Outliers

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM GLADWELL

Gladwell grew up in England and Canada, obtaining his bachelor's degree in history at Trinity College. He did not have the grades to get into a graduate program, and instead looked for journalism jobs in the USA. He moved his way up to *The Washington Post* and eventually *The New Yorker*. His first book, *The Tipping Point*, was released to widespread critical acclaim and Gladwell has enjoyed a successful writing career ever since. He has written five books so far, and plans to continue writing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Perhaps Gladwell's biggest concern in this book is the crisis in American public school systems, especially the "achievement gap," which refers to the difference in educational outcomes, such as high-school and college graduation rates, between lower-income students and students from more affluent communities. In *Outliers*, Gladwell suggests that this gap is one among the most dire consequences of our culture's misunderstanding of how success works. He believes a better understanding of success will address many contemporary problems regarding social, racial, and (especially) class inequality.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Gladwell builds off the works of several major 20th-century psychological and sociological researchers, whose research investigates innate ability and cross-cultural dynamics. His aim is to use this research to understand success, talent, and achievement more clearly.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Outliers*
- **When Written:** 2005-2008
- **Where Written:** USA
- **When Published:** 2008
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction
- **Point of View:** Gladwell narrates in first person.

EXTRA CREDIT

Top 100. In 2005, *Time Magazine* named Gladwell one of the 100 most influential people of the year.

PLOT SUMMARY

Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* examines the nature of success using various success stories as case studies. Gladwell begins by exploring what we tend to think about particularly successful people: famous athletes, multi-millionaires, Nobel Prize winners, or titans of business, for example. He notes that we tend to believe in the predominance of "individual merit." We believe people are unusually successful because they are unusually gifted. They possess innate talent, drive, and determination, and they are rewarded with great success.

Gladwell's primary objective in *Outliers* is to show that assumptions like these are often wrong. Gladwell argues that achievement and expertise don't just happen, but rather they result from a combination of various crucial and sometimes seemingly superficial contextual factors. For instance, he points out that athletes born in certain months (after a particular age cut-off date) are older and bigger, receive more attention as kids, and therefore tend to achieve more success in sports. Thus, whether he or she is born in January or July can dramatically impact a young person's chances of going on to play professional hockey in Canada, professional baseball in the US, or soccer in Europe. A similar phenomenon can be observed in schools, where the older kids in the class often test better than younger students. The older students then receive more attention, praise, and opportunity in class as a result, even though their "merit" derived merely from being older (and therefore, "wiser"). Arbitrary factors like these can have a huge effect on the life trajectories of children.

Two other success factors that Gladwell explores are practice time and social skills. Great success requires an enormous amount of practice, a point that Gladwell famously backed up by showing that highly successful people often spent ten thousand hours or more practicing. Even if one is born with some innate talent, without the financial resources, spare time, and support system that make thousands of hours of practice possible, success may still be out of reach. Mozart had innate talent, but he also had been practicing the art of composing a concerto for nine years before he produced his first masterpiece. Gladwell points out that IQ and success have a rather dubious relationship, and notes that becoming a great professor or being published in an academic journal requires a certain amount of social dexterity and negotiating skills, without which even a genius will fail to become successful.

Gladwell's most emphatic point is that our heritage, such as our ethnicity, childhood circumstances, and even the life experiences of our predecessors, can have a huge effect on our potential for success. Cultural traditions, attitudes, and

economic factors from far in the past can persist and present challenges to those who inherit them. To address problems like achievement gaps in American schools, we must acknowledge the reality of "cultural legacies" and provide for students whose communities are less likely to produce "successful" students. When we look at outliers, when we look at success stories, if we look closely enough, we see lives rife with opportunity after opportunity from the start. Gladwell argues that many more success stories could result if the same opportunities could be available to all children, regardless of where and to whom they are born.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Chris Langan – Often called "the smartest man in the world," Chris Langan has an IQ of 195 and has authored many papers on theoretical physics. His work goes unpublished however, and he has never been able to earn a college degree. Gladwell argues that Langan's genius didn't guarantee him success, and that other factors (like his childhood and background) made it difficult for him to achieve his full potential.

Robert Oppenheimer – The leading physicist on the atomic bomb project (part of the Manhattan Project). Oppenheimer earned his PhD and his highly prestigious job in spite of his communist affiliations and (even more strikingly) having once been accused of trying to poison his professor. Gladwell points out that Oppenheimer knew how to navigate the world and make success for himself in a way that Chris Langan did not.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Stewart Wolf – The physician who suggested in the late 1800s that the unusually good health of the people living in the small Pennsylvanian town of Roseto was due to Rosetan community and culture, and not to the physical condition of the townspeople.

Roger Barnesley – A Canadian psychologist who first drew attention to the issue of relative age and its effect on the success of Canadian hockey players.

Bill Joy – The famous computer scientist whose success Gladwell attributes not only to intelligence but also to his good fortune: he happened to go to a school that had a computer system, and he happened to have the opportunity to work on that system for many hours a day.

Bill Gates – The co-founder of Microsoft and one of the world's wealthiest and most successful entrepreneurs and philanthropists, Gates was fortunate enough to work with computers at a very young age.

The Beatles – Perhaps the most popular rock band in history, whose opportunities to practice live shows outstripped almost all other bands of their era, and became a crucial though often overlooked factor in their success.

Joe Flom – A major New York attorney. Gladwell uses Flom's story (he rose to wealth and fame because his timing, background, and opportunities allowed him to) to articulate how and why Jewish law firms had so much success in the late 1900s.

Dr. Terman – A Stanford professor who studied genius and the achievement of a group of specially selected child geniuses, only to find that, despite their high IQs, they did not as a group become particularly successful.

The Termites – The subjects of Dr. Terman's study, a group of highly intelligent children who were tracked in order to study the effects of genius on success.

Mr. and Mrs. Borgenicht – An immigrant couple who came to New York City and became successful in the garment industry.

Suren Ratwatte – A veteran Sri Lankan pilot who Gladwell consults regarding the causes of airplane crashes.

Marita – A young child from a poor family who attends KIPP public school. Gladwell uses Maria's story to illustrate what can be done to provide low-income children with the tools they need to achieve as much success as their wealthier peers.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Malcolm Gladwell's primary objective in *Outliers* is to examine achievement and failure as cultural phenomena in order to determine the factors that typically foster success. His main argument—that success results from a complicated mix of factors, requires taking a closer look at why certain people, and even entire groups of people, thrive while others fail.

Gladwell builds his argument on close examinations of typical "success stories," in which a "self-made" man or woman overcomes great odds and succeeds based purely on talent and "merit." Athletics, business, and academics are fields where people often achieve success seemingly as a result of individual merit. Athletic professionals are prodigies or all-stars, wealthy businessmen are preternaturally savvy and motivated, successful academics are "geniuses." Gladwell's book demonstrates how these perceptions of success are misguided or inaccurate—there is more to any person's success story than his or her individual talent (see "Talent, Opportunity, Work, and

Luck" below).

The other side of this coin is the cultural discourse surrounding failure—just as we have internalized certain narratives of success, we tell ourselves similar stories about failure. Malcolm's argument examines the many ways in which we rationalize or understand failure, and often employs anecdotal evidence and statistical analysis to debunk commonly held beliefs about failure. For instance, many athletes fail not because they aren't innately skilled enough but because of other seemingly random factors, including even their date of birth. Similar often overlooked factors determine success or failure in every profession.

Gladwell's overarching message in *Outliers* is one of empowerment. By debunking commonly held misconceptions about why people actually succeed and fail, Gladwell reveals to his readers the real "secret" to success: an impossible-to-bottle mixture of timing, luck, cultural heritage, and thousands of hours of practice.

TALENT, OPPORTUNITY, WORK, AND LUCK

Gladwell is keenly interested in investigating the complex and often misunderstood relationships among individual talent, hard work, opportunity, and luck in creating "outliers," like star athletes, highly successful entrepreneurs, and famous academics. Gladwell endeavors to show that individual talent is necessary *but not sufficient* to achieve success. The surrounding context of available opportunity is also crucial. For example, Bill Gates would never have been so successful without his unusually frequent exposure to computing technology in an era where computers were still rare. Mozart had tremendous innate talent, but just as important a contributor to his success was the opportunity and time he had to practice composing music for thousands of hours, making him more successful than others who, for a variety of reasons, did not have such time. These outliers were not only talented and willing to work hard—they were *able* to.

Luck also plays a crucial role in success. Gladwell opens *Outliers* by demonstrating that a young Canadian boy's birth month, of all things, can have a tremendous impact on his likelihood of success in hockey. A fourth grader's ability to test well is determined in large part by his or her birth month, due solely to age cut-off dates for certain school years, and not as a result of any individual traits like talent, intelligence, or study habits. Gladwell uses fact-based evidence like this to prove that seemingly random factors like date of birth can be integral to success. His systematic and carefully researched findings show that great success results not from any single factor, such an individual "gift" for sports or music, but from a confluence of many factors, most notably hard work, opportunity, and luck. The pervasive societal narrative about success resulting from being "gifted" is a misconception, and "pure talent" is a myth.

TIMING AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Outliers is deeply concerned with the role of historical context and timing in determining success. Having a set of skills that one develops through hard work is not enough to guarantee success. In addition, one must also live in a time when those skills are valued by your culture. Your historical moment might also prevent you from acquiring certain skills. For example, Gladwell argues that if you entered the workforce as a computer scientist (say, at IBM) before the era of personal computers, when the personal computer did finally become mainstream, you would be too invested in the "old" way of doing things. You would be inevitably stuck in a historical status quo, and you would never attain the level of success of someone like Steve Jobs or Bill Gates, both of whom benefitted greatly from the timing of their involvement in the personal computer and software revolution. Gladwell uses statistical analysis to support his argument that timing plays a key role in determining success by examining the average age of Silicon Valley titans like Gates and Jobs: he finds that many of the most successful entrepreneurs of the computer age were born in or around 1955, placing them at the right time (and at the right age) to ride the wave of the personal computer revolution. Gates and Jobs are extreme examples of outliers, of course, but Gladwell "pans out," so to speak, to show that almost any major success story can trace its roots to the societal context in which it occurred.

PRIVILEGE, HERITAGE, AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

One of the most complex and subtle thematic elements of Gladwell's argument concerns the idea of privilege, and the crucial role that cultural heritage plays in determining success. Cultural heritage can be an advantage or a disadvantage, and sometimes it can be both at once. For example, the rise of Jewish-run law-firms in New York City in the early 20th century had much to do with the fact that Jews were discriminated against, and forced to form their own (often litigation-oriented) firms. This ended up giving Jewish firms a major advantage when corporate takeovers became common practice later in the 20th century. The tremendous success of many of New York's most legendary lawyers stemmed from the disadvantage that religious discrimination had formerly imposed on them: a disadvantage became a huge advantage over time. Gladwell expands on this point throughout the book, examining ways that our cultural heritage can influence our attitudes towards race, religion, honor, work (and what constitutes "meaningful" work), money, and entitlement. Cultural forces even generations removed can determine

success as much as timing, talent, hard work, and luck.

SOLUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Throughout *Outliers*, in addition to exploring the factors that determine success, Gladwell demonstrates how an improved understanding of success could have a dramatic impact on some of the most crucial facets of contemporary society, such as business, athletics, economics and education. Gladwell attributes several major societal problems, such as low graduation rates in inner-city schools, to a failure to understand success. For example, Gladwell posits that educational outcomes in inner city schools could be improved by adjusting age cut-offs or shortening summer vacation, two overlooked factors that have been shown in research-based studies to significantly impact student outcomes. Throughout *Outliers*, Gladwell seeks not only to inform, but also to suggest specific evidence-based solutions to real 21st-century problems. He also invites the reader to apply his or her newfound understanding of success to think constructively about how we can all contribute to a better society by focusing on the success factors that matter most, such as opportunity and hard work, rather than perpetuating the myth of "talent" above all.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE TALLEST TREE

Outliers argues that success results from a vast combination of factors, not merely from luck or innate talent. When we see the tallest tree in a forest, we know that it has come from a good seed. But we must also take into account that it has been planted in good soil, and that its leaves have been able to reach the sunlight unimpeded, that it was not shadowed by some larger tree. The tree's good seed is its "innate" ability, but the combination of its *circumstances* have allowed it to achieve great heights. The tall tree is a symbol of how success *really* works.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Back Bay Books edition of *Outliers* published in 2011.

Intro Quotes

They had to look beyond the individual. They had to understand the culture he or she was a part of, who their friends and families were, and what town their families came from.

Related Characters: Stewart Wolf

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In this introduction, Gladwell sketches out the format of his book. He describes a doctor named Stewart Wolf who tried to solve a medical mystery: why the population of a small local town was so healthy. Wolf concluded that no external stimuli (water, nutrition, etc.) could explain the town's health--the answer lay in the town's culture of care and attention to detail. Gladwell hopes that he can apply the same techniques to statistical analysis: just as Wolf looked holistically at his community, Gladwell hopes to analyze the broader, cultural factors that determine things like success, failure, and progress.

Gladwell's basic point is that there are two ways to explain a phenomenon: focusing on individuals and focusing on a group. In our society, we like to focus on individuals: when a person succeeds, we like to believe that they did so thanks to their own hard work and determination. Gladwell (and Wolf) is skeptical of such ways of thinking: he wants to analyze success and failure in broader and more abstract terms.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Personal explanations of success don't work. People don't rise from nothing.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

In this crucial section of the book, Gladwell debunks one of the cornerstones of the way we view the world. Most people, Gladwell admits, like to believe in "personal explanations of success." If a man succeeds in life, we like to believe that he succeeded because of his talent and innate worth. We subscribe to a Romantic notion of "rising from

nothing"--indeed, we'd like to believe that a talented man could ascend to fame and fortune no matter where he's born, where he goes to school, who his parents are, etc.

For Gladwell, our understanding of this hypothetical "successful man" amounts to a fairy tale. The reality is that success has to be understood in a broader context. People don't succeed simply because of their innate talents; they also succeed because of their families' support, their wealth, their proximity to other talented people, etc.--in short, talent is only one small factor that determines success.

> But [a professional hockey player] didn't start out as an outlier. He started out just a little bit better.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell outlines his definition of "accumulative advantage," a convincing explanation for how external factors influence one's innate abilities. Gladwell gives a sporting example: a professional hockey player is a lot better than the average hockey player. But when this hockey player was a kid, he was only slightly better than his peers. The small advantage the hockey player enjoyed over his peers as a young child must have grown into the huge advantage he now enjoys--but how?

Gladwell shows how tiny advantages, noticed at an early age, can grow into large advantages if they're nurtured and supported. If a young boy is good at hockey, he might get extra attention from his coaches and extra support from his parents--as a result, the young boy will grow into a talented high school hockey player, and eventually, a talented professional athlete. His advantages don't arise from nothing--they accumulate over years and years.

> *The talent of essentially half of the Czech athletic population has been squandered.*

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell here gives a surprising example of how accumulative advantage works in practice. On the Czech soccer team, there are almost no players born in the second half of the year (July through December). Gladwell offers his theory for why this is the case. As young boys, Czech citizens are organized onto soccer teams based on the year in which they were born. At the age of 7 or 8, being born in January is a big advantage over being born in December--almost a year makes a marked difference in a young boy's height and strength. So from an early age, the boys born in the first half of the year get a small advantage in sporting events. Instead of "evening out" over the years, such advantages actually accumulate over time--the boys born in the first half of the year get more praise and attention from their coaches, and thus succeed even more.

Gladwell sums up his findings by pointing out that a huge chunk of Czech athletes have been essentially barred from professional athleticism simply because they were born in the wrong months (and therefore never enjoyed the slow accumulation of advantages that their slightly older teammates did). It's unclear what, exactly, Gladwell is proposing in place of the current system of organization (i.e., a system that organizes young people based on the year in which they were born). Nevertheless, it's bizarre and surprising to think that half of an entire population has had such a huge obstacle put in the way of them achieving athletic success.

> We are too much in awe of those who succeed and far too dismissive of those who fail.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell offers an explanation for why governments and administrators haven't tried to correct problems of accumulative advantage in schools and on sports teams. Most human beings sincerely believe in the myths of individual success: we like to think that people prosper because of their innate superiority. In short--"talent rises to the top."

But Gladwell is largely dismissive of such myths of individual excellence. Individual talents can only get you so far: humans *also* need support, leisure time for practicing, and attention from professionals to push themselves along the road to success. Because society's myths of individual greatness are so powerful and pervasive, people don't acknowledge that success is truly a "team effort."

Chapter 2 Quotes

The outliers in a particular field reached their lofty status through a combination of ability, opportunity, and utterly arbitrary advantage.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell disagrees with the notion that "outliers" in any field (those who are particularly good at, say, football, theater, or computer science) succeed because of their talent and their talent alone. Rather, Gladwell argues, these individuals succeed because of a combination of many factors, some of which are "innate" and some of which are "external." Examples of innate factors in an individual's success include talent and determination; examples of external factors include opportunity and luck.

Gladwell acknowledges that it can be disturbing to consider how much of success is determined by sheer luck; intuitively, people *want* to believe that they succeed because of innate factors. But the truth is that people succeed in part because of their own abilities and in part because of changing circumstances over which they exercise no control.

In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

One of the most famous ideas to emerge from Gladwell's book is the principle of 10,000 hours. Gladwell did lots of research into what determines success--i.e., how much of success is just practicing and preparing for the future. After much research, Gladwell concluded that success in almost any field is the result of some 10,000 hours of practice.

Even the most talented people in their field need to practice constantly--indeed, so much practice is required for their success in a field that it's often years and years before even the most talented people achieve anything of note. Even Mozart--the very embodiment of the myth of "innate talent"--didn't compose anything truly masterful until he was 21 years old. Mozart practiced the piano for hours every day, and Gladwell suspects that he must have practiced for around 10,000 hours before he "hit his stride." The important part of this idea is that one has to *have* that much time in order to become truly great--if someone is constantly working just to survive, or taking care of a family member in need, then they won't have 10,000 hours of time to devote to practicing their skill, no matter their innate talent level and drive.

Do you know how extraordinary that is? Most bands today don't perform twelve hundred times in their entire careers. The Hamburg crucible is one of the things that set the Beatles apart.

Related Characters: The Beatles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell cites a little-known fact about the Beatles: during their early years, they traveled to Hamburg, Germany, and played at strip clubs. At the strip clubs, the Beatles were expected to play for surprisingly long amounts of time; often 8 hours without a break. The result is that by the time the Beatles began to achieve great success, they'd already played an astonishing 1200 times before a live audience--far more than most successful bands play in their entire careers.

Gladwell doesn't mean to suggest that the Beatles succeeded simply because they practiced so much more than most bands do. And yet he wants to argue that the Beatles' commitment to practice was an integral part of their success, every bit as important as their talent and imagination. The fact that most people don't know that the Beatles played in Hamburg strip clubs before they "hit it big" reiterates the point that people are more interested in the myths of innate talent than they are in studying the long, frustrating path to success (a path that even the Beatles had to walk).

I don't mean to suggest...that every software tycoon in Silicon Valley was born in 1955...but there are very clearly patterns here, and what's striking is how little we seem to want to acknowledge them.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell points out something surprising: most of the biggest names in personal computers were born within a couple years of each other--including Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. Surely, Gladwell argues, birth year was an important factor in determining Jobs and Gates's success--if they'd been born a couple years too late or too early, they might not have chosen to move to Silicon Valley to invest in computers, and someone else would have risen to fame in the same field. In short, Gladwell argues that external factors like the year in which a person is born play a key role in their success. Gladwell doesn't have a detailed argument about how, exactly Jobs's life would have been different had he grown up a couple years too early (he could he?). Rather, Gladwell notes that mostpeople don't even *realize* that most of the major computer tycoons were born around the same time: people are so obsessed with myths of individual talent that they disregard the importance of sheer luck and external circumstances like the historical timing of one's life.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Terman didn't understand what a real outlier was, and that's a mistake we continue to make to this day.

Related Characters: Dr. Terman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Gladwell talks about one of the most famous studies of the relationship between IQ and success: Dr. Louis Terman's study of IQ, which played out in the middle of the 20th century. Terman thought that by studying a group of young children with astronomical IQs, he could eventually learn about what factors determine success in life. Terman's mistake, Gladwell argued, was to believe that people with extremely high IQs go on to greatness in life. In other words, Terman assumed that being an outlier in life was equivalent to having an outlying intelligence. In general, people tend to believe that innate ability and success are one and the same--a mistake that Gladwell spends his entire book trying to debunk.

❝ This was Terman's error. He fell in love with the fact that his Termites were at the absolute pinnacle of the intellectual scale...without realizing how little that seemingly extraordinary fact meant.

Related Characters: Dr. Terman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell continues his discussion of Dr. Louis Terman, the psychologist who tried to "predict" success by studying young children with high IQs.Gladwell insists that Terman was too narrow and reductive in his definition of success; in other words, too reductive in his definition of being an outlier. To be a success in life, or to be a genius, isn't only a matter of having a high IQ--indeed, there are all sorts of people with high IQs who never achieve anything particularly noteworthy, and all sorts of people considered "geniuses" who *don't*have high IQs. Rather, success and genius result from many, many factors, including determination, support from teachers and family, and luck.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ [Oppenheimer] possessed the kind of savvy that allowed him to get what he wanted from the world.

Related Characters: Robert Oppenheimer, Chris Langan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell contrasts two figures: Chris Langan and Robert Oppenheimer. Langan was a highly talented young man who rose from poverty to study at Reed College, among other places. Oppenheimer was raised in a middle-class family, and studied at elite institutions, including Harvard and Cambridge. But Langan eventually dropped out of college because of various minor disagreements with his administrators. Oppenheimer was briefly put on probation while working on his Ph.D thesis. The reason Oppenheimer was put on probation was that he tried to poison his adviser--a serious crime.

The point Gladwell is getting at is that Oppenheimer managed to stay in a high-level academic program by using his negotiating and arguing skills, while Langan dropped out

because he was too quick to take "no" for an answer. Gladwell uses the differences between Oppenheimer and Langan to clarify one of his key points: intelligence is not enough; drive and determination, as well as a social skills and luck, are also necessary to understand why certain people succeed.

> The sense of entitlement...is an attitude perfectly suited to succeeding in the modern world.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell argues that certain kinds of people are much more adept at feeling a sense of entitlement. Feeling a sense of entitlement is extremely useful in succeeding in one's chosen field--those who feel a sense of entitlement will be more likely to lobby for funds, make relationships with their colleagues, and generally fight for themselves. And yet entitlement, Gladwell finds, correlates closely with class. People who are raised in middle or upper-class families have a greater sense of entitlement: they're encouraged to speak up, and they expect other people to pay attention when they do.

In all, Gladwell's findings suggest that class is a key factor in determining success in life. One's class determines one's sense of entitlement, a key factor in success.

> The Cs were squandered talent. But they didn't need to be.

Related Characters: The Termites

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the chapter, Gladwell brings the conversation back to Dr. Terman, the doctor who tried to find a link between intelligence and success. Terman continued to chart his children's success in life--some of these brilliant children went on to be great successes in life, while others turned out to be pretty average. Terman noted one major factor in his subjects' success in life: their class. Children who were brilliant but came from a lower-class environment tended to be less successful later in life. Gladwell argues that such children ended up less successful because, among other reasons, they didn't have the same sense of support and entitlement that their higher-class counterparts did. In other word, the lower-class children didn't lobby for themselves, easily form relationships with colleagues, have free time to practice, etc.--their talent was "squandered."

> No one—not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses—ever makes it alone.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell sums up his findings so far: success in life is never, ever, the result of innate talent alone. On the contrary, people succeed because of many different factors. On one hand, people succeed because of factors like luck and coincidence--if Gates or Jobs had been born a few years earlier, they might not have become computer tycoons (Gladwell speculates). On the other hand, there are factors that *seem* innate, like drive and determination. But even such factors result in part from a person's nurture. Dr. Terman's test subjects' success correlated closely with their class and their sense of entitlement--indeed, Gladwell argues that class is a major factor in determining a person's sense of drive and determination.

> Since we know outliers always have help along the way, can we sort through the ecology of Joe Flom and identify the conditions that helped create him?

Related Characters: Joe Flom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Gladwell deals with another issue: the success of minorities and oppressed peoples. So far, Gladwell has been exploring the idea that people succeed because they're helped along by other people, or by sheer coincidence. How, then, would Gladwell respond to the

success of people like Joe Flom--people who were persecuted because of their religious faith (Flom was a Jew) and yet became very successful? Surely Joe Flom's success is proof that the greatest talent rises to the top inevitably.

Gladwell seeks to debunk the idea that minorities' success is *only* the result of their striving and hard work. On the contrary, he argues, the playing field certainly isn't even, but minorities are still subject to the same system of luck, circumstance, and determination. While their overall privileges may be less than members of majorities, certain factors can still uniquely contribute to success in individual cases.

❝ Is there a perfect time for a New York Jewish lawyer to be born? It turns out there is.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell continues to study the career of Joe Flom in order to show that even minorities and exploited groups benefit from chance. Gladwell argues that Flom--who overcame racism, poverty, and a global depression to become one of the most powerful lawyers of his day--was *lucky* to be born in the year 1930. Flom was born at a time when the overall population of the U.S. was expanding at a slower rate. As a result, Flom had less competition in schools and less competition in applying to law firms. As strange as it sounds, Flom benefitted from random chance as much as anything else--had he been born in 1919, he might not have been accepted to such high-quality law schools, and therefore might not have gone on to be such a successful lawyer.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ I realize that we are often wary of making these kinds of broad generalizations about different cultural groups—and with good reason. This is the form that racial and ethnic stereotypes take. We want to believe that we are not prisoners of our ethnic histories.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Gladwell offers a very important disclaimer. Gladwell is beginning to argue that culture is an important determining factor in people's behavior. The rate of "personal crime" in the South, for example, can be partly explained by the influence of a cultural tradition that stretches back hundreds of years and continues to exert a powerful influence on how people speak and behave.

Gladwell is worried that his ideas could be interpreted as "essentializing"--i.e., that he could be interpreted as saying that certain groups of people (black people, say) will always act a certain way because of their culture. Gladwell wants to make it clear that he's saying nothing of the kind. Rather, he's talking about a greater *likelihood* of a certain behavior, one that is grounded in culture. Culture doesn't determine what we do to a certainty, but it would be foolish to deny that culture plays a major role in influencing our behavior.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ [The pilot's] plane is moments from disaster. But he cannot escape the dynamic dictated to him by his culture in which subordinates must respect the dictates of their superiors.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell studies the importance of culture in determining the rate of plane crashes. In one particular example, a Korean airplane is about to crash. The first officer is frightened, but knows that he should try to pull up. However, the first officer is reluctant to tell his immediate superior to pull up, because he feels that doing so would be disrespectful. In short, the first officer doesn't do his job because of cultural factors--the strong tradition of respect and loyalty in Korean culture.

There are many factors that determine plane crashes, but Gladwell argues that culture can't be ignored. The relationship between different pilots on a plane affects the plane's likelihood of landing safely, so at times, even something as seemingly abstract as culture can affect a plane's flight.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Throughout history, not surprisingly, the people who grow rice have always worked harder than almost any other kind of farmer.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Gladwell uses his studies of Chinese culture to argue that China's legacy of hard work on rice paddies has echoes and reverberations in modern Chinese culture. For centuries, a huge chunk of the Chinese population worked on rice paddies, where the hours were brutal and the work was tremendously challenging. Gladwell wants to argue that the culture of hard work and toil has led to an "accumulation" of certain cultural values over time: the emphasis on hard work continues to influence modern Chinese people. Gladwell here arrives at a (rather conjectural) conclusion: Chinese people's famous reputation for hard work is partly the result of their country's rice-based economy.

Chapter 9 Quotes

This idea—that effort must be balanced by rest—could not be more different from Asian notions about study and work, of course.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254

Explanation and Analysis

Before he begins to discuss the American education system, Gladwell contrasts two different sets of cultural values: one recognizably "Western," one recognizably Chinese. Perhaps it is a Western notion that work and rest must be balanced out (even the Bible says so!). In Chinese culture, by contrast, there's a much greater emphasis on hard work as an end, not just a means to an end. (This is a rather simplified argument, however, considering ideas like the "Protestant work ethic" and various Western cultures that emphasize leisure far more than America.)

In short, Gladwell is trying to explain differences between certain behaviors in Chinese and American society by citing the vast differences in Chinese and American culture. Culture, he argues, is an important factor in how people behave and how they interact with one another. The only way to fully understand academic success and failure across the world is to analyze cultural differences.

Schools *work*. The only problem with school, for the kids who aren't achieving, is that there isn't enough of it.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell uses statistical analysis to argue that the biggest problem with the American educational system is that summer vacation is too long. For middle- and upper-class families, summer vacation is an opportunity for children to gain useful skills: studying, joining sports teams, going to camp, etc.--things that usually require money and free time on the parents' part. For lower-class families, however, summer vacation is a time when many students regress. Without intellectual stimulation or access to clubs or teams, lower-class children fall behind their wealthier peers--a tragic decline that school is partly designed to reverse.

In all, Gladwell argues that school succeeds in its intended purpose: providing the equalizing force of education for students of all ages and economic brackets. But because of the length of summer vacation (a phenomenon that's basically unique to American kids), the gap between wealthy and poor students is higher than it needs to be.

Her community does not give her what she needs. So what does she have to do? Give up her evenings and weekends and friends—all the elements of her old world—and replace them with KIPP

Related Characters: Marita

Related Themes:

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell clarifies and qualifies some of his thoughts about how to achieve equality and success in American society. He praises schools like KIPP, which are designed to help students from low-income families by giving them year-round education. By going to school 12 months of the year, students gain an advantage over their wealthier peers, equalizing society somewhat.

But, as Gladwell fully admits, it's unfair that poorer students are the ones who should have to change their behavior by working harder. Marita, the student Gladwell discusses in this chapter, attempts a KIPP school, and she works like

crazy. She wakes up early every day, comes home from school, does her homework until midnight, and then goes to sleep again. She works incredibly hard, simply to be as educated and well-qualified for college as wealthier students (who have the luxury of summer vacation). Marita is making an incredible sacrifice: she's giving up her friends and her weekends, just to succeed in life.

It's important that Gladwell makes this point here. Gladwell wants society to reform using his findings, but he doesn't believe that society will necessarily become "fairer" in the process. Marita is working hard to achieve equality with her wealthier peers--a process that is far from fair, and actually rather tragic.

Marita just needed a *chance*. And look at the chance she was given! Someone brought a little bit of the rice paddy to South Bronx and explained to her the miracle of meaningful work.

Related Characters: Marita

Related Themes:

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

In the end, Gladwell argues that Marita--the young student who studies hard at KIPP--is making a worthwhile sacrifice by attending the KIPP school. Marita is giving up her friends and her weekends, but she's gaining the opportunity to go to college, make more money, and provide for her family. In short, Marita has been offered an incredible chance, which few of her low-income peers ever get: the chance at a good education. Marita is, in short, the very embodiment of the "seized opportunities" that Gladwell finds so important to success. People like Marita succeed in the long run, not just because of their innate talent, but because they seize all available opportunities for success. By working hard at KIPP, Marita gives up a lot but may gain more in the long run.

Eplg Quotes

These were history's gifts to my family—and if the resources of that grocer, the fruits of those riots, the possibilities of that culture, and the privileges of that skin tone had been extended to others, how many more would now live a life of fulfillment, in a beautiful house high on a hill?

Related Themes:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his book, Gladwell turns his analysis to his own family. Gladwell acknowledges that his own success in life is the result of his heritage and his economic background, not just his intelligence or his talent. Gladwell grew up in relative prosperity because his ancestors had a huge advantage over their darker-skinned peers: his ancestors lived at a time when white and pale-skinned people were heavily favored over black and dark-skinned people. In short, Gladwell has succeeded in life because he was given the opportunity for success thanks to social prejudices and his family history.

Gladwell can't help but wonder how different society would be if everyone had the advantages that he enjoyed as a child. To contemplate one's own success honesty and frankly is to admit that there are billions of people who deserve the same success but have never gotten the chance to gain it.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

The *Outliers* introduction tells the story of a small and isolated Pennsylvania town called Roseto in the late 1800s. Roseto was an outlier in terms of health—death rates in this small village, populated by immigrants from the same small town in Italy, were unusually low. Doctors and scientists looked tirelessly for an explanation. They thought there must be something about the diet, exercise routines, or environment of the Rosetans to explain their unusually good health, but all of these hypotheses led to dead ends. Finally Stewart Wolf, a physician, suggested that the very culture of Roseto—deeply communal, family oriented, friendly—kept these people healthy. Wolf had looked beyond the individual and found a solution. Gladwell concludes his introduction by saying, "in Outliers, I want to do for our understanding of success what Stewart Wolf did for our understanding of health."

Gladwell's introduction serves to illustrate two central facets of his overall argument: first, that the "understanding of success" he puts forward will be somewhat controversial. Like Wolf, his methodology will be largely different from culturally dominant methods of examining and defining success. Second, his argument will emphasize the collective: it will look "beyond the individual" in order to determine how success works and how successful outliers are made. The story of the Rosetans is not only an entertaining way to begin the book, but also a useful analogy when it comes to understanding his argument in broad strokes.

CHAPTER 1: THE MATTHEW EFFECT

1. Gladwell opens the chapter with a seemingly innocuous description of a Canadian hockey player's rise to the top of the sport in Canada. A young boy has talent as a child, is found by a talent scout, and works hard to rise to the top of the Canadian hockey meritocracy. His individual merit is the reason for his success. Players succeed because they perform well, and succeed on the basis of their own superior ability—nothing else matters, in the end. Gladwell then asks us: is this really the case?

Gladwell uses this type of setup many times throughout the book. Note that the story Gladwell tells has become ingrained in popular culture: success achieved from hard work and individual merit. Gladwell's job (which involves dismantling this culturally dominant story) will be a tough one.

2. Gladwell gives us his general thesis, the argument of his book in broad strokes: he will point out that there is something "profoundly wrong with the way we make sense of success." We often attribute success to a rare and triumphant collection of individual qualities—talent, motivation, genius—when in fact, success stories (successful outliers) feature people who are "the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies" that enable their success. He offers us the following analogy: **the tallest tree** in the forest came from a good seed—this is not in question. But it did not become the tallest tree in the forest simply because it grew from a good seed; it became the tallest tree because it was planted in good soil and because no other trees blocked its sunlight.

This crucial segment includes Gladwell's thesis statement—that culturally dominant narratives of success are "profoundly wrong" and that successful people do not achieve success based on talent alone, but as a result of various "hidden advantages." Gladwell's main objective in Outliers *is to reveal these "hidden" advantages and give readers a more accurate understanding of how success happens. His "tallest tree" analogy reaffirms his point: the tree grew tall not just because its seed has some special qualities, but because of a confluence of various other external factors.*

3. Gladwell directs his reader's attention to a 2007 roster for the Medicine Hat Tigers, an elite Canadian youth hockey team. He tells us that Roger Barnesly, a Canadian Psychologist, looked at this roster and noticed that an overwhelming number of players were born in January, February, or March. And, conversely, there were very few players on the team born between October and December. The same pattern persisted elsewhere on other teams. Gladwell rewrites a play-by-play of the championship game of the Memorial Cup, a major hockey tournament, using players' birthdays instead of names. The resulting transcript makes the unusual prevalence of January, February and March birthdays exceedingly clear.

Gladwell dives into a discussion of the strange pattern in hockey players' birth months without doing much in the way of preparing the reader, or making his point clear ahead of time. Gladwell is using our incredulity (how on earth could our birth month determine our success?) to help strengthen his point: the cultural forces that help determine success are indeed "hidden," and we are surprised precisely because we have bought into the misconception that success derives primarily from talent and hard work alone.

4. Gladwell gives us a simple explanation for this strange phenomenon: the cutoff for age-class hockey is January 1st. The difference in strength and ability between someone who is almost eleven-years-old and someone who has just turned ten is significant. These bigger, older players make an impression on talent scouts at a young age. Then they are moved to better teams, receive better coaches, have more opportunities to practice—and this makes them better. Similar trends are seen in some of the more popular youth sports in other countries: Baseball in the US and soccer throughout Europe all tend to feature players with birthdays right after the cut-off date on the best and most elite teams.

Gladwell's explanation of why birth months matter demystifies the impact of this seemingly random success factor: Gladwell insists that there is nothing mysterious going on here at all. The rise of all great athletes is characterized by multiple factors, such as increased interest and attention from coaches, lots of practice time, more competition, plus more games or matches. That a child's age would affect his or her performance should not surprise us—what we have failed to see is the greater context in which age can influence success, and in turn lead to even more success.

These arbitrary age cut-offs don't only affect youth sports. Economists have recently looked at the relationship between birth month and performance on standardized tests on fourth graders, and found an average difference of 12 percentile points between the oldest (who performed better) and youngest students. 12 percentile points is easily the difference between being admitted to a gifted program or not. Maturity is seen as innate ability, and success is rewarded with better training, and more success. Something as arbitrary as an age cutoff translates into persisting disadvantage for younger students, and no one seems to be taking this fact seriously.

Because we live in a culture that rewards success with more attention, one's initial success often leads to better training, which in turn begets more success. On the contrary, an initial lack of success due to age cut-off dates can become a compounding disadvantage for younger students. Because decision makers fail to recognize this issue, age cut-off dates rarely factor into discussions about education reform—Gladwell's argument is that they should.

5. Gladwell explains to us what these realities say about the nature and reality of success. Our culturally dominant explanations for success—that the "best and the brightest" rise to the top on their own merit—don't account for things like arbitrary age cut-offs and the presence of opportunity. Success, argues Gladwell, is the result of what sociologists like to call "accumulative advantage." Great athletes didn't start out as outliers. They were only slightly better than their peers. A system of accumulative advantage gave them training, resources, and coaching that no one else had access too, and through this kind of special treatment they became outliers.

Gladwell makes a crucial point about outliers: they don't start out as outliers. They start out only a little better than their peers, and then patterns of advantage elevate and enable them to achieve outlier status. And it is important to remember that these repeated advantages are granted to outliers by broad cultural forces that are often not recognized as key contributors to success.

Gladwell also points out that another implication of this reality of accumulative advantage is that the systems that generate success aren't "efficient." On the roster for the Czech Republic soccer team, there are no players born in July, October, November, or December. These younger players have been overlooked or pushed out of the sport. "Half of the Czech athletic population," writes Gladwell, "has been squandered."

What's more, we have a vested interest in recognizing that certain decisions we make as a culture put huge parts of the population at a disadvantage, effectively limiting success. Gladwell's point about athletic talent being "squandered" has much broader implications beyond sports: there is a vast amount of untapped human potential throughout world.

"Because we so profoundly personalize success, we miss opportunities to lift others onto the top rung," Gladwell continues. He emphatically maintains that we repeatedly overlook the enormous role society plays in "individual" success. Gladwell suggests that schools divide students into classes by birth month, so that they only compete with students roughly the same age. The same could be done in athletics, at least until such a time in a child's development when several months has less of an effect on an athlete's strength, size, and ability. He insists it might take more administrative involvement, but it is not an expensive or particularly difficult fix. The only reason we aren't thinking about ways to solve the problem of age cut-offs is that we are "clinging to the idea that success is a simple function of individual merit."

Gladwell offers up one of the first of many concrete solutions to the problem of arbitrary reward. His solution is not unreasonable—it wouldn't cost much money; it would only be slightly more administratively complicated. In doing so we could lift more people to the "top rung." We could have more success stories; and a smaller achievement gap between the "gifted" students and the struggling ones. If the solution is so simple, why haven't we considered it before? The strength of our misconceptions about success, Gladwell argues, has thus far prevented us from doing so.

CHAPTER 2: THE 10,000-HOUR RULE

1. Gladwell opens this chapter with the story of the famous computer scientist Bill Joy. The University of Michigan opened one of the world's most advanced computer centers in 1971. The Mainframe filled almost an entire room, and of the thousands of students who passed through this room, perhaps the most famous of all was Joy. He entered school contemplating a major in either biology or mathematics, but he stumbled across the computing center late in his freshman year and was hooked.

Chapter 2 opens the same way as Chapter 1—with a success story. Now that we are more well-versed in Gladwell's argument about success, we should recognize that Bill Joy's success was not based merely on talent: he attended one of the most advanced computing schools in the world to study biology or mathematics, and only happened to stumble upon computing by chance.

Joy eventually enrolled in graduate school at UC Berkeley, where he stunned his PhD examiners with his intellectual dexterity and brilliance. He went on to rewrite UNIX, a popular operating system, and his edits remain in effect today. He also rewrote Java, another computer language, and his legendary status grew. It is often said of Joy that he succeeded in a brave new world where heritage, connections, and status didn't matter. He was judged solely on his talent, and he won, because he was one of the best. But, Gladwell suggests, arbitrary advantage played a role in Joy's success as well.

There is no doubt that Bill Joy was brilliant and talented, but Gladwell makes it clear that good fortune and arbitrary chance also played a role in his success—after all, he didn't even intend to study computer science!

2. Gladwell launches into a discussion about the existence and nature of "innate talent"—the aptitude, intelligence, and capability we are essentially born with. Gladwell concedes that innate talent exists, and that Joy probably had buckets of it. But, he argues, innate talent will never become expertise without practice—lots of practice. He refers to studies that examined the practicing habits of expert and amateur musicians and chess players. These studies found that no expert rose to the top without practice, and no amateur failed in spite of many hours of practice. The more capable individuals were always the individuals who practiced the most.

We know intuitively that successful athletes and chess players and violinists have worked hard and practiced a lot. But we rarely think of success as wholly dependent on having the opportunity and means to practice—Gladwell aims to uncover these often overlooked factors that contribute to success.

Gladwell says that research has even settled on the "magic number" of hours it takes to achieve expertise: it is 10,000 hours. And this holds true even for those select few we consider "prodigies." By the time Mozart composed his first masterwork he was 21. He had been composing concertos for ten years by this time. This is an important argument against what Gladwell calls the "primacy of talent." Without the opportunity for intense, prolonged, and concentrated practice, no one can become exceptionally successful in a given field. To become an expert, you need parents who support you and encourage you, and enough money so that you don't have to work for a living in your spare time. Only extraordinary opportunity gives a person the ability to become an expert.

Gladwell employs research to back up his arguments because his claim that success derives in part from an extreme number of dedicated hours of practice flies in the face of the traditional concept of success: that it comes from talent and "hard work" alone. And 10,000 of practice alone won't guarantee success, of course: one also needs the support and resources to be able to spend 10,000 free hours practicing.

3. Gladwell returns to his discussion of Bill Joy. Just before Bill Joy enrolled at Michigan, programming was done with punch cards which had to be fed by an operator into the computer. It was such a tedious process, it was nearly impossible to become an expert. Coders spent too much time doing menial, mechanical tasks, and not enough time coding. But when Bill Joy entered school, the computing revolution of "time-sharing" had been invented. Multiple people could connect to one computer with a Teletype and give commands in a program and receive feedback. Suddenly, coding had become a skill one could truly practice. And Michigan, where Joy went to school, was one of the first universities to switch over to time-sharing.

It turns out that if Bill Joy had gone to school before the time sharing revolution had taken place, it would have been impossible for him to put in the hours of practice required to become a computer programming expert. This is a deeply compelling argument for the importance of timing when it comes to success.

Bill Joy didn't choose Michigan because of its computers. He had never even thought about doing any kind of work in computing when he enrolled there. By happy accident, Joy found himself at one of the only places in the world where a seventeen year old could program all he wanted. Joy says that the difference between computing cards and time-sharing was like "the difference between playing chess by mail and speed chess." It had become accessible; it had become fun. Joy soon figured out that a bug in the computer's software allowed him to work indefinitely on the system without having to pay for his time. He neglected his coursework and spent most of every night in the lab. By his second year at Berkeley, in Joy's own calculation, he had programmed for ten thousand hours.

The opportunities and lucky breaks add up in Bill Joy's case. After he happens to stumble across a time-sharing computer system, he figures out that he can finagle a way to work without having to pay for time—otherwise the cost of 10,000 hours of work would have been prohibitive. His schedule allows him to spend successive nights in the lab. All of this led to a rapid accumulation of hours of practice, which, in turn, helped enable his success.

4. Gladwell wonders if the ten thousand hour rule applies across cultures and disciplines. He decides to take two (very famous) examples: the Beatles, one of the most popular rock bands of all-time, and Bill Gates, one of the world's richest men. Before the Beatles even arrived in the US, John Lennon and Paul McCartney had already been playing together for seven years. What's more, those long years of preparation were characterized by the same kind of intensive practice that shaped the careers of professional athletes, Bill Joy, and world-class musicians alike.

Gladwell's decision to investigate the stories of Bill Gates and the Beatles is an important one. He isn't simply exploiting the chance to invoke familiar public figures—he wants to challenge culturally dominant ideas about success and how it works by using two success stories almost everyone knows.

5. In 1960, the Beatles were invited to play in Hamburg, Germany. Hamburg didn't have rock and roll clubs at this time; they had strip clubs. The Beatles were seen performing by a club owner, who asked them to come play in Hamburg. These clubs didn't pay well; the acoustics weren't good; the audience didn't care much about what they were listening to. What made this experience exceptional was the sheer length of time the bands were expected to play: sets were *8 hours* long, and they played seven days a week. By the time the Beatles began having major success in 1964, they had played live performances approximately twelve hundred times (more than most bands today ever play live in their lifetimes).

The story of the Beatles' rise to fame and success doesn't usually include the fact that they played strip clubs in Hamburg. But, as Gladwell points out, their stint in these clubs was actually an extraordinary opportunity for practice. 8 hour live sets are almost unheard of, and the Beatles played live more than most of their contemporaries. As with so many other outliers, chance opportunity and thousands of hours of practice set the Beatles apart and put them on a course to achieve tremendous success.

5. Gladwell turns to the life and career of Bill Gates. Bill Gates's story is well known—he is widely recognized as a man who rose to the top of his field through "sheer brilliance and ambition and guts." But, as ever, the story is more complicated than that. Gates went to a private high school in Seattle, which had a computer club that offered students access to a time-shared computer—most colleges didn't have computer clubs. Bill Gates, a mere 8th grader in 1968, had a highly unusual opportunity.

Bill Gates's first great opportunity was a convergence of wealth, privilege, and extraordinary good fortune and timing: he had easy access to a computer in the 1960s, decades before computers became mainstream. This stroke of good luck and timing gave Gates the opportunity to become an expert at computer programming well ahead of his time, which later put him in the perfect position to start Microsoft at the dawn of the personal computer revolution.

The rest of Gates's life is full of similar lucky breaks and seized opportunities. He manages to secure an internship with a tech company and even spent a semester away from school, honing his programming skills. By Gladwell's calculation, Bill Gates succeeded because no less than nine extraordinarily rare opportunities presented themselves to him, and all of these were opportunities to practice. By the time Gates started his own software company (after dropping out of Harvard), "he was *way* past ten thousand hours."

Gladwell focuses on the nine Gates's nine opportunities to drive home his point that even the most phenomenal success story ever (Gates remains the richest man on earth to this day) arose from a confluence of various factors, and not just from pure talent or genius.

6. Gladwell argues that Gates, the Beatles, and Joy are all no doubt examples of great talent, but what sets them apart are a series of (often randomly occurring) opportunities. Lucky breaks are not the exception, but the rule.

Gladwell hammers home the most important part of his argument: arbitrary instances of luck are not incidental in success stories: they are in fact essential to success.

Gladwell makes another point about the importance of timing. 14 of the 75 richest people in recorded history were born within 9 years of one another in the 19th century. Many of the most well-known names in software development (Including Gates and Joy) were born between 1953 and 1956. Those 14 wealthy mid-19th century men became outliers because they came of age in one of the greatest economic transformations in American history (the railroad industry and Wall Street financial firms were being built). And the major players in Silicon Valley graduated from college when the idea of personal computers was just beginning to gain some traction. If Gates had been born even just five years earlier or later, it's possible he never would have become so successful.

Gladwell wraps up this chapter by pointing out that perhaps the greatest lucky break of all in the cases of Gates and Joy is perhaps a factor totally out of their control: their birth date. This most arbitrary of advantages was essential to his success. More broadly, timing is a key factor in every success story.

CHAPTER 3: THE TROUBLE WITH GENIUSES, PART 1

1. Gladwell begins the third chapter with the story of Chris Langan. Langan's IQ is 195 (that's thirty percent higher than Albert Einstein's). He is a "celebrity outlier." He's invited onto game shows, interviewed for magazines, and even been the subject of a feature length documentary. Langan learned to speak when he was only six months old, and his prodigious intelligence continued to make itself known throughout his childhood and adolescence. As an adult, he speaks about complex ideas so fluently, so confidently, with no hesitation, that his intelligence is evident as soon as he utters even a few sentences.

The story Gladwell tells us about Christopher Langan is a familiar story about prodigies, children with seemingly innate genius. Gladwell uses this setup to strengthen the argument he will make later that Langan's success involved much more than just the "gifts" of a child prodigy.

2. Gladwell turns his attention to a mid-20th century psychology professor at Stanford University named Lewis Terman. Terman was interested in intelligence testing, and became invested in the idea of seeking out young geniuses (where a "genius" is someone with an IQ around 150 or above) and tracking their lives, careers, and achievements. He interviewed and selected roughly 1500 kids from all over the country with exceptionally high IQs. These subjects would become known as the Termites, and this study would become one of the most famous in history.

This view of intelligence—as though it is something that exists from the beginning, ensuring success and acclaim from the very start—drove Lewis Terman to perform his famous experiment. This experiment will prove to be incredibly useful to Gladwell's argument and to the project of debunking popular narratives about the relationship between intelligence and success.

Terman believed IQ was of central importance to achievement and attainment. He thus hypothesized that when the Termites grew up they would become great—they would be policy makers, Nobel laureates, famous professors, or great artists. And Terman's ideas shape a lot of contemporary educational policy: we have special programs for "gifted" students and standardized intelligence tests are used by universities and major companies when selecting from a huge pool of qualified applicants.

Gladwell is careful to point out that the idea that intelligence and success are closely linked has a huge effect on educational and employment policies in America especially. The American education system relies heavily on standardized testing, and we tend to provide "gifted" children with extra opportunities to learn because we believe that intelligence and success are so deeply linked.

As a culture, we often speak of geniuses as though they are the ultimate outlier—if you are possessed of extraordinary intelligence, nothing can possibly hold you back. But, as has we have already seen, our cultural understanding of success and genius is misguided. And as it turned out, Terman was wrong about his Termites, and that he was wrong about the relationship between genius and success.

Gladwell suggests here that our ideas about genius represent some of our strongest and most indelible misconceptions about how success works

3. The relationship between success and IQ had been studied often, especially in recent years. A high IQ does generally correspond to higher achievement, but there is a catch: once a person's IQ is above 120, the direct relationship between success and IQ ceases to exist. Someone with an IQ of 125 isn't any less likely to win a Nobel prize than someone with an IQ of 170. In other words, IQ has a threshold. If you are smart *enough*, you can have as much success as anyone else who is smart *enough*. Gladwell clarifies with an analogy: Basketball players generally need to be tall. But a player who is 6'8" is not necessarily better than a player who is 6'5". Once a basketball player is tall enough (say the "threshold" is about 6'0" or 6'1"), *other things begin to matter*. He is tall, but is he fast? agile? good under pressure?

Gladwell begins to build his argument against the notion that genius correlates with success by showing how the difference in levels of success attained by those with IQs between 125 and 185 is minimal. We don't often think of genius in terms of thresholds like this—we tend to think that smarter is better, and that people with higher IQs will achieve greater heights of success accordingly. This point about thresholds is Gladwell's first stand against ideas like Terman's.

4. Gladwell illustrates this point by drawing his readers attention to a different kind of intelligence testing. The IQ test usually asks participants to look at a question and choose the correct answer out of a handful of answers: they "converge" on the solution. But a different kind of testing is called "divergence" testing, which involves asking a participant to, for example, list all of the uses he or she can think of for a brick, or a bed sheet. It just so happens that, at one British high school, the student with the highest IQ came up with the least number of ways to use a brick and a bed sheet, while students with lower IQs demonstrated remarkable versatility and creativity in their responses. Perhaps this is why a high IQ doesn't guarantee a Nobel prize. You may be smart enough, but not creative enough, to achieve that level of recognition.

Gladwell is also sure to make the important point that "intelligence" (as measured by the IQ test) is of a very specific kind. The IQ test cannot measure a person's creativity, their ability to shift gears intellectually with ease and dexterity, their ability to think creatively. And it has already been demonstrated that just because someone has a high IQ does not mean that these other kinds of intelligence are present. This is one reason that someone with an IQ of 125 is just as likely to win a Nobel prize as someone with an IQ of 185—because other kinds of intelligence matter.

5. This was a crucial point that Terman failed to recognize. His child geniuses did not turn out the way he imagined they would. Many were successful, but many were not. Most led normal middle-class lives, and none of them became famous for anything. And in fact, two children he had rejected because their IQs were two low went on to win Nobel prizes. The lesson learned by Terman, and by the greater psychological community, was that to say person is a genius is not to say very much at all. In order to predict whether someone will become a true outlier, we have to know more.

The results of Terman's experiment confirm everything that Gladwell has suggested in this chapter: though Terman selected the "smartest" children, they did not go on to become the most successful adults. He set out to show that IQ is the most definitive predictor of success; what he did prove was that many of our ideas about intelligence and success were misguided or just plain wrong. If intelligence can't predict success, what can? Gladwell explores the answer to that question in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: THE TROUBLE WITH GENIUSES, PART 2

This chapter delves more deeply into the rather tragic life of Chris Langan. He grew up very poor; his father was an alcoholic and for the most part absent. He was a highly gifted student, and ended up going on full scholarship to Reed University. He found the adjustment very difficult, and struggled to speak up in class even though he knew the material well. Then, because his mother failed to fill out a financial aid form correctly, he lost his scholarship and had to drop out. He worked as a construction worker for a year and a half before enrolling in Montana State University. He faired well there until one day his car broke down on the way to class, and he asked to be transferred to a different section so that he could avoid having an absence. His teacher was dismissive, as was the administration, and didn't grant his request. He dropped out, deciding that he was done with the higher education system

Knowing that the objective of this chapter is to determine what other factors (besides innate intelligence) have an effect on success and failure, the reader should be looking for clues in Langan's story. He was poor, and his family struggled to make ends meet. He was unable to file financial aid forms correctly, and a fight with his professor and his administrators put an end to his formal education. Poverty, family strife, bureaucracy, interpersonal issues—all these factored into Langan's story. What's more, Langan left Montana State of his own accord. He clearly lacks a certain type of persistence.

Without a degree, Langan found he couldn't make it in the academic world. He's written several papers on the origins of the universe, but no one will take him seriously since he is not educated. He insists that to apply for professorships or to go back to school would be compromising his ideals: he sees institutions of higher learning as depraved corporate entities interested in profit alone.

Langan's lack of formal education, caused by the variety of factors discussed above, had an significant effect on the trajectory of his life and career—the events of his past and his personal convictions limited his success despite his "giftedness."

2. Gladwell points out that, though heartbreaking, Langan's account of his life story is a little strange. He lost a scholarship because of one missed deadline on a financial aid form, and it seems every teacher or administrator he met was completely indifferent to him and all of his problems. Are educators really like this? Reed is a small liberal arts college, the kind that's known for going out of its way to accommodate individual students needs. And, as a general rule, educational institutions are seen as places where intellectual disagreements and opposing viewpoints are cherished and cultivated. It is true that universities are wealthy, and it is true that they are profit-driven (to an extent)—but are they really as hard-hearted and corporate as Langan makes them sound?

Gladwell's work in this section is crucial to our understanding of which hidden factors determine success. He delves deeper in to Langan's story, pointing out certain strange easily overlooked elements. Langan's extreme mistrust of educational institutions borders on paranoia. For all his intelligence, his observance, his analytical acumen, it seems as though he cannot value education rationally. Once again it seems that external forces have had a major impact on his ability to achieve success.

Gladwell tells us that Langan's story makes him think of Robert Oppenheimer, a physicist who famously led the American effort to develop a nuclear bomb in WWII. Oppenheimer was, like Langan, an extraordinary mind even as a child. He went to Harvard and then to Cambridge to get his doctorate in Physics. His tutor at Cambridge forced him to study experimental physics, even though he preferred theoretical physics and believed everything else was below his intellect. He became unstable, and tried to poison this tutor with chemicals from the lab. The university found out, and Oppenheimer was put on probation. Then later in life, though he was still young, widely thought to be a Communist, and utterly hopeless with lab equipment, he was hired to lead the atomic bomb effort.

Oppenheimer's story contrasts sharply with Langan's in terms of his ability to overcome obstacles to achieve success. Oppenheimer had a breakdown and tried to poison his tutor, but still managed to finish his PhD. He had communist affiliations and still managed to get appointed to the most important military project in American history.

Langan was kicked out of school for forgetting to file a form, where Oppenheimer received probation for attempting to poison his tutor. Langan believes he is too controversial a figure to be accepted by the academy, where Oppenheimer was appointed to lead the development of a nuclear bomb in America during World War II when he had affiliations with the Communist Party. We must conclude that Oppenheimer wouldn't have lost his scholarship at Reed. He wouldn't have taken no for an answer from professors or administrators. Oppenheimer knew how to get what he wanted from the world. Chris Langan isn't necessarily any less intelligent than Oppenheimer, but he lacked the kind of savvy that would have allowed him to succeed.

Gladwell reaffirms his point that success is not determined by intelligence alone. Oppenheimer's savvy navigation around obstacles and his resolve to persevere, contrary to Langan's tendency to quit, helped him achieve success in the face of extreme challenges. But as always, the reader should keep certain questions in mind: where does the "savvy" that Gladwell directs our attention to come from? Is it innate? Or does it come from somewhere other than the individual?

3. The kind of skill that allows a person to talk their way out of trouble or secure a job for which they are unqualified is called "practical intelligence" by many psychologists. Unlike IQ intelligence, which we believe people are born with, practical intelligence is something a person must learn and practice.

This point is crucial: "practical intelligence" must be learned. That means a person must have the means and opportunity to learn it. It must come from somewhere other than the individual.

Sociologists have studied differences in parenting across racial, geographic, and economic lines. One such study involves following certain children and parents around in their day-to-day lives and observing interactions. It was discovered that there are essentially only one major dividing line with respect to parenting style: class. Wealthier kids are encouraged, praised, and taught "entitlement." They learn to speak up if they are unhappy; they learn to "customize" their environment so that they can thrive. Poorer children are better at being independent than wealthier children, but they receive less attention and praise. They learn to accept and cope with hardships instead of trying to change them. They learn from a young age that they are constrained, and they learn to accept this. It just so happens that, in today's world, a sense of entitlement makes you more suited to success than a sense of constraint.

Here Gladwell dives into one of the most important points in his book: that, more than anything else, class determines the environmental factors that contribute to a child's likelihood of success. A family's wealth predicts whether or not children in that family will learn crucial skills for succeeding in todays world. Wealthier children learn to manipulate and customize their environments; poorer children, on the other hand, learn simply to adapt. This clearly has implications for how we address disparity in achievement in the future. By pointing out that class has an immense effect on success, Gladwell makes an important regarding how we could address achievement disparity in the future.

4. This is perhaps where we can locate the most important difference between Oppenheimer and Langan. Oppenheimer's parents (an artist and a successful businessman) fostered his passions, made him join clubs, taught him skills like public speaking and negotiation, and introduced him to high-powered people and insisted that he not be intimidated. Langan grew up in a bleak environment, with parents who were absent or too busy to help cultivate such skills. When he entered a world where filling out complicated forms correctly and negotiating with busy administrators became necessary, he floundered. He hadn't learned this; he had only learned constraint. This seemingly small fact crippled him—one imagines that, with a different childhood, Langan could have achieved much more.

To make his point about class affecting success more concrete, Gladwell spells out the precise difference between Oppenheimer and Langan. Oppenheimer had acquires more of the necessary skills, had had more opportunities to practice these skills, and as a result he fared better than Langan, who never learned skills that would ultimately become of vital importance—like negotiating and navigating complicated form work—was almost destined by his childhood not to succeed.

5. This is supported by Terman's final observations about his Termites. Some of them were quite successful: they obtained advanced degrees, had families, and made a good income. Some, however, dropped out of college or didn't attend college at all. The difference between the most successful group and the least successful group was (as Gladwell's reader has probably guessed): class. Kids brought up in lower class families, even if they are geniuses, generally lack the necessary skills to make a name for themselves. The children in Terman's study who failed to put their intelligence to work for them were, in Gladwell's words, "squandered talent. But they didn't need to be."

Once again Gladwell returns to the idea that society's misguided understanding of success leads to the "squandering" of talent. Gladwell's pointed critique of our current system is accompanied by the hope that the system can be improved. There is a refrain beginning to emerge: things don't need to be this way. Success doesn't need to be as limited as it is, and knowing what causes the problem, can go a long way toward correcting it.

CHAPTER 5: THE THREE LESSONS OF JOE FLOM

1-2. Joe Flom is the last living named partner of one of the most prestigious law firms in New York, "Skadden, Arps." Flom grew up in a Jewish family during the depression, did well in school, and eventually got into Harvard law without a college degree, and graduated as one of the very top in his class. When it came time to search for a job, he felt he didn't fit in at the major New York firms and joined a small group of men who were starting their own firm. Today, that law firm, Skadden, Arps, earns over $1 billion a year.

Here is yet another "success story" presented for the reader to scrutinize. Once again we are being called upon to question this story of a self-made man who, against the odds, succeeded in a field in which he was not welcome and then made a name for himself anyway.

3. Just like all of the success stories we've heard so far, Flom is a product of his environment. He had talent, ambition, intelligence; but we have learned that this is not enough. Flom was Jewish: to illustrate the importance of this point, Gladwell examines the lives and career of some of Flom's other Jewish peers. They all experienced something similar: they didn't fit in with the big firms of the day. They faced discrimination because of their faith. They all faced very similar setbacks: though they were qualified, though they were great lawyers, they were not hired.

Gladwell begins his discussion of how heritage, cultural identity, and social systems of advantage and disadvantage play a role in individual success. He seems to be suggesting that Flom's Jewishness had an impact on his success; but, the reader should note, his faith seemed to be a distinct disadvantage—he was discriminated against. Isn't his faith one of the many obstacles he had to overcome? Or did it actually give him a kind of hidden advantage?

4. The old Wall Street firms that didn't hire people like Joe Flom did a very specific kind of work. They disdained litigation and thought corporate takeovers were uncivilized, so they avoided accepting cases that involved those things. They mostly handled legal filing and taxes for big corporate entities, and this was what was considered "dignified" legal work. But in the 1950s and 60s, corporate takeovers became more commonplace, and the only lawyers that corporate investors could get to do this work for them were lawyers like Joe Flom—lawyers with talent who had been pushed out of the major firms and were forced to take whatever work they could get.

A complicated scene begins to unfold. Because of cultural prejudice against Jewish lawyers, these lawyers were pushed into a certain sector of the legal profession in New York. They were forced to do the kind of work that other firms didn't like to do. This, Gladwell will show, eventually made them perfectly positioned for huge success.

Between 1970 and 1980 there was a massive boom in the number of mergers and acquisitions, and these deals were worth millions and millions of dollars. Now all law firms wanted to do this kind of work—but only a few law firms had had enough practice to be experts in these matters. These firms were, by-and-large, the Jewish firms full of lawyers who had been kept out of the old-world firms. Adversity turned into opportunity.

All of the sudden, the skills in litigation that Jewish lawyers had been forced to acquire because of their faith became some of the most desirable skills in the profession. Gladwell is not saying that Jewish lawyers in new york had it easy—he merely means to suggest that cultural disadvantage happened, in this case, to become an advantage.

5-7. Another important point is that the Joe Flom was a Jewish lawyer in New York when it was the perfect time to be a Jewish lawyer in New York. There is such a thing, argues Gladwell, as being "demographically unlucky." If you became old enough to enter the work force at the very beginning of the Great Depression, you were demographically unlucky. Joe Flom's success can be attributed (at least in part) to this kind of demographic logic. In the 1930s, because of the hardships of the Great Depression, people stopped having children. The result was a small generation (of which Flom was a part.) He enjoyed smaller class sizes, more attention, and less competition throughout school. For a lawyer, being born in the 1930s was an almost magical kind of advantage.

We are already familiar with how important timing and historical context are to any successful individual. Flom was born into a small generation, in a year that would put him at his professional peak right around the time there would be a corporate takeover boom in New York. This is utterly arbitrary good luck—but we can see that it played a formative role in ensuring Flom's success.

8-10. Gladwell then moves on to talk about how Lawyers like Flom benefitted from, of all things, the New York garment industry. He tells a story common to many New York garment workers: a young couple, Mr. and Mrs. Borgenicht, with experience in clothing and manufacturing, move to New York from Europe in search of a better life. They begin selling child's aprons after they notice there don't seem to be many for sale, and have a great deal of success. They worked long exhausting hours, but eventually made enough money to buy a factory and hire employees. It was an exhausting life, but Mr. Borgenicht was his own boss, doing engaging, complicated work, and being rewarded for his efforts. In other words, the work was *meaningful*.

Gladwell continues to build on the idea that, when it comes to success, it matters where we come from. The garment industry in New York, was, Gladwell argues, characterized by meaningful work. Garment workers lived in a culture where effort was met with appropriate reward, and creativity and flexibility were essential. It's becoming clear that the value that their culture placed on work had a strong influence on the families and children of these garment workers.

11. In the 1980s, sociologists studied the fates of children of couples like the Borgenichts. Overwhelmingly, researchers saw the children of these families becoming educated professionals. Gladwell says that "Jewish doctors and lawyers did not become professionals in spite of their humble origins. They became professionals *because* of their humble origins." Children of Jewish garment workers learned growing up that persuasion, initiative, and hard work lead to success. "The garment industry was boot camp for the professions." And Joe Flom's father sewed shoulder pads for women's dresses.

In the case of Jewish professionals from New york, "humble origins" were not an obstacle but an advantage. This goes directly against our intuitive sense of Joe Flom's success story—that he heroically overcame the shackles of his past in order to become successful. Growing up in the 1930s with parents who were garment workers gave a child an advantage (much the same way that growing up with wealthy parents gives a child an advantage today).

12. Gladwell gives us an overview of what he has just argued. Once again, a bevy of things came together to help ensure Joe Flom's success. He was presented with opportunities, his timing was perfect, and his cultural heritage had taught him important lessons about how to succeed in this culture, as was the case with many other Jewish lawyers in New York. "Their world—their culture and generation and family history—gave them the greatest of opportunities.

The reader should take time to reflect on the sheer number of advantages Joe Flom enjoyed that were beyond his direct control. This is yet another case where timing, background, and sheer luck all play a key role in determining opportunity and success.

CHAPTER 6: HARLAN, KENTUCKY

1. Gladwell tells the story of a small town in Kentucky in the 1800s. Somehow, a feud started between two families in this small town. Fights broke out, and confrontation between these two families repeatedly ended in violence and death. It came to be expected—people here did not live in harmony; this was simply the way things were.

Whereas the previous several chapters opened with success stories, this chapter begins with a story about cultural norms, and about our tendency not to question them.

2. Feuds were not only the norm in this small town: there are records of similar feuds all over the state of Kentucky. "When one family fights with another, it's a feud. When lots of families fight with one another in identical little towns up the same mountain range, it's a pattern." And the cause of this pattern is what sociologists call a "culture of honor." The original inhabitants of these tows were descended from Scots-Irish herdsman, whose livelihood depended on their being feared and respected enough that no one would dare steal their livestock. The point is that the cultural tendencies of our ancestors have an effect on us (and likely our descendants).

Though the inhabitants of this small town never perceived themselves as part of a larger pattern, their heritage did have a huge effect on the way they lived their lives. It turns out that a tendency for feuding was traceable back to the very early ancestors of this town, who depended on a culture of honor to survive. Gladwell is very clear about the relevant point here: cultural legacies are real, and they have a lasting effect on our lives.

2-4. In fact, this helps to explain why patterns of crime in the South are so distinctive. Murder rates are higher in the South, but "stranger" crimes (crimes committed by one stranger against another) are lower. Violence in the back-country has always been distinctly personal. Gladwell acknowledges that he is making broad generalizations, and notes that we are right to be skeptical of him—"we want to believe we are not prisoners of our ethnic histories." But he then clarifies what he means to say: that we cannot understand culture in the present without understanding where we came from. "Cultural legacies are powerful forces." Gladwell wants to make the point, in his remaining chapters, that traditions and attitudes of our forbearers also have an impact on our success. He notes that if we begin to take cultural legacies more seriously, we can use them to understand success better.

Gladwell acknowledges that he is treading on difficult ground to an extent. His observations about southerners bear a resemblance to stereotyping—and certainly he does not mean to say that we cannot escape our "ethnic histories." He simply means to suggest that in order to understand the present, and to make necessary changes in the future, we cannot ignore the past and the strong influence of our cultural heritage.

CHAPTER 7: THE ETHNIC THEORY OF PLANE CRASHES

1. The chapter opens with the story of the crash of Korean Air flight 801. The plane was in good condition. The weather was bad, but not too bad. As the captain and the first officer bring the plane into land, they can't see the runway. Alarms begin to go off as they get closer and closer to the ground. The flight engineer suggests that the captain pull up and try again. A short while later he suggests this again. This time the captain agrees, but three seconds later the plane slams into the side of a mountain, killing almost everyone aboard.

Another story: this time the story of a plane crash. If this story seems strange, that's because it is. The first pass at the story contains no good explanation for why the plane went down. Plane crashes are rare, but they are often devastating and tragic, and we demand explanations for them. Gladwell wants the reader to ask how and why these pilots failed to land the plane.

2. Korean air had a spate of crashes in the 80's and 90's that earned them a bad reputation and threatened their continued existence as an airline. Pilots were found by investigators to be under-trained, and the proper safety protocol wasn't being followed. But, amazingly, Korean air turned itself around. Since 1999, they have a perfect safety record. It is now as safe as any airline in the world. And the reason Korean Air succeeded was because it "acknowledged the importance of its cultural legacy."

The second half of this story also demands an explanation: Korean Air turned itself around, but how did it manage to do so? This is how Gladwell will begin in earnest to discuss the importance of addressing cultural legacies when it comes to avoiding tragedy and failure.

3. Gladwell says that, though plane crashes are often portrayed in movies as the results of a single catastrophic event, in reality they occur because of the accumulation of many small problems. Bad weather, tired pilots, new or unfamiliar airports, crew members who have only recently started to work together—it often takes all of these things to add up to disaster. "The typical accident involves seven consecutive human errors."

The reader can think of airplane crashes as outliers of failure in the same way that people like Bill Gates are successful outliers. They are rare, and when they do happen, it is because of a confluence of various seemingly unrelated factors.

4. Suren Ratwatte is a veteran pilot who has studied aircraft disasters. He confirms that the typical crash involves exhausted pilots, poor communication, poor decision-making, and misunderstanding. It is not often bad piloting that causes plane crashes: it is the pilots' inability to do all of the other things that flying a plane involves: talking, improvising, multitasking, listening.

Gladwell further breaks down our preconceptions of airplane crashes—often, it is not bad piloting or harsh weather that causes them. As with the predictors of success, unseen easily overlooked factors can make a big difference.

5. Ratwatte tells the story of a time he had to make an unexpected landing at an unfamiliar airport when one of his passengers fell ill. The plane was full of fuel, and therefore too heavy to land in normal conditions. He had to land against the wind, which meant coming into the airport in the opposite direction than what was usually allowed. He told Air Traffic Control what he needed, he enlisted the help of his entire crew to keep things running smoothly, and put the massive heavy jet on the ground in time to save the ill passenger. This success came about because he stayed calm, communicated himself clearly, and listened to what his inferiors and peers were telling him.

Ratwatte's story underscores this: the reader should note how many things Ratwatte had to do to get the plane safely on the ground. He had to be a good leader, a good listener, a good communicator, a quick thinker. Recall the earlier discussion of thresholds in Chapter 3. Once a pilot becomes skilled enough to fly and land a plane, then other factors begin to influence his success (or failure). The question we should be asking is, What are these other skills and how did Ratwatte develop them?

6-8 In contrast, Gladwell provides the transcript from another doomed flight, Avianca 052. The plane has had to divert several times from its planned landing and is running dangerously low on fuel. The pilot repeatedly tells the first officer to tell Air Traffic Control (ATC) at the airport that their fuel levels have become a problem. The first officer tells ATC that the plane is "running out of fuel" but doesn't use the word "emergency" or even seem very concerned. ATC asks them to divert again, and the first officer agrees. The plane runs out of fuel and crashes shortly after this final communication to ATC. Gladwell dissects the language used. The first officer and the pilot made suggestions and hints, but failed to commandingly tell ATC what the problem was. ATC did not interpret their words correctly and the result was a deadly crash.

The failure of these pilots resulted from their inability to communicate effectively, assert themselves, and insist on their own needs. Gladwell's exhaustive examination of the pilots' use of language conveys the complexity of airborne communication, and narrows down the earlier question: how does one become the kind of communicator who succeeds in the cockpit? Can this kind of close investigation of cockpit communication and language help to prevent future plane crashes?

9. Ratwatte notes that Air Traffic Control at JFK, the airport at which these pilots were trying to land, is notorious for its bluntness and even rudeness. And they are indeed short with the pilots in their communication. But all the pilots needed to do was tell them they definitively needed to land, which they never did. They deferred to the bitter end.

Nobody would expect that interpersonal factors like rudeness or intimidation could be the leading cause of a plane crash. But as Gladwell has shown throughout the book, easily overlooked or unlikely factors can be the primary determinants of success, or, as in this case, can lead to catastrophic failures.

10. Cross cultural psychologists have found that depending on where we are from, we conform to different rules in our speech and our interpretation. Some countries tolerate ambiguity more than others, some prefer to stick rigorously to rules and procedures. Some countries are called "low power-distance" countries—these are countries where things like rank and authority don't have a huge effect on communication. Other countries have strict cultural rules regarding how one can speak to a superior, an elder, or even a stranger. These are "high power-distance" countries. It became clear that one way of stopping plane crashes might be to reduce the power-distance in the cockpit. This way first officers would not be afraid to voice a problem or a concern to the captain, and pilots would not defer so readily to ATC if a plane's safety were at stake. Korea just so happens to be a high power-distance country.

Gladwell pulls back and discusses the phenomenon he has been describing in more detail. Our cultural legacies determine to some extent how we relate to one another. If we are from a culture where authority is respected above all else, we will find it harder—even when lives are at stake—to challenge what we perceive to be a higher authority. Conversely, if we are from a culture where standing up to superiors is commonplace, we will not be intimidated by demonstrations of authority and will continue to communicate our opinions regardless of whatever power discrepancy might be present.

11-12. Gladwell dives back into the Korean Air flight 801 crash with which he began the chapter. He notes that when the first officer makes comments about the weather, he is trying to tell the captain that the weather conditions are dangerous. When he comments on how much he appreciates having weather radar in the cockpit, he means to suggest that the captain take a look at the radar. Korea's culture is one in which the listener is expected to pick up on subtle cues like this. But the captain was tired, and didn't hear what his first officer was trying to tell him. This failure of communication caused the plane crash.

Korean social norms had a direct effect on what happened in this cockpit. Korean speech tends to put a great deal of interpretive responsibility on the listener. Speakers are not blunt, because they usually don't have to be. The listener will pick up on subtle cues and grasp their meaning without the speaker ever having to say what he means directly. But when the listener is a captain in an airplane, when he is tired and multitasking, this cultural trend becomes dangerous, and in this case led to a crash.

13. In 2000, Korean Air brought in experts to help them improve their communication in the cockpit. They began speaking in English, a language that didn't belong to their culture, and in a sense allowed them to have a different kind of identity when speaking. The pilots could participate in a different cultural legacy, at least when they were in the cockpit.

Gladwell, as ever, remains solution oriented: though cultural legacies are powerful; though they have a major impact on the way we behave and relate to the world, they can be addressed, and counteracted when necessary.

CHAPTER 8: RICE PADDIES AND MATH TESTS

1. Rice is part of China's cultural legacy, and building a rice patty is demanding, exacting, and complicated work. This was also work that many lives depended on. In southern Chinese villages, rice is a crucial facet of society.

Gladwell turns to another very specific cultural legacy: rice farming in China. The reader can anticipate that this chapter (based on its title) will show that this cultural legacy has an effect on a child's ability to succeed in math.

2. Gladwell moves from his brief discussion of rice paddies to a discussion of the Chinese numbers system. It is highly regular, following simple rules without exceptions. As a result, Chinese children can learn to count to 40 two years earlier than American children on average. The system is what psychologists call "transparent." The rules are clear enough for very young children to understand counting, addition, and multiplication much more easily. Children who grow up speaking an Asian language have a built-in advantage. But what if that isn't the only advantage Chinese students have when it comes to math? Could the rice paddies make a difference in the classroom?

One of the potential reasons for the dominance of Chinese students on math tests is the fact that their language (a key part of cultural heritage) makes numbers and mathematical concepts more accessible to a young child's brain. And we know already that success as a child helps to foster success as an adult: accumulated advantage for Chinese math students might start with their language itself.

3. Rice farmers have had to work harder than every other farmer. Growing rice requires perfectionism and constant vigilance. There are no vacations. The days are long with no exception. And the harder a farmer works to optimize his rice paddy, the more rice that paddy will produce. Some estimate that the average workload of a wet-rice farmer in Asia is three thousand hours a year.

But what about the legacy of rice farming? Already we can begin to see how this legacy would give children with southern Chinese heritage an advantage: it is characterized by hard, engaging, intellectually rigorous work, and it necessarily involves many, many hours of practice.

4. This, like the garment work previously discussed, is meaningful work. It is difficult, requires a great deal of dedication and problem solving, and effort is directly linked to reward. In order to be a rice farmer, you have to care deeply about your work. Chinese peasant proverbs underscore this fact: proverbial wisdom in Chinese history repeatedly comes back around to the idea that hard work leads to a better life, that persistence is key, and that sacrifice is necessary.

The most important point to gather from this section is that rice farming has led to a cultural belief in China that hard work leads to success. This, we will see, if of crucial importance when it comes to succeeding in school.

5-6. Researchers have found that one of the most reliable predictors of whether or not a student will be good at math is not their IQ or the quality of their schooling. It is their willingness to complete tasks carefully. In one study, when students were given a long and tedious questionnaire, the students who rushed through and skipped questions along the way performed consistently worse on mathematical exams than students who carefully completed the questionnaire without taking shortcuts. In a country shaped by wet rice farming like China, where "doggedness is not the exception but a cultural trait," perhaps it is not surprising that students tend to be better at math.

Though we often think of facility with math to be a kind of innate trait, it turns out that being good at math is a lot like being good at piloting: math skills are not the only thing that matters. In fact, persistence is an excellent predictor of someone's math skills. This makes the cultural legacy of rice farming all the more relevant to mathematical skill—they both require dedication, persistence, and lots of practice to perfect.

CHAPTER 9: MARITA'S BARGAIN

There is a middle school in New York City called KIPP. It is in a poor neighborhood, and its students are largely from financially disadvantaged families and members of racial minorities. But KIPP has, against what has become the general expectation regarding the quality of low-income schools, become one of the most desirable middle schools in the city. And it is most famous for mathematics. Now there are more than 50 KIPP schools across the United States, and more are on the way. And Gladwell attribute's KIPP's success to its dedication to taking cultural legacies seriously.

The final chapter of Gladwell's book tackles an issue that's clearly very important to him: the American educational system. Gladwell tells the story of one particularly successful public school, which is successful because it "takes cultural legacies seriously." Implicit in this assessment is the suggestion that, in the future, schools could—and should—strive to be more like KIPP.

2. The American school system evolved according to ideas about the balance of work and rest. Summer vacation is so ingrained into our culture we hardly think to question it. But recall what was said earlier about the cultural notions surrounding the importance and meaning of work in Asia. The proverbial Chinese wisdom discussed in the previous chapter could not be more at odds with the notion that effort must be accompanied by rest. But the institution of the distinctly long American summer vacation has remained, and has an enormous effect on our country's educational system.

In just the same way that rice paddies (and their lesson about perseverance) make up a certain part of China's cultural legacy, the American institution of summer vacation is part of our own culture. We believe work ought to be followed by rest. This is notably a departure from Chinese cultural wisdom, which emphasizes that constant work leads to great rewards.

3. Summer vacation has not been at the center of any debates about the American school system. But, Gladwell argues, it really should be. High performing and low performing schools record the same or very similar levels of improvement over the course of a school year. In other words, a student from a top school and a student from a bottom school both record better test scores at the end of each year than at the beginning, and their scores are better by about the same degree. But over the summer, low-income schoolchildren lose ground that middle class children do not. If your family cannot provide for your engaging, enlightening summer vacation, if no one is present to encourage you to keep reading or join clubs or play educational games, summer vacation is a huge disadvantage to you.

Gladwell begins to direct his argument toward a possible solution to America's education crisis. Whereas most arguments about education reform focus on teachers and students, Gladwell zeroes in on summer vacation, a seemingly tangential issue. But Gladwell convincingly demonstrates that the achievement gap is in many ways attributable to the existence of a summer break, which drives apart higher income children from lover income children and allows months of schooling to be undone for children who cannot afford to have a productive summer vacation.

America's problem is not that its schools are bad. America's problem is that its summer holidays are too long—and this is precisely the problem that schools like KIPP have set out to solve.

Gladwell makes his point in no uncertain terms: the problem with American education is not bad schools or bad teachers—it is summer vacation; a highly solvable problem.

4. KIPP's students have a long school day, but this allows for longer classes. Teachers don't have to rush through material, and as a result, students don't feel pressure to be first, to be the fastest. Students don't fall behind simply because they need a little more time to figure a problem out.

Gladwell begins to dissect the inner workings of KIPP in order to sketch out what a successful school schedule might look like in the future.

5. Gladwell examines the life of one specific student at KIPP, named Marita. She is a middle schooler who wakes up at 5:30 AM and doesn't get home from school until 5pm. She then starts her homework, and rarely takes a break, often eating her dinner as she works instead of sitting down at the table with her family. Sometimes she doesn't get to bed before midnight. She is working like a lawyer or medical resident, and she is only twelve.

Gladwell is careful not to overlook the effect of a schedule like KIPP's on the individual children who attend this school. They don't lead what many Americans consider to be "normal" childhoods. In order to accept the success of schools like KIPP, we must let go of some of our own cultural norms, like summer break.

6. The lesson Gladwell wants us to learn from Marita is that her community cannot give her what she needs. Communities like hers do not have the resources or time to make her into a great student in contemporary American culture—not when wealthier students are using their summers to get ahead. So she must give up a lot: friends, vacations, evenings and weekends off. She must replace these things with KIPP. This is a lot to ask of a child, but Marita has made a kind of bargain. 80 percent of KIPP graduates will go to college, many of them being the first person in their family to do so. It is not a bad bargain. We have learned that outliers come from seized opportunities—students like Marita cannot succeed without being given the chance to—and KIPP will give her that chance.

Gladwell wraps up his argument by noting that the solutions he is suggesting will require sacrifice. They require us to confront our misconceptions about success, to let go of certain beliefs about how children should grow and learn, and to accept a certain kind of trade off. But Gladwell is emphatic that these sacrifices are worth it. Marita proves that these sacrifices are worth it. He draws the various elements of his argument together: if we know that success can only come from equal opportunity, then we must expand opportunity to those who don't currently have it. This is the only solution.

EPILOGUE: A JAMAICAN STORY

Gladwell ends his book by telling the story of his own life, and tracking his own successes and failures back to cultural legacies, opportunities, and good fortune. His grandmother was the great-granddaughter of acclaimed businessman William Ford (Henry Ford's father). She lives in the northwestern end of Jamaica, where her lighter skin (due to her partially white genetic heritage) gave her many advantages. Mulattos had it relatively good in Jamaica. If they were slaves, they were rarely required to do hard labor, and were often left substantial fortunes when their white master died off. Gladwell's grandmother was lucky to be Mulatto, and enjoyed a certain amount of privilege. She grew up in a culture of possibility—"these were history's gifts to my family," writes Gladwell, "and if the privileges of that skin tone had been extended to others, how many more would now live a life of fulfillment, in a beautiful house high on a hill?"

Gladwell's epilogues adds a kind of personal touch to his argument, making it all the more accessible to the reader. Gladwell, like Bill Gates and Joe Flom and the Beatles and Bill Joy, can trace his own success back to a series of specific opportunities, cultural privilege, and just good luck. He believes his success doesn't have to be so unusual or unique, and that by expanding opportunity, we can increase the likelihood of success for all.

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