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Malcolm Gladwell

Author and Writer for "The New Yorker" Magazine

Q&A Podcasts

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BRIAN LAMB, HOST, Q&A: Malcolm Gladwell, author of the new book, "What the Dog Saw," and three others we'll talk about, what does it mean now to be Gladwellian?

MALCOLM GLADWELL, AUTHOR, "WHAT THE DOG SAW": I have no idea. I mean, I hear that. People use that phrase, which I suspect was invented by one of the publicists at my publishing company.

I think to describe something, which I think has been going on for years, which is just intellectually engaged, narrative non-fiction.

But I didn't invent that. That was around many hundreds of years before I came along.

So, like I say, I think it's an example of corporate self-promotion by my publisher.

LAMB: If you look on the "New York Times" best-seller list, as I'm sure you know – and I'm not sure how often this has happened in history – you have four of your books either on the paperback best seller or the hardback best seller.

And let me just go down briefly. Just explain, give us half-a-minute. You are number eight on the hardback. Well, I'm going to get myself messed up. No, you're number eight on the paperback with "Tipping Point," which came out in 2000.

What's – 30 seconds of what "Tipping Point" was.

GLADWELL: "Tipping Point" was a book about using the idea of the epidemic to explain how ideas spread through a population. And so, it took all the language and metaphor of epidemiology and applied it to behavior, to things we think about, the clothes we wear. So, it's a kind of primer on how change happens.

LAMB: Do you have a total of how many books have been sold by now?

GLADWELL: Oh, I don't know. No, I don't know.

LAMB: We talked two million the last time you were here, three years ago.

GLADWELL: Yes, it must be more. But it's – I don't – it's curiously difficult to find that question out. And …

LAMB: Do you pay any attention to the numbers?

GLADWELL: Not really. I mean, I'm one of those people who, once I've written something, I never go back and reread it.

So, I think it's very important to always be looking forward. And if you go back and you dwell too much on what you've done, you start to fall into bad habits and repeat yourself and get trapped, I think, a little bit.

Program Details

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Info: Our guest is Malcolm Gladwell, best-selling author and writer for "The New Yorker" magazine. Mr. Gladwell currently has four books on either the New York Times Hardback Bestseller List or the New York Times Paperback Bestseller List. His newest book, "What the Dog Saw" is a compilation of stories he wrote for "The New Yorker" magazine. His previous best-selling books including "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference" (2000) "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking," (2005) and "Outliers: The Story of Success" (2008). Malcolm Gladwell has been a writer for "The New Yorker" since 1996. Prior to that he wrote for The Washington Post for nine years.

LAMB: So, you don't go back and ever reread something you've written.

GLADWELL: No. I haven't read "The Tipping Point" since it was published nine years ago.

LAMB: Does it worry you you might forget some of it?

GLADWELL: Oh, I'm sure I have. In fact, people periodically will tell me about something that I've written. And I'll say, "Did I write that? Really?"

I'm either horrified or I'm, you know, sort of quietly pleased to learn that I wrote that.

LAMB: These numbers, by the way, are early December when we're recording this. Number seven on the paperback list for 109 weeks is "Blink."

GLADWELL: "Blink" is about rapid cognition. It's about the decisions we make in an instant, and when they're good and when they're bad, and how to make them better. And just – it's really a kind of exploration of this fact that an enormous amount of what we do is governed by things that we, you know – we go like that. Right?

I found that really interesting, and wanted to kind of devote a book to explore that phenomenon.

LAMB: That was done in 2005.

And then, 52 weeks on the hardback best-seller list is "Outliers," which was done in 2008 – then number 10, the week we're talking about this. What's that about?

GLADWELL: "Outliers" is an investigation of success. It's an attempt to understand what are the reasons why certain individuals are outliers, why they lie outside normal experience, what sets them apart. And so, it looks at culture and luck and generation, and all the kind of other things that I think feed into success.

LAMB: And the current one, "What the Dog Saw." Where did that title come from, by the way?

GLADWELL: That is the – that is borrowed – the current book is a collection of essays from the "New Yorker" that I've published over the last 10 years. And "What the Dog Saw" is the title of one of the essays, which was a profile of Cesar Millan, the dog whisperer, on National Geographic.

And I wanted to write an essay about – I was spending all this time with Cesar. And my first thought was to write an essay about what does Cesar see when he sees a dog, because he has this extraordinary ability to calm dogs. I mean, you see that on TV, but I saw it. I followed him around for quite some time.

And I would see – it's incredible. He would walk into a room, and there's a dog misbehaving. And the dog literally looks at Cesar and just kind of – so then I realized, no, no, no – halfway through I was like, oh, no, no.

The interesting question is not what does Cesar see when he looks at a dog. It's what does the dog see when he looks at Cesar.

And so, that was the title of the essay. And I thought it's such a – I don't know. Any time you can put "dog" in the title of a book, I think you're doing well. So …

LAMB: Did you pick the essay – the "New Yorker" pieces for that? Or did …

GLADWELL: Yes, with some suggestions from my editors. I wanted to get a sense – sometimes your favorite pieces are not actually the best pieces, you know. Because writers – very often writers have very idiosyncratic reasons for liking things that aren't shared by the rest of the world. And so, you have to kind of – you have to check your preferences against more objective sources.

LAMB: I read – you tell me if you want – that you got as much as $4 million for this book.

GLADWELL: Oh, no. No. That's not even – way, way, way, way less.

LAMB: Does that drive you crazy when you see stuff like that? It was printed …

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: … somewhere in one of these blogs.

GLADWELL: No. I mean, I think people know well enough that, if that number didn't come from me or my publisher, then chances are it might not be true. So, I think, you know, I don't really – I think most readers are fairly, or appropriately, skeptical about the things they read.

LAMB: 1996 you went to work at the "New Yorker." You spent nine years before that at the "Washington Post."

Born in England.

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: Spent some time in Jamaica where your mother was born, and grew up in Canada – in Elmira?

GLADWELL: In a little, tiny town that has since become famous, because down the road is where – in Waterloo, 10 minutes away – is where the BlackBerry comes from. So, we're now on the map, we think. BlackBerry the device, not the fruit.

LAMB: Some of the stuff we normally talk about on this program can be found on the transcript of "Booknotes," when we talked three-and-a-half years ago. That's a total of 1,297 pages in book form. This last book has already been up to as high as number three, I think, and it's number five the week we're talking.

Of all the books you've done before, when you go out and speak, which book do people ask you the most about?

GLADWELL: Well, that's interesting. Well, "Tipping Point" has probably been read by the most people, because it's been out the longest. And it has an idea that naturally applies itself to many, many different domains and realms. And so, that's always a kind of occasion for much discussion.

But I don't know. I mean, "Outliers" is a topic that everyone's sort of interested in, in one way or another. And so, there's always some little piece that people are curious about or want to know more about.

So, it's hard to say what the – which one has provoked the most responses. But it would probably be "Tipping Point," I think.

LAMB: It's also reported that you are paid as much as $80,000 to give a speech.

GLADWELL: Yes, I don't talk about money. I do get – all of us who do this speech business know that it's a – it can be a very good living. That's true, yes.

LAMB: OK. Let's just say that it's anywhere from $40,000 to $80,000 to give a speech. What's that experience like when you all of a sudden have been contracted by somebody to make a lot of money to stand up for 90 minutes?

GLADWELL: Yes. Well, I …

LAMB: Do you worry about it?

GLADWELL: Not really. I'm not a – I don't get nervous before public speaking. I used to – it's, for a very simple reason, I'm actually – I am kind of a nervous person. But years ago, I used to be a competitive runner. And I would get insanely nervous before big races, so much so that I wouldn't be able to sleep for weeks beforehand.

And ever since then, everything else I've ever had to do which seems scary, I just think, is it as scary as running a race? I think, no, it's not. So, everything else in my life has been – so I never get nervous.

I like – I really like giving talks, because I think that the discipline of being forced to tell a story in front of a group of people and explain yourself through spoken word, as opposed to written, is very important for a writer. They are skills that beautifully

translate to the task of writing on paper. And I think that I've become, since I started to do my speaking, I think I've become a much better storyteller.

And the other thing that's crucial about it is that it forces you to get outside your world. And that's hugely important if you are going to do, as I do, a lot of this non-fiction journalism. I am by nature somewhat reserved and reclusive. But I need, by virtue of my job, to meet people, hear about new ideas, hear stories, get different perspectives.

And so, what speaking has allowed me to do is to – I meet people I would never in a million years have met before. And it's fascinating. It sort of constantly replenishes my store of information about the world.

LAMB: How often do people come up to you and say, here's an idea for a story?

GLADWELL: Well, they do that more often – they don't phrase it that way. More often is you start to chat with somebody who does something totally different from you, and they tell you something that's incredibly interesting. And they don't realize it's interesting, because it's in – it's something familiar to them. Right? So, it doesn't have to be as formal as that.

The amazing thing is that – this is sort of my kind of rules of conduct – I think everyone's interesting. I really, honestly, seriously believe that, that when people are talking about the things that they know well and do well, they are almost always interesting.

And if they're not, it's generally your fault – because you're not asking the right questions, or you haven't made them comfortable, or you haven't – and not their fault. And once I learned that lesson, my journalism became a lot easier.

LAMB: You said to a group recently, "In times of crisis" – this was November 19, 2009 – "In times of crisis, we want our leaders to be smart, but what we want is our leader to be humble."

GLADWELL: Yes. This comes from a – I wrote a talk – after the financial crisis I wrote a talk, part of which is in the New Yorker, but part of it was new, that was all about the Battle of Chancellorsville, which is …

LAMB: Civil War.

GLADWELL: … the Civil War, Robert E. Lee and "Fighting Joe" Hooker.

And Lee beats Hooker, and he shouldn't have beat him. Hooker had him outnumbered two-to-one. I mean, Hooker had him dead to rights, and Lee pulled it out. And it's this incredibly interesting battle.

And there's all kinds of reasons why Hooker blew it. But at the core of it was that he was arrogant. He was overconfident. He thought he had Lee so completely outgunned, that he no longer had to take Lee seriously as an opponent.

And I thought that there was some – a truly extraordinary, fascinating lesson in that, because overconfidence turns out to be, psychologists tell us, the most common kind of flaw of experts. You know, if incompetence is the disease of the novice, overconfidence is the disease of the expert.

And what I believe happened – one of the things, one of the ways to explain what happened on Wall Street two years ago is precisely this, that these Titans of the financial industry began to behave as Hooker did on the eve of the Battle of Chancellorsville. They believed themselves to be in such command of their world and their environment and their decisions, that they were no longer capable of failure.

And so, I think this notion that our experts and our leaders need to be humble more than they need to be good, is really important. It's not to say that they don't need to be good. Of course they do. It is that, as we get better and better at what we do, we run an ever increasing risk of overconfidence and arrogance.

And we need to keep that – the task of the leader or the expert is to keep that psychological problem in check. And they need our help to do that.

LAMB: When you think of leaders, can you name a leader that you think showed some humility?

GLADWELL: Oh, interesting. I thought you were going to ask the opposite question, a leader who did not. That's a much easier question to answer.

Well, you know, it's funny. There is a wonderful book written a couple of years ago called "Overconfidence and War," by a man who, tragically, whose name I have forgotten at the moment, in which he walks through virtually every major conflict of the last 200 years, trying to find the humble military leader. And he can't find one – or he can rarely find one.

In fact, the overwhelming preponderance of the leaders he looks at suffered from some kind of major overconfidence. So, in that realm, it's hard to find. What I do – you know, but that's not to say there isn't humility at all kinds of levels.

I had a conversation a couple of weeks ago. I was giving a talk, and I was seated next to a guy who ran a regional bank in Akron, Ohio. And I said to him – I was talking about his business – "How's your business, your banking business?"

And he says, "Oh, we're fine. In fact, we're more than fine. We're about to buy a big bank in Chicago."

And I said, "Why are you fine, and no one else is?"

And he was an older man. He was probably in his late sixties. And he said, "I've been through this three times before."

And what I suspect was – we talked a bit – and I suspect that he got humbled 25 years ago, or in the early '70s or late '70s, and never forgot that lesson.

And it's that kind of – it is in times like that, that we understand why experience and learning from experience is so important. You know, it's more than simply – that word is not a kind of meaningless triviality.

Experience matters, because there's certain kinds of things that you only learn when you've been humbled. Right? You can't just explain to a 28-year-old, things are going to get bad. It's not going to sink in.

But to this man I was speaking to, who saw it first hand and dealt with it, and I'm sure went through all manner of crises before, it's a lesson that he kept with him, you know.

Colin Powell, before the Iraq War, was the – he was the in-house skeptic. Why? Because he'd been through Vietnam, you know, in a very first-hand way, in a way that many of the other decision-makers had not, and had never forgotten those lessons. So, there's another sort of case of someone who appropriately was humbled and learned from experience.

And you've got to have people like that around. Right?

LAMB: I've got a stack of stuff here that includes praise and criticism. What did – what about your own humility after four enormous successes.

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: Ten years – this is in 10 years. It hasn't happened that many times in history.

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: I mean, what's that do to your head? What's that do to your own humility?

GLADWELL: Well, it's a good question, because I have thought about this. There's no denying that it changes you. It changes the way your life is. It changes how quickly people return your phone calls. It changes how much money you have in the bank. And these are all kinds of things that have both positive and negative consequences.

I am lucky in a number of ways. One is that – writers, we have built-in kind of support systems that do keep us humble. I have an editor at the "New Yorker," Henry Finder, who, you know, is not dazzled by any of my book sales, and is, if anything, more willing today to tell me when what I've written is nonsense than he was 10 years ago.

I have a mother who is resolutely unswayed by the opinion of the outside world, and who said, actually, of "Outliers," she said – you know, in a way that only a mother can – "I really like this book." Meaning, I think, that she didn't like the first two so much.

So, you know, when you have people in your life who kind of keep you in check, it's easier. And luckily, I don't have any kind of real power. I'm not running a major country or investment bank, so the kind of damage I can do if I were to get overconfident is

limited – thankfully.

LAMB: Has anything directly happened, cause and effect, from one of your articles, one of your books, stories that come back to you and say, this changed because of?

GLADWELL: Yes. You know, the nature of influence that a writer has is very specific. We don't change the world. What we do is, we start conversations. And maybe, if we're lucky, those conversations well down the road are developed and enhanced, and some idea gets in the hand of someone who can actually effect change.

There is a piece in "What the Dog Saw" – one of my favorite pieces in the whole collection – called "Million-Dollar Murray," about homelessness. And it is – it describes the work of a guy named Phil Mangano, who was an extraordinary public servant in the Bush administration. He ran the kind of homelessness policy. And he was responsible for dramatically changing the way we treat the homeless in city after city after city.

He was the Paul Revere of this new policy - went - traveled incessantly for four years, making the argument that it is cheaper to solve homelessness than to treat homelessness, that the homeless person who stays on the streets costs us all far more money than if we simply were to go and give than person an apartment, you know, someone to watch over them and, finally, a job.

And I wrote a piece about his ideas, his crusade, and also the kind of larger intellectual context in which he was operating. I didn't create that movement, but I publicized what he was doing.

And many people in that world tell me that it made their work a lot easier to have an argument, a kind of fully fleshed-out argument, in a national magazine making the case for what they were doing. It helped to overcome some of the skepticism.

That's the way in which writing of the sort that I do is, I think, valuable. And it helps people who are – when I bring – when I shed light on something, it helps those people who are interested in creating change. It makes their life a little bit easier.

LAMB: There is a woman by the name of Maureen Tkacik who writes for "The Nation." Do you know about her? "Why Is Malcolm Gladwell So Successful?" is the title of her piece, back in November 23rd of 2009.

She says, "That success is in the eye of the unsuccessful would seem to be the great unspoken dilemma dogging critics" – I need to re-emphasize – "dogging critics asked to consider the work of the rich and famous author and inspirational speaker Malcolm Gladwell. No matter how well-intentioned or intellectually honest their attempts to assess his ideas, the subtext of Gladwell's perceived success, and its implications for their own aspirations in the competitive thought-generation business, obscures their judgment and sinks their morale."

GLADWELL: I read that essay. And it has many interesting parts. And I think she's a very smart person.

I have to say, I have no idea what those two sentences mean. So, I'm a little bit at a loss about how to respond to them. I don't know what it means that success lies in the eyes of the unsuccessful – or whatever. I mean, I've struggled with that a little bit.

There is a – in people who comment on what I do, I think there is a sense sometimes that – a dissatisfaction, not so much with me, but with my audience, just a kind of feeling that they can't believe so many people would so happily kind of go out …

LAMB: Tell you what. We're going to turn that mike off so you can put it back on, if you can fit it on your – I mean, I'll read some more here while you're doing that.

GLADWELL: Good.

LAMB: Because otherwise, it makes a lot of noise.

Anyway, in this piece, Maureen Tkacik writes, "Gladwell may be merely 'a slickster trickster' who 'markets marketing' (as James Wolcott put it), or a 'clever idea packager' who 'cannot conceal the fatuousness of his core conclusions' (science writer John Horgan); he might even be an 'idiot' (Leon Wieseltier)," from the "New Republic."

"But one thing is clear: Gladwell is no fad. He is a brand, a guru, a fixture at New York publishing parties and in the spiels of literary agents hoping to steer writers toward concepts that will strike publishers as 'Gladwellian.'"

There's another – do you go to a lot of publishing parties?

GLADWELL: Actually, I almost never go to publishing parties. That's – I'm somewhat reclusive, so – I think it's, when you're making a list of – when you're setting someone up, one of the things you do is, you pretend that they are fixtures at publishing parties.

I haven't been to one in probably about three years.

LAMB: What about somebody calling you an idiot? I mean, did you actually see him do that? I just see it in her …

GLADWELL: Oh, it was in – that was Leon Wieseltier of the "New Republic," who I used to write for. I wrote many articles for him years ago, some of which he put on the cover of the "New Yorker" – of the "New Republic."

So, it's very odd that he would now call me an idiot. I don't think he – I think he meant that, probably, a little bit facetiously.

LAMB: Steven Pinker – you have answered him in a recent – I picked up this "New York Times" Sunday review of books. And you take off by saying, "It is always a pleasure to be reviewed by someone as accomplished as Steven Pinker, even if in his comments on 'What the Dog Saw'" – and he had written a review – "he is unhappy with my spelling" – and then you put in parentheses, "rightly" – "and with the fact that I have not joined him on the lonely ice floe of I.Q. fundamentalism."

All right. What are you getting at?

GLADWELL: Well, he – I just wanted to make the point. And I should say that I genuinely have a lot of respect for Steven Pinker. I've read all of his books. I thought "The Language Instinct" is a classic.

But some of his criticisms of my writing come from a very particular scientific and ideological perspective. You know, all kinds of people who think about intelligence – and I do, as well – you know, we're somewhere along this continuum, how much of a nature guy are you, how much of a nurture guy are you.

And he's over here. He thinks that I.Q. matters a great deal and it's highly heritable. And I'm a big – my books are all about the power of culture and environment. So, I'm over here.

And I just wanted to say, you know, when he criticizes me, he's doing so, not because I'm violating the rules of scientific understanding, or what have you – just because we're at different points on a continuum. That's all.

And it isn't – it's not right or wrong, or legitimate or illegitimate. It's just a difference of scientific perspective.

LAMB: He's a Harvard professor …

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: … and you guys go back and forth in e-mails.

And you actually write, "I have enormous respect for Pinker," in this "New York Times" piece. "And his description of me as a 'minor genius' made even my mother blush. But maybe on the question of subjects like quarterbacks, we should agree that our differences owe less to what can be found in scientific literature than they do to what can be found on Google."

Explain that.

GLADWELL: He – one of the things that he had a quibble with in his review was an essay I wrote about quarterbacks and teachers. And it just made this point. I was talking about what does it mean to – teachers are the single most important variable in education. Teacher quality explains more of student outcome than almost any other factor you can deal with.

So, the question was: How can we get better teachers in the classroom? And I talked about how it's really, really difficult to predict whether someone's going to be a good teacher until they actually teach. Right?

So, you can get someone with really great grades, and you can get someone who's got all manner of degrees, and you can get someone – but none of those things are terribly useful in figuring out who's going to be the all-star teacher and who isn't.

And so, I was saying, the only way you can tell is to have people start teaching, and then pick the ones who can do it well and

keep them, and tell the rest of the people to do something else.

And I said, this is marvelously analogous to what happens with quarterbacks, because, if you look at the history of NFL teams' decisions in drafting college quarterbacks, you'll see they don't do a very good job of predicting who's going to be a good pro quarterback or not. And the reason for that is not that they're stupid, or not that they're not trying hard enough, but just because the college game is so dramatically different from the pro game, that doing well at one doesn't help you predict what you're going to do at the other.

He had a problem with this. And so, I e-mailed him and I said, why don't you think – why are you so sure that NFL teams actually do do a good job of predicting who's going to be a good quarterback? Can you give me your scientific sources?

Because I had a scientific source. I had an article in the journal of – one of the – I had an article in an economics journal.

So, he e-mailed me back, and his sources weren't from the scientific literature at all. They were, like, a blogger and some other blogger. And so, I was like, why are you attacking me when all your sources are are bloggers?

But it was meant in good fun. But it's always – you know, there's nothing wrong with having a little bit of a dust-up every now and again.

LAMB: Going back to your first book, "The Tipping Point," when was the Malcolm Gladwell tipping point?

GLADWELL: Well, it was getting the job at the "New Yorker." The minute you start at that magazine, and you start getting – your audience grows dramatically – you start getting read in a way you've never been read before. You start getting taken seriously in a way you've never been taken seriously before. And you have an opportunity to write about things at a length and a leisure that you never had before.

So, that was clearly – I was just – I was one of many "Washington Post" reporters. I was anonymous. I wasn't, you know, much of anything. And then I got that job, and everything changed.

LAMB: But at some point along the way, I mean, "Tipping Point" sold a tremendous number, a couple million at least, and beyond that. And then "Blink" came along, and it sold a couple million. And then "Outliers." Do you have any idea how many – did that sell as well as "Blink"?

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: Something happened there, that all of a sudden people are quite anxious to get that next book you write.

GLADWELL: Yes. Well, you get – there is a thing where, you know, people get comfortable with the way you look at the world.

So, I think of – I love that book "Freakonomics." And what was interesting about that book "Freakonomics" was that it was a very particular and distinctive way of looking at the world. Right? It was an economist and a journalist who have combined storytelling and kind of academic rigor to shed light on stuff that you would never have thought an economist had an interesting to say about.

And so, that book, I read that book. I love that book. The new one comes along. I see it. It's "SuperFreakonomics." What do I do? I buy it.

Why? Because that way of looking at the world has – they've already – they've won me over to their particular perspective on things. And it's so unusual, and I know I'm not going to get it anywhere else. And so, I'm delighted to kind of have another go with them, go for another ride with them.

And I think some part of that is probably what's happening with me, is that people read "Tipping Point." And even if they didn't agree with everything I said, I think that they found something exhilarating or exciting about the way in which I approach topics.

LAMB: Have you had any analysis done about where your books sell in the country?

GLADWELL: No. I never – I never have, no. I've never …

LAMB: You know, like two-thirds of the American people live on this side of the Mississippi.

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: And whether or not you …

GLADWELL: No, I don't think, you know – I don't think of my readers as being defined by geography or class or income. I think of them being defined by an attitude. I think of them as just being kind of curious, open-minded people.

Look, I've run into them, and that's the sort of – I just get that vibe over and over.

LAMB: When you're invited to speak, where more often than not will you be traveling to? What part of the country?

GLADWELL: Well, all over. But, you know, if you do a lot of sort of conventions and company meetings, you do them in warm weather places in the winter. So, the people come from all over to San Diego, or something. So, you're in San Diego.

But, so, no. It's a pretty – when you think about where they're coming from to hear me, it's from all over the country.

LAMB: I'm going to go back to Steven Pinker's original analysis review in the "New York Times," back in the middle of November.

"The common thread in Gladwell's writing is a kind of populism … "

Do you agree?

GLADWELL: Very much, yes.

LAMB: "… which seeks to undermine the ideals of talent, intelligence and analytical prowess in favor of luck, opportunity, experience and intuition."

GLADWELL: That's a little strong, but – I wouldn't go quite that far – but …

LAMB: "For an apolitical writer …"

Are you an apolitical writer?

GLADWELL: Mildly. I'm a Canadian, like Professor Pinker. So, are Canadians apolitical? Or are we just different?

LAMB: "For an apolitical writer like Gladwell, this has the advantage of appealing both to the Horatio Alger right and to the egalitarian left."

Do you sense that when you're out there at those conventions and speaking to those groups?

GLADWELL: Yes, I don't – I mean, I don't – he's right in the sense that I do not – I am not explicitly political. I'm not interested in playing those kind of familiar, ideological games. I'm interested in providing a kind of different view of things.

And so, I don't – it never comes up when I'm talking to an audience, political matters. And so, there's no kind of opportunity for people to divide themselves along ideological lines when they're listening to me or reading me, because I'm just not – we're not touching on those issues, you know.

LAMB: By the way, "What the Dog Saw," the current book, is 19 articles from the "New Yorker." Are you working on another book for the future already?

GLADWELL: No. I'm working on articles for the "New Yorker." I'm not – my day job is my "New Yorker" writing, and I do that in the years between book writing. But my next book is, I'm sure, many years away.

LAMB: Many years.

GLADWELL: You know, you need an idea, a good one. If I don't have – if I never have another good idea for a book, I'll never

write another book. You know?

I don't think you decide to write a book, then look for an idea. I think you have to have an idea that's good enough for a book, and then you go and do it.

LAMB: Now, I'm not going to put words in your mouth, but if you just do a simple arithmetic, and you say you've sold six million books, and you get $3 a copy, that's $18 million. You don't have to agree with that, but you've made a lot of money.

What's money done to you?

GLADWELL: I mean, not that – I mean, I'm not a very – I mean, it's off in the bank somewhere. So, I don't really – I'm not a big spender. I mean, I rent my apartment. I drive a Volkswagen. I'm not a kind of – I don't have a kind of extravagant lifestyle.

But I didn't grow – I grew up in a very kind of – my family was fundamentally kind of agnostic in its feelings towards money. My parents weren't – we didn't lack, but we weren't terribly concerned with it, you know. We didn't sort of – it wasn't meaningful.

And I sort of have the same attitude towards it. It's sort of – it's fine. I mean, it's better than not having it. But it's not something that makes a great deal of difference in how I live my life.

LAMB: At one point in one of your books you say that "Judith Rich Harris, author of 'The Nurture Assumption,' changed the way I thought about the world."

Who is she? Do you know her? When did she write the book, and what was it?

GLADWELL: Judith Rich Harris is a psychologist who I wrote about years ago when she wrote a book called "The Nurture Assumption," which is an extremely interesting book. And what I – she makes a number of very sophisticated arguments in the book, one of which is that when we talk about what we mean by environmental influence – so, all of us are shaped in part by our genes, and in part by the world we grew up in.

And she wanted to argue – and I think she convincingly did so – about what we mean by that is really peers and not parents. In other words, that parents provide less of an environmental influence on their lives, on the lives of their children, than do children's siblings, friends, cohort. And she works this out.

And what appealed to me about that idea was that almost all of my – a lot of my writing is about trying to understand the nature of the environment, the influence of the environment. That's really what I come back to again and again and again.

"Outliers" is trying to understand success in a context of the worlds people are born into – generation, culture. "Blink" is trying to understand what does what's going on around you, how does that affect the kind of snap decision you make, right? So, I keep coming back to this issue.

And what she did very brilliantly and very early on in my kind of thinking was that she clarified what that means, what the environment means, and she said even more powerfully that we have only the dimmest understanding of what the environment means. Right? We've been operating on all kinds of – using all kinds of myths that are untested and untried, and we need to rethink that really important word.

And that was a sort of a crucial motivation for me to write some of the books I've written.

LAMB: A fellow named Paul Greenberg. He writes editorials and has a column at the "Arkansas Democrat-Gazette." It's a conservative paper; he's a conservative writer.

He probably has as harsh a criticism as I've seen. He says, "Malcolm Gladwell's specialty is the kind of pseudo-intellectuality designed for the carriage trade, and delivered with an air of insight – and only the air. Pretentious, ponderous, and mostly piffle – when it's not just plain wrong-headed." It's the print version of the most pompous talk show you can think of.

(LAUGHTER)

GLADWELL: He doesn't sound very happy, does he.

LAMB: He doesn't. I just wondered, do you get a lot of that?

GLADWELL: Well, I mean, you never …

LAMB: I mean, are you pretentious? Do you feel pretentious?

GLADWELL: I don't think I am. I mean, I try not to be.

LAMB: Are you ponderous?

GLADWELL: I don't know. I mean, people will read you how they read you. And you have to – a long time ago when I started writing, being a journalist, I had to kind of sit down and think about how am I going to deal with criticism? Because criticism, as writer, is absolutely inevitable. Right?

You're always going to have the Paul Greenbergs. There's nothing you can do about them. And the question is, how do you want to respond to them?

And I decided very early on that, A, I was never going to make it a sign of my own success or feeling that I had succeeded, that I silence critics. I'm not out to convince the world. I have no interest in so doing. I just simply want people to engage with my ideas. And if they disagree, fine.

The other thing that I decided early on, that I would be happy if the people that I cared about, people closest to me, thought what I was doing was meaningful. If my mom likes it, if my editor likes it, if my best friend Bruce likes it, I'm happy.

And that – those are important rules. And I think, if you could have some version of that, some kind of system for making sense of criticism, it's a lot easier to function.

LAMB: He goes on in his own piece to quote Joseph Epstein from the "Weekly Standard."

"So much of what Gladwell writes that is true seems not new, and so much he writes that is new seems untrue. Preponderantly, what he reports feels more like half- and quarter-truths, because they do not pass the final truth test about human nature: They rarely, that is, honor the complexity of life.

"In prose that never lingers over complication, he explains that life is fairly simple, no great mystery about it, nothing cannot be explained, nothing cannot be changed, nothing not improved."

GLADWELL: Well, that's an odd – I think I remember reading that. You know, "Outliers" is, for example, is, I would have thought, an example of the opposite phenomenon. I mean, I was trying to confront what I thought was a simplistic idea about success and say success is actually far more mysterious and more complex than that.

It's not simply about talent. It's about – it matters what year you were born. It matters, the particulars of the culture you grew into. It matters, you know, the particular – I mean, the book is one, long attempt to kind of complexify this thing.

So, that's sort of odd.

And then, we were just talking about quarterbacks and teachers, and how the impetus for that article, which is in "What the Dog Saw," was all about the fact that we cannot predict who's going to be good. And we've been trying over and over again to simplify this and make out that, if you simply have a teacher's degree and a B.A., and this kind of certification, you will be a good teacher.

And my whole point in that article was actually, no, you can't predict it. It's messy. You've got lots of people try and pick the ones who are good, and say sadly goodbye to the rest.

So, I feel like I spend a lot of time in my writing doing the opposite to what he's saying.

LAMB: University of Toronto?

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: Canadian history major?

GLADWELL: Yes, and English history.

LAMB: OK. What's the difference between studying Canadian history and studying American history?

GLADWELL: Oh, so much. How can you say that?

LAMB: Well, what I mean – I mean, obviously.

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: But what is it that the Canadian history professors are teaching that …

GLADWELL: Oh, I see.

LAMB: What's the difference in the …

GLADWELL: Well, we are, you know, we are a very, very minor player in the world. So, when you learn Canadian history, you're really learning the history of everybody else, because everything we do is so hopelessly, you know, influenced by our larger neighbors and larger allies.

So, you learn a lot about England, and you learn a lot about France, and you learn a lot about America, and you learn a lot about all kinds of other places – which is useful, I think.

I remember as a kid listening to the radio. We listened to the news on the CBC Radio every night at six o'clock. And the thing about the news at six o'clock on the radio in Canada is that it's all about the rest of the world, because it has to – you're Canada. You can't give a kind of sophisticated account of what happened that day and confine yourself to a country of 18 million. Not enough happened of consequence.

So, I grew up as a little kid hearing about Africa and South America in the news every night, right, all of these places. And then, you know, it's very different, though, when you're in a country like America, where you actually can give the news every night and only talk about America, and not – I'm not saying that's a bad thing. America is so large and complex, and so sits at the center of so much that happens in the world, you really can have a sophisticated conversation about this world that is about America.

It's just a matter of where you are in the – so, in Canada, we were forced to look outwards. And that was a really wonderful experience for someone who wanted to go into the business of being professionally curious.

LAMB: I won't stay on this very long, but in this country you hear about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and on and on.

Who do you hear about in Canada?

GLADWELL: Well, Sir John A. Macdonald, who is the man who founded – who is the man who brought independence to Canada, the Canadian Confederation.

But you hear about lots of other – you know, you hear about English kings. And you hear about – you know, it's a – all my memories of childhood history are just completely – I would hear about Michael Manley, you know, the founder of Jamaican independence and …

LAMB: Because of your mom.

GLADWELL: Because of my mom. Or, you know, there was just a kind of – my father would talk about Henry VIII to us. And, you know, there was a – so, it was always out there.

LAMB: Since we last talked, a man named Barack Obama became president of the United States. And he is like you, as a …

GLADWELL: Biracial.

LAMB: … biracial.

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: Any impact? And did you instinctively like him, because he was like you?

GLADWELL: Well …

LAMB: And what do you think of him now?

GLADWELL: Well, I'm a – I will confess to being a huge fan of his, I would hope not just because he and I are both biracial. But I, you know, like many Americans, my initial – I was initially fascinated by him. He's exotic. Right? I mean, he really is.

And he has that kind of princely air about him. He's really quite an extraordinary – you know, we had a – the man he reminded me of was Pierre Trudeau, who was the great Canadian prime minister of the late '60s, early '70s, who was cosmopolitan and regal in that same kind of way, and a little bit aloof, you know, kind of – but charismatic. I mean, there's really quite some similarities between the two of them.

And like many people, I was profoundly hopeful that his election represented some kind of turning point in the way we think about race. I'm less convinced of that now, actually. But I was hopeful of that at the time.

LAMB: Are you very political?

GLADWELL: I'm not. Like I said, there's a reason I don't, rarely ever talk about politics in my pieces. I just don't. Like I say, I'm Canadian, so I don't really kind of – I've never quite wrapped my mind around American politics.

LAMB: Of all the stories that you have done since 1996, which one did you spend the most time on?

GLADWELL: Oh, a very easy one to answer. The piece in "What the Dog Saw" called "Late Bloomers," which I – it took three years to get into the magazine. It went through so many drafts, I cannot even count how many.

And it was because I had this really interesting idea, which was there was a work – I read this book by an economist at Chicago named David Galenson, and which I thought was so fascinating, in which he talked about how genius comes in two very different forms. He talked about the conceptual innovator, who is the person who has the big, bold idea. And he talks about the experimental innovator, who is the person who succeeds, creates through trial and error.

And the conceptual innovator is the prodigy, right, and the person who works through trial and error is the late bloomer.

And I loved this idea so much, because he was dignifying the late bloomer, which I thought was a – there was something wonderful in there. But I had a devil of a time finding the right stories to illustrate that point, because I like, when I have an academic argument, I like to find narratives to complete it. And it just was really hard to find the right ones, but sometimes you have to be persistent.

LAMB: And you focused on two people?

GLADWELL: I ended up choosing this novelist from Dallas named Ben Fountain, who wrote a book called – a collection of short stories – called "Brief Encounters with Che Guevara," which is magical. And he was my late bloomer. He published that book in his late 40s, after spending 20 years sitting at his kitchen table in Dallas, writing and being rejected, and writing and being rejected.

And my prodigy was Jonathan Safran Foer, you know, who – you know, the brightest of the young novelists of …

LAMB: Who's on the best seller list with you now.

GLADWELL: He's on the best seller list.

LAMB: But on non-fiction.

GLADWELL: Non-fiction, yes. He wrote a really interesting book about vegetarianism.

And they were such fascinating contrasts. And they beautifully illustrate what I think David Galenson was talking about when he – and I don't know why – I don't know why it took me so long to find. But sometimes, you know, finding the right story is really difficult. And you can't – if you rush into print with something that doesn't quite work, you throw away that idea. And that's something you should never do.

LAMB: One of the people critiquing you suggests that you feel closest to – and correct the pronunciation – Nassim Taleb?

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: Is that – tell us who he is, and do you …

GLADWELL: I wrote a piece about Nassim, oh, maybe four or five years ago. Maybe longer than that.

LAMB: 2002.

GLADWELL: 2002. And he had just written a book called "Fooled by Randomness." And he was a Wall Street trader, who was making the argument that we greatly underestimate the frequency of catastrophic events in our life. And we also greatly overestimate our ability to control events, the role of – we underestimate the role of luck and overestimate our own kind of efficacy.

And Nassim is a brilliant man, one of the most gregarious and charming and hilarious people I've ever met.

So, I wrote this. I, you know, as one does sometimes when you write a profile, I fell in love with the guy. I mean, who wouldn't? He's just so fascinating. I wrote a piece about him.

And then he subsequently wrote a book called "The Black Swan," which was a huge best-seller.

And his – by the way, his ideas so brilliantly kind of predicted, anticipated the events of last year on Wall Street. I mean, he called it. I mean, he was saying this four or five years ago, that the models these traders were using, that they were using to justify these enormous, multi-billion-dollar risks, were based on a fiction. I mean, Nassim said this in 2002.

And I do feel – I do feel an enormous intellectual kinship. I mean, we talked about Judith Rich Harris before. If I had to list the people whose thinking has powerfully influenced mine, I would put Nassim very high on that list, as well. I think he's right. We want to – it's part of this desire we have as humans to pretend we are far more in control of things than we actually are. We're not respecting the mystery and the complexity of the world we operate in.

LAMB: Explain, though, how he made his money with the options.

GLADWELL: Oh, Nassim had a contrary trading strategy. So, what he would do is, he would basically buy what are called out-of-the-money options. He would buy a series of options on the stock market which would pay off only if stocks either went up extraordinarily, or, more importantly, dropped extraordinarily.

In other words, he had an investment strategy where 99 days out of 100 – or more, actually, 499 days out of 500 – he lost a little bit of money. But then, he was just waiting for a crash. And when the crash happens, he would make, you know, depending on the size of his position, tens, hundreds of millions of dollars, if not billions. In fact, I think the trading firm which he's involved with made, last year, made an utter fortune.

But it takes – he makes this really interesting argument. You know, it's really hard to do that. He wakes up every day knowing that there's a 99.9 percent chance he will lose money that day. Right? And he's just banking on something which no one – he doesn't know when it's going to happen. He's just saying, at some point, there's going to be a big catastrophe.

It could be seven years away, right, which means he will lose money every day for seven years, and then make it all back, and more, on the – and that's – nobody does that.

And what's one of the things that's so fascinating about him is that he tries to get at this question of, why don't more people do that? I mean, it's painful and difficult, but it's actually – it's a rational – it's a very rational way of approaching, of hedging your risk in the marketplace, right, being prepared for catastrophe.

LAMB: Where is he from originally?

GLADWELL: Nassim is Lebanese. But he's moved – he's American now, but his family is Lebanese. And he's …

LAMB: Do you still see him? Do you know him?

GLADWELL: Yes. I ran into him not long ago, and I e-mail with him sometimes. And, yes, you know, one of the great, wonderful things about writing these pieces for the "New Yorker" is that you meet – you get to meet these extraordinary people, who you would never meet otherwise, right? And spend time with them and get to know them, and keep in touch with them.

And when I make – there's a – I did a piece a couple of months ago for the "New Yorker" about this brilliant software mogul in Silicon Valley named Vivek Ranadive, who – it's all about how he – he's Indian – and what happened when he began to coach his daughter's basketball team, and began to coach them as an Indian, not as an American. He didn't know anything about basketball.

So, it's all about what happened when someone from outside of our culture discovers one of our – when a very, very thoughtful person from outside of our culture encounters one of our little closed, cultural worlds. Well, what does happen is he took this team of 12-year-old girls to the national championship.

But there's another guy who, you know, when would I have gotten to meet him otherwise. I mean, you write a story like that and you get to know these people.

LAMB: What story did you write that was the easiest – you got to quickly and it just fell in your lap?

GLADWELL: It was the opening piece in the volume is a profile of Ron Popeil, the great kitchen gadget entrepreneur and king of late-night infomercials. And it was – it's one of my favorite pieces that I've ever written. And it was far and away the most interesting, because he is so effortlessly interesting.

Ht was - every now and again as a journalist – it happens once every decade. You turn on the tape recorder. The person you're writing about starts talking. And as they talk, you realize, "I have to do nothing else. I just have to go home and transcribe the tape, and it's done."

It literally was that way with Ron. He just started talking, and then I went and talked to his cousin and his, you know, the guy he worked with and one other guy. And I just transcribed the tapes and literally just put blocks of text down, and it was done.

It's amazing. Sometimes that happens. It's a miracle when that happens. And it's – you never forget it.

LAMB: What are you doing with all of those tapes? Did you keep them?

GLADWELL: They're somewhere. I'm not very organized, and so, I don't know where they are. But they are somewhere in a box.

LAMB: So, you're not thinking of the future of a Malcolm Gladwell collection in some library somewhere.

GLADWELL: Oh, no, no. I doubt – I'm sure I'll be forgotten long before anyone collects my belongings.

LAMB: One of the things that comes through is that, you know, you couldn't go to grad school, you say, because you didn't have good enough grades?

GLADWELL: Yes. No, I wasn't a superb student.

LAMB: So, if there was a person you could thank for your writing ability, who would that be? Or did you just come to it on your own?

GLADWELL: Well, my mom is a writer. My mom is a lovely writer.

LAMB: Living in Canada?

GLADWELL: Living in Canada. And …

LAMB: Is your dad still alive?

GLADWELL: My dad is – my father is a mathematician, but he also has a – both my parents have an extraordinary, clear and simple way of expressing themselves, both in speaking and in print. And that was always – that's always been my model, that if you can express yourself, complicated ideas in a clear and simple manner, you will – people will read you.

LAMB: I know you live in New York City. West Village still?

GLADWELL: I do, yes.

LAMB: Do you intend to live in the United States for the rest of your life?

GLADWELL: I don't know. I like it here. I love this country, and I have – all of my friends are here. But if I ended up in Europe one day or back in Canada, I wouldn't be terribly surprised.

LAMB: Here they are. There are four of them, all on the "New York Times" Best Seller List, over a period – still on after 10 years.

GLADWELL: Yes.

LAMB: "Tipping Point," "Blink," "Outliers" and "What the Dog Saw."

Malcolm Gladwell, thank you for joining us.

GLADWELL: Thank you.

END