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"David and Goliath" Offers Lamorinda Readers Prescient Insights

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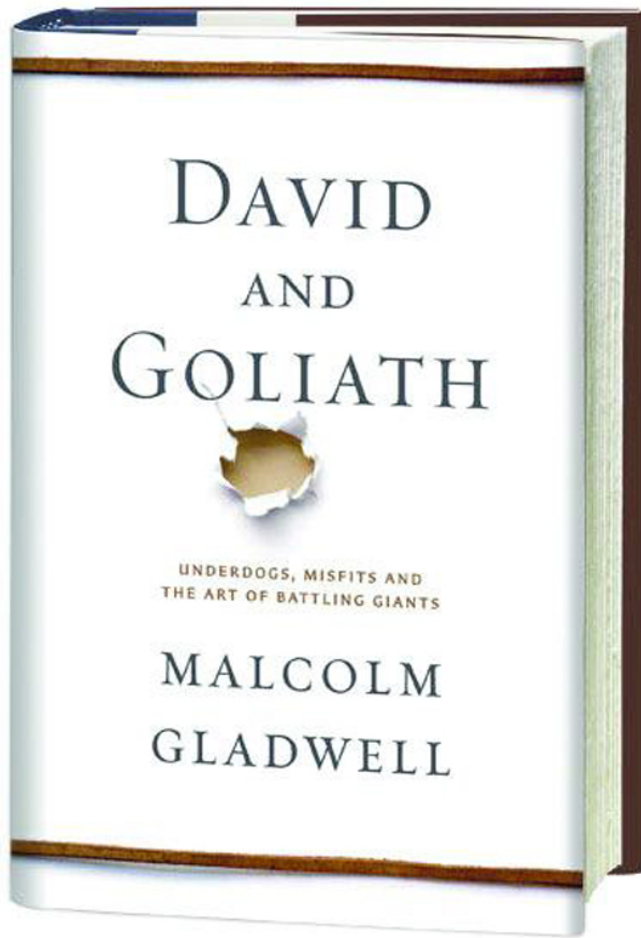


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The best thing about a new Malcolm Gladwell book might be the kerfluffle it causes. Starting with "The Tipping Point" in 2000 and floating on three subsequent bestselling books before this year's "David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants," Gladwell isn't afraid to tell the world it doesn't understand itself.

Inevitably, the world accepts the bestselling author's blend of storytelling, selective social science research and 'crystal ballism' with everything from adoring astonishment to grudging resentment to outright animosity. Pleased or infuriated, the chatter his books inspire means we're finally talking about something other than whether or not Congress will ever get along.

"David and Goliath" tells us the world doesn't steer along predictable paths or reward the mighty to the exclusion of the meek. Instead, life tips in a blink on an unexpected axis: delivering success to hard working, lucky outliers, and frequently, mislabeling beauty as a flaw, or predicting impending, certain victory according to size.

Expanding upon themes in articles he's written for The New Yorker, Gladwell scavenges for compelling real life narratives and research studies with simple, eye-pleasing data to support the premises of his books. In his latest tome, he reaches back to the Bible for a foundational "cunning beats cumbersome" message and forward, to recent social psychology research and stats related to college graduation rates and incarceration percentages. Inverted U-curves (demonstrating a featured item's rise-plateau-plunge trajectory) are his current favorite graphic.

Although Gladwell's opening argument - that "we consistently get these kinds of conflicts wrong" and "misinterpret them" - is deeply flawed when it comes to "David and Goliath" (I've yet to meet someone who thinks the story is an argument for weight lifting or for expecting oneself to be defeated by a bully with poor eyesight),

Gladwell swiftly moves into his pursuit of the story's underlying implications. Like his previous books, it's entertaining, scientific (to a degree) and written with the clipped flair that has made his book sales - and his advances - number in the millions.

Dividing the book into three sections, readers are taken on an upside down ride meant, in large part, to jostle the brain's gray cells. Growing up poor spawns a basketball coach genius; large classroom sizes improve learning; second-tier colleges spawn bigger fish than Ivy League schools; and losing one parent as a child is advantageous. More outrageously, experiencing dyslexia, or slots of bomb explosions (rather than just a few), or suffering debilitating racism, are gifts. And landing "on the far end of the (disagreeable) continuum," is a precursor to innovative success. In the final section, unlikely heroes confound: pram-pushing Irish citizens, a police officer bearing turkeys, a grieving father, a heartbroken mother and a French Huguenot priest.

All along, Gladwell champions the underdog, and in doing so, he occasionally over-reaches. A murky section on Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 battle against segregation in Birmingham, Ala., is particularly flimsy. And most egregiously, as any parent of a child with a disability will tell you, it takes good people to create silver linings. Watching a child struggle to read isn't a blessing: grace arrives courtesy of the tools and people who help a child overcome the obstacles.

For Lamorinda's academic-centric community however, Gladwell's book has prescient insights. It would be unfortunate if Gladwell's tendency to skirt opposing arguments and stack his own deck caused local readers to overlook the chapters on wealth and happiness, class size and test scores, and college choice and career potential.

"Wealth contains the seeds of its own destruction," he writes, referencing studies showing happiness follows the inverted u-curve when income rises above \$75,000. And although Gov. Jerry Brown's popularity ratings once doubled within three weeks of announcing his intention to reduce school class sizes, Gladwell cites studies and economists finding little statistically significant evidence demonstrating students perform better in smaller classes. Especially relevant to parents of high school-age students, is the story of a bright young woman whose choice to attend a prestigious university over one with a lesser reputation knocked down her ambition - as surely as David's

slingshot stone toppled Goliath.

A chapter on California's 1994 Three Strikes law allows readers without children to find close-to-home application of the book's themes. Created to combat crime with increasingly significant punishments, Three Strikes was supported by 72 percent of the voters. Statistics relating to the law's impact showed ambiguous reductions in some crimes - and costly, alarming prison population increases and an inflammatory effect on violent crimes. The law was amended greatly in 2012, by Proposition 36. If Gladwell ruffles the feathers of scientific purists demanding more or other substantiation for his claims, it's worth it. The benefit for the remainder of the world is astute, enjoyable storytelling and an opportunity to find contentment through better understanding. And maybe his sixth book will explore congress and discover they are, after all, getting along famously.

"David and Goliath" is available at Orinda Books and local libraries.

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