

In Response to your Book Review

Ms. Sullivan,

I began writing this response for the “letters to the editor” column, but at 600+ words it will not fit that forum. I am not interested in editing down the column (as I have done in previous instances) because I think that my point would be lost. Therefore, I have to content myself with writing you directly and with the satisfaction that you will hear another view on the book you have so easily dismissed.

I apologize for referring to you in the third person, as I stated I had intended this for a LTTE.

Finally, thanks for sparking my response with your review. I love when writing emerges fully formed from my head, as this did.

Dave

Dear Editor,

Margaret Sullivan’s condescending dismissal of Malcolm Gladwell’s new book “Outliers” says more about Ms. Sullivan than it does the book, or the theories it espouses.

Many, perhaps most, Americans are threatened by the notion that luck or chance could play such an important role in our success. It is almost subversive to state that the archetype “rags to riches” Horatio Alger story is just a myth. Ms. Sullivan takes great glee in reducing the theories in the book to an absurd level, in a vain effort to defend these myths. *Me think she doth protest too much!*

One of the observations in the book, that 10,000 hours of practice seems to be a threshold for the mastery of anything, receives especially mocking attention from Ms. Sullivan. The book talks about the Beatles long hours in Hamburg, Germany prior to their international success. Where, she argues, are the other bands that toiled in Hamburg? How do you explain successful bands that have hardly ever practiced?

In this instance, Ms. Sullivan has confused the concept of “mastery” with “success.” These are parallel themes in “Outliers.” It is generally accepted that mastery of any one field is the byproduct of dedicated, hard work. Gladwell’s refinement to this is an observation of a threshold amount of time required to achieve mastery. Gladwell further states, controversially for Ms. Sullivan, that this mastery is merely a necessary ingredient for success, that something as arbitrary as luck (however you define it) plays an equally large role in life’s successes or failures.

For the Beatles, the eight-plus hour gigs in Hamburg allowed the musicians to hone their performance skills through constant repetition and revision. Even more importantly, John Lennon and Paul McCartney began to develop their writing talents. This preparation of their skills allowed them to be “the best prepared” when musical opportunity came knocking. As one small example of the role of chance in the success of The Beatles, what would have happened if Brian Epstein did not go to the

Cavern Club to see The Beatles play and they never hooked up with Epstein? Would all of their mastery have matter if they never were discovered?

Other well prepared bands never got that “lucky break,” while other “talent-poor bands” that did receive a break, squandered it because of a lack of “mastery” of their craft (think Freddie and the Dreamers or Gerry and the Pacemakers, both Beatles contemporaries). Finally, I think Ms. Sullivan will agree that the notion of “success” in music needs to be completely de-coupled from any thought of craft “mastery.” Everyone can point to a favorite example where the financial success seems to be inversely related to the talent of the individual. I pick Britney Spears, someone who has made many times more money than The Beatles, with what could charitably be called modest talent.

The above example illustrates just one way that Ms. Sullivan’s trivialized misstating of the concepts in “Outliers” leads to a fallacious conclusion regarding the theme of the book. The theme is not that there are mysterious patterns in how people succeed that are only available through some arcane form of biographical data mining, or that hard work and individual initiative don’t play an important role in our successes. The theme is that there are forces and events that shape our life, which play a role in the person we become. By understanding that reality, we should all be just a little bit less cocky when we succeed and a little bit less judgmental towards those who don’t. Additionally, by learning factors that have positively influenced other people’s lives we might discover ways of positively influencing our own lives, or our children’s.

Too me, this is the message of “Outliers;” a message that everyone could benefit from hearing and a message that, sadly, Ms. Sullivan seems to have completely missed.

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