narrator in the shoes of his readers while he guides them to the crux of his theories. One element that he uses time and again throughout *Outliers* is the conveyance of a backstory that he immediately discredits as only a partial and sometimes misleading truth. For example, when he tells the tale of his own legacy, he starts with a cursory depiction of his grandmother’s life in a tiny village in Jamaica, and eventually leads to the birth of his mother. This brief story then leads to his mother’s education, and then to her courtship and marriage to Gladwell’s father.

Next, Gladwell calls into question the very ideas that he has just presented: He calls that story of his grandmother’s path to success a *lie*. By pointing out the missing pieces of his grandmother’s story, he makes the profound point that no simple tale of a person’s rise to success can be complete without an inspection of that person’s cultural legacy. Then he tells the extended version of the same story of his grandmother, but this time he adds many vital bits of Jamaican history to illustrate the complexity that completes the idealized picture of the story that he has just labeled as false. The added depth that comes with his inclusion of facts about Jamaica’s history in the slave trade, the country’s educational system, an influential South African historian who helped

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reform that educational system, how his grandmother benefited from those reforms, and many other details makes the story come alive with greater clarity than his first draft. This is how he helps readers get past the overly simplistic assumptions that are made when those types of important historical elements are either glossed over or ignored by a less-detailed story.

Deeper Depths of Truth

By telling several incomplete stories and then retelling them with additional historical facts and cultural references, Gladwell puts into perspective the underlying message found in *Outliers*. The message is that simple stories cannot answer the greater questions we have about success and the ways we can achieve it. A simple story helps us get a taste of the underlying answer to the question, but it does not satisfy our deeper need to gain more clarity about reality and the depths of truth that help us make sense of the most important and complex questions we have about life.

The cultural legacies of the people Gladwell profiles in *Outliers* are not only fascinating, but are also necessary for creating a stronger foundation on which to build the real story of success. The outliers in his book — those people who lie outside of the norm thanks to their amazing successes — are the results of many factors, including the dates they were born, the cultural legacies of the places in which they grew up, the family members who mentored them, the opportunities they took and even the luck they had along the way.

In other words, not one of them became a success all

by himself or herself. Each outlier had benefits of long storylines that led up to the individuals they became and their accomplishments in their fields. Opportunity, history, advantages, community and legacy are all at the root of the real story of success Gladwell tells in *Outliers*.

Beyond Bootstraps

While the many lessons that Gladwell reveals in

Outliers help to answer numerous questions about success in the fields of hockey, airlines, music, entrepreneurship, business, law and education, among others, the most important message that resonates throughout the book is that resourcefulness, hard work and an ability to make the most of our advantages and legacies are the keys to success.

By relating the story of his own family, and those of a wide variety of others who either found success or failed in its pursuit, Gladwell demonstrates that the answers to questions about the origin of success are more complex than a few brief stories about people pulling themselves up by the bootstraps. And best of all, the reality that his reporting and journalistic skills reveals is one that helps us see that success is much more possible than we might have imagined if we were left with only an incomplete, cursory story. Instead, the secrets of success can

only be found when we make a much more complete examination of ourselves and the world in which we live. *Outliers* provides a perfect example of how we can begin to re-examine all that we know to bring that elusive success within our reach. ●

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The author: Malcolm Gladwell has been a staff writer with *The New Yorker* magazine since 1996. His 1999 profile of Ron Popeil won a National Magazine Award, and in 2005 he was named one of *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People. In addition to *Outliers: The Story of Success*, he is the author of two books, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference* (2000) and *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005), both of which were No. 1 *New York Times* bestsellers.

From 1987 to 1996, Gladwell was a reporter with *The Washington Post*, where he covered business, science, and then served as the newspaper's New York City bureau chief. He graduated from the University of Toronto, Trinity College, with a degree in history. He was born in England, grew up in rural Ontario and now lives in New York City.

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Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries (ISSN 0747-2196), P.O. Box 1053, Concordville, PA 19331 USA, a division of Concentrated Knowledge Corp. Published monthly. Subscriptions: \$209 per year in the United States, Canada and Mexico, and \$295 to all other countries. Periodicals postage paid at Concordville, Pa., and additional offices.

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