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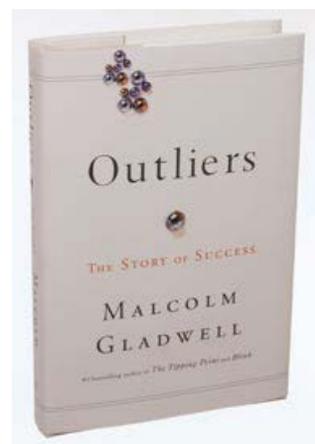
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OFF THE SHELF

The Sociology of Success

By STEPHEN KOTKIN
Published: November 1, 2008

MALCOLM GLADWELL has a rare ability: he can transform academic research into engaging fables spotlighting real people. His new book, **“Outliers: The Story of Success”** (Little, Brown, \$27.99), with its entertaining psychology and sociology, is catchy and beautifully written. But it also feels like a sumptuous Chinese meal that an hour later leaves a diner feeling hungry.



A staff writer for [The New Yorker](#), Mr. Gladwell uses “Outliers” (to be released Nov. 18) to refute the simplistic old saw of the self-made man — and to remind us that success is social.

One of his best examples involves Joe Flom, who was born during [the Great Depression](#). His parents toiled in the Garment District of Manhattan. After graduation from law school he was shunned by the patrician, “white shoe” law firms. Yet he became part of the storied New York firm Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom as a seeming rags-to-riches success.

Certainly, Mr. Flom exhibited smarts and ambition in droves. But he was also born in a “demographic trough,” meaning that he faced fewer rivals for coveted school slots. And his Jewish immigrant parents had skills that enabled them to set up urban businesses and benefit more from hard work. Mr. Flom’s rejection by establishment law firms forced him into new areas, like work on lucrative hostile corporate takeovers.

So in the end, all of Mr. Flom’s supposed disadvantages proved to be advantages. Further, the work of the legal scholar Eli Wald, recapitulated by Mr. Gladwell, shows that Joe Flom belongs to a packed galaxy of star lawyers who share Jewish descent, 1930s birth, and Garment District parents.

Over and over, Mr. Gladwell zeros in on circumstances. The best hockey players in Canada, the psychologist Roger Barnsley has noted, are disproportionately born in January, February and March. Why? The eligibility cut-off in age-grouped youth leagues is Jan. 1, meaning that those born at the beginning of the year are older than their peers. These more mature youths get more coaching attention, reinforcing their age advantage.

American children born in the latter part of the year are underrepresented in college. Conveying the research of the economists Kelly Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey, Mr.

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Gladwell writes that those born early in the calendar year enjoy many months of developmental advantage because of arbitrary school entrance cut-off dates, and are often tracked into “gifted” programs.

By way of equalizing the field, Mr. Gladwell suggests grouping school classes and youth sports leagues by birth months. “We cling to the idea,” he writes, “that success is a simple function of individual merit.” We? Who actually thinks that way? Not the parents holding their late-month-born children back a year before they enter kindergarten. Not those involved in wrestling or other sports that group individuals by weight.

If some points border on the obvious, others seem a stretch. Asian children’s high scores at math, Mr. Gladwell would have us believe, derive from work in rice paddies. Never mind that few of the test takers or their urban parents in Hong Kong, Singapore or Tokyo have ever practiced wet-rice agriculture. Noting that math test scores correlate with how long students will sit for any kind of exam, Mr. Gladwell points to an Asian culture of doggedness, which he attributes to cultural legacies of rice cultivation. (Paddies require constant effort.)

Here as elsewhere, Mr. Gladwell promotes a cultural explanation for success no matter how indirect the causal mechanisms.

Although the individuals that Mr. Gladwell cites are exceptional, their success, he argues, does not flow from their natural gifts but from their unusual cultural legacies, the uncanny opportunities that come their way, and their really, really hard work.

He demonstrates this to bravura effect in an epilogue about the emergence of his mother, Joyce, as a writer and therapist from a slave-descended, mixed-race Jamaican family. Her background turns out to have had hidden advantages, bolstered by fortunate breaks and effort. Even better at making this point are chapters that connect the Beatles and [Bill Gates](#). Top musicians and software programmers make their superiority look effortless only after 10 years of nonstop practice, Mr. Gladwell shows.

But often the examples are unsatisfying, as in his discussion of the KIPP academy in the Bronx, where 90 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches but do as well in math as privileged suburban children. Why? Supposedly because the academy abolished long summer vacations. Mr. Gladwell, following the research of the sociologist Karl Alexander, contends that virtually the entire educational performance difference between better-off and poorer children derives from what some students do not learn when school’s out.

So forget class size, funding levels, teachers, principals, parental involvement, role models, home life. Just shorten the summer break. “The only problem with school for the kids who aren’t achieving,” Mr. Gladwell asserts, “is that there isn’t enough of it.” His argument is attention-grabbing, but simplified.

Academic journals brim with disputes as theories are contested by opponents. Mr. Gladwell revels in the flaws of Lewis Terman’s hoary work on I.Q. — because it argues for innate ability — and he gives voice to Terman’s critics. But he omits discussing objections to the work of the social scientists he chooses to rely upon. As in a magic trick, he wows the audience, using bold claims and exquisite storytelling, but we see no arguments that would detract from his brilliant spectacle.

A version of this article appeared in print on November 2, 2008, on page BU6 of the New York edition.

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