



MALCOLM GLADWELL
1963

Pop Sociology

CHAPTER 23

MALCOLM GLADWELL

“The Writer and His Tipping Point”

From one extreme we go to another, from Sir Alex Ferguson who didn't start until he was nearly 40, to Malcolm Gladwell, who was on the road to success before he hit 40. Gladwell is almost a premature PG-40er who was close to, and almost on the wrong side of the line I'm using, when he made it. Still we won't hold near-precociousness against him and we'd be shooting ourselves in the foot if we didn't take the opportunity to learn from his life and experiences.

Born in 1963, Gladwell graduated in history and kicked off his career as a writer at *The American Spectator*. He spent nine years as a science writer and New York bureau chief for *The Washington Post* before joining *The New Yorker* in 1996 as a staff writer, a post he stills holds down today. His beat at *The New Yorker* has been wide ranging and eclectic with a tendency to write on “pop sociology”. Apart from spreading his name, his writing in *The New Yorker* led to the American Sociological Association's Award for Excellence in the Reporting of Social Issues for “his contributions to *The New Yorker* which expound and elaborate in novel ways the works and ideas of distinguished sociologists”.

However, in the public eye Gladwell is famous for the stunning success of his three books *The Tipping Point*, *Blink* and *Outliers*, all

dealing with contemporary issues and all drawing on a wide range of social science research. The sales of these three non-fiction books from someone known only for writing outside the world of books have been astonishing. When interviewed on the launch of *Outliers*, his third book, which hit bookshops in 2008, his first two books had reportedly sold two million copies each in the USA alone.

There is no doubt that Gladwell's own professional "tipping point", his personal breakthrough moment, was when his literary agent was able to sell *The Tipping Point* for a reported US\$1 Million. There should be absolutely no doubt in any reader's mind about the significance of that deal; I speak from my own experience in touting PG-40 to number of "agents". To a man, and a woman, they told me flatly that there is no chance of a non-fiction deal on any terms, let alone for US\$1 Million, unless the author is already famous or had a "platform". So how did Gladwell manage it?

First of all, he's an excellent writer; by the time he wrote *The Tipping Point* in 2000 he'd dialed in 13 years of writing at a high level and before his first book hit the shelves he had written on numerous topics from sociology to psychology and human communications. He had covered many of the hot topics, trends, policies, and politics of the day plus many aspects of business and consumer behavior as a published writer. Secondly, he'd developed a solid following for his works like graphic artist Frank Miller, Gladwell's success is firmly grounded in his investment of both time and hard work before striking out; time which helped him become well known among a potential audience and developed a following. He was paid to research and then paid to put what he had learned down on paper so that people could read about it, and read they did. The hard yards of practice honed his craft and gave him the potential circulation for further written work. This created "the platform" which allowed his agent to secure such a lucrative first contract for what appeared to be a relative unknown.

Gladwell's success is based on a series of events which produced a "naturally" gifted writer and placed him in a position to hone his craft and build a keen audience for his output. He then put in the hard work to develop an eye for a good story and the skill to present it in a compelling way. While he may not have made it as late as some of the other PG-40ers featured in these pages he's no overnight success either; even after

securing a deal for *Blink* he could have sunk back into comfortable but relative obscurity. However Gladwell followed up on his initial success and is now a literary phenomenon. Three non-fiction best sellers, up to US\$40,000 for public speaking engagements and a reported film deal for *Blink*, sold to Leonardo DiCaprio in 2005 for US\$ 1 Million; and no doubt another book or two in the pipeline. The recently published *What the Dog Saw*, a compilation of twenty two stories from The New Yorker is probably just a placeholder in his story.

Did Gladwell make it at 37 with the publication of *Blink*? There's no doubt that it helped. Massively. But I'm certain that we wouldn't be talking about Malcolm Gladwell today if he hadn't followed through on *The Tipping Point*. What he did after *The Tipping Point* has helped make *The Tipping Point* and Gladwell himself the real successes they are today and moved that phrase into our vocabulary.

And that's what I think we can take away from Gladwell; work hard to hone your craft for a specific audience and when your break does come take it and follow through. Your bandwagon might start rolling a little before you hit 40 but keeping your shoulder to the wheel will make sure that it keeps going and picks up momentum. A good start can be made infinitely better by what comes after it, building the critical mass needed to truly make it.

DOWNLOAD more free chapters of PG-40

www.PG-40.com

www.PG-40.com