

## *Outliers* Book Review

Luck is the intersection where preparation meets opportunity. This long-lived adage rings true at an intuitive level, possibly because we see it so often demonstrated in our daily experiences. Acknowledged in that wisdom-filled phrase is the need for discipline and good work—in the guise of preparation, but also the importance of chance, happenstance, social capital, and mass ingenuity—as forms of opportunity.

In his recent book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell puts the proof to the old aphorism, convincingly arguing that practice and good fortune are intertwined in webs of relationships, coincidences, antecedents, and cultural/anthropological conditions. As with his other best-selling treatises—“The Tipping Point” and “Blink”—Gladwell’s structure is simple and delectably readable. In 296 pages, broken into nine chapters—with an introduction and an epilogue (as well as a thorough index), the author carries us on a fast-paced journey through several great success stories—from Bill Gates to the Beatles, to mention only two of several such offerings. In each case, talent seems less a factor in the stunning accomplishments of these people than sheer steadfastness and serendipity. (Of late there’s been a rash of books published touching on the topic of talent, including “Superfreakonomics,” Steven Levitt & Stephen Dubner; “Talent Is Overrated,” by Geoff Colvin; and “The Talent Code,” by Dan Coyle.)

With the Beatles, for instance, Gladwell indicates how long the band had been playing together before they ever became “over-night” sensations in the United States, in 1964. “Lennon and McCartney first started playing together in 1957, seven years prior to landing in America,” Gladwell calculates. Further, Gladwell notes, “the time that elapsed between their founding and their... greatest artistic achievements—‘Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band’ and ‘The Beatles’ [White Album]—is roughly ten years.” Gladwell goes on to posit that a decade is required in order to accommodate the “practice time” necessary to achieve 10,000 hours worth of concentrated study, rehearsal, and performance time—whether it’s in music, or the law, or computer engineering. Gladwell further postulates that 10,000 hours is roughly the investment of time mandated of people working to achieve mastery in a complex trade, profession, or art form (Gladwell proves that it even applies to hockey players—with the right birthdays, that is). Indeed, Gladwell has coined this phenomenon as the “10,000 hour rule.”

For the Beatles, the opportunity that provided the cauldron for their craftsmanship and creativity was the “strip clubs” of the early 1960s, in Hamburg, Germany. “Various clubs had this formula,” explains Gladwell (through a quote from Beatle biographer, Philip Norman). “It was a huge nonstop show...bands would play all the time to catch passing traffic.” Often, the Fab Four would be playing music eight hours a day, sometimes seven days a week. The Lads from Liverpool were challenged to improve their game in order to engage and entertain the gregarious and volatile crowds patronizing these 24/7 beer-hall-cum-babe exhibits. Through emotional commitment and physical endurance, the Beatles became what most rock ‘n roll aficionados consider to be the best band in the history of the genre.

But alright, maybe the Beatles are one exceptional example; that doesn’t necessarily prove the point. Really, can it all be summarized in that other all saw, “practice makes perfect”? No, and Gladwell doesn’t ask us to merely take his word for it either. Rather, in a multitude of fascinating tales Gladwell makes his point time and again, and from unexpected angles: Opportunity and dedication, together, are the ingredients of success.

On the final page of *Outliers*, Gladwell writes, “Superstar lawyers and math whizzes and software entrepreneurs appear...to lie outside ordinary experience. But they don’t...Their success...is grounded in a web of advantages and inheritances, some deserved, some not, some earned, some just plain lucky...” Appropriately enough, the subtitle of *Outliers* is “The Story of Success.” Although there are several stories told within Gladwell’s pages, there is one theme, and

that is, as Gladwell puts it, “The outlier, in the end, is not an outlier at all.” Instead, the outlier is the product of opportunities—through family ties, community connections, and/or cultural inspirations — made available and seized by individuals with devotion. Expanded opportunities will result in a higher quantity of so-called outliers being produced. And, of course, the more outliers there are the more opportunities they will create. Now that’s a win-win situation.

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