

Hard work pays off

Gladwell finds success once again with 'Outliers'

"For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance. But from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

— Matthew 25:29

This Biblical quote is found at the beginning of Malcolm Gladwell's latest book, "Outliers: The Story of Success." But only after contemplating the full significance of what Gladwell is saying does the true relevance of the excerpt become apparent.

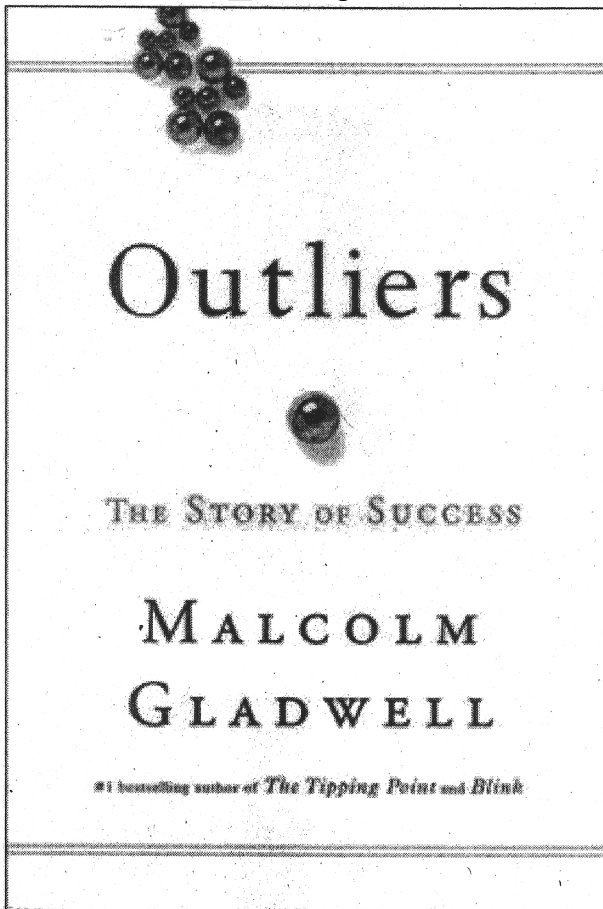
As the title implies, "Outliers" is about exceptional people — smart, rich, powerful — who achieve success at the upper limit of what seems possible. By carefully examining the careers of such diverse people as Microsoft founder Bill Gates, atomic bomb developer Robert Oppenheimer, the Beatles and even legendary chess champion Bobby Fischer, Gladwell comes to some interesting and thought-provoking conclusions about those who attain extraordinary success.

Gladwell is on a mission to disprove a fundamental misconception: that those who succeed in life do so primarily due to personal initiative and individual effort. As the author masterfully points out, those attributes definitely contribute, but they fall far short of telling the whole story. If there is a basic tenet to "Outliers," it is that talent alone rarely leads to truly transcendent accomplishment; other factors almost always contribute more to this kind of success. (In many respects, Gladwell's own extraordinary success as a writer — three No. 1 bestsellers so far — is a reflection of many of the ideas he presents in the book.)

"Outliers" consists of nine chapters organized into two major parts. In the first section, "Opportunity," Gladwell argues convincingly that success is almost always a function of the experiences that one is afforded in life. The second half of the book, "Legacy," deals primarily with the influences of culture and background on one's ultimate accomplishments.

One of Gladwell's central ideas is what he calls the "10,000 Hour" rule. This refers, both figuratively as well as literally, to the approximate amount of time that has to be spent engaging in an activity in order to become exceptionally proficient. Incidentally, 10,000 hours is the equivalent of devoting 20 hours per week to an activity over the course of 10 years. To back up this assertion, he demonstrates (with amazing precision) how Bill Gates' marathon programming sessions as a teenager had a direct correlation to his later success with Microsoft. Similarly, he recounts how the Beatles' years of playing seven-hour gigs in Hamburg, Germany, eventually contributed to their phenomenal worldwide success.

Providing anecdotal evidence to substantiate these kinds of assertions is one of Gladwell's specialties. In the case of Bill Gates, for example, he notes that during "one seven-month period in 1971, Gates and his cohorts ran up 1,575 hours of computer



"Outliers. The Story of Success" by Malcolm Gladwell, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008. 309 pages, \$27.99.

Though light on empirical evidence and too reliant on anecdotes, 'Outliers' is a fascinating and informative look at why a select few truly make it big.

time on the ISI mainframe, which averages out to eight hours a day, seven days a week." And with respect to the Beatles, he reveals that "by the time they had their first burst of success in 1964 ... they had performed live an estimated 1,200 times."

According to Gladwell, the potential for achieving extraordinary success depends to a significant extent on when and where you were born, as well as the opportunities that you are exposed to as a result. Your ultimate potential for success, he argues, is shaped fairly early in life by circumstances largely outside your control.

"If you make a decision about who is good and who is not good at an early age," Gladwell observes, "if you separate the 'talented' from the 'untalented'; and if you provide the 'talented' with a superior experience, it doesn't take a genius to figure out who's Most Likely to Succeed." Continuing, Gladwell notes that "the closer psychologists look at the careers of the gifted, the smaller the role innate talent seems to play and the bigger the role preparation seems to play."

Chapter 6, titled "Harlan, Kentucky," will no doubt be of considerable interest to readers in this area. In this chapter, Gladwell describes the interfamilial conflict that has distinguished the Appalachian region for generations. He begins with a narrative about the clash between two

of the principal families in the early town, the Howards and the Turners. "When one family fights with another, it's a feud," Gladwell writes. "When lots of families fight with one another in identical towns up and down the same mountain range, it's a pattern."

Gladwell uses this example to explain how culture is an important factor in determining how success is related to context. He makes the observation that what developed in the region can be called a "culture of honor" and it substantially contributes — even to this day — to the accomplishments (or lack thereof) of people who are from this part of the country. Or, in Gladwell's words, "Can we learn something about why people succeed and how to make people better at what they do by taking cultural legacies seriously? I think we can."

One important implication of "Outliers" involves debunking the meritocracy myth. If Gladwell's observations are taken to their logical conclusion, it becomes obvious that factors such as socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic background contribute more to success in life than do innate abilities or aptitudes. When viewed through this lens, the book can be seen as a strong endorsement for the philosophy of Affirmative Action.

Of course, "Outliers" is not perfect. Gladwell tends to assume that we all define success in the same manner, and he provides a lot more anecdotal evidence than empirical data. Still, his ideas are exciting and provocative. He offers a new way of interpreting the world around us that is, at the very least, worthy of serious consideration.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, counseling and student affairs, Western Kentucky University.