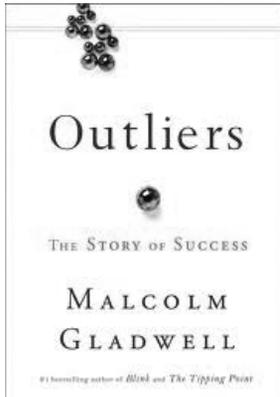


BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

Outliers: The Story of Success

Malcolm Gladwell

New York, Little Brown and Company, 2008, 309 pp. (including acknowledgments and index), \$16.97, hardcover.



In *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell, staff writer for the *New Yorker* and author of bestsellers *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*, offers a series of interesting, engaging narratives to illustrate how opportunity and legacy intertwine to culminate in success.

This book is intended for the general public, yet is directly applicable to those in academia and medicine.

Gladwell defines an “outlier” as something statistically significantly removed from the main sample. Using an engaging storytelling style interwoven with appropriate evidence, he builds the case that outliers are the products of demographics, hours of practice, and culture. The book is a pleasurable read, logically split into two sections: Opportunity and Legacy. The reader is taken through account after account demonstrating that a person’s demographic data alone may enable that person to have opportunities others will never have. For example, elite Canadian hockey players born in the earlier months of the year have a substantial advantage over players born in the later months. Simply by being born just after the January 1 cutoff date, a boy will likely be more physically mature, receive better coaching, and be chosen to play more, leading to more practice and mastery. Similarly, Jewish lawyers fresh out of school in 1940s New York City had the “opportunity” of having to take any job offered, such as hostile corporate takeovers, which no one else wanted. When, in the 1970s, corporate takeovers became mainstream, those Jewish lawyers had put in their

10,000 hours and were poised as masters in this legal arena.

The Beatles and Bill Gates are prime examples of the success attributable to the 10,000 hour rule: the concept that in order to become a master, one must practice 10,000 hours. Yet, it’s not just about hard work—luck of geography plays a role. Bill Gates attended a school with a computer club at a time no other schools did. The Beatles worked summers in Hamburg, Germany performing nightly 8-hour sets, honing their skills as entertainers.

Another component of success is cultural legacy, the attitudes and values of our predecessors passed on through generations. Gladwell argues that it is the practical intelligence and social savvy learned within families that correlate more directly to success within our society than with IQ points (after a certain IQ threshold).

Gladwell describes how copilots from high power-distance cultures are unable to effectively communicate certain danger with their pilots or air traffic controllers. In these cultures, the listener must interpret what is being communicated, rather than the emphasis being on the speaker to communicate their message. Chronicles of immigrants to New York City and of Chinese rice farmers demonstrate that the culture of meaningful work is passed on through generations. The three components of meaningful work are autonomy, complexity, and a connection between effort and reward. Jewish immigrants to New York City inherited the skills their families cultivated working as traders in cities and passed on this culture of meaningful work. Their family trees are laden with second generation physicians and lawyers. The children of Chinese rice farmers learned that hard work, problem solving, and concentration meant a successful rice crop, translating well into success in the field of mathematics. Having found one’s own meaningful work is what allows a person to dedicate oneself, putting in the 10,000 hours of practice needed for mastery. The author concludes with a description of his own family legacy.

The potentially serious implications of the book for family medicine educators engage the reader throughout. Gladwell's definition of success as mastery of a topic or skill raises many questions: What is my own definition of success? What are the implications of the 10,000 hour rule on one's training to become a family physician in light of decreased residency training and mastery of the approach of the family physician? How many hours have we logged toward the skills necessary to an academician, writing and teaching? What are the implications of this book on pipeline programs encouraging underrepresented ethnicities toward health careers with respect to giving

opportunities for beginning their 10,000 hours and confronting unhelpful attitudes? How can this knowledge be used in teaching about social determinants and in patient education and empowerment?

This thought-provoking book is relevant to anyone wishing to master any field or skill or hoping to teach someone else how to do so and worth the investment. With the inquisitive nature of a family physician, it is hard to pass this book by.

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From the New "Book and Media Reviews" Editor

Continuing the Conversation

"The Great Conversation" was the most memorable learning experience of my undergraduate years. Over four semesters, we read, philosophized, debated, and even dramatized our way through great books and literature of Western civilization from antiquity to the present. Reading and being challenged by the great writers of our heritage at a formative time in my learning was priceless and helped shape who I am as a thinker, a healer, and a person.

Though books and media continue to evolve, with even "old standard" medical texts adopting tablet-friendly formats and e-books presenting new opportunities to make genuinely multi-media books, the fundamental nature of reading a book remains essentially the same: an opportunity to engage with the author's

thoughts, ideas, techniques, and sources of inspiration. Reading adds depth and breadth to what we do.

Over the past 2 years, I've appreciated working alongside Cathy Morrow, MD, in editing the Book and Media Reviews column. It has been fascinating to see the variety of books that come our way for review, and I've valued the chance to share in bringing reviews of these books to our readers. I want to share my thanks to Cathy for the opportunity to work with this column and for setting a high standard as we go forward.

As physicians and educators, we may not have nearly the time we'd like to read, and picking out the best becomes vital. My hope is to continue sharing in this column reviews from our colleagues of books that can best inform and inspire our teaching of family medicine. This should make for an ongoing "great conversation."

William Cayley, Jr, MD, MDiv

The Book and Media Reviews column presents critical analysis and commentary on recently published books, electronic resources, and other media that are pertinent to the teaching and practice of family medicine. Most reviews are invited.

Publishers who wish to submit books for possible inclusion in *Family Medicine's* Book and Media Reviews section should send texts to Jan Cartwright, Society of Teachers of Family Medicine, 11400 Tomahawk Creek Parkway, Leawood, KS 66211.

Those interested in writing book or media reviews for publication should contact William Cayley, Jr, MD, MDiv, Book and Media Reviews editor, bcayley@yahoo.com.

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