

BLINK. SNAP. BUZZ.

Review of *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, by Malcolm Gladwell (New York: Little-Brown, 2005)

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Malcolm Gladwell has a good eye for a great story. And in *Blink* he tells one great story after another to illustrate the power of snap judgments—those virtually instantaneous and occasionally life-changing decisions guided by intuition, instinct, or “gut” feeling that we all make in life, love, and war.

Conventional wisdom says our judgments are better when we have lots of information at our disposal and when we carefully deliberate before deciding anything. But often we don’t need to gather more information, analyze the situation, or ponder our options at length to know what we should think or do. As Gladwell says: “There are moments—particularly at times of high pressure and stress—when haste does not make waste, when our snap judgments and first impressions offer a much better means of making sense of the world.”

To make this vital point, Gladwell takes us on a marvelous tour. We learn how speed dating works, why some surgeons are more likely than others to be sued for malpractice, and how a retired renegade general humiliated the Pentagon’s best and brightest wargamers. We find out why all top-40 rock songs are mindlessly similar, what common behaviors by spouses doom marriages, and how Oreo cookies have ninety distinct attributes of appearance, flavor, and texture. *Blink* is a truly entertaining romp through a candy store of ideas, personalities, and scientific findings.

So I like the book, right? Ah, beware of snap judgments! Sometimes first impressions—like your first impression from the above three paragraphs—can be misleading. So sometimes judgments based on first impressions will be wrong. The message of this review: think before you *Blink*.

Everything I said in the first three paragraphs above I believe to be true, but those paragraphs don’t reveal my full opinion of *Blink*. A reader who doesn’t take the time to read more will almost certainly make the wrong judgment about what I say here. So it is with many

things in life—first impressions can be misleading, sometimes even deadly.

Gladwell is right that our brains have an astonishing ability to recognize patterns, to focus on what’s key in a storm of unsorted data, and to arrive—in a flash—at accurate assessments of staggeringly complex situations. We have an uncanny ability to read each other’s faces and plumb the emotions in the mind behind, even though our dozens of facial muscles give us each a repertoire of literally thousands of possible expressions. Expert birdwatchers can identify a particular species from a glimpse of a flight pattern hundreds of meters away. And the world’s great art specialists often know, in a single glance, that a painting or sculpture is a fake, even though they can’t articulate why. To them, it just feels wrong.

In all these situations, people are “thin-slicing” the data they’re receiving from the world around them—they’re disciplining their minds to pay attention to very specific bits of data streaming in from that world and they’re drawing conclusions based on those bits alone.

So far so good. But too often Gladwell makes a mess of the details. In his effort to give his readers an overly simple, “one-size-fits-all” theory of fast cognition, he cherry picks sexy scientific findings, mostly from recent experimental psychology. In the process, he ignores literally decades of highly relevant research in cognitive psychology, social psychology, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience on such central topics as stereotyping, experiential knowledge, tacit knowledge, framing effects, neural networks, and cognitive selection. Then he often misinterprets and misrepresents the scientific findings he does discuss. And last but not least, he’s so eager to entertain us that his stories overwhelm his argument: he often seems to tell a great story simply because it’s a great story and not because it supports the point he’s trying to make. Perhaps as a result of these flaws, his argument is full of contradictions—some of which literally leap out at the attentive reader. By the end of this book, the reader is left with a mishmash of half-developed ideas and no real understanding of fast cognition’s intricacies or how it can go astray.

As it turns out, I have a story of my own about the perils of fast cognition, and it involves Malcolm Gladwell himself. A few years ago, we met briefly when our book tours intersected. In the 1990s, Gladwell had developed a wide following as a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, but his 2000 book *The Tipping Point* propelled his renown

into the stratosphere. On a quick visit to meet his family in Ontario in early 2001, his Canadian publisher arranged for him to chat with an audience at a church in Waterloo. Since there was some overlap between the topics of our recent books, his publisher and mine agree that it would be fun if we did a joint event.

I remember it was a bitter evening, and people were bundled up in winter coats when they arrived. I was looking forward to meeting Malcolm, and we were introduced to each other in the minutes before the event started. We chatted briefly, but he seemed reserved and inscrutable, even cold. I had a lot of trouble reading his face. After we were introduced to the audience, I spoke first for about twenty minutes, Malcolm followed, and then we took questions for a while. His talk was far better than mine (I still had lots to learn about public speaking), and his answers to questions were careful and interesting. But there was something under the surface that bothered me—he seemed to project weariness, even indifference. I got the feeling that he really didn't want to be there and that he was just going through the motions. An uncharitable thought crossed my mind: perhaps he felt this Canadian audience was beneath him.

So I came away from the event with a negative impression of Malcolm Gladwell. But after reflecting on the evening for a while, I realized that there were all kinds of reasons why my snap judgment was likely wrong. Malcolm was probably exhausted; I think he'd just flown in from New York City. Anyone who has transited LaGuardia on a busy weekday evening knows that it's one of the best prescriptions for a foul mood. He was on his way to see his family, and who knows what fraught interactions he anticipated there. Most importantly, I was almost certainly subject to what psychologists call "motivated bias": Malcolm Gladwell has a huge audience for his ideas, something that's the envy of any non-fiction author, and envy can subtly twist one's perceptions in nasty ways. To be brutally honest, what I saw as Malcolm's arrogance was likely nothing more than a reflection of my own feelings of insecurity at that moment.

Now, *Blink* does acknowledge that snap judgments can be wrong. But the book's explanation of how and why is superficial and often completely muddled. For instance, Gladwell emphasizes, rightly, that our choice of what to include in our thin slice—that is, our choice of which data from our surroundings we focus on—crucially determines the quality of our judgments. But sometimes he says we make bad judgments because we have too little data and other times because we have too much. He says that Coca-Cola executives acted on too little

when they decided, on the basis of blind taste tests in which people preferred Pepsi to Coke, to introduce New Coke; and then two chapters later he argues that orchestras consistently avoided hiring female brass players until the 1970s because the people making the hiring decisions had too much data—in particular about the auditioner's sex (a problem that was solved only when screened auditions were introduced). Similarly, Gladwell argues early on, as in the quotation at the start of this review, that stress and pressure make our snap judgments better, and then he devotes a whole chapter at the end of the book to showing how these factors often lead to precipitous decisions that cause horrible tragedies.

And just how "fast" is fast cognition, anyway? It may be very fast at the instant the judgment is made, but a focus on that instant ignores the immense, resource-intensive, and time-consuming investment that people have made beforehand to gather data, sort through it, and painstakingly learn to identify what matters and what doesn't. The tactical intuition of a great general, the art expert's mysterious ability to recognize a forgery in a second, and even our everyday ability to recognize people's emotions through their facial expressions are all predicated on years and years of training, sometimes conscious, much of it unconscious. Gladwell acknowledges this fact, but it takes an astonishing 186 pages before he does so explicitly.

And that's the real danger of *Blink*. A lot of people are going to thin-slice this book. In other words, they're going to blink at *Blink*. They'll read the first few pages, and they won't get to Gladwell's acknowledgment, muddled though it is and far later in the book, that human fast cognition is an astonishingly powerful ability that can also be astonishingly dangerous if it's undisciplined, misused, or badly trained. In our infogluttled world, we're all under huge pressure to move quickly, to multitask, and to increase our information throughput. So we're all looking for excuses to thin slice, and we're all looking for excuses to avoid the hard work that makes thin-slicing effective.

Within a few weeks, *Blink* will be part of the Zeitgeist. *Blink* will Buzz. And its wide influence will subtly allow people to rationalize prejudice, stereotyping, and the premature closure of reflection and thought. Simple storytelling sometimes comes with a high price.