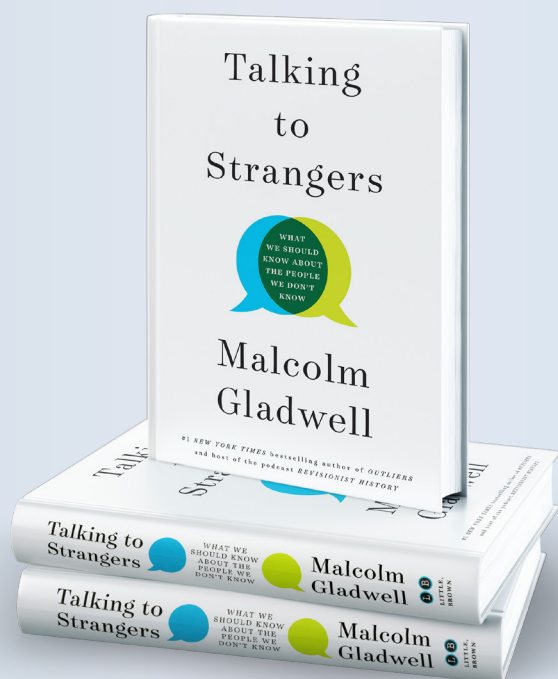


# BOOK SNAPS™

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## Talking to Strangers

**What We Should Know about the People We Don't Know** by Malcolm Gladwell

Malcolm Gladwell is the author of five *New York Times* bestsellers—*The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, *Outliers*, *What the Dog Saw*, and *David and Goliath*. He is also the co-founder of Pushkin Industries, an audio content company that produces the podcasts Revisionist History, which reconsiders things both overlooked and misunderstood, and Broken Record, where he, Rick Rubin, and Bruce Headlam interview musicians across a wide range of genres. Gladwell has been included in the TIME 100 Most Influential People list and touted as one of *Foreign Policy's* Top Global Thinkers. [www.gladwellbooks.com](http://www.gladwellbooks.com)

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## Why Snap Judgments About Strangers are Often Wrong

Billed as a “classic Gladwellian intellectual adventure,” Malcolm Gladwell’s sixth book begins with a benign reminiscence of his father having a delightful conversation with a stranger in the lobby of the Mercer Hotel in New York City. The recollection that their conversation was constantly interrupted by people “coming up to him to take pictures and have him sign little bits of paper,” suggests a celebrity encounter of which Gladwell’s father was blissfully unaware.

The gentle nature of this opening story stands in stark contrast to the introduction: *Step Out of the Car!* That is revisited in the final chapter of the book and is attributed with igniting the author’s interest in why we are so inept at talking to people we don’t know.

### Sandra Bland

The traffic stop that took place on the perimeter of the Prairie View A&M University campus in July 2015 should have been routine. The fact that it resulted in Sandra Bland’s arrest and subsequent suicide in her cell three days later escalated the case to prominence (propelled by a viral dashcam video of the interaction) amid a national debate about aggressive and allegedly racist police practices. Gladwell is very clear in his pronouncement that this “traffic stop gone awry,” resonated with him more than any other police case.

The media response to the case was disappointingly familiar, with one side focusing on the larger racism issue, and the other examining the lives and personalities of both parties in microscopic detail. The greater concern for the author was that, in short order, the novelty of the case would dissipate to be replaced by a new story and people would move on to other things. Gladwell’s position was more intransigent: “I don’t want to move on to other things.”

His response is to take the reader on a journey through history, psychology, and even some pop culture, using a diverse mix of scandals and other media events to make the larger point that because we don’t know how to talk to strangers, we often set ourselves up for misunderstanding and conflict. The term ‘stranger’





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is never defined, as the author chooses instead to embrace an array of options, including someone we've never met, someone we've only talked to a couple of times, someone we may think we know pretty well, and someone we know only by reputation.

The author exemplifies the potential damage of such conflict between strangers through such cases as the conquistador Hernán Cortés meeting Montezuma II in Mexico in 1519, and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain meeting Adolf Hitler on the precipice of the Second World War. For Montezuma, cultural and language challenges led to his untimely death and the launch of an era of “catastrophic colonial expansion.” For Chamberlain, the misunderstanding lay in the ease with which he was manipulated by Hitler. Politicians had witnessed Hitler's ascension on the strength of extremist Nazi rhetoric, but they remained eager to believe that he could be appeased because they were desperate to avoid another war. Chamberlain, relatively new in his role, was equally eager to believe Hitler's affirmations that he had no territorial ambitions beyond Germany's immediate borders. As such, he was primed to fall for Hitler's displays of sincerity and respect, including “the double handshake that he reserves for specially friendly demonstrations.”

### Defaulting to Truth

Should Montezuma and Chamberlain simply be dismissed as naïve or gullible? Or is there something more substantive here that needs further examination? Gladwell clearly believes the latter, and his search for answers in this treatise begins with the work of a psychologist named Tim Levine whose work focuses on why we are so often deceived by strangers. The author guides us through a series of Levine's experiments in which college students are tempted by a proctor (on Levine's team) to grasp the opportunity to cheat on a test without fear of being caught. The resulting analysis affirms the universal human truth that people are more likely to assume that people are telling the truth—Levine's *truth-default theory*.

Using Levine's research as a framework, the author moves on to examine three specific cases: Bernie Madoff, the investor responsible for the largest Ponzi scheme in history; Jerry Sandusky, the Penn State football coach convicted of sexual abuse, and Ana Montes, an apparently dedicated analyst at the United States Defense Agency who was discovered to be a spy for Cuba. Here again, the emphasis is not so much on strangers but on the ease with which miscommunication can be leveraged by those with a nefarious intent, prompting the default to truth response.

For the sexual abuse for which Sandusky was ultimately imprisoned, the fact that such conduct could go unpunished for so many years in the face of numerous doubts and suspicions

about his conduct is indicative of just how powerful this default to truth can be. One area worthy of further examination would be just how many doubts are needed to overcome that default. For Ana Montes, her nickname of the “Queen of Cuba” within the intelligence community, was indicative of the high regard with which she was held. A rising star with impeccable credentials and an impressive track record, Montes had the perfect reputation for a default to truth. Any rumors or doubts were quickly discounted or dismissed outright without further investigation. Even in the face of irrefutable evidence, her superiors gave her the benefit of the doubt and five more years to spy for Cuba before her true role was finally revealed.

The author's approach to the Madoff case is unusual in that he chooses to focus not on the perpetrator but on Harry Markopolos, the independent fraud investigator who first raised concerns about Madoff with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Others had raised their suspicions about Madoff before, but in each case, while Madoff may have seemed strange or suspicious, no one entertained the possibility that his entire operation had been a scam from day one. They might not have believed that his stock-picking skills were based on an infallible “gut feel,” but the alternative was so unbelievable that they settled for the answer given to them. By *defaulting to truth*, they were placing their faith in the system to catch crooks or in their own abilities to sniff out those crooks. They were wrong on both counts.

Markopolos did not default to truth. He had arrived at the same conclusions that Madoff's consistent performance year after year didn't add up. Where he differed was that he was willing to consider the possibility that Madoff's entire operation was a scam. He didn't trust the system to expose Madoff, so he took it upon himself to do an extensive search on his own. His error, from the author's perspective, was his choice to present his findings to the SEC anonymously in a very cloak-and-dagger fashion, convinced that the revelations would anger high-powered financiers who could be expected to respond very forcefully. Gladwell's portrait of Markopolos sitting at home with a loaded 12-gauge shotgun, extra rounds, and a gas mask in anticipation of a raid by assassins “while the rest of us went calmly about our business,” underscores a proposed trade-off that those who decline to default to truth may face.

### Transparency

Gladwell challenges the notion that our faces are the billboards for our hearts by examining the deeply intuitive idea of transparency first proposed by Charles Darwin. He begins by exploring why bail judges prefer to look at the people they are judging rather than processing decisions by email or even snail



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mail. What is it they looking for? Do they really believe they can get a sense of the defendant by looking him or her straight in the eye? How well did that work for Chamberlain?

The author then takes a surprising detour from history and psychology by presenting the argument that the characters on the television show *Friends* expressed their emotions so transparently in their facial expressions that it allowed viewers to transcend even the most convoluted plot points. His conviction on this point is evident in the analysis of one specific episode—episode fifteen of season five, titled “The One with the Girl Who Hits Joey”—which he concludes to be so transparent that “you can probably follow along even if you turn off the sound.”

Using the Amanda Knox case—the American student studying in Perugia, Italy who was accused of murdering her roommate—Gladwell examines the darker side of transparency. In this instance, Knox’s facial expressions, dismissed by her defense team as “youthful American goofiness,” were interpreted as evidence of guilt. As an innocent person judged to be acting guilty, she spent almost four years in custody after being *mis-matched*.

### Coupling

The retelling of the story of poet Sylvia Plath succumbing to her depression by turning on her gas oven and deliberately suffocating herself to death is a jarring read. The connection to strangers, the author goes on to explain, is the notion that the availability of the highly toxic “town gas” in London at the time, coupled or connected gas as a popular means of suicide. When British Gas later replaced the supply with cleaner and safer natural gas, suicide rates plummeted.

The broader point is well made. The “context in which the stranger is operating,” has a direct impact on our response. In other words, what is said can be as important as where and how it is said. Video evidence of Amanda Knox’s “goofiness” were presented out of context as damning evidence of her alleged heartlessness in killing her roommate without remorse. Bernie Madoff’s reclusive offices on the upper floors of the Lipstick Building in Midtown Manhattan, along with his “imperious manner,” gave him an aura of exclusivity that investors were only too willing to believe. Even as returns performed in direct contradiction to the broader markets, they were willing to suppress their natural skepticism and stick with him.

### Sandra Bland Revisited

After documenting Bland’s interaction with police officer Brian Encinia as the opening for this book, Gladwell returns to the case and examines Encinia’s actions through the prism

of his police training—the so-called Kansas City approach to policing. This approach trains police officers to “suspect the worst of every car.” As such, they are actively suppressing any sense of defaulting to truth in believing that the people being stopped are guilty of nothing more than the traffic violation that prompted the stop in the first place. The disconnect, the author argues, is that the training should be situationally specific. If you’re policing in a known high-crime area or war zone, that approach may be appropriate for both officer and public safety. A traffic stop on the perimeter of a rural Texas university campus does not qualify as a war zone. Officer Encinia, by the author’s analysis, embraced the training to the point of indoctrination and was unable to make the distinction between a war zone and a rural campus. In this context, he was as primed to mis-read Sandra Bland’s responses as Neville Chamberlain was to take Hitler’s act on face value.

Gladwell concludes by acknowledging that his response to the Bland case has led him to a conundrum. Not talking to strangers is clearly not an option, but not communicating effectively with those strangers is fraught with real dangers. Whether it’s overzealous police officers, defaulting to truth, or mis-matching facial expressions, it’s clear that we’re not as good at this as we think we are. However, Gladwell argues, what we should not do when things go awry is automatically blame the stranger. “To assume the best of another is the trait that has created modern society,” he writes. “Those occasions when our trusting nature is violated are tragic. But the alternative—to abandon trust as a defense against predation and deception—is worse.”

Gladwell makes no apologies for his approach to this topic. The Sandra Bland case clearly struck a nerve and set him on a journey to investigate the broader issues at work in these types of exchanges—to “understand what really happened.” His ability to tackle large subjects and generate a few buzzwords in the process is already well-established as the terms tipping point and the quasi-metric 10,000-hour rule have joined the modern lexicon. Default to truth may rise from this work, but that term rightfully belongs to Tim Levine. The individual cases benefit from his traditional attention to detail and novelist pacing, but the meandering approach and lack of an overarching thesis may prove unpalatable for those readers who do not consider themselves true Gladwellian acolytes.