

David and Goliath



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM GLADWELL

Malcolm Gladwell was born in England and grew up in Canada. He studied history at the University of Toronto and afterward went to work for the conservative magazine *The American Spectator* in Indiana. By the late 1980s, Gladwell had risen to begin covering science and business news for the *Washington Post*, and gradually found that he excelled at simplifying complex information for a lay-audience. Gladwell began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1996 and has stayed there ever since. He rose to success after composing a *New Yorker* article called “The Tipping Point,” the basis for his first book. After publishing [The Tipping Point](#) in 2000, Gladwell became a popular guest speaker for businesses, think tanks, and universities. Since 2000, he’s published four successful books, including [Blink](#), [Outliers](#), *David and Goliath*, and *Talking to Strangers*. He continues to write for *The New Yorker* and appear as a guest speaker around the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

David and Goliath spans a large amount of time, since Gladwell uses a number of events throughout history to illustrate his arguments. First and foremost, he retells the biblical story of David and Goliath, when the Israelites and Philistines were at war in ancient times. Furthermore, he references T. E. Lawrence’s victory against Turkish forces at Aqaba during World War I, when Lawrence and his army of Bedouin soldiers trekked through the desert and repeatedly took their enemies by surprise. Gladwell also calls upon the German bombardment of London during World War II, when Nazi forces bombed the city for eight consecutive months. Later, he tells another story about the German occupation of France around the same time, discussing the dangers of hiding Jewish people from Nazis and the small fascist government the Germans allowed the French to form. In terms of slightly more recent history, Gladwell examines the American civil rights movement and the effort to fight segregation in the South in 1960. Lastly, he considers the power dynamics during the Troubles, which was a 30-year conflict that began in 1968 in Northern Ireland between the country’s Catholic community, Protestant community, and the British military.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

When discussing *David and Goliath*, it’s worth considering the book alongside Gladwell’s other nonfiction titles, including [Blink](#), [The Tipping Point](#), and [Outliers](#). In particular, [Outliers](#) is especially similar to *David and Goliath* least insofar as both

books explore the factors that contribute to what society deems admirable or desirable. In both cases—and, really, in all of his books—Gladwell is eager to challenge the uninformed assumptions that end up driving so much of the way people see the world. On another note, *David and Goliath* studies authority in a similar manner as Michelle Alexander’s [The New Jim Crow](#), which explores the United States’ racist and unjust penal system and the ways in which the idea of “law and order” gave law enforcement officials permission to implement bigoted, unfair practices. It also bears mentioning that Gladwell references a number of scholarly books throughout *David and Goliath*, including an important study of power by Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf Jr. called *Rebellion and Authority*, which Gladwell criticizes extensively.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** David and Goliath
- **When Published:** 2013
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, Pop Psychology, Pop Sociology
- **Climax:** Given the wide-ranging nature of the stories in *David and Goliath*, the book does not have just one narrative climax.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Listen Up. In addition to publishing articles and books, Malcolm Gladwell is the host of a popular podcast called *Revisionist History*, in which he revisits interesting moments throughout history that he believes have been overlooked.

Source Material. The idea to write *David and Goliath* came to Gladwell in 2009 when he published an article in *The New Yorker* entitled “How David Beats Goliath.”



PLOT SUMMARY

Gladwell begins by recounting the battle of David and Goliath, an Old Testament story which takes place when the Israelites and the Philistines encounter each other in the valley of Elah. Neither army wants to advance for fear of rendering themselves vulnerable, so the Philistines send Goliath—their largest warrior—to engage in one-on-one combat. At first, none of the Israelites want to face Goliath because he’s so large, but then a small shepherd boy named David volunteers. King Saul tries to dissuade David, but he eventually agrees to send him

because nobody else will go. David runs into the valley carrying nothing but his staff and several smooth stones, which he puts in a sling and sends hurtling through the air. The projectile strikes Goliath in the forehead and sends him to the ground, and David uses this opportunity to pick up Goliath's sword and cut off the giant's head. Gladwell argues that this story is informative because it not only demonstrates that underdogs can beat "giants," but that the very qualities that make a person powerful are often the qualities that lead to defeat. Conversely, some disadvantages can actually become beneficial. To illustrate this, he notes that Goliath fails because he's too large to react to David's projectile. What's more, David wins because his smaller size allows him act fast, and the fact that he's not a trained warrior forces him to think outside the box, which is how he comes up with the idea of using a projectile to slay Goliath.

Setting out to examine the nature of underdog stories, Gladwell turns to Vivek Ranadivé, an Indian immigrant who lives in California and becomes the coach of his daughter Anjali's basketball team. Vivek Ranadivé has no basketball experience, and the players on his team aren't particularly talented. However, Ranadivé notices that most basketball teams only play defense underneath their own hoop even though it's legal to apply defensive pressure as soon as the ball is inbounded. Accordingly, he teaches his team to play **the full-court press**, a defensive strategy that utilizes the entire court. This tactic makes up for the team's lack of skills, and it catches other teams by surprise. Using this approach, Ranadivé's team goes to the national championships, though they're forced to stop running the play in their final game when a biased referee takes out his frustration on them by calling unfair fouls. Once the team stops playing the full-court press, they lose, but not before demonstrating their ability to compete with much better teams.

Gladwell argues that Ranadivé's team's disadvantages contribute to their success, since they would never have played the full-court press if they hadn't been forced to think of ways to take pressure off of their weaknesses. This suggests that the things people conceive of as advantages and disadvantages aren't always accurate, since disadvantages can become beneficial in certain circumstances while advantages can become hindrances in others. Gladwell applies this line of thought to education, focusing on Shepaug Valley Middle School in Connecticut, where Teresa DeBrito is the principal. Although most people in the United States assume smaller class sizes lead to better student performance, Gladwell notes that the research on this matter is inconclusive. What's more, some teachers would rather have large classes than extremely small classes, since it's difficult to engage students when there are only a few children in the room. For this reason, DeBrito worries that enrollment at Shepaug Valley is shrinking. To illustrate the problem, Gladwell suggests that making classes

smaller is beneficial when there are already too many students (around, say, 30 children). If, however, a class is already small, making it smaller will only have a negative impact on the overall environment. The ideal class, then, has a medium amount of students. And yet, prestigious institutions continue to advertise small class sizes, and parents still gravitate toward this model.

The reason people continue to covet small classes, Gladwell upholds, is because society puts too much emphasis on whatever's considered desirable. For instance, most people believe that Ivy League schools set students up for success no matter what. To explore this idea, Gladwell tells the story of Caroline Sacks, a young woman who excels in school. Sacks wants to be a scientist for her entire life and is accustomed to being the best student in her class. When it comes time to decide where to go to college, she decides on Brown University over the University of Maryland—a seemingly reasonable choice, considering Brown's prestigious reputation. However, going to Brown is discouraging for Sacks because everyone around her is so smart and competitive. By Sacks's sophomore year, she is so dispirited by her chemistry courses that she decides to quit studying science. Gladwell notes that this is a very common occurrence at prestigious schools. In fact, research shows that students who want to become scientists would be better off going to "mediocre" schools (where they'd be a "Big Fish in a Small Pond") than they would be if they went to Ivy League schools (where they'd be a "Small Fish in a Big Pond"), since Ivy League schools are so competitive that many perfectly capable students drop out of the sciences because they're too discouraged to go on.

The difficulties Sacks faced at Brown were dispiriting, but Gladwell asserts that there are such things as "desirable difficulties," or challenges that lead to positive outcomes. To illustrate this, he introduces David Boies, a man who struggles in school because he has dyslexia. Because Boies finds it difficult to read, he develops extraordinary listening skills, which later help him excel as a lawyer because he knows how to listen in court for subtleties that other prosecutors overlook. He is now one of the nation's most sought-after litigators. Going on, Gladwell notes that dyslexia actually functions as a "desirable difficulty" rather often. He tells the story of Gary Cohn, whose dyslexia forces him to become acquainted with failure so that, when it comes time to put himself out there to secure a job as an options trader on Wall Street, he feels he has nothing to lose. Consequently, he goes to great lengths to obtain an interview despite knowing nothing about finance, and eventually lands the job and moves on from there to become the president of Goldman Sachs. In both of these cases, Gladwell adds, there's something else at play too: a personality trait known as "disagreeability," which helps a person cast aside any worry about what others might think.

To further demonstrate the unexpected benefits of hardship and the value of "disagreeability," Gladwell considers the life

story of a doctor named Jay Freireich. Freireich grew up in extreme poverty after his father committed suicide when he was just a young boy. Throughout his childhood, he knew all kinds of struggle, so he was especially motivated to succeed when he went to medical school. His first job is on the childhood leukemia ward at the National Cancer Institute—perhaps the most depressing posting a doctor can receive, since childhood leukemia is so relentless and causes immense suffering. Because Freireich feels like he's been through worse, though, he refuses to get depressed about the apparent hopelessness of his job, and this attitude enables him to keep working to find a cure. To do this, though, he has to try a number of unorthodox tactics that enrage many members of the medical community. Nonetheless, he doesn't care what other people think because he's focused on finding a cure. And though some of his methods put children through pain, he figures that since they're going to die anyway, he might as well do whatever it takes to find a treatment. In this way, he comes up with a new method of treating childhood leukemia, which now has a 90 percent cure rate.

Gladwell turns his attention to the civil rights movement, claiming that one of the reasons activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Baptist minister Wyatt Walker were able to successfully stand up against segregation was that they were used to being underdogs. Moreover, Wyatt Walker understood that sometimes standing up against authority means thinking outside the box and using clever tricks. When trying to attract attention to the Movement, he travels to Birmingham, Alabama in the hopes of getting the racist public safety commissioner, Bull Connor, to do something that will attract outrage across the country. At first Walker is unsuccessful, but he eventually helps stage a large protest made up of schoolchildren, coaxing Bull Connor to send police dogs after them so that reporters take pictures of angry officers sending bloodthirsty dogs at children. This results in a photograph that strikes a nerve in the national discourse about racism and segregation. According to Gladwell, this is a perfect example of how underdogs can use alternative strategies to use their opponents' power against them.

Still examining the nature of authority, Gladwell pivots to consider the Troubles, the 30-year conflict that took place between Northern Ireland's Catholic and Protestant communities, as well as the British military. In particular, Gladwell tells the story of an incident that took place in the small Catholic town of Lower Falls, where the British Army (which was biased against the Catholic community) came to search for illegal weapons. This incites rage amongst the residents, who throw stones at the soldiers as the British forces retreat after completing the search. And though the British Army could simply keep going, they turn around because they've been ordered to meet resistance with harsh punishment. This leads to a bloody conflict that results in a

multi-day curfew, during which residents aren't allowed to leave even to eat. The curfew only ends when a steady stream of Catholic women from a nearby neighborhood march to Lower Falls, showing solidarity with the residents and forcing the soldiers to leave, since they don't know how else to respond to the women's nonviolence. The primary mistake the British made during this encounter, Gladwell upholds, is that they overestimated the effectiveness of their own authority.

With this in mind, Gladwell tells readers about how a Californian man named Mike Reynolds influenced the state to institute a **Three Strikes Law** after his daughter was murdered by two ex-convicts. In the aftermath of this tragedy, Reynolds sought to address California's high crime rate, eventually helping pass Three Strikes, which ensured that third-time offenders would go to jail for 25 years to life. Reynolds is quite proud of this, but Gladwell—along with many criminologists—thinks that Three Strikes did more harm than good, since it overcrowded the prison systems and possibly even had a negative effect on the crime rate, though researchers are conflicted about the actual impact of the law. All the same, Gladwell asserts that Reynolds's efforts to change the penal system were perhaps misdirected, ultimately relying too heavily on the idea that strict laws and merciless authority are capable of bringing about positive change.

In a final examination of the idea that some forms of authority are simply useless when facing underdogs, Gladwell considers the life of a Protestant French pastor named André Trocmé, who openly shelters Jewish people during World War II. Even though the entire town of Le Chambon-sur-Ligne (where Trocmé lives) is forthcoming about helping Jewish people escape persecution, the fascists fail to stop them. Gladwell argues that this is largely because it's so clear that Trocmé doesn't care what will happen to him. No matter what, he's going to stand up for what he believes in. Consequently, the fascists don't know what to do with him, since killing him would do little to squash what he stands for and the movement he represents. In turn, Gladwell maintains that even the most frightening forms of authority are often rendered powerless by the underdogs who dare to stand up to them.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Malcolm Gladwell – Malcolm Gladwell is a writer and public intellectual, and the author of *David and Goliath*. Throughout the book, he attempts to untangle the misperceptions people have about power, arguing that the majority of society tends to assume that certain things are always advantageous, no matter what the circumstances. Turning to the biblical story of David and Goliath, Gladwell suggests that people often overlook the fact that certain disadvantages can be beneficial in some

contexts, which is why underdogs frequently triumph over “giants” like Goliath. To illustrate this point, Gladwell provides many real-life examples of this principle, interviews a wide cast of subjects, and draws upon scholarly research to support his claims.

David – David is a small shepherd boy from the well-known biblical story of David and Goliath. According to this story, David volunteers to fight a giant named Goliath on behalf of the Israelites. Goliath is waiting for a contender at the foot of the valley of Elah, where the Israelites and Philistines have encountered each other. To avoid unnecessary bloodshed, they decide to settle the conflict in one-on-one combat, but nobody wants to go up against Goliath because of his enormity. Nonetheless, David decides to fight because he recognizes that although Goliath is a capable warrior in hand-to-hand combat, he’s no match for a fast and clever opponent. With this in mind, David runs at Goliath and uses a sling to send a rock hurtling toward the giant’s forehead. This knocks Goliath to the ground, at which point David runs to him, picks up the giant’s sword, and cuts off his head. Gladwell uses the story of David and Goliath as the basis for his argument that sometimes disadvantages (like David’s small stature) can turn into advantages. He also suggests that David wins because he takes an alternative approach to one-on-one combat, thereby proving that it’s often beneficial to go against convention.

Goliath – Goliath is the large, giant-like warrior from the biblical story of David and Goliath. In this tale, the warring Israelites and Philistines meet each other in the valley of Elah, where Goliath volunteers to challenge just one Israelite in hand-to-hand combat to avoid massive bloodshed. To do this, he lumbers into the valley and challenges the Israelites while an assistant carries his massive shield. Goliath is dressed in hundreds of pounds of armor, and because of his impressive stature, nobody wants to fight him. Eventually, though, a small shepherd boy named David agrees to face Goliath. When Goliath sees David approach, Goliath makes fun of him for bringing nothing but a staff, but he fails to note that David is preparing to send a projectile hurtling toward his head. The stone strikes Goliath in the forehead and knocks him to the ground, at which point David runs over, picks up Goliath’s sword, and cuts off his head. Gladwell uses this story to illustrate that conventional strengths aren’t always advantageous—after all, Goliath’s size would have most likely prevented him from quickly dodging David’s stone even if he *had* seen it coming. Furthermore, Gladwell posits that Goliath may have had a tumor on his pituitary gland, a condition that makes people quite large. This condition can also negatively affect vision, meaning that the very thing that made Goliath so big is what kept him from properly seeing his opponent. In turn, Gladwell argues that traditional advantages aren’t always beneficial.

T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) – T. E. Lawrence was a

British military leader best known for leading the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Better known as “Lawrence of Arabia,” he was put in charge of a number of Bedouin soldiers who didn’t have conventional military skills. However, they were remarkably capable of traveling through the deserts and navigating around their enemies, which put them at an advantage while fighting Turkish forces. Gladwell notes that Lawrence was a creative leader who didn’t mind working hard to turn his army’s supposed disadvantages into advantages, which is how he ended up successfully seizing the port town of Aqaba from the Turks.

Vivek Ranadivé – Vivek Ranadivé is an Indian immigrant living in Silicon Valley in the United States. An employee at a software company, he decides to coach his daughter Anjali’s youth basketball team. Recognizing that neither he nor his team have much basketball experience, he decides to take a slightly unconventional approach to the game. To do this, he teaches his players to deploy a defensive strategy known as the **full-court press**, which is when a team applies defensive pressure at all times, not just once the other team has advanced the ball beyond half-court. This runs contrary to how most teams play the game, but it enables Ranadivé’s players compensate for their lack of talent, ultimately keeping the other team from outplaying them beneath their own hoop. This strategy leads the team to the national championships, but because the full-court press is an unconventional tactic, it enrages the parents and coaches of the other teams. For this reason, Ranadivé is forced to call off the strategy in one of the final championship rounds, and this costs them the game. Gladwell uses Ranadivé’s story to demonstrate how effective it can be to think outside the box. He also suggests that certain disadvantages (like Ranadivé’s team’s lack of basketball skills) often force people to think creatively and break from convention in ways that ultimately benefit them.

Caroline Sacks – Caroline Sacks is a woman who has always believed she would become a scientist. From an early age, Sacks excels in her academic pursuits and takes a special interest in science. As she gets older, this interest only gets stronger, and she takes pride in the fact that she stands out as a stellar student. When it comes time to decide where to go to college, she chooses Brown University over the University of Maryland. This, Gladwell notes, is an easy choice, since most people would opt to attend an Ivy League school over a public state school. However, Sacks struggles at Brown, finding herself discouraged not only by her subpar grades, but by the feeling that she isn’t as academically capable as her peers. By the time she’s a sophomore, she decides to stop pursuing a science degree even though it has always been her dream to become a scientist. Looking back, she says that she would most likely still be in the sciences if she’d gone to the University of Maryland. Gladwell tells this story in order to show readers that it can be demoralizing to be a “Little Fish in a Big Pond.” He

then uses this point to suggest that it's not always beneficial to attend an Ivy League school, since many people end up getting discouraged by such competitive environments and quit before they have a chance to establish themselves. In turn, Gladwell argues that the things society sees as prestigious and sought after aren't always as desirable as they seem.

Rick Pitino – Rick Pitino is a college athlete on the basketball team of the University of Massachusetts. When his team plays the Fordham Rams, Pitino is astounded as he sits on the bench and watches the Rams—who are significantly worse than UMass—beat them using the **full-court press**. Taking this as a lesson, Pitino adopts the full-court press when he becomes the head basketball coach of Boston University's team. He later teaches the press to his team at Providence College and when he starts coaching other basketball coaches. Despite the full-court press's success rate, though, Pitino knows that not everyone is willing to adopt it as a strategy because it takes hard work. To address how physically tiring it is to play such constant defense, Pitino spends a lot of time doing cardiovascular training with his players—something not all coaches are willing to do. Gladwell uses this as an example of why not everyone embraces alternative techniques, arguing that underdogs have to be genuinely desperate and motivated by their disadvantages to gravitate toward such strategies in the first place.

The Hollywood Executive – Gladwell refers several times throughout *David and Goliath* to an unnamed Hollywood executive who grew up in a working-class family. As a boy, the Hollywood executive worked hard to earn money by assembling a group of his friends to shovel his neighbors' driveways when it snowed, contracting out the workers to efficiently cover the entire neighborhood. Later, he worked in his father's factory and decided he didn't want to become a manual laborer, so he continued to work with an entrepreneurial spirit through college and graduate school. He's now extremely wealthy and owns a mansion, fancy cars, and a private jet. And though the executive is happy about this, he thinks his wealth has made it difficult for him to raise his children, since he doesn't know how to instill in them the same work ethic that he himself had no choice but to cultivate. Gladwell uses this story to outline the idea of diminishing returns, suggesting that more money doesn't always make people happier or make their lives easier. Although people often assume that certain advantages are *always* advantageous, Gladwell argues, the Hollywood executive's parenting dilemma demonstrates that there can sometimes be too much of a good thing. Furthermore, his success indicates that certain challenges can benefit a person, since his working-class upbringing inspired him to do whatever it took to prosper.

Teresa DeBrito – Teresa DeBrito is the principal of Shepaug Valley Middle School. Although most people in the United States believe that small class sizes are highly desirable,

DeBrito worries that the classes at Shepaug Valley are shrinking too much. This is because she has taught both very small and very large classes and knows that while large classes are exhausting to control, they're usually more successful than incredibly small classes (contrary to popular belief). In fact, tiny classes are difficult to teach because it's especially hard to incite exciting discussion with so few people. By outlining this dilemma, Gladwell suggests that it's wrong to assume that students will do better in smaller classes, since this isn't always the case.

David Boies – David Boies is one of the United States' most successful litigators. As a child, Boies struggles to learn to read because he has dyslexia. After graduating high school, he works as a construction worker before deciding to become a lawyer and attending a community college, where he excels because he's quite smart despite his learning disability. Boies then attends law school, eventually transferring to Yale to complete his degree. Although he still has trouble reading, he has developed incredible listening skills because he's always had to compensate for his struggle to make words out on the page. This ends up benefitting him in law school, since he can absorb so much of what his professors say during lectures. He also puts this skill to good use in the courtroom, managing to pick up on important subtleties when cross-examining people. Gladwell uses Boies's story to illustrate the idea of "desirable difficulty," which upholds that some challenges are productive because they force people to find new ways to excel.

Ingvar Kamprad – Ingvar Kamprad is the founder of IKEA. Kamprad came up with the idea to sell disassembled furniture in the 1950s, long before anyone had thought of doing anything like this. Because of this innovative idea, though, the other furniture retailers in Sweden started a boycott of IKEA that forced Kamprad to take the business to Poland, despite the fact that the country was under communist rule at a time when the world was starkly divided over such matters, with the Cold War reaching new heights and the Cuban Missile Crisis on the near horizon. Nevertheless, Kamprad was undeterred and ended up establishing an incredibly successful company. Gladwell uses Kamprad's story to demonstrate how successful people often have beneficially "disagreeable" personalities—they don't care what others might think of them and are willing to take unconventional steps toward realizing their goals.

Gary Cohn – Gary Cohn is the former president of Goldman Sachs. He struggled as a young boy in school because he has dyslexia, which made it difficult for him to learn to read. His academic troubles were often misinterpreted as misbehavior, which is partly why he was expelled from elementary school after trying to defend himself from a nun while she kicked him underneath a desk. Despite this, Cohn managed to graduate high school, at which point he started working as an aluminum siding salesman. While on a business trip on Long Island, Cohn asked for the afternoon off and made his way to Wall Street,

where he heard an obviously wealthy man telling someone that he needed to get a cab to the airport. Upon hearing this, Cohn lied and said he was going to the airport, too, suggesting that they share a cab. On the ride, he told the man that he knew all about selling stock options, so the man told him to call him on Monday. They then set up a job interview, which is how Cohn started working at one of Wall Street's most influential brokerage firms. Cohn excelled in this position and later became the president of Goldman Sachs. Gladwell outlines his story to demonstrate the benefits of having nothing to lose, since Cohn was so accustomed to failure because of his dyslexia that he didn't hesitate to go out on a limb in a way most people would never consider.

J. T. MacCurdy – MacCurdy is a psychiatrist who wrote about morale. More specifically, MacCurdy studied London's overall response to German bombings during World War II, wanting to know how Londoners managed to stay so calm during the eight-month bombardment. According to MacCurdy's analysis, traumatic events effectively break a population into three groups: the "direct hits," the "near misses," and the "remote misses." In London, the direct hits were those who were killed or injured by the bombs; the "near misses" were those who were nearby and were perhaps wounded; the "remote misses" were those who were far enough away that they escaped completely unharmed. MacCurdy found that the "remote misses" developed new outlooks on life, suddenly feeling invincible and incredibly happy. Because the bombings turned the majority of London into "remote misses," then, the German attacks had the unintended effect of emboldening the entire population. Gladwell turns to this research as a way of illustrating the idea that even traumatic experiences can have positive outcomes.

Emil "Jay" Freireich – Jay Freireich is a doctor who grew up in extreme poverty. The son of Hungarian immigrants, his father died when he was a very young boy, leaving him and his mother nearly destitute. Throughout his childhood, Freireich experienced numerous hardships but decided upon meeting a doctor that he wanted to go to medical school. Because he did well in school, he managed to fulfill this dream. A quick-tempered but affable man, Freireich's first posting was on the childhood leukemia ward at the National Cancer Institute—a hopeless place where it was all Freireich could do to keep children from bleeding to death. However, Freireich remained undeterred because, according to Gladwell, he had already been through worse in his life. Because of this outlook, Freireich managed to maintain a sense of optimism even in extremely bleak circumstances. He also wasn't afraid to try new things, despite the fact that his colleagues often criticized him for experimenting on children. However, Freireich believed there was nothing to lose because these children were going to die anyway, so he worked with his colleague Tom Frei to develop a cure that is still in use to this day. Today, 90 percent

of childhood leukemia cases are successfully cured, and Gladwell argues that this is because of Freireich's refusal to give up—an approach to life he developed in response to his difficult upbringing.

Fred Shuttlesworth – Fred Shuttlesworth was a black preacher and activist in Birmingham, Alabama during the civil rights movement. A brave man, he was a strong opponent of segregation. When news went around that he was planning on riding a segregated bus, the Ku Klux Klan bombed his house. Miraculously, though, Shuttlesworth survived, and this experience made him feel invincible. Shuttlesworth experienced several other close-calls, all of which simply emboldened him even more. Gladwell calls upon these stories to further illustrate the idea of "near misses" and "remote misses," which suggest that traumatic events can reinvigorate people and make them feel stronger. Later in the civil rights movement, Shuttlesworth worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Wyatt Walker to undermine Birmingham's racist public safety commissioner, Bull Connor.

Martin Luther King, Jr. – Martin Luther King, Jr. was a well-known preacher and activist who came to prominence during the civil rights movement. Gladwell focuses on Dr. King's effort to call attention to the Movement in Birmingham, Alabama, where the reverend hoped to challenge the racist public safety commissioner, Bull Connor. To do this, Dr. King enlisted the help of Wyatt Walker, a Baptist minister with a penchant for trickery. Dr. King asked Walker to trick Connor into doing something that could be used against him—a request that led to a clash between black schoolchildren and police that ultimately incited a backlash against racist policing around the country. Gladwell examines the civil rights movement because he argues that black activists were able to overcome racists like Bull Connor because the black community is used to being underdogs.

Wyatt Walker – Wyatt Walker was a Baptist minister who came to Birmingham, Alabama in 1960 to work with Martin Luther King, Jr. An intelligent and cunning man, Walker enjoyed tricking racists like Bull Connor, the city's public safety commissioner. Because of this, Dr. King asked him to create a situation that would trick Connor into doing something unwise, hoping this might help them show the nation the terrible racism of Birmingham's segregationist policies. In keeping with this, Walker capitalized on the fact that the white members of the press couldn't distinguish between black protestors and black bystanders, making sure that everyone in the black community knew when a protest would be happening—in turn, black people would flock to the streets simply to watch the march go by, but the white members of the press would assume that everyone present was a protestor. Later, Walker and Dr. King enlisted the help of black schoolchildren to fill up the Birmingham jails, forcing the police to resort to more aggressive measures of handling protests. As a result, a picture

circulated nationally of a chaotic scene in which a police dog is attacking an innocent young black man. This photograph incited rage throughout the country and kickstarted the civil rights movement. Gladwell tells this story as a way of illustrating the fact that underdogs are often forced to think outside the box in creative, beguiling ways.

Rosemary Lawlor – Rosemary Lawlor is a Catholic woman from Northern Ireland. As a young woman, Lawlor is forced to flee her home with her husband and newborn baby because it's no longer safe for them to stay in their Protestant neighborhood. This takes place at the beginning of the Troubles, a 30-year conflict between Northern Ireland's Protestant and Catholic communities (and the British military). Lawlor and her family flee to a Catholic neighborhood, where they stay with family until another Catholic woman named Harriet Carson urges people to come help the people of Lower Falls, a nearby Catholic community where a violent riot has erupted between the townspeople and the British military. Because the residents of Lower Falls have been forced into their homes and aren't allowed to come out, they're running out of food, so Lawlor, Carson, and a number of other women fill their baby strollers with bread and make their way to the neighborhood, where the British forces don't know how to respond to the vast number of young women. After trying to fight them back, the soldiers eventually give up and leave Lower Falls. This, needless to say, is yet another manifestation of the David and Goliath story in which an unlikely minority upsets a more powerful opponent.

Nathan Leites – Nathan Leites was a researcher who studied the nature of authority after World War II. Together with his colleague Charles Wolf Jr., he penned *Rebellion and Authority*, in which the two men argue that people in positions of power don't need to pay attention to how they're perceived. Rather, Leites and Wolf believe that authority figures simply need to harshly punish insurgents in order to cement their power. However, Gladwell demonstrates that it's a mistake for authorities to ignore how people feel about them, upholding that it's important for people to feel as if authority figures have a sense of "legitimacy."

Charles Wolf Jr. – Charles Wolf Jr. was a researcher who studied the nature of authority after World War II. Together with his colleague Nathan Leites, he penned *Rebellion and Authority*, in which the two men argue that people in positions of power don't need to pay attention to how they're perceived. Rather, Leites and Wolf believe that authority figures simply need to harshly punish insurgents in order to cement their power. However, Gladwell demonstrates that it's a mistake for authorities to ignore how people feel about them, upholding that it's important for people to feel as if authority figures have a sense of "legitimacy."

Joanne Jaffe – Joanne Jaffe is a police officer who, when put in charge of New York City's Housing Bureau, institutes a new

way of addressing juvenile crime in the neighborhood of Brownsville, Brooklyn. Brownsville is notorious for its high crime rate, so Jaffe compiles a list of all juvenile offenders arrested in the last year for mugging, then reaches out to each and every one of them and speaks to their families, saying that they've been enrolled in the Juvenile Robbery Intervention Program (J-RIP). This means that the police will keep close tabs on these young people, though they'll also do whatever they can to help them succeed. Before long, this approach begins to work, especially when Jaffe and her officers start bringing Thanksgiving turkeys to J-RIPpers' houses and holding toy drives at Christmas. Within three years, the crime rate among J-RIPpers plummets. Gladwell attributes this to Jaffe's understanding that it matters what people think of authority figures. Rather than trying to assert power without caring what young people think of law enforcement, Jaffe goes out of her way to build meaningful relationships, proving that Leites and Wolf were wrong to think that authority figures can succeed without listening to the people over whom they hope to preside.

Mike Reynolds – Mike Reynolds is Kimber Reynolds's father. In the aftermath of Kimber's shooting and subsequent death, Mike Reynolds gathers all the influential people he knows and brainstorms ways of addressing California's high crime rate. He's especially angry because Douglas Walker—one of the men involved in Kimber's death—was temporarily released from prison to visit his pregnant wife and simply never returned. Worse, both Walker and his accomplice, Joe Davis, have long criminal records, which is why Reynolds comes up with the **Three Strikes Law**—a law that sends third-time offenders to prison for 25 years to life, no matter how small or insignificant their third crime is. Reynolds is extremely proud of the effect this law had on California, but Gladwell is unconvinced that Three Strikes did any good, since the crime rate had already begun to fall when Three Strikes was instituted, meaning that the decrease in crime can't be attributed solely to the new policy. What's more, there are numerous studies that suggest that Three Strikes actually had a *negative* impact on crime, but Reynolds remains proud of what he's done—an example of how strongly people often hold to their convictions, even when their beliefs don't necessarily align with reality.

Wilma Derksen – Wilma Derksen is a Canadian woman whose daughter was murdered in the 1980s. When her daughter, Candace, doesn't come home one evening, Wilma and her husband go looking for her but are unsuccessful. It isn't until seven weeks later that the police find Candace's dead body tied up in a nearby shed. That night, a man comes to Wilma's house and tells her and her husband that his daughter was also murdered. He tells them stories about trying to bring the killer to justice, and Wilma can sense that his anger has all but ruined his life. Because of this (and because she and her husband are Mennonites who believe in forgiveness), Wilma decides to let

go of the matter altogether. To that end, the Derksens tell reporters that they hope their daughter's killer finds the love he needs. Gladwell juxtaposes Wilma's story with Mike Reynolds's story, demonstrating that there are multiple ways to respond to adversity and trauma.

André Trocmé – André Trocmé was a pastor of the Huguenot faith, a sect of French Protestants. During World War II, Trocmé lived with his family in the small mountain town of Le Chambon-sur-Ligne, where he and the rest of the townspeople sheltered Jewish people and refused to adhere to the fascist ways of Marshal Philippe Pétain. This attracted quite a bit of negative attention, but Trocmé refused to compromise his values. In fact, he was so committed to his morals that he declined to sign an oath of loyalty to the fascist French regime even when he and his close friend, Édouard Theis, were put in an internment camp. And yet, the guards were so flustered by their refusal that they let both Trocmé and Theis go, not knowing what to do with them. This, Gladwell upholds, is evidence that truly “disagreeable” underdogs are difficult to thwart, since they not only have the courage to stand up against authority, but also are willing to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs.

King Saul – King Saul is the leader of the Israelites in the biblical story of David and Goliath. When David volunteers to fight Goliath, Saul tries to dissuade him, pointing out that David is not only too small to face such a large person, but that he's also untrained in battle. However, because nobody else will agree to fight Goliath, Saul agrees to send David. In his analysis of the story, Gladwell uses King Saul as an example of somebody who thinks power only comes in the forms of strength and size, proving that many people cling to convention and overlook the many ways in which other qualities can be advantageous.

Édouard Manet – Édouard Manet is a famous painter who was part of the Impressionist movement in 19th-century France. Gladwell turns to this movement to illustrate the benefits of breaking away from convention, since the Impressionists decided to stop displaying their paintings in the coveted Salon in order to gain more control from their exhibitions.

Edgar Degas – Edgar Degas is a famous painter who was part of the Impressionist movement in 19th-century France. Gladwell turns to this movement to illustrate the benefits of breaking away from convention, since the Impressionists decided to stop displaying their paintings in the coveted Salon in order to gain more control from their exhibitions.

Paul Cézanne – Paul Cézanne is a famous painter who was part of the Impressionist movement in 19th-century France. Gladwell turns to this movement to illustrate the benefits of breaking away from convention, since the Impressionists decided to stop displaying their paintings in the coveted Salon in order to gain more control from their exhibitions.

Claude Monet – Claude Monet is a famous painter who was part of the Impressionist movement in 19th-century France. Gladwell turns to this movement to illustrate the benefits of breaking away from convention, since the Impressionists decided to stop displaying their paintings in the coveted Salon in order to gain more control from their exhibitions.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir – Pierre-Auguste Renoir is a famous painter who was part of the Impressionist movement in 19th-century France. Gladwell turns to this movement to illustrate the benefits of breaking away from convention, since the Impressionists decided to stop displaying their paintings in the coveted Salon in order to gain more control from their exhibitions.

Camille Pissarro – Camille Pissarro is a famous painter who was part of the Impressionist movement in 19th-century France. Gladwell turns to this movement to illustrate the benefits of breaking away from convention, since the Impressionists decided to stop displaying their paintings in the coveted Salon in order to gain more control from their exhibitions.

Eugene “Bull” Connor – Bull Connor was the racist public safety commissioner of Birmingham, Alabama in 1960. Wyatt Walker and Dr. King end up tricking Connor into ordering firemen to spray crowds of black children with water. Connor also sends police dogs after young protestors, leading to a picture that troubles the nation and directs attention to the civil rights movement.

Harriet Carson – Harriet Carson is an Irish Catholic woman who rallies support for the people of Lower Falls who have been forced into their homes by the British military. Because these people are beginning to starve as a result of this violently enforced curfew, Carson urges other Catholic women to march to Lower Falls with bread in their baby strollers—an act that confounds the British soldiers and succeeds in getting them to leave.

Ian Freeland – Ian Freeland is the general of the British forces assigned to bring order to Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Clearly subscribing to Leites and Wolf's belief that it doesn't matter what people think of authority figures, Freeland instructs his soldiers to respond to any kind of insurgency or misbehavior with extreme punishment, but this only exacerbates the situation. As a result, what Freeland thinks will be a short assignment turns into a 30-year conflict.

Marshal Philippe Pétain – Marshal Philippe Pétain was a French war hero during World War I. When the Nazis overtook France during World War II, they appointed Pétain as the leader of a small fascist government, and he took kindly to their anti-Semitic ways, perpetuating their persecution of Jewish people and forcing everyone in the country to adopt a nationalist, fascist way of life.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Anjali Ranadivé – Anjali Ranadivé is Vivek Randivé’s daughter. Anjali plays on the basketball team that Vivek coaches and is surprised that her father—who, like her, has very little basketball experience—manages to cultivate such a successful team using the **full-court press** strategy.

Gordon Zubrod – Gordon Zubrod was Jay Freireich’s boss at the National Cancer Institute. Although Zubrod objected to many of Freireich’s techniques, he ultimately let him do what he needed to in order to find a cure for childhood leukemia.

Tom Frei – Tom Frei was Freireich’s colleague at the National Cancer Institute, and one of the only people who actively helped him find a cure for childhood leukemia.

Kimber Reynolds – Kimber Reynolds was a young college student who was mercilessly shot and killed while visiting her hometown of Fresno, California in 1992. Kimber’s death led her father, Mike, to work with influential people to institute the **Three Strikes Law** in California.

Joe Davis – Joe Davis is the criminal who shot and killed Kimberly Reynolds. Like his accomplice, Douglas Walker, he had a long criminal record, though this didn’t stop him from riding around that night on a stolen motorcycle and trying to rob Kimberly.

Douglas Walker – Douglas Walker is the criminal who shot and killed Kimberly Reynolds. Like his accomplice, Joe Davis, he had a long criminal record, though this didn’t stop him from riding around that night on a stolen motorcycle and trying to rob Kimberly.

Candace Derksen – Candace Derksen was the 13-year-old daughter of Wilma Derksen. Candace was murdered while making her way home one night, and though her parents were distraught, they decided to move on with their lives instead of getting hung up on finding and persecuting her killer.

Édouard Theis – Édouard Theis was André Trocmé’s close friend in Le Chambon-sur-Ligne during World War II. Like Trocmé, he was fiercely committed to upholding his morals, which is why he worked to protect Jewish people from persecution, even when doing so put him in danger.

TERMS

Inverted-U Curve – An inverted-U curve is a concept Gladwell uses to refer to the concept of diminishing returns. On a graph outlining the relationship between two variables, an inverted-U curve ascends at first, plateaus, and then descends—creating what looks like an upside-down U. This represents one variable positively affecting the other until it ceases to have any effect, at which point it levels off and then begins to have a *negative* effect. One example Gladwell uses to illustrate an inverted-U curve is income’s effect on a family’s happiness: families who

earn less than \$75,000 per year notice an increase in happiness when they start earning more money. After \$75,000, though, more money stops increasing happiness and even begins to interfere with contentment the more wealthy a family becomes.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

In *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that people often place too much faith in the things they believe to be advantageous or beneficial. According to Gladwell, certain forms of power can actually work against people who otherwise see themselves as infallible. To illustrate this dynamic, he turns to the titular biblical story of David and Goliath, in which a small shepherd defeats a hulking and intimidating warrior in combat. The giant Goliath, Gladwell argues, meets his end not in spite of his strength and size, but *because* of these qualities. After all, David’s small stature forces David to think creatively and allows him to quickly realize that, though he doesn’t stand a chance against Goliath up close, he can beat him by strategically using his slingshot from a distance. Goliath, on the other hand, is so confident in his hand-to-hand combat skills and his history as an undefeated warrior that he never even considers the possibility of fighting in any other way. This, in turn, leads to his death. Taking direction from this story, Gladwell focuses on the ways in which so-called advantages can quickly turn into *disadvantages*. In keeping with this, he ultimately proposes that society would do well to recognize not only the drawbacks of power, but also the benefits of being an underdog.

Early in *David and Goliath*, Gladwell debunks the idea that conventional forms of power and strength are always beneficial. To do this, he calls attention to the ways in which Goliath finds himself at a severe disadvantage when pitted against a creative thinker like David. Goliath has too much confidence in himself because he has always won hand-to-hand battles in the past. This, however, is simply because he’s used to facing people who challenge him on his own terms. In other words, he has only ever squared off against people who value the same set of strengths as he does and therefore fight according to the same rules. Because Goliath truly *is* the strongest, most powerful warrior in this regard, he comes to see himself as all but invincible. What he fails to see, though, is that it’s possible for somebody like David—different than him in

every way—to use Goliath’s own strengths against him. For instance, Goliath is so musclebound and large that he lacks the kind of swiftness and grace required to protect himself from a nimble opponent like David. Even if he saw David preparing to sling a stone at him, then, he would most likely find himself unable to react quickly enough to dodge the dangerous projectile. What’s more, Gladwell suggests that Goliath’s hulking stature could be the result of a tumor on his pituitary gland, which often hinders a person’s sight, meaning that the very thing that makes Goliath so big is possibly responsible for his inability to see that David is about to send a rock hurtling toward his head. Whether or not this is true, it remains symbolically significant, effectively outlining an important element of Gladwell’s argument: some advantages can, in certain circumstances, quickly turn into disadvantages.

Conversely, Gladwell upholds that disadvantages can also become advantages. He argues that sometimes the very things that set people back end up playing to their favor. He notes that most people think of a disadvantage as “a setback or a difficulty that leaves you worse off than you would be otherwise.” This, however, isn’t categorically true. To prove his point, Gladwell outlines the life stories of three people: David Boies (one of United States’ top trial lawyers), Ingvar Kamprad (the founder of IKEA), and Gary Cohn (the president of Goldman Sachs). All three of these men, Gladwell explains, are dyslexic, and it is partly because they struggled to compensate for their cognitive challenges as children that they ended up becoming so successful, since they were forced to develop skills that not everyone develops. Inherent to Gladwell’s logic is the idea that adversity builds character. Conflict, in other words, leads to growth. And because traits that are typically seen as disadvantageous are what create this kind of conflict in the first place, it follows that disadvantages can ultimately lead to success and triumph. Consequently, Gladwell warns readers against underestimating people who don’t align with society’s narrow-minded understanding of what it means to have an advantage.

A critical element of Gladwell’s argument is that these matters can be highly circumstantial. According to this logic, nothing is wholly beneficial nor wholly detrimental. Rather, some qualities or resources can be advantageous up to a certain point before becoming *disadvantageous*. To describe this, Gladwell uses what’s known as an inverted-U curve: a graph illustrating a scenario in which one thing has a positive effect on another thing until, at a certain point, it has no effect, and then finally begins to have a *negative* effect. Gladwell uses family income to outline this idea, explaining that the more money a family has, the easier it is for the parents to raise their children. However, this is only the case for families who make less than \$75,000 per year. Parents who make a little bit more than this amount, he says, don’t notice much of a difference, and parents who make significantly more than \$75,000 per year actually find

parenting increasingly difficult (since it’s harder to say no to children who know their parents *could* give them whatever they want). Similarly, Goliath’s size isn’t always a disadvantage, nor is David’s size always an advantage—these things depend upon the circumstances. This notion enables Gladwell to demonstrate that traits, qualities, or resources are never categorically advantageous, nor are they always disadvantageous. In turn, he implies that people ought to scrutinize the nature of their own strengths and weaknesses, thereby allowing themselves to more accurately assess when, exactly, they’re at an advantage or disadvantage.



CONVENTION AND THE STATUS QUO

Malcolm Gladwell’s examination of underdogs in *David and Goliath* suggests that success often depends upon a person’s ability to think outside the

box. This is something underdogs are especially good at, since their disadvantages push them to challenge convention out of necessity. To illustrate this point, Gladwell references King Saul, the leader of the Israelites who insisted that David wouldn’t stand a chance against the giant Goliath. Saul doesn’t believe in David, Gladwell upholds, because he “doesn’t appreciate that power can come in other forms as well—in breaking rules, in substituting speed and surprise for strength.” Gladwell spotlights this unimaginative way of thinking because he claims it’s quite common, since people frequently discount new ways of doing things simply because those ways don’t align with the status quo. On the whole, society is rather set in its ways, and this unfortunately makes it harder for innovators and underdogs to bring about change. If, however, people were able to rid themselves of the notion that the most obvious or common approach is *always* the best approach, then society as a whole would increase its chances of improvement and success.

Gladwell posits that the people most likely to challenge convention are those with a good reason to abandon traditional tactics. As an example, he tells the story of Vivek Ranadivé, an Indian immigrant living in California who has no experience with basketball. Nevertheless, Ranadivé becomes the coach of his daughter’s team, which is made up of a group of nonathletic girls who don’t have much experience with the sport. Recognizing that the team will be hard-pressed to compete against taller, more athletic opponents, Ranadivé adopts an unpopular strategy known as the **full-court press**. This involves playing defense at all times, not just under the hoop. Because a team has only five seconds to inbound the ball, Ranadivé instructs his team not to fall back to their own hoop, but to do whatever they can to make it impossible for their opponents to inbound the ball on time. Then, if the ball successfully makes it to one of the other players, Ranadivé’s team continues their defensive efforts, trying to keep the ball from advancing beyond half-court, since the offensive team has only 10

seconds to pass this mark before losing possession. Ranadivé's team ends up dominating the league, besting teams that are significantly better than simply by adopting this relentless strategy. In this way, they become a perfect example of how challenging convention can lead to success, illustrating that it benefits outsiders and underdogs to adopt alternative tactics to make up for their shortcomings.

Perhaps even more important than this idea, though, is the fact that society at large often criticizes or dismisses approaches that don't align with the status quo. In response to the overwhelming success of Ranadivé's team of traditionally unskilled basketball players, for instance, the coaches and parents of other teams in the league are outraged. According to them, Ranadivé's strategy isn't "fair." Even though Ranadivé's tactic teaches his players to think outside the box, his detractors argue that he's undermining the purpose of youth basketball leagues, which is to teach young athletes about the sport. Of course, learning the full-court press is learning about basketball, but the approach is unpopular because it's unconventional. Even at higher levels, only some teams have adopted this strategy, and though it led them to success, the full-court press has never caught on—perhaps because people see it as nothing but a way of compensating for a lack of skill. Rather than focusing on the results it brings about, then, basketball coaches and players frame it as somehow dishonorable, thereby emphasizing the extent to which people cling to convention even when it's clear that the standard way of doing things is holding them back.

Above all, Gladwell stresses the downfalls of going along with conventional thinking. To do this, he highlights not only the success that can come from thinking outside the box (like Ranadivé and his team), but also the failures that can come from blindly following the status quo. He uses a woman named Caroline Sacks as an example, explaining that she grew up loving and excelling in science. She was at the top of her class and certain she'd become a successful scientist, so she decided to go to Brown, one of the nation's top schools. Her backup school was the University of Maryland, which is far less prestigious or competitive, so she found the choice to go to Brown quite easy. However, Gladwell argues that this decision cost Sacks dearly because it turned her into a small fish in a big pond. At Maryland, she would have been a big fish in a little pond, which is what she was used to in high school. What she found at Brown, though, is that the students around her grasped the difficult course material much more easily than her, and this ultimately discouraged her so much that, in her sophomore year, she gave up her dream of becoming a scientist, all because of *one* class. Gladwell goes on to present studies showing that more math and science students from supposedly "mediocre" schools end up succeeding in the field than equally smart (or even smarter) students from Ivy League schools. And yet, students continue to flock to the most

prestigious institutions because of the prevailing narrative that all students are better off at the most competitive schools. But Caroline Sacks is sure she'd be a scientist right now if she'd gone to Maryland. Instead, though, she followed the status quo, which wound up hurting her in the end. In turn, readers see that it's not only wise to challenge preconceived notions, but also risky to unquestioningly accept what society deems valuable.



HARDSHIP AND RESILIENCE

In *David and Goliath*, Malcolm Gladwell is particularly interested in how people respond to adversity. He recognizes that everyone reacts to hardship differently, and that it's not always possible to rise above challenging circumstances. However, he insists that humans are more resilient than they might think. To that end, he upholds that not all negative experiences are incapacitating, instead suggesting that "remote misses"—situations in which people narrowly escape danger—have the power to reinvigorate individuals, giving them a renewed outlook on life. Gladwell also argues that difficult experiences sometimes lead to greatness because people who have faced hardship often feel like they have nothing to lose. With this mentality, they're less likely to back down from trying something incredible or daring—after all, they only stand to benefit from the possibility of success and are therefore unafraid of failure. By spelling out the unexpected positive outcomes of otherwise undesirable circumstances, then, Gladwell encourages readers to consider the usefulness of hardship—a helpful outlook to adopt, considering that it's rarely possible to live a life void of misfortune or difficulty.

Although people recognize in an abstract sense that hardship can lead to resilience, Gladwell demonstrates that humans still tend to overestimate the kind of devastation that accompanies adversity. For instance, the British government predicted mass hysteria amongst its citizens during World War II, believing that the entire city of London would be thrown into panic and disarray if Germany bombed it. Thinking this way, they set up psychiatric hospitals outside the city to deal with the psychological fallout of a major bombardment, anticipating that thousands of survivors would flock to these hospitals in search of psychiatric help. When the Germans finally did start bombing the city, though, nobody made use of the hospitals. In fact, the vast majority of Londoners didn't even leave the city, instead going about their daily lives for the eight months during which bombs continued to fall. For the first two months of the bombardment, Germans dropped bombs on London every single night, but the British population remained largely unfazed, thereby proving that it's possible to live through experiences that would previously have seemed unimaginable and unbearable.

Wanting to better understand why, exactly, London didn't

descend into panic and chaos during the eight-month bombardment, a psychiatrist studying morale posited that when the bombs fell, the population was divided into three groups: the people who were killed, the “near misses” who were close to the blast but still survived, and the “remote misses” who merely heard the commotion but weren’t directly harmed by the explosion. The incorrect assumption that the British government made was that the “remote misses” would plunge into terror and bereavement. In reality, people who experienced multiple “remote misses” developed a feeling of “invulnerability” and overwhelming joy. One woman who survived a nearby bombing wrote in her diary that surviving made her feel “pure and flawless happiness.” In this way, the Germans’ attack on London had an unintended effect, inadvertently invigorating a large number of Londoners instead of demoralizing them. Taking this as an example, Gladwell makes it clear that hardship doesn’t always have a predictable effect on human beings, who can be surprisingly adaptable and resilient.

Needless to say, there are many different kinds of hardship, not just the kind that affects people in adulthood. With this in mind, Gladwell considers the impact of childhood challenges on a person’s overall life. To do this, he uses a number of examples, ranging from children struggling with dyslexia to those grappling with poverty and a lack of parental support. In every case, the person in question grows up to do incredible things, and though Gladwell acknowledges that this doesn’t mean *all* children facing hardship are lucky enough to find success or happiness, he suggests that achievement is nevertheless a possible outcome of adversity. For instance, Gladwell uses Gary Cohn—the president of Goldman Sachs—to demonstrate his point, explaining how Cohn effectively conned his way into the stock market business by pretending to have investment experience and strategically creating a situation in which he shared a taxi with an influential person at a Wall Street brokerage firm. Cohn has dyslexia and barely graduated high school, but because of these previous setbacks and difficulties, he knew he had nothing to lose by putting himself out there in a way that few other people would. Bearing this logic in mind, it becomes clear that hardship not only has the ability to help people become adaptable and resilient, but can also encourage them to pursue possibilities they would otherwise never think of as feasible. Accordingly, Gladwell urges readers to avoid seeing adversity as unequivocally bad, instead advocating for the idea that hardship often inspires human growth, resilience, and even prosperity.



CONVICTION, MORALITY, AND EMPATHY

Although *David and Goliath* focuses almost exclusively on underdogs and their unexpected advantages, there are moments throughout the book when

Gladwell’s analysis highlights something broader—namely, the fact that humans often cling stubbornly to their convictions because they believe them to be moral, even when this is not the case. This dynamic is especially evident in the story Gladwell recounts about Mike Reynolds, who helped institute California’s **Three Strikes Law** in the aftermath of his daughter’s senseless murder. Throughout the 1990s, Reynolds was celebrated for helping decrease crime by pushing lawmakers to abide by the Three Strikes Law, under which offenders receive prison sentences of between 25 years and life if they commit three crimes—no matter how serious their third crime actually is. In recent years, though, it has become clear that this policy has put a massive strain on the prison system and has possibly done more harm than good. And yet, Reynolds refuses to acknowledge the law’s negative qualities. By placing Reynolds’s uncompromising view alongside the British military’s myopic obsession with power in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s—along with several other instances of unyielding conviction—Gladwell ultimately urges readers to recognize that believing in something doesn’t always make it right.

At first, Gladwell invites readers to empathize with Mike Reynolds. He does this by recounting the story of Reynolds’s daughter’s death, explaining that Kimber Reynolds was in a restaurant parking lot in her hometown of Fresno, California, when two men appeared on a motorcycle, pinned her against her car, snatched her purse, and shot her in the head. Devastated, Mike Reynolds immediately set to work talking to the most influential people he knew about how to address Fresno’s high crime rate. These conversations led to the drafting of the Three Strikes Law, which soon went into effect. In a conversation between Reynolds and Gladwell, Reynolds explains that California had a murder rate of roughly 12 people per day before the Three Strikes Law went into effect. Years after the law was put in place, the rate decreased to 6 people per day. This makes Reynolds feel incredibly “lucky,” since he sees himself as having saved many lives over the years. However, Gladwell is skeptical of this idea, since the murder rate in California had already begun to decline before the law even went into effect. Furthermore, studies have had trouble proving that the law did anything but overcrowd prisons, and some criminologists have even posited that Three Strikes surprisingly “increased the number of violent crimes.” Because of the overwhelming skepticism surrounding the law, California “scaled [it] back” in 2012, but this has had no effect on Reynolds’s unwavering belief that he did the right thing. In turn, his unwillingness to fully assess the ramifications of his idea comes to symbolize the somewhat unsettling human capacity to ignore the greater good in service of what one wants to believe.

Gladwell’s interest in what makes people unquestioningly commit themselves to a cause also extends to the book’s more

central preoccupation with power. He implies that belief isn't the only thing that can lead to unreasonable dedication, demonstrating this by referencing the relentless commitment to law and order that the British military displayed in a particular incident during the Troubles (a period during which the British government and Ireland's Protestant population fought against Ireland's Catholic community). This confrontation took place in a Catholic neighborhood called Lower Falls, where the military came to search for "illegal weapons" in the local church. The British military had been instructed to "deal toughly" with "thugs and gunmen," which is why they overreacted when a riot broke out over their intrusion into the Lower Falls church. When they military finished, they started to walk away, but the crowd flung insults and small stones at them, so they turned around.—after all, they had been instructed to meet resistance with strength. Accordingly, they fired tear gas and began to shoot, only making the crowd angrier and prompting them to throw small homemade bombs. Eventually, the military forced the residents of Lower Falls into their homes and instituted a curfew that lasted for two days, a period during which families weren't even allowed to go outside to get food for their children. Gladwell uses this story to exemplify the extent to which people will unfortunately devote themselves to the pursuit of power even when it's not in their best interest—if the military had simply taken the residents' anger in stride, they could have avoided unnecessary turmoil.

There are, however, times when uncompromising convictions are appropriate. Gladwell makes this clear by recounting the story of the French mountain town of Le Chambon, where the entire population put themselves in danger by openly defying the Nazis and protecting Jewish people during World War II. Although everyone in the town—and especially the local priest, André Trocmé—opened themselves up to extraordinary danger by welcoming Jewish families from all over France, they remained steadfast in their commitment to what they thought was right. Reflecting upon his altruistic actions later in life, Trocmé wrote that "there was no decision to make." For him, standing up to the Nazis was the only thing to do. The difference between this kind of conviction and the relentlessness of the British military at Lower Falls, of course, is that Trocmé's actions were motivated by empathy, whereas the British military merely wanted to establish dominance. And though Mike Reynolds's steadfastness comes from a good place, it, too, lacks the empathetic motivation of Trocmé's selflessness, since the Three Strikes Law was a punitive measure that likely hurt more people than it saved. By revealing the different forces driving these three forms of conviction, then, Gladwell tacitly prioritizes the kind of commitment that arises out of empathy and morality, though his depiction of conviction as a whole suggests that people are often blind to the moral failures of their beliefs.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE FULL-COURT PRESS

Gladwell uses the basketball strategy known as the full-court press to represent the kind of creative approach underdogs should adopt in order to maximize their chances of defeating more powerful opponents. As a defensive technique, the press makes it especially difficult for even talented teams to advance with the ball to the other end of the court, thereby interfering with their ability to score points. In this way, it gives relatively unskilled teams (like Vivek Ranadivé's) a better chance of winning against otherwise unbeatable opponents. The full-court press is an incredibly successful strategy, but not everyone embraces it. This, Gladwell argues, is because it requires extremely hard work, since teams have to be in extraordinarily good physical shape to successfully use such a cardiovascular approach. Therefore, only teams who are genuinely desperate are generally willing to adopt this tactic, which reinforces the idea that certain challenges and disadvantages can lead to extremely successful, innovative strategies. That more teams don't use it also comes to stand for society's unwillingness to embrace alternative approaches even when it's clear that those approaches are undeniably beneficial.



THE THREE STRIKES LAW

The Three Strikes Law that Mike Reynolds convinces the state of California to adopt in the aftermath of his daughter Kimber's murder is a representation of how deeply people invest themselves in the value of power and authority. According to the law, third-time offenders must serve 25 years to life in prison regardless of how petty their final crime might have been. To this day, Reynolds is convinced that the law positively impacted society, believing that it was solely responsible for California's decreasing crime rates. Gladwell, on the other hand, isn't so sure, since many criminologists believe that Three Strikes not only overcrowded prisons for no good reason but also possibly had an overall *negative* impact on crime. For these reasons, California has significantly revised the law, but Reynolds still wholeheartedly believes in it. In turn, his dedication to the idea serves as a reminder that some people conflate power and authority with success. His steadfast conviction also suggests that people frequently cling to certain beliefs even if they don't align with reality.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown and Company edition of *David and Goliath* published in 2013.

Introduction: Goliath Quotes

Through these stories, I want to explore two ideas. The first is that much of what we consider valuable in our world arises out of these kinds of lopsided conflicts, because the act of facing overwhelming odds produces greatness and beauty. And second, that we consistently get these kinds of conflicts wrong. We misread them. We misinterpret them. Giants are not what we think they are. The same qualities that appear to give them strength are often the sources of great weakness. And the fact of being an underdog can *change* people in ways that we often fail to appreciate: it can open doors and create opportunities and educate and enlighten and make possible what might otherwise have seemed unthinkable. We need a better guide to facing giants [...].

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Goliath, David

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears early in *David and Goliath* and serves as a roadmap of sorts for Gladwell's central thesis. This thesis has two main components: that great things often arise from "lopsided conflicts" and that society frequently "misinterpret[s]" such conflicts. In other words, underdogs end up triumphing over "giants" fairly frequently, but people remain convinced that such upsets are exceedingly rare. According to Gladwell, this is an unfortunate misconception because it keeps people from recognizing the positive outcomes that can come from being at a disadvantage. To that end, he believes that being an underdog can fundamentally alter the way people move through the world, forcing them to cultivate skills and ways of thinking that they'd never otherwise develop. This is what David does, for instance, when he manages to kill the giant Goliath. But even though this biblical tale is quite well-known, most people continue to think of underdog stories as anomalous. For this reason, Gladwell states that "we need a better guide to facing giants," thereby outlining the purpose of this book: to function as that guide.

On one level, the duel reveals the folly of our assumptions about power. The reason King Saul is skeptical of David's chances is that David is small and Goliath is large. Saul thinks of power in terms of physical might. He doesn't appreciate that power can come in other forms as well—in breaking rules, in substituting speed and surprise for strength. Saul is not alone in making this mistake.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Goliath, David, King Saul

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

After recounting the biblical story of David and Goliath (in which the small shepherd boy David surprises everyone by killing the giant warrior Goliath), Gladwell examines the reasons that nobody originally thought David had a chance of slaying the hulking Goliath. Most importantly, King Saul—and, of course, Goliath himself—have a very narrow idea of what counts as power. Rather than recognizing that David's speed and cleverness might give him an element of surprise that he can leverage to his own benefit, Saul assumes that David is powerless because he doesn't align with the conventional image of strength. Needless to say, Goliath also makes the assumption that David is harmless because he isn't built like a traditional warrior. This, however, is the very reason that David wins—he alone grasps the fact that "power can come in other forms." In turn, he's capable not only of effectively challenging Goliath, but also of taking the giant by surprise. In this way, then, he demonstrates the benefits of thinking outside the box, proving that the traits people think of as disadvantageous aren't actually disadvantageous in all circumstances. In fact, Gladwell illustrates that they can even be turned into advantages.

Chapter 1: Vivek Ranadivé Quotes

●● Having lots of soldiers and weapons and resources—as the Turks did—is an advantage. But it makes you immobile and puts you on the defensive. Meanwhile, movement, endurance, individual intelligence, knowledge of the country, and courage—which Lawrence’s men had in abundance—allowed them to do the impossible, namely, attack Aqaba from the east, a strategy so audacious that the Turks never saw it coming. There is a set of advantages that have to do with material resources, and there is a set that have to do with the *absence* of material resources—and the reason underdogs win as often as they do is that the latter is sometimes every bit the equal of the former.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

To expand upon the notion that shortcomings can be turned into advantages, Gladwell references T. E. Lawrence’s victory against the Turks in Aqaba during World War I, when Lawrence led an army of Bedouins who were untrained in the traditional military sense. Although these men weren’t experienced soldiers, they knew the land extremely well and were accustomed to making long, grueling desert passages. Because of this, they were able to approach the port town of Aqaba by land instead of by water, which caught the Turks off guard, since the Turks would never have guessed that anyone would dare to make such a harrowing journey across the desert. In this sense, the Turks’ resources put them at a disadvantage, rendering them “immobile” and vulnerable to a surprise attack by Lawrence and his soldiers. Even though most people would assume that the side with the most artillery and material resources would be at an advantage, in this case the Turks lost Aqaba precisely *because* of these resources. In turn, Gladwell argues that underdogs frequently triumph over more powerful opponents not in spite of a lack of resources, but *because* of this lack.

●● Yet the puzzle of the press is that it has never become popular. [...The Fordham coach] never used the full-court press the same way again. And the UMass coach, [...] who was humbled in his own gym by a bunch of street kids—did he learn from his defeat and use the press himself the next time he had a team of underdogs? He did not. Many people in the world of basketball don’t really believe in the press because it’s not perfect: it can be beaten by a well-coached team with adept ball handlers and astute passers. Even Ranadivé readily admitted as much. All an opposing team had to do to beat Redwood City was press back. [...] The press was the best chance the underdog had of beating Goliath. Logically, *every* team that comes in as an underdog should play that way, shouldn’t they? So why don’t they?

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), David, Goliath, Vivek Ranadivé

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell considers the fact that, although the full-court press is an incredibly successful strategy that gives underdog basketball teams the best chances of winning, people hardly ever use it. Even the coach of the Fordham Rams stopped using it after his team upset the powerhouse UMass team. Of course, this makes little sense, since it’s clear that the full-court press helps unskilled teams make up for their lack of talent. However, the unpopularity of the press says something important about the way people think about convention: most people are hesitant to embrace alternative tactics because they don’t want to go against the status quo, ultimately accepting their disadvantages and refusing to think outside the box. Only some people—like Ranadivé (who uses the press strategy to propel his daughter’s unskilled basketball team to victory) and David (who similarly uses an unconventional technique to best the giant warrior Goliath)—are willing to work hard to change their approach. This is perhaps why giants like Goliath so rarely recognize that underdogs are capable of beating them. In this way, then, the unpopularity of underdog tactics preserves the element of surprise that often accompanies them, thereby making them even more effective.

Chapter 2: Teresa DeBrito Quotes

☞☞ He was successful because he had learned the long and hard way about the value of money and the meaning of work and the joy and fulfillment that come from making your own way in the world. But because of his success, it would be difficult for his children to learn those same lessons.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), The Hollywood Executive

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell considers a successful Hollywood executive's approach to money and parenting. The executive succeeded financially because he grew up understanding "the value of money" and the importance of hard work—his family didn't have much money and he was forced to make his "own way in the world," which informed the rest of his life. Now that the executive is rich, though, he worries about his children, realizing that they won't have the same meaningful experiences as him because they don't have to struggle or think about earning money. After all, his children are growing up in an extremely wealthy family, so they don't have to work as hard to simply get by. Moreover, it's difficult for the executive to teach his kids the value of money, since for them wealth is a fact of life rather than a dream to work toward. Gladwell uses this dilemma as a way of illustrating the idea that there can indeed be too much of a good thing: in certain circumstances it's *not* beneficial to have a lot of money, contrary to what most people think. This, in turn, aligns with the idea that advantages aren't *always* advantageous, thereby highlighting why it's important to carefully consider what, exactly, society declares valuable or desirable.

Chapter 3: Caroline Sacks Quotes

☞☞ In the end, the Impressionists made the right choice, which is one of the reasons that their paintings hang in every major art museum in the world. But this same dilemma comes up again and again in our own lives, and often we don't choose so wisely. The inverted-U curve reminds us that there is a point at which money and resources stop making our lives better and start making them worse. The story of the Impressionists suggests a second, parallel problem. We strive for the best and attach great importance to getting into the finest institutions we can. But rarely do we stop and consider—as the Impressionists did—whether the most prestigious of institutions is always in our best interest.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Caroline Sacks

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell turns to the Impressionist painters of the late 1800s to illustrate that it's often beneficial to strike out on one's own instead of unquestioningly adhering to convention. The Impressionists did this by deciding not to display their work in the Salon, France's most prestigious exhibition. After years of trying and failing to gain attention, they decided to stage their own show. In doing so, they made their work accessible to more people, and this is why their paintings are so famous today. Gladwell points out that the Impressionists' decision to go their own way is responsible for their success, but he also acknowledges that many people fail to embrace this kind of mindset. Rather than acknowledging that advantages aren't *always* advantageous, people assume that certain resources will never "stop making [their] lives better." For this reason, society covets prestigious institutions, thinking that anything so sought after must have incredible value. In reality, though, this isn't always the case, as choosing the more prestigious option can ultimately end up backfiring in the long run.

“I figured, regardless of how much I prepared, there would be kids who had been exposed to stuff I had never even heard of. So I was trying not to be naive about that.” But chemistry was beyond what she had imagined. The students in her class were *competitive*. “I had a lot of trouble even talking with people from those classes,” she went on. “They didn’t want to share their study habits with me. They didn’t want to talk about ways to better understand the stuff that we were learning, because that might give me a leg up.”

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Caroline Sacks

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Gladwell shares Caroline Sacks’s perspective on what it was like to study chemistry at Brown University. Sacks notes that she was prepared to meet other students who were smarter or more experienced than her—after all, going to one of the best schools in the United States naturally means having to study alongside extremely intelligent people. However, Sacks is used to standing out as the best student in her class, so it’s a shock to her when everyone around her is so advanced while she struggles just to grasp the basic concepts. This, it seems, is a difficult but bearable situation to be in, considering that Brown is such a well-respected institution. But what really makes it difficult for Sacks isn’t just the fact that her peers are quite smart, but that they’re deeply competitive: rather than collaborating and helping each other, Sacks’s fellow students don’t want to do anything that might help anyone else succeed. In turn, Sacks suffers from a lack of support, making her feel comparatively unintelligent as well as isolated from the surrounding academic environment. Gladwell points to this experience as a way of emphasizing why it’s not necessarily the case that the most prestigious institutions always benefit students more than average schools.

Parents still tell their children to go to the best schools they possibly can, on the grounds that the best schools will allow them to do whatever they wish. We take it for granted that the Big Pond expands opportunities, just as we take it for granted that a smaller class is always a better class. We have a definition in our heads of what an advantage is—and the definition isn’t right. And what happens as a result? It means that we make mistakes. It means that we misread battles between underdogs and giants. It means that we underestimate how much freedom there can be in what looks like a disadvantage. It’s the Little Pond that maximizes your chances to do whatever you want.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Caroline Sacks

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

This is a continuation of Gladwell’s argument about why it’s not always advantageous to attend the most prestigious universities. According to his analysis, Caroline Sacks would have been better off if she’d gone to the University of Maryland instead of Brown University. Society advances the flawed idea that “the best schools will allow [people] to do whatever they wish.” This, however, only makes it more likely that a person will become a “Little Fish in a Big Pond,” where they might (like Caroline Sacks) feel unnecessarily disheartened by the sheer amount of competition. Still, people have a hard time letting go of the assumption that the most respected institutions give students some kind of “advantage.” This, Gladwell upholds, is the same thinking that leads people to “misread battles between underdogs and giants” like David and Goliath. Instead of focusing on the many benefits of the “Little Pond”—which often “maximizes” a person’s chances of succeeding—the vast majority of society perpetuates inaccurate ideas about what is advantageous and what is *disadvantageous*.

Chapter 4: David Boies Quotes

☞ Most of the learning that we do is capitalization learning. It is easy and obvious. If you have a beautiful voice and perfect pitch, it doesn't take much to get you to join a choir. "Compensation learning," on the other hand, is really hard. Memorizing what your mother says while she reads to you and then reproducing the words later in such a way that it sounds convincing to all those around you requires that you confront your limitations. It requires that you overcome your insecurity and humiliation. It requires that you focus hard enough to memorize the words, and then have the panache to put on a successful performance. Most people with a serious disability cannot master all those steps. But those who can are *better* off than they would have been otherwise, because what is learned out of necessity is inevitably more powerful than the learning that comes easily.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), David Boies

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell makes a distinction between what he calls "capitalization learning" and "compensation learning." Capitalization learning comes naturally to people: if, for instance, a person is already good at singing, it will be easy to build upon that skill. This implies that people tend to learn more readily when they don't have to work particularly hard. Compensation learning, though, is the kind of learning that *doesn't* come easily. To illustrate what this might look like, Gladwell references David Boies's experience as a young boy with dyslexia. Instead of reading along with his mother each night, Boies memorized the words because the act of reading was so difficult for him. In this regard, learning auditory memorization was a form of compensation, one that took pressure off of his struggle to read. Later in life, Boies's listening and memorization skills prove extremely valuable, as he makes use of them in law school and then in court as one of the United States' top litigators.

This aligns with Gladwell's assertion that people who are capable of using compensation learning to overcome other challenges are "better off than they would have been otherwise," since Boies's efforts ultimately help him establish himself in an extremely competitive career—one that would have been all but impossible for him if he hadn't figured out how to work around his learning disorder. In the

scope of Gladwell's argument, this example shines a light on why some difficulties are actually "desirable," since they lead to positive outcomes.

☞ More important, most of us wouldn't have jumped in that cab, because we would have worried about the potential social consequences. The Wall Street guy could have seen right through us—and told everyone else on Wall Street that there's a kid out there posing as an options trader. Where would we be then? We could get tossed out of the cab. We could go home and realize that options trading is over our heads. We could show up on Monday morning and make fools of ourselves. We could get found out, a week or a month later, and get fired. Jumping in the cab was a disagreeable act, and most of us are inclined to be agreeable. But Cohn? He was selling aluminum siding. His mother thought that he would be lucky to end up a truck driver. He had been kicked out of schools and dismissed as an idiot, and, even as an adult, it took him six hours to read twenty-two pages because he had to work his way word by word to make sure he understood what he was reading. He had nothing to lose.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Gary Cohn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is about Gary Cohn, a man with dyslexia who manages to essentially trick his way into a career as an options trader on Wall Street. To do this, he has to lie to a powerful executive, sharing a cab with him and claiming to know all about options trading. Gladwell argues that Cohn did this because he's "disagreeable," meaning that he doesn't mind if his actions might upset or offend other people. In other words, Cohn takes a risk by getting in the executive's car, but he is able to take this risk because he doesn't mind the idea of the stranger finding out the truth about him. Most people, however, would be mortified by the prospect of being discovered as a fraud. At the same time, there's another reason that Cohn was willing to put himself out there in this way: "he had nothing to lose." Not only does Cohn not care all that much what the executive might think of him, but he's also operating from a place of desperation, and this enables him to cast aside the kind of hesitations that would prevent most people from setting themselves up for success. In turn, readers see that Cohn takes the very thing that seems like a disadvantage—namely, a lack of

opportunity—and wields it to his benefit, once more proving that people often overlook the value of certain disadvantages.

Chapter 5: Emil “Jay” Freireich Quotes

●● But to MacCurdy, the Blitz proved that traumatic experiences can have two completely different effects on people: the same event can be profoundly damaging to one group while leaving another *better off*. [...] Too often, we make the same mistake as the British did and jump to the conclusion that there is only one kind of response to something terrible and traumatic. There isn't. There are two [...].

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), J. T. MacCurdy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of the German bombing of London during World War II, something unexpected happens. Although the British government anticipated mass hysteria, Londoners remain calm. Wanting to understand this, a psychiatrist named J. T. MacCurdy studies the effects of trauma on people, determining that close calls—in which people were aware of danger but ultimately escaped unharmed—surprisingly *improve* many people's lives. This is because surviving a bombing (for instance) emboldens people, making them feel stronger than before. In this way, they find themselves “better off.” The British government, however, assumed that the inhabitants of London would be terrified by the threat of death. Of course, this is a rather reasonable assumption, since the bombs fall on a nightly basis for eight consecutive months. What's more, just because somebody survived one bombing doesn't necessarily mean they'll survive the next. And yet, many Londoners feel a renewed sense of happiness each time they manage to stay alive during a bombardment. Gladwell uses this anecdote to prove that there are multiple different ways to respond to adversity: although some people might react to hardship in the way most people would expect, others will actually find themselves newly emboldened by facing trauma. Consequently, it would be a mistake to think that hardship is always something that ought to be avoided, since it can sometimes lead to overall positive outcomes.

●● But the question of what any of us would wish on our children is the wrong question, isn't it? The right question is whether we as a society *need* people who have emerged from some kind of trauma—and the answer is that we plainly do. This is not a pleasant fact to contemplate. For every remote miss who becomes stronger, there are countless near misses who are crushed by what they have been through. There are times and places, however, when all of us depend on people who have been hardened by their experiences. Freireich had the courage to think the unthinkable. He experimented on children. He took them through pain no human being should ever have to go through. And he did it in no small part because he understood from his own childhood experience that it is possible to emerge from even the darkest hell healed and restored.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Emil “Jay” Freireich

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell considers the strange fact that there is a societal need for individuals who have faced adversity. He acknowledges that this is somewhat difficult to accept, since not everyone is capable of surviving hardship. And yet, traumatic or generally negative experiences often lead to forms of progress that humanity might not otherwise achieve. Jay Freireich is a perfect example of this idea, since his difficult childhood gives him “the courage to think the unthinkable.” Because Freireich has been through so much, he isn't afraid to do whatever it takes to succeed in finding a cure for childhood leukemia. In keeping with this, it becomes clear that Freireich's misfortune ultimately ends up benefiting humanity, since it is—according to Gladwell—what leads him to find such a successful way of treating an otherwise deadly and untreatable illness. By spotlighting this dynamic, Gladwell frames hardship not only as something that can lead to good, but also something that plays an important role in humanity's overall advancement.

Chapter 6: Wyatt Walker Quotes

☞☞ In the traditional fable of the Tortoise and the Hare, told to every Western schoolchild, the Tortoise beats the Hare through sheer persistence and effort. Slow and steady wins the race. That’s an appropriate and powerful lesson—but only in a world where the Tortoise and the Hare are playing by the same rules, and where everyone’s effort is rewarded. In a world that isn’t fair—and no one would have called Birmingham in 1963 fair—the Terrapin has to place his relatives at strategic points along the racecourse. The trickster is not a trickster by nature. He is a trickster by necessity.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Martin Luther King, Jr., Eugene “Bull” Connor, Wyatt Walker

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell references old fables about unevenly matched footraces to illustrate how, exactly, underdogs can position themselves to win. He has already told the story of the Deer and the Terrapin, wherein the slow Terrapin agrees to race the spritely Deer but strategically places his relatives along the race course, so that each time Deer turns a corner, it seems as if Terrapin is beating him. This differs from the classic story of the Tortoise and the Hare, in which the Tortoise beats the Hare “through sheer persistence and effort” even though he’s considerably slower. Gladwell acknowledges that this story teaches a valuable lesson about consistency and persistence, but it’s not particularly suited for a world in which things are often unfair. To that end, the story of the Deer and the Terrapin is a more appropriate fable, at least when it comes to underdog stories. After all, the Terrapin wins because he’s forced to think creatively, and though he cheats, Gladwell doesn’t condemn his behavior. Rather, Gladwell compares the Terrapin’s victory to Wyatt Walker and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s attempts to defeat the racist Bull Connor in Birmingham, Alabama during the civil rights movement, suggesting that sometimes the only way to achieve justice is by compensating for various disadvantages in any way possible.

Chapter 7: Rosemary Lawlor Quotes

☞☞ In Northern Ireland, the British made a simple mistake. They fell into the trap of believing that because they had resources, weapons, soldiers, and experience that dwarfed those of the insurgent elements that they were trying to contain, it did not matter what the people of Northern Ireland thought of them. General Freeland believed Leites and Wolf when they said that “influencing popular behavior requires neither sympathy nor mysticism.” And Leites and Wolf were wrong.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Charles Wolf Jr., Nathan Leites, Ian Freeland

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Gladwell considers the miscalculation that the British military made when trying to impose law and order on Northern Ireland during the Troubles (a 30-year conflict between Ireland’s Catholic and Protestant communities). Rather than assuaging tensions, General Ian Freeland and his soldiers inadvertently exacerbate an already fraught situation by assuming that traditional forms of power and strength would successfully quell unrest and insurgency. This belief aligned with the report that Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf Jr. wrote about authority in the aftermath of World War II, when the two researchers asserted that powerful forces should respond harshly to any kind of backlash. Leites and Wolf also maintained that people in positions of authority don’t need to have “sympathy” for the people they’re trying to control. This, according to Gladwell, is a terrible mistake, since he believes that brute force doesn’t work in all circumstances. Where the Troubles required nuance and care, General Freeland applied violence and strength. And as a result, the conflict raged on for three decades.

☞☞ First of all, the people who are asked to obey authority have to feel like they have a voice—that if they speak up, they will be heard. Second, the law has to be predictable. There has to be a reasonable expectation that the rules tomorrow are going to be roughly the same as the rules today. And third, the authority has to be fair. It can’t treat one group differently from another.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Charles Wolf Jr., Nathan Leites

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell outlines the elements that make an authoritative body or presence seem “legitimate” to the people who must abide by its demands. The idea that people must “feel like they have a voice” directly contradicts Leites and Wolf’s idea that people in power need not pay attention to how the people they’re trying to control feel. Giving people the sense that their voices will be heard helps them feel empowered, at least to a certain extent. Furthermore, people must sense that the law is consistent with itself, otherwise there’s no reason to follow it. Lastly, there has to be a prevailing sense that the reigning authority is “fair.” By listing these requirements, Gladwell calls attention to the nature of power, demonstrating that a domineering spirit isn’t enough to convince people to follow orders. Given that *David and Goliath* is about power dynamics, this is an important message, since it provides insight into why underdogs often decide to take the risk of contradicting authority.

Brownsville at that time had a family member in jail. Gladwell argues that this significantly impacted their perception of law enforcement, convincing them that the police were out to get them and their families. This aligns with Gladwell’s earlier assertion that authorities have to pay close attention to what people think about them, otherwise they risk not seeming like a “legitimate” form of power. In keeping with this, Jaffe does whatever she can to create personal relationships with the members of the Juvenile Robbery Intervention Program, hoping that this will show them that the police care about their wellbeing—a strategy Gladwell believes is much more effective than simply ruling with an iron fist.

☞ Is Wilma Derksen more—or less—of a hero than Mike Reynolds? It is tempting to ask that question. But it is not right: Each acted out of the best of intentions and chose a deeply courageous path.

The difference between the two was that they felt differently about what could be accomplished through the use of power. The Derksens fought every instinct they had as parents to strike back because they were unsure of what that could accomplish. They were not convinced of the power of giants.

Chapter 8: Wilma Derksen Quotes

☞ This is what Jaffe was talking about in Brownsville. The damage she was trying to repair with her hugs and turkeys wasn’t caused by an absence of law and order. It was caused by *too much* law and order: so many fathers and brothers and cousins in prison that people in the neighborhood had come to see the law as their enemy.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Joanne Jaffe

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell is referring to Joanne Jaffe, the police officer who responded to the high juvenile crime rate in Brownsville, Brooklyn by reaching out and engaging with the offenders and their families. At one point, Gladwell recognizes that Jaffe’s methods—which included giving hugs and donating turkeys to underprivileged families on Thanksgiving—might seem simplistic, but he also believes that she had a good reason for trying to establish this kind of connection. Statistically speaking, the vast majority of young people in

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Mike Reynolds, Wilma Derksen

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

Both Wilma Derksen and Mike Reynolds lose their daughters to merciless acts of violence. However, the way they respond to tragedy is significantly different. Mike Reynolds’s impulse is to do whatever he can to ensure that people like the men who killed his daughter are put in jail for a long, long time. To do this, he asserts his influence in the community and eventually helps pass the Three Strikes Law in California, fundamentally refiguring the state’s entire penal system. And though Reynolds believes that this law benefitted society, Gladwell disagrees, arguing that Three Strikes overcrowded prisons and possibly even negatively impacted the overall crime rate.

Unlike Reynolds, Wilma Derksen chooses to let go of what she cannot change, deciding to forgive her daughter’s killer

so she can move on with her life. Comparing these two reactions, Gladwell notes that both Reynolds and Derksen responded understandably to terrible circumstances. However, Gladwell believes that Wilma Derksen's response to hardship is preferable, since it demonstrates an understanding of power—namely, that even the power of the legal system is incapable of achieving certain things, like bringing back her daughter. Instead of devoting her energies to overhauling the penal system, then, Derksen manages to lead a more or less happy life and, more importantly, one that doesn't run the risk of negatively impacting thousands of people in an attempt to seek compensation for something that cannot be changed.

☞ This final lesson about the limits of power is not easy to learn. It requires that those in positions of authority accept that what they thought of as their greatest advantage—the fact that they could search as many homes as they wanted and arrest as many people as they wanted and imprison people for as long as they wanted—has real constraints.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Ian Freeland

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

As Gladwell prepares to conclude *David and Goliath*, he admits that the book's overall argument about power won't necessarily be easy for everyone to grasp. This is because one of his central claims is that people in positions of power ought to recognize that the very things that make them powerful have significant limitations. For instance, General Ian Freeland led the British military into a complicated 30-year conflict without fully stopping to think about the possible harmfulness of their involvement. Even though it would have helped him to recognize that raiding homes in Catholic neighborhoods might do nothing but exacerbate already fraught tensions in Northern Ireland, he invested himself in the idea that authoritative forces don't need to consider the nuances of a given situation. Rather, he believed that powerful people simply need to demonstrate their power—a tactic that ultimately backfired when the surrounding Catholic community flooded Lower Falls and gave the British military no choice but to back down. Although this dynamic has played out time and again throughout history (reaching back all the way to the story of David and Goliath), Gladwell understands that people will continue to overlook the "constraints" of power, since this

kind of naïveté often comes along with power in the first place.

Chapter 9: André Trocmé Quotes

☞ But had the police asked him if he was Beguet, he had already decided to tell the truth: 'I am not Monsieur Beguet. I am Pastor Andre Trocmé.' *He didn't care.* If you are Goliath, how on earth do you defeat someone who thinks like that? You could kill him, of course. But that is simply a variant of the same approach that backfired so spectacularly for the British in Northern Ireland and for the Three Strikes campaign in California. The excessive use of force creates legitimacy problems, and force without legitimacy leads to defiance, not submission. You could kill Andre Trocmé. But in all likelihood, all that would mean is that another Andre Trocmé would rise in his place.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Ian Freeland, David, Goliath, André Trocmé

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

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Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell tells the story of when André Trocmé is arrested during World War II. Trocmé is carrying false identification papers which state that his name is Beguet. However, because lying goes against Trocmé's morals, he knows he won't be able to actually say his name is Beguet if an officer asks him outright. Accordingly, Trocmé plans to tell the truth despite the fact that he knows it will most likely get him killed or imprisoned. Luckily, he manages to slip away before this happens, but Gladwell calls attention to this dynamic to demonstrate just how fiercely committed Trocmé is to his moral convictions. And though this attitude might seem like an extreme disadvantage in this particular instance, Gladwell argues that it's actually something of a strength, since people in positions of power have no idea what to do with somebody who so blatantly doesn't care about getting in trouble. Like the Catholics of Lower Falls, Trocmé sets aside any concern for his personal safety, making it difficult for otherwise harsh authorities to respond effectively. With this in mind, Gladwell accentuates the fact that power and might aren't always effective, since simply dominating people doesn't stamp out the things for which they stand.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION: GOLIATH

Gladwell introduces the setting of the biblical David and Goliath's famous battle, which took place in the valley of Elah in the north of ancient Palestine. According to the tale, the Israelites and the Philistines encounter each other while standing on either side of the valley. This setup forces them into a stalemate, since it would be suicidal for either army to run down one side and up the other, rendering them vulnerable to their enemy. Soon, though, a brave Philistine named Goliath descends into the valley. Goliath is enormous, standing at roughly six feet, nine inches tall and wearing nearly 100 pounds of armor. He carries a spear, a javelin, and a sword, and he is accompanied by a servant carrying Goliath's massive shield. Addressing the Philistines, Goliath tells them to send him an opponent and says that whoever wins in one-on-one combat with him will determine which army emerges victorious.

None of the Israelites want to face the hulking Goliath. Finally, though, a small shepherd boy named David steps forth to volunteer. Looking upon him, King Saul says David can't go because he doesn't stand a chance against Goliath—he's only a boy and has no experience, whereas Goliath is a trained warrior. In response, David insists that he has experience hunting down lions and bears who steal his sheep, and because nobody else will volunteer, Saul agrees to send him to fight the giant.

Gladwell notes that his book is about "what happens when ordinary people confront giants." He clarifies that he uses the word "giant" to refer to all forms of power, explaining that the chapters that follow will focus on different people who have taken on seemingly hopeless challenges. With no other choice but to face difficult circumstances, people are forced to ask themselves if they should follow conventional rules or take their own approach—a question that often determines whether or not they'll continue to endure hardship or simply give up. These stories, Gladwell upholds, will enable him to examine the fact that people tend to value things that arise out of "lopsided conflicts," since adversity often results in triumph and beauty.

Gladwell begins David and Goliath by recounting the Old Testament story after which the book is named. In doing so, he rehashes a classic tale of victory, one that people frequently reference when discussing mismatched battles in which a seemingly weak opponent bests a stronger, more powerful foe. By scrutinizing this story, Gladwell sets himself up to analyze the nuances of such interactions, ultimately urging readers to refrain from taking old stories for granted. Instead of approaching the story of David and Goliath as nothing but a well-known biblical tale that requires no further scrutiny, he encourages readers to look more closely at what, exactly, happened that day in the valley of Elah.



The story of David and Goliath is one about bucking expectations. Even if readers aren't familiar with the tale, they might already begin to sense that, though David is certainly outmatched, he will likely find a way to triumph over Goliath. After all, why else would the story itself have survived since ancient times? With this in mind, it becomes clear that Gladwell is interested in whatever it is that gives David the confidence to challenge such an intimidating opponent.



In this passage, Gladwell states his intentions for the book, confirming that he's retelling the story of David and Goliath in order to make a broader argument about "what happens when ordinary people confront giants." To that end, it becomes clear that Gladwell believes these confrontations aren't quite as straightforward as people tend to think. Part of what fuels people like David, he argues, is that their disadvantages inspire them to seek alternative approaches to problems that would otherwise be impossible to overcome. In doing so, these people break from convention and find themselves capable of greatness, and this is all because it's necessary for them to compensate for their own shortcomings.



More importantly, though, Gladwell believes that people tend to misinterpret stories about underdogs facing monumental challenges. He believes that “giants are not what we think they are,” since the aspects of their strength that make them seem so invincible are often the very same qualities that lead to their downfall. What’s more, being an underdog can fundamentally alter the way people approach the world, giving them an outlook that helps them find new ways of tackling old problems.

Returning to the story of David and Goliath, Gladwell explains that Goliath expects to face an opponent in hand-to-hand combat. This, Gladwell notes, was quite common in ancient times, as armies would send just one warrior to settle conflicts to avoid widespread violence. Because of this practice, Goliath thinks he’s going to be challenging his opponent in a context in which he thrives, since he’s strong and skilled in hand-to-hand combat. However, David has something else in mind. Seeing Goliath’s size, he knows he’ll have no chance if he fights on the giant’s terms, so he refuses the armor King Saul offers him, saying he can’t move quickly enough under so much weight. Instead, David simply picks up a handful of stones, running into the valley with nothing but these rocks and his shepherd’s staff.

When he sees David quickly approaching with his staff, Goliath makes fun of him by saying, “Am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks?” However, David swiftly places a stone in a sling and sends it hurtling toward Goliath, striking him in the forehead. Goliath falls to the ground, at which point David runs to Goliath, picks up his sword, and chops off the giant’s head. When the Philistines see this, they immediately run away. In this instance, Gladwell notes, an underdog bests a giant and seasoned warrior. This, at least, is how people have told the story for hundreds of years, using it to illustrate the idea of “improbable victory.” Gladwell, however, believes this version of the story is almost completely wrong.

Gladwell reviews the different kind of warriors that made up the standard army in ancient times. There were the cavalymen who rode horseback, the infantrymen who traveled on foot and carried swords, and the slingers who sent projectiles hurtling through the air. Slingers were incredibly accurate, and scholars have determined that their slingshots were as powerful as some modern handguns. Goliath, Gladwell asserts, is an infantryman, and he believes he’s going to fight another infantryman. But David has no reason to abide by the “rituals of single combat.” As a shepherd, he has chased down wild animals, clearly using his impressive slinging skills to stop them. Because of this experience, he is like a military slinger, and he uses this to his advantage.

By this point, Gladwell has made it clear that his primary focus in David and Goliath will be on people who are supposedly weak or disadvantaged. However, he also expresses a desire to better understand powerful people, since he believes that society often misinterprets what it means to be powerful in the first place. This, it seems, is why he’s rehashing the story of David and Goliath, using it to illustrate the fact that the assumptions people make about power are often woefully inaccurate.



Gladwell has already suggested that people tend to make incorrect assumptions about what, exactly, counts as an advantage. In keeping with this, Goliath thinks he’s in a position of power because he assumes David will play by his rules—but David understands it would be futile to challenge the giant in this regard. In other words, he knows he’ll have to find some other way to best Goliath, an attitude that makes sense of his decision to forgo armor and traditional weaponry. As David approaches his opponent, then, it becomes increasingly clear that he has a plan that goes against the conventional practices of one-on-one combat.



When Gladwell argues that everything about this story is incorrect, he doesn’t mean that the actual tale of David and Goliath is inaccurate or false. What he means is that people often overlook the story’s many details. Although people understand in a general sense that David and Goliath is a story about “improbable victory,” they don’t scrutinize the factors that lead to David’s victory. This, it seems, is why Gladwell has decided to examine underdogs and giants, wanting to outline the thought patterns and overall conditions that lead to this kind of upset.



Because duels in ancient times usually took place between two burly infantrymen, the face-offs always involved the kind of fighting that these soldiers were best at—namely, hand-to-hand combat. This is why Goliath assumes David will be challenging him in this manner, since he has never experienced any other kind of fight. This, however, is his fatal mistake, since David upends his expectations, ultimately using them against the giant.



Calling attention to David's tactics, Gladwell reminds readers that the young shepherd runs at Goliath—something he's able to do because he refused to wear heavy armor. Knowing that Goliath is slow and encumbered not only by his own weight, but by his armor, David is confident that the giant won't even be able to react to the approaching projectile. According to Gladwell, the three categories of soldiers in ancient armies balance each other out: infantry beats cavalry by spearing them off their horses, cavalry beats "projectile warriors" by moving too quickly for them to take proper aim, and slingers beat infantrymen, who are sitting ducks to their dangerous projectiles. Because David is a slinger, Gladwell argues, it makes sense that he beats Goliath. After all, slingers always beat infantrymen.

On the surface, Gladwell says, there's an obvious lesson inherent to the story of David and Goliath, one that everyone understands—namely, that Goliath and King Saul have a narrow understanding of power, thinking it can't manifest itself in forms other than strength or size. This is an informative point, but it's even more important to recognize that everyone but David fails to see Goliath for what he is: although he's supposed to be a celebrated warrior, he needs a servant to walk in front of him while carrying his shield. He also calls out to David before the battle, saying, "Come to me." Along with the fact that Goliath apparently needs a guide, this suggests that he finds physical movement cumbersome. Even though everyone thinks of him as a capable warrior, then, he seems to lack the physical prowess to engage in agile confrontations.

Gladwell points out that Goliath sees David approaching with his staff and asks why he brought "sticks"—multiple sticks—which, given that David seemingly only brings one stick, could perhaps suggest that Goliath is visually impaired. Medical scholars have suggested that Goliath may have had a tumor on his pituitary gland. People with this condition grow far beyond average. And because the tumor can press down on optic nerves, people suffering from this condition often have vision problems. With this in mind, Gladwell suggests that Goliath is unable to accurately judge David because of his pituitary tumor, meaning that the very thing that made him so large in the first place actually puts him at a disadvantage, rendering him incapable of seeing his opponent. And even if Goliath could properly see David, he's too slow and weighed down to react quickly enough. Gladwell believes that this fact contains a worthwhile lesson, which is that "the powerful and the strong are not always what they seem."

Gladwell's analysis of how David beats Goliath underscores the idea that Goliath's supposed advantages quickly become disadvantages when David changes his approach to one-on-one combat. Because of Goliath's large size and heavy armor, it is difficult for him to dodge David's projectile. Moreover, Goliath's undue confidence leads him to overlook the possibility that David might go against convention by attacking him in an unexpected way. And yet, the results of their battle shouldn't actually be all that surprising, since projectile warriors typically have an advantage over infantrymen. The problem, of course, is that Goliath isn't thinking in these terms—instead, he invests himself in tradition by believing that David will fight him as an infantryman.



According to Gladwell, everyone understands that David's victory proves underdogs can sometimes win. However, not everyone understands why this is the case, ultimately framing such upsets as anomalous and unlikely. But Gladwell believes there are observable factors that render an underdog capable of triumphing over a giant. To illustrate this point, he calls attention to the multiple signs that hint at Goliath's various weaknesses before the battle even begins. Everyone but David is distracted by Goliath's impressive size, so they don't notice his glaring vulnerabilities, like the fact that he apparently has trouble walking on his own. Needless to say, this is a major flaw for a celebrated warrior to have, but nobody recognizes this shortcoming because they're too focused on Goliath's strengths—strengths that are useless to him as soon as David capitalizes on Goliath's weaknesses.



It's worth acknowledging that Gladwell's theory about Goliath's pituitary gland is highly speculative. At the same time, though, it's an important point because it encapsulates Gladwell's overall point about advantages. Whether or not Goliath had a tumor on his pituitary gland, what's important to grasp is that the very things that make him powerful in most situations end up working against him when David changes the rules of combat. If Goliath has a tumor on his pituitary gland, it is responsible for his hulking size but also responsible for his inability to properly see his opponent. In turn, it becomes clear that strengths and advantages aren't always what they seem to be, since hardly anything is beneficial 100 percent of the time. David's main triumph, then, is his ability to recognize that Goliath's supposed strengths can be used against him.



CHAPTER 1: VIVEK RANADIVÉ

Gladwell introduces Vivek Ranadivé, an Indian immigrant to the United States who lives in Silicon Valley and works for a software company. When Ranadivé becomes the coach of his daughter Anjali's basketball team, he decides to behave as he would at work—in a calm, measured manner. This is especially difficult, though, because he knows very little about basketball. Nevertheless, he knows he'll get nowhere by yelling at his athletes and teaching them to play like other teams, so he decides to take his own approach. According to him, the way most teams play basketball makes little sense because they don't utilize the entire court. Every time a team scores a basket, they run to their own end of the court and wait for the offensive side to approach with the ball. If a team isn't good at defense beneath the hoop, this tactic puts them at a disadvantage.

Ranadivé decides to coach his team to play what's known as the **full-court press**, in which the defensive team puts pressure on the offensive team right away, making it difficult for them to inbound the ball. If the other team does manage to inbound the ball, then Ranadivé's girls play tough defense on them before they even reach half-court. This is an ideal strategy for Ranadivé's team, since the girls are inexperienced basketball players who spend the majority of their time studying. If they play the traditional way, Ranadivé knows, they will lose—a prospect he dislikes as an immigrant who came to the U.S. with only \$50 and secured a successful life for himself. Consequently, Ranadivé has his team run the full-court press every play of every game, and they end up playing in the national championships.

Turning to the idea of unexpected upsets, Gladwell references a study showing that small countries at war against countries with 10 times their population end up losing only 71.5 percent of the time. This means that smaller countries win 28.5 percent of the time against much, much bigger opponents, outmatching them nearly a third of the time. What's more, the success of the smaller countries increases to 63.6 percent when they opt not to play by the conventional rules of warfare—in other words, forced to devise their own tactics against more powerful entities, supposedly weaker nations win more often than not. This means that underdogs win far more frequently than people tend to think. And yet, the vast majority of people continue to believe that such victories are anomalous, even though it's rather clear that so-called disadvantages aren't always disadvantages at all.

Gladwell's decision to focus on a girls' basketball team after considering the story of David and Goliath signals his effort to apply his theories about underdogs to contemporary circumstances. More specifically, he's interested in exploring the ways in which Vivek Ranadivé can—like David—go against convention in order to turn his (and his team's) disadvantages into advantages.



Ranadivé's lack of experience in coaching basketball is what allows him to apply an outsider's perspective to the sport. In doing so, he recognizes a flaw in the way most teams play the game, noticing that hardly anyone applies defensive pressure at all times. Because his players lack traditional basketball skills, then, it's in their best interest to break from convention by playing the full-court press. By outlining this story, Gladwell suggests that Ranadivé's overall lack of experience ends up playing to his favor. He also implies that Ranadivé's life as an immigrant has taught him the value of hard work and instilled in him a desire to triumph in unlikely settings—an idea that underlines Gladwell's belief that challenges often lead to resilience and innovation.



Again, Gladwell destabilizes standard ideas about what it means to be at a disadvantage, turning to wartime statistics to illustrate that people often underestimate underdogs. This is an important point to grasp, but it's perhaps even more meaningful to note that smaller nations triumph far more often when they break from convention. In the same way that Vivek Ranadivé's basketball team finds its way to success by using unpopular strategies, supposedly weak countries frequently beat powerful forces by utilizing alternative warfare tactics. This, in turn, suggests that thinking outside the box is one of the most effective ways to succeed against "giants."



A prime example of an underdog is T. E. Lawrence, or “Lawrence of Arabia.” Leading the Arab revolt against Turkish forces in Arabia during World War I, Lawrence was put in charge of what one British authority called “an untrained rabble.” And yet, the soldiers Lawrence led were resilient and tireless, and they were extremely knowledgeable of the terrain and area for which they were fighting. What’s more, they were used to traveling through deserts and were therefore able to cover great distances to unexpectedly sabotage a number of Turkish-run railroads and stations. More importantly, they managed to launch a successful attack on the port of Aqaba by making their way through the desert instead of approaching by water, as the Turkish expected them to do. Doing this required spending days in intolerable heat, but because Lawrence’s men were used to such conditions, this wasn’t a prohibitive problem.

The general perception of Lawrence’s men was that they were “untrained” and therefore ineffective. This presumption, in combination with the men using their specific skillset to their favor, meant they were able to kill or capture 1,200 soldiers in Aqaba while only losing two men of their own. Gladwell draws attention to the fact that, though the weaponry and resources the Turks had are indeed advantageous in a traditional sense, they aren’t *always* advantageous. In this case, their resources rendered them largely immobile, and therefore vulnerable to the agile and creative Bedouins. Though this dynamic has repeated itself time and again throughout history, people continue to underestimate underdogs, thinking that only conventional assets lead to success. This is the thought process Gladwell hopes to challenge.

Gladwell explains that in basketball, players have only five seconds to pass the ball in from out of bounds, so Ranadivé teaches his players to cover the person trying to make this pass. Instead of letting the offensive team easily walk the ball up the court, Ranadivé’s players cover them the entire time. If the other team succeeds in inbounding the ball in the allotted time, they then have 10 seconds to pass half-court, so Ranadivé’s girls continue to apply defensive pressure. This has a tremendous effect, as it forces the team’s opponents to run out of time, make bad passes, or randomly throw the ball. With this tactic, Ranadivé’s girls beat teams who are ostensibly much more skilled than them. Simply put, the press enables them to hide their shortcomings. Because it’s an exhausting strategy, Ranadivé focuses on getting his players in shape instead of refining their traditional basketball skills.

In this section, Gladwell provides yet another example of how it can sometimes be beneficial to be disadvantaged. Of course, Lawrence’s men weren’t weak or incapable, but nearly everyone assumed they were because they didn’t have the kind of resources that other, more traditionally powerful armies had. Instead, they had a set of skills that enabled them to endure a grueling desert passage, ultimately making it possible for them to catch their opponents by surprise at Aqaba.



Once again, Gladwell suggests that people ought to avoid writing others off because they don’t conform to traditional conceptions of power, since traits that seem like disadvantages in some circumstances can suddenly become useful in others. In this case, Lawrence’s army was successful precisely because they didn’t have the kind of resources the Turks had—resources that ultimately turned the Turks into sitting ducks at Aqaba. Accordingly, Gladwell urges readers to think about advantages and disadvantages as highly dependent upon the surrounding circumstances, not unequivocally helpful or detrimental.



By this point, it’s clear that thinking outside the box has helped Ranadivé’s team enormously. Instead of accepting their weaknesses and playing in a way that exposes those weaknesses, they turn away from tradition and play a different kind of basketball, one that minimizes the effects of their shortcomings. This way, they don’t have to waste time trying to get better at something they know they’re bad at. Rather, they devote their energy to figuring out how best to execute the full-court press, something they can actually master.



Ranadivé's team isn't the only one in history to have embraced the **full-court press**. In 1971, Gladwell notes, the Fordham University Rams adopted the same strategy against the University of Massachusetts. At that time, UMass was a powerhouse of a team that hadn't lost a home game for two years. Fordham, on the other hand, was "a team of scrappy kids from the Bronx and Brooklyn," and they were missing their center when they played UMass. And yet, Fordham won by 11 points.

Gladwell says that Fordham's victory isn't a particularly unique story, since there are a number of similar tales about the **full-court press** in basketball. However, the strategy has never caught on. In fact, the Fordham coach didn't even continue using the press, going back to normal tactics immediately after besting UMass. Gladwell explains that people tend to turn away from the press because it can, technically, be beaten with the right approach—a team only needs to press back to even the scales. Nonetheless, the full-court press is "the best chance the underdog ha[s] of beating Goliath." Therefore, Gladwell argues, every underdog team should apply this strategy, but for some reason, they don't. This tendency surfaces throughout history in other contexts: for example, smaller countries frequently fight more powerful nations "straight up" and lose the vast majority of the time.

It makes very little sense that underdogs don't do whatever they can to win, Gladwell says, but he then points out that it often takes more effort to take alternative approaches. For Lawrence's soldiers to best the Turks at Aqaba, they had to take long detours through the grueling, merciless desert. Similarly, Ranadivé's team has to be in impeccable cardiovascular shape to successfully execute the **full-court press**. It's easier, then, to go along with convention, even if this doesn't set underdogs up for success.

It's worth noting that, although some people have made use of the full-court press, it's clearly not a tactic most teams use. This is made obvious by the mere fact that Gladwell frames it as an innovative, unconventional approach. In turn, readers are invited to consider that, although the strategy is obviously effective, most people are hesitant to embrace it. In keeping with this, readers see just how rare it is for people to break from convention, even when it's obvious that doing so would be beneficial.



Even after securing an unexpected victory against UMass, the coach of the Fordham Rams never uses the full-court press again. This once again demonstrates people's natural hesitance toward alternative tactics, ultimately suggesting that even the most effective strategies often remain unpopular simply because people don't feel comfortable going against the status quo. In turn, readers see the extent to which convention influences people, often convincing them to sacrifice their chances of beating "giants" in order to align with society's standards.



After underscoring just how difficult it is for people to turn away from convention, Gladwell provides another reason that many people refuse to use alternative tactics: it's hard to come up with new strategies and properly execute them. To successfully execute the full-court press, Ranadivé's players need to be so physically fit that they can apply defensive pressure at all times. Similarly, Lawrence's men need to be capable of withstanding dismal conditions in order to surprise the Turks at Aqaba. According to Gladwell, this level of effort discourages people from embracing the approaches that might turn their disadvantages into advantages.



Unlike the Fordham coach, one person fully grasped the import of what happened that day in the game against UMass. His name is Rick Pitino, and he was on UMass's bench marveling at the upset taking place before his eyes. It was clear to him that the **full-court press** was solely responsible for Fordham's success, so he incorporated it into his approach when he later became the head basketball coach at Boston University in 1978. With this strategy, BU won the NCAA tournament before Pitino moved to Providence College as head coach and turned a losing team into a contender for the national championship. He now teaches other coaches how to coach basketball, and though he teaches the full-court press, not all coaches adopt the strategy—they can't imagine working their teams hard enough to make it a viable option, since it requires so much cardiovascular training.

Gladwell calls attention to the fact that not all coaches adopt the **full-court press** even though Rick Pitino teaches it to them. This demonstrates that not everyone is willing to adopt such strategies. In fact, only underdogs will gravitate to such arduous approaches. In other words, people have to be "desperate" to "play by David's rules." To that end, a team or group must be so bad at something that they have no other reasonable choice but to reassess their approach. In this way, the fact that Ranadivé's team is so bad at basketball is its most important asset, because it's what compels them to play the full-court press—its greatest strength.

Unfortunately for Ranadivé's team, not everyone approves of their methods. The coaches and parents of the teams they face are often outraged by their strategy. At one game, the opposing coach throws a chair onto the court, furious that his team—which is actually quite good at basketball—is losing to a band of traditionally nonathletic players. Gladwell points out that people associate success with traditional forms of advantage. Lawrence of Arabia, though, didn't have respectable degrees, nor was he a decorated military general—but this is precisely why he had the courage to think outside the box. Similarly, Ranadivé knows very little about basketball and isn't invested in the various conventions to which most people adhere, which is why he has no problem taking a new approach that enrages his opponents.

Rick Pitino's history as a coach proves Gladwell's point about the level of effort it takes to be a successful underdog. Playing in unconventional ways doesn't necessarily make the game of basketball easier, it simply takes pressure off a team's preexisting weaknesses. This means that thinking outside of the box isn't a magical path to victory, but simply a creative way of altering the power dynamics between giants and underdogs. But this still requires quite a bit of effort, which not everyone is willing to put in.



Gladwell highlights an important part of his argument in this section, emphasizing the role desperation plays in an underdog's success. An average team isn't desperate enough to adopt the full-court press even though it would certainly help them, but a truly unskilled team has no other option (except, of course, to lose). Therefore, desperation becomes an unexpected asset of sorts, since it's what leads to innovation. As such, a disadvantage can quickly become an advantage.



The anger certain coaches and parents feel about Ranadivé's successful strategy is indicative of society's overall unwillingness to accept unconventional approaches. These angry adults feel as if Ranadivé and his girls have cheated the system. In reality, they have simply found a way to even the scales, something every team should be thinking about. Nevertheless, people are enraged by their success, revealing yet another reason why not everyone embraces nontraditional tactics: they often attract negative attention.



In the national finals, Ranadivé's team wins their first two rounds. During the third round, though, they play a team on their home court. The referee presiding over the game is also affiliated with their opponents. The referee ends up calling fouls on Ranadivé's players even when they don't do anything against the rules. One girl is even ejected from the game because the referee continues to call unfair fouls against her. Unsure of what else to do, Ranadivé calls off the **full-court press**, ultimately costing them the game by forcing them to play basketball "the way basketball is supposed to be played."

Ranadivé's team's loss is a perfect illustration of what happens when underdogs concede to convention. He and his players are massively successful while using the full-court press because it takes pressure off of their shortcomings. But as soon as they stop using this tactic, they no longer stand a chance. They're forced to give up on their strategy, which underlines just how intolerant society is of creative tactics that challenge the status quo and empower underdogs.



CHAPTER 2: TERESA DEBRITO

Gladwell turns his attention to Shepaug Valley Middle School in Connecticut. Although the school was originally built to accommodate large numbers of children during the baby boom, it now has a very small enrollment rate, since the surrounding area's population has shrunk considerably. There are, for example, only 80 children in the sixth grade. Given these statistics, Gladwell asks readers a question: "Would you send your child to Shepaug Valley Middle School?" To address this question, he reminds readers that the story about Ranadivé suggests that common conceptions of advantages and disadvantages are not always accurate. He then guesses that the majority of parents would like to send their children to Shepaug Valley because of its small class sizes, since the general assumption is that this is an advantage.

Although he hasn't said it yet, it's already clear that Gladwell is suspicious of the idea that small class sizes are actually beneficial. The question becomes, then, whether students succeed more often in larger classes or smaller classes. When applying the framework of the biblical David and Goliath story to this situation, the answer to this question depends upon whether or not traditional advantages in education are always advantageous, or if they sometimes become detrimental.



Many people believe that smaller class sizes are desirable, Gladwell notes, adding that multiple governments have made substantial efforts to reduce the number of students in each class. In the United States, 77 percent of the population agrees it would be better to use tax money to decrease the average class size than to raise teachers' salaries. Considering that Americans rarely agree upon something so unanimously, this is quite significant. The question remains, though, of whether or not students actually benefit from smaller class sizes. To address this, Gladwell looks at the class sizes at another middle school in Connecticut from between 1993 and 2005. The numbers fluctuate greatly, but what experts have found is that there are no "statistically significant effect[s]" of the changes in class size.

Right away, Gladwell debunks the idea that smaller classes have a profound effect on student success. Although studies of the relationship between class size and academic performance have yielded no "statistically significant" results, it's still notable that smaller classes clearly don't have an overwhelming influence on performance—otherwise, the data would clearly and unanimously reflect this. Consequently, Gladwell has already destabilized society's opinion of what counts as an advantage when it comes to education.



Gladwell acknowledges that there have been many studies on class size, and all of them have yielded different results. Some find that there is a positive correlation between class size and student success, but just as many studies find that there's a *negative* correlation (meaning students actually do worse in smaller classes than in larger classes). For all intents and purposes, then, it makes sense to say that smaller class sizes don't meaningfully impact how well students perform. And yet, the United States hired roughly 250,000 new teachers between 1996 and 2004 in order to reduce the average class size, meaning that taxpayer costs rose by 21 percent. Despite all this spending, though, Gladwell argues that reducing class size isn't the advantage everyone thinks it is.

Switching tracks, Gladwell introduces an unnamed character, whom he identifies as one of the most successful and powerful people in Hollywood. This executive grew up in Minneapolis, where he worked hard as a kid to organize a conglomerate of neighborhood children to shovel his neighbors' driveways, contracting these workers out and taking a cut of their pay. This entrepreneurial spirit arose from the working-class values the boy learned from his father, who emphasized the importance of hard work and admonished him when he left lights on or acted lazily. When he was 16, he worked at his father's scrap-metal business and found the work unbearably taxing and boring. He now thinks his father hired him to encourage him to "escape" a life of manual labor. When he went to college, he started a laundry service for his rich classmates, then attended business and law school.

The Hollywood executive eventually started working in Hollywood (of course) and became so successful that he now has a mansion in Beverly Hills and owns both a private jet and a Ferrari. Gladwell upholds that the executive has a unique understanding of money because of his working-class upbringing in Minneapolis. The executive fears, however, that he won't be able to give his children the same kind of understanding of the value of money, since they are growing up surrounded by wealth and could technically have whatever they want—if, that is, he gave it to them. He tells Gladwell that people underestimate how difficult it is for rich parents to raise children, suggesting that there's most likely some place between poverty and extreme wealth that is ideal for childrearing.

In this section, Gladwell simply emphasizes the idea that small class sizes aren't as beneficial as everyone thinks. And yet, the United States has thrown significant amounts of money into reducing the number of students in each classroom. In turn, readers once more see the extent to which people invest themselves in traditional notions of what's advantageous, even when there's no data to support such beliefs.



It's not yet clear why Gladwell has introduced this unnamed character. However, the fact that this man came from a modest working-class background and eventually became successful supports the idea that greatness can emerge from hardship. Because he always had to work hard and practice frugality, this man developed an entrepreneurial spirit that undoubtedly helped him succeed later in life. In this sense, then, his economic disadvantages are partially responsible for his eventual triumphs.



Having overcome hardship himself, the most difficult challenge in the Hollywood executive's life these days is figuring out how to instill the same values in his children that he himself grew up with. This is challenging because he grew up in significantly different circumstances than his children. And though all parents want to provide their children with whatever they want, doing so isn't a particularly effective childrearing technique. In fact, the executive recognizes that his children might be better off in the long run if they had to face the same difficulties he himself faced as a child and young man, since these are the very same hardships that led to his success. In other words, he doesn't want his children's advantages to end up working against them.



Gladwell acknowledges that people are hesitant to sympathize with millionaires complaining about their wealth. At the same time, he points out that the Hollywood executive's concerns about parenting underscore an important idea that he believes most people intuitively grasp—namely, that “more is not always better” when it comes to how money affects parenting. Needless to say, it's difficult to raise children in poverty, since parents need certain resources to make their jobs easier. Struggling to make enough to care for a child is exhausting, emotionally taxing, and time-consuming. And yet, Gladwell asserts that more money doesn't always make it easier to raise children. Instead, “money makes parenting easier until a certain point—when it stops making much of a difference.”

Researchers have found that money stops profoundly affecting happiness around a household income of \$75,000. Once a family makes more than that amount, they stop noticing substantial differences. For example, if one family makes \$75,000 and their neighbors make \$100,000, their neighbors will perhaps be able to own a nicer car or go out to restaurants more often, but the extra \$25,000 won't make it significantly easier for them to be “good parents.” Keeping this in mind, Gladwell proposes that a graph of the relationship between parenting and wealth would show a curved line that slowly plateaus after reaching the \$75,000 mark.

Continuing his argument about the effect of money on parenting, Gladwell says there's a certain point at which wealth starts making parenting *harder* again. This is because it's difficult to say no to children when the kids know their parents *could* buy them whatever they want. In working class families, parents need only explain that it's not financially possible for them to buy a pony, but wealthy parents have to find ways to explain that although they're capable of purchasing a pony, they're not going to do so. In accordance with this, a proper graph of the relationship between parenting and wealth would be what's known as an inverted-U curve (a graph with a line that resembles an upside-down U). On the left side, the graph shows a positive correlation between wealth and parenting, but the line plateaus once it hits the \$75,000 mark and then begins to plunge.

Gladwell proposes that wealth can have diminishing returns. Though he recognizes that people need a certain amount of money to set themselves up to be successful parents, he also suggests that too much money can have adverse effects. At first glance, this might seem counterintuitive—if earning a certain amount of money makes parenting easier, shouldn't earning more money make it even easier? However, the central thesis of David and Goliath is that advantages aren't always what they seem. In the same way that Goliath's strength isn't always beneficial, then, money ceases to be helpful once people reach a certain level of wealth.



The most important thing to take away from Gladwell's argument about money is that more is not always better. While it's true that an extra \$25,000 per year would certainly influence a family, it wouldn't change the way they live in a fundamental or meaningful way. As a result, it's unlikely that a family making \$100,000 would be happier than a family making \$75,000. At the same time, it's worth noting that Gladwell conflates studies about money's effect on happiness with his own ideas about the relationship between wealth and parenting. Though it's likely that these two things are rough equivalents, Gladwell doesn't actually specify why this information about happiness would impact the process of raising children.



In the same way Gladwell previously proved that Goliath's strength is only beneficial in certain circumstances, he now asserts that wealth doesn't always have a positive effect on parenting. It helps people who earn less than \$75,000 per year to receive more money, but after this threshold, money actually makes parenting more difficult. By outlining this trend, Gladwell once again challenges the idea that an advantage is always an advantage, ultimately positing that such things are highly circumstantial.



Returning to the topic of academia, Gladwell proposes that the relationship between student success and class size is also an inverted-U curve. To explain this, he suggests that, though class sizes have no effect on academic achievement when classes are in a “medium range,” they *do* have noticeable effects at either end of the spectrum. For instance, there are classes in Israel with as many as 40 students, and these classes perform worse than other classes in Israel with only 20 students. In Connecticut, though, some teachers have found it even more difficult to effectively educate children in extremely small classes. This is because it’s helpful to have enough students to start exciting discussions or to break into even groups. Plus, small classes sometimes feel too intimate for shy students, therefore making it harder to draw them out of their shells.

The downsides of small classes are so stark that Teresa DeBrito—the principal of Shepaug Valley—actively worries about the school’s shrinking enrollment, despite what most people think about the benefits of small classes. A former teacher herself, she fondly remembers teaching a class of 29, though she admits it was quite a bit of work. Still, this larger size made it easier for her to get students excited or involve them in more interesting discussions. Of course, she doesn’t want all of the classes at Shepaug Valley to have 29 students, but her fear of extremely small cohorts underscores the fact that people have become blindly obsessed with the idea that smaller classes lead to greater success—something that isn’t always true.

To illustrate Teresa DeBrito’s point, Gladwell references an elite private boarding school in Connecticut called Hotchkiss. The tuition at Hotchkiss is \$50,000 per year, and the administration proudly boasts about its “intimate” class sizes. Even though research shows that classes can be *too* small, Hotchkiss continues to abide by the idea that smaller is better. This, Gladwell says, is because the school has unquestioningly accepted that “the kinds of things that wealth can buy always translate into real-world advantages.” This, however, is untrue, as evidenced by the successful Hollywood executive’s difficulty in raising his children.

One of the most important lessons that emerges from David and Goliath is that it’s unwise to assume something is categorically good or bad. The vast majority of people in the United States believe that smaller classes lead to better academic results, but this only true when a class is reduced from, say, 40 to 20 students. If, on the other hand, a class is reduced to a very small size, the entire dynamic shifts and makes it harder for teachers to meaningfully engage their students. Accordingly, it’s unwise to assume that smaller classes are unequivocally better than larger classes, just as it’s unwise to assume that strength is always more advantageous than speed or agility.



Teresa DeBrito’s fondness of larger classes supports the idea that smaller classes aren’t always preferable. At the same time, she recognizes that having too many students in one class can overwork the teacher. Therefore, there must be a happy medium, a class size that doesn’t overextend the teacher but isn’t so small that it’s impossible to incite lively discussion. This size, it seems, would exist in the middle—or at the apex—of an inverted-U curve measuring the relationship between class size and student success.



The assumptions people form about what is or is not an advantage are largely tied to arbitrary ideas about wealth and status. To that end, many people are obsessed with the idea that whatever costs the most or is the most prestigious is unquestioningly the best—a miscalculation that Gladwell will continue to scrutinize throughout David and Goliath.



CHAPTER 3: CAROLINE SACKS

In the 1860s, Impressionist painters like Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Paul Cézanne, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Camille Pissarro had trouble showing their work to the public. This is because the art world of 19th-century France centered around a yearly exhibition called the Salon, which took place at the Palais de l'Industrie. The only way to gain respect as an artist was to have a piece in the Salon, but the jury that decided which paintings would be displayed had very high, specific standards. Because the Impressionists didn't conform to the traditional style of painting, they found it nearly impossible to have pieces accepted for the Salon. And when Renoir and Monet finally *did* have pieces accepted, they were taken down six weeks into the show and moved to a dark back room, where they were hung with paintings "considered to be failures."

The Impressionists frequently gather at Café Guerbois, where they debate whether or not they should keep submitting to the Salon. What they want to decide, Gladwell says, is whether they should create their own show, thereby becoming "Big Fish in a Little Pond" instead of continuing to fail as "Little Fish in the Big Pond of the Salon." Eventually, they decide to put on their own show, and it is because of this decision that their work is now lauded and displayed in the world's most famous museums. Gladwell notes that this illustrates an important notion—namely, that people often assign too much importance and reverence to what they believe to be "the finest institutions." It's not often, he argues, that people break from convention like the Impressionists did. Nothing, he adds, highlights this dynamic more than the way people decide where to attend college.

Gladwell introduces readers to a woman named Caroline Sacks, who recalls her childhood as one full of science and wonder. As a young girl, Sacks enjoyed identifying bugs and various animals, and she cherished the idea of becoming a scientist. She excelled in high school, graduating at the top of her class. While trying to decide where to attend college, she visited a number of elite institutions and was eventually accepted to her top choice, Brown University. Her back-up school, she says, was the University of Maryland. When Sacks got into Brown, though, there was no question in her mind that she should go there, so she enrolled in chemistry and several other classes. Right away, she was surprised that everyone seemed just like her—"intellectually curious and kind of nervous and excited." At that point, she couldn't have been happier with her choice.

Gladwell's focus on the Impressionist painters and their fight to be accepted by the Salon follows his examination of Hotchkiss, another elite institution. The Impressionists desperately want to display their work in the Salon because this is the only path in their society toward fame and recognition as artists. If, however, readers consider this alongside the idea that a school like Hotchkiss is universally respected despite its incorrect assumption that small classes benefit students, it's apparent that Gladwell will most likely challenge the validity of the Salon's prestige, questioning whether or not it's as beneficial as the artists think to have a painting displayed in the Salon.



Before deciding to break away from the Salon, the Impressionists are like every person who unthinkingly assumes that an elite school like Hotchkiss is better than other schools with slightly larger classes. Prestige and reputation, Gladwell intimates, often manage to interfere with the public's ability to judge the actual merit of an institution. Thankfully for the art world, the Impressionists eventually recognize that they'll be better off forging their own way, thereby ignoring the status quo and opening themselves up to new advantages—after all, nobody will hang their paintings in a backroom at their own show, so putting on their own show means that the public will actually have a chance to see their work.



Faced with the same decision, most people would do what Sacks did and choose Brown over the University of Maryland. This is because Brown is one of the nation's most respected and competitive schools. Given that David and Goliath is about the incorrect assumptions people often make about what counts as an advantage, though, it seems all too likely that Gladwell intends to challenge the idea that it's always beneficial to attend an Ivy League school. In turn, the book invites readers to ask themselves if there are some situations in which attending a public school like the University of Maryland would be a better choice than attending a more prestigious school like Brown.



Gladwell asks readers if Caroline Sacks's decision to go to Brown might seem less ideal when compared to the Impressionists' decision to turn away from the Salon. The Impressionists, Gladwell argues, grasped that striking out on their own would have its own set of benefits and downsides in comparison to the Salon, which was somewhat like an Ivy League school. In the same way that the Salon was prestigious and well-respected, Ivy League schools are sought-after institutions. However, the Salon had its own drawbacks. Because it accepted so many paintings, the vast majority of the pieces went largely unnoticed, meaning that the Salon's prestige was one of its only benefits.

Recounting the story of the Impressionists, Gladwell says that Pissarro and Monet suggested that the group found a collective in which every artist would be treated the same. In 1874, they put on their first show, displaying 165 pieces on the top floor of a building with small, connected rooms. It was a massive success, and viewers were able to see each painting up close in ways they would never be able to at the Salon. These days, to buy one of the paintings displayed at this show would cost more than a billion dollars. This, Gladwell suggests, indicates that it is sometimes much better to be a "Big Fish in a Little Pond than a Little Fish in a Big Pond."

According to Gladwell, Sacks's decision to be a Little Fish in a Big Pond costs her. During the second semester of her freshman year at Brown, she receives a poor grade on a midterm exam in chemistry. In retrospect, Sacks thinks she was most likely enrolled in too many classes and doing too many extracurricular activities, but at the time, she is overwhelmingly disappointed and discouraged. When she meets with the professor, he urges her to drop the class and take it again the following semester. Sacks follows his advice, but when she takes it again, she receives a B: a shocking grade to her, since she's only ever gotten A's. This, Sacks says, is especially discouraging because all her classmates are freshmen. Worse, none of them want to talk about study habits or help each other because they are all so competitive.

Slowly but surely, Gladwell begins to reveal the downsides of various elite institutions. In the same way that Goliath's widely respected strength later leads to his demise, Gladwell implies that the very thing that attracts the Impressionists to the Salon in the first place—namely, its popularity—is what ends up working against them, since the few times they actually display pieces in the Salon, their paintings are hung inconspicuously, lost among the many other canvases. The Salon's appeal of exclusivity, then, is also its worst quality.



Again, Gladwell makes it clear that the Impressionists were wise to turn away from convention by putting on their own art show. In their case, it paid off to be a Big Fishes in a Little Pond. The question becomes, then, whether or not the same would hold true for Caroline Sacks, who—as somebody who went to Brown—entered college as a Little Fish in a Big Pond.



Caroline Sacks's problem isn't that she's too unintelligent to attend Brown. After all, she gets a B in chemistry—a perfectly good grade, all things considered. However, she's used to standing out as an excellent student, the kind of person who everyone else admires as incredibly smart. Now, though, she's surrounded not only by people who are as smart as her, but also by people who are even smarter. Since she's never experienced this before, she finds it incredibly discouraging. Worse, the entire atmosphere at Brown is highly competitive, which only makes things harder for her. That she finds herself so demoralized by this experience suggests that she really would have been better off at the University of Maryland, where she would most likely feel just as intelligent and high-achieving as she always did in high school, and thus less discouraged.



In Sacks's second semester of her sophomore year, she takes organic chemistry and continues to struggle. She can't wrap her head around the concepts necessary to excel. Other students, though, have no trouble at all solving problems given to them by the professor. But no matter how hard Sacks works, she has no success. When the professor asks questions in class, hands fly into the air while Sacks sits silently and listens to her peers deliver the correct answer. She begins to feel "inadequa[te]" and frustrated, and while studying one night at three in the morning, decides to stop chasing her dream of becoming a scientist.

What's perhaps most unfortunate about Sacks's experience at Brown is that it shouldn't have *mattered* how good she was at organic chemistry, since she never wanted to be an organic chemist anyway. Many people find organic chemistry nearly impossible, and some premed students even take it at another institution during the summer just to get months of practice before taking it at their own school. To add to this, Sacks took organic chemistry at one of the most competitive institutions in the country. One of the main reasons Sacks quit science, then, is that she was comparing herself to some of the smartest, most competitive students in the entire nation. She wasn't comparing herself to *everyone* taking organic chemistry, but if she were, she'd most likely have felt rather competent. Instead, she suffered as a Little Fish in a Big Pond, and it made her feel unintelligent.

Gladwell argues that Caroline Sacks suffered from "relative deprivation," a concept coined by a sociologist studying morale. The term refers to the fact that people tend to compare themselves not to all of society, but to their immediate peers. Because Sacks attended Brown, then, she made damaging comparisons between herself and her highly accomplished peers. This, Gladwell says, is simply human nature, since it makes sense for people to compare themselves to others in the same environment, not to some abstract universal. Therefore, "the more elite an educational institution is, the worse students feel about their own academic abilities."

In Caroline Sacks's case, going to one of the top schools in the United States actually has an adverse effect on her overall trajectory, interfering with her dreams of becoming a scientist. As somebody who obviously responds well to positive reinforcement (as evidenced by her history of success in high school), being in a cut-throat academic environment only demoralizes her. Therefore, Gladwell implies, it is not always beneficial to attend the most prestigious universities, despite what most people might think.



To somebody like Caroline Sacks who's always seen herself as someone who excels, competing against other high-achievers is intellectually damaging, regardless of the fact that the majority of people in the world wouldn't do nearly as well as her. This, Gladwell intimates, is one of the drawbacks of being a Little Fish in a Big Pond. It's also an indication that the things people think are advantageous—say, for example, going to an Ivy League school—aren't always as beneficial as they might seem.



Sacks's decision to be a Little Fish in a Big Pond instead of a Big Fish in a Little Pond ultimately led to her struggle with "relative deprivation," since comparing herself to such intelligent peers discouraged her. This importantly indicates that it's not always beneficial to attend the most prestigious institutions, since doing so can discourage otherwise brilliant students like Caroline Sacks.



What happened to Caroline Sacks is common. In fact, more than half of STEM (science, technology, and math) students drop out of the sciences within the first two years of their course of study. To examine this trend, Gladwell looks at the SAT scores of STEM majors at Hartwick College in New York. The top third of the class received an average score of 569 on the math SATs, whereas the bottom third of the class received an average score of 407. Going on, Gladwell notes that 55 percent of the top third actually ended up earning STEM degrees, while only 17.8 percent of the bottom third graduated with STEM degrees. These figures make sense, since most of the students entering STEM majors with the lowest SAT scores end up switching tracks.

Continuing his examination of STEM major retention rates at various colleges, Gladwell explains that the same trends hold true for students at Harvard as at Hartwick, even though the bottom third of the class received an average math SAT score of 581—higher than the average score of the *top third* at Hartwick. And yet, only 15.4 percent of students in Harvard's bottom third ended up earning STEM degrees. This means that it's better to be in the top third of the class at Hartwick than in the bottom third at Harvard, since 55 percent of Hartwick's highest-scoring students received STEM degrees. Even though the Harvard students with the lowest SAT scores are technically smarter than the highest-scoring Hartwick students, more of those Hartwick students end up earning STEM degrees.

Gladwell's analysis of SAT scores illustrates that it's better to be a Big Fish in a Little Pond than a Little Fish in a Big Pond. Looking at the same statistics at a number of other schools, Gladwell further emphasizes the validity of this theory. He also turns his attention to economics scholars interviewing for jobs at various universities. Instead of using test scores as a metric, he looks at the average number of papers the candidates have published in the field's top journals, finding that candidates who were at the top of their class at non-prestigious schools have better publication records than almost everyone who attended Ivy League schools (except those who were in the 90th percentile or higher at Ivy League institutions). This means that academic employers are better off hiring Big Fish from Little Ponds than Little Fish from Big Ponds.

In this section, Gladwell presents data that show just how difficult it is to succeed in STEM. However, this isn't his main point. Rather, he wants to expand upon his notion that it's not always beneficial to attend the most prestigious institutions, even if society continues to promote this idea. To do so, then, he examines the retention rate of college STEM majors, clearly preparing to compare these figures (drawn from a non-Ivy League school) with those drawn from more prestigious colleges.



It is somewhat difficult to visualize the information Gladwell presents here without actually looking at the charts he provides, but the important thing to understand is quite simple: Hartwick students at the top of their class are better off than Harvard students at the bottom of theirs, even though the Harvard students are smarter (according to their SAT scores). This confirms that Caroline Sacks would most likely have found success if she'd gone to the University of Maryland, where she didn't have to compete against such intimidating peers. That only 15.4 percent of Harvard's bottom-third students graduate with STEM degrees suggests that the learning environment at Harvard is simply too much for many people to bear—even if those people are quite intelligent. Once again, then, Gladwell gives readers another reason to second-guess the things society assumes are beneficial.



Gladwell's second example about the benefits of being a Big Fish in a Little Pond is important because it indicates not only that people have a better likelihood of graduating with a STEM degree if they attend less competitive schools, but also that graduates of these school are better off after their education, too. After all, economists from supposedly mediocre schools end up securing more publishing success than the majority of economists from Ivy League schools. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that they end up getting hired more often, and Gladwell doesn't clarify this point. To that end, if hiring committees still believe in the prestige attached to the Ivy League, then they might still favor the candidates from the most competitive institutions, though it's worth noting that this would still align with Gladwell's overall point about the inordinate amount of significance people associate with prestige.



Gladwell applies the idea of being a Little Fish in a Big Pond to the debate surrounding affirmative action. The thinking behind affirmative action—insofar as it pertains to college admissions—is that “helping minorities get into selective schools is justified given the long history of discrimination.” Some people, however, believe that admissions should only focus on academic ability. And there’s yet another group who think affirmative action should be based on financial considerations, not race. Gladwell, for his part, maintains that all three of these views take for granted that going to prestigious institutions is an advantage in the first place—an idea of which he’s deeply suspicious. According to him, it’s potentially harmful to take good students who “happen to be black” and “bump them *up* a notch,” since this will simply put them in the same situation as Caroline Sacks.

At the same time, Gladwell doesn’t think affirmative action is wrong. His main point is that there are a number of downsides to the “Big Pond” that people don’t consider. Most people take for granted that going to prestigious universities will always increase the chances of a student’s success, but this isn’t the case. Still, though, people have very specific ideas about what, exactly, an advantage is—ideas that aren’t all that accurate. For this reason, people frequently discount the value of turning away from things that are typically considered advantageous. When Gladwell asks Sacks what she thinks her life would be like if she’d gone to the University of Maryland instead of Brown, she gives him an immediate answer: “I’d still be in science,” she says.

CHAPTER 4: DAVID BOIES

Gladwell turns his attention to dyslexia, a brain disorder that makes it difficult for people to distinguish various sounds from one another. Dyslexia can also impact the way people learn to read, since it’s harder for people to grasp certain words on the page if they have “no concept of the sounds of language.” Taking this into consideration, Gladwell posits that nobody would wish dyslexia on their child, but he immediately challenges this notion by calling into question what, exactly, people tend to see as a disadvantage. He has already considered various advantages, he says, so now he wants to explore the things people think of as *disadvantageous*. In doing so, he references a concept known as “desirable difficulties,” suggesting that certain challenges sometimes have positive effects.

Regardless of whether or not Gladwell supports affirmative action, his primary intention is to highlight the fact that the vast majority of people tend to assume that going to an elite university is beneficial. This assumption underlines society’s tendency to take it for granted that certain things are advantages when, in reality, they aren’t—or at least aren’t always advantageous. Once again, then, Gladwell suggests that people ought to more carefully scrutinize what, exactly, counts as beneficial.



The fact that Sacks is unhesitatingly certain she’d still be in science if she hadn’t gone to Brown spotlights the negative influence that the elite institution had on her overall educational development. Of course, her decision to attend Brown is what most people would do, since it’s one of the most respected schools in the United States. In doing so, though, Sacks failed to recognize the negative aspects of being a Little Fish in a Big Pond, and this ultimately cost her.



Having established that not all advantages are actually beneficial, Gladwell now considers whether or not there are ever any benefits that come from disadvantages. This, of course, is a rhetorical question, for he immediately presents readers with the idea of “desirable difficulties,” a self-explanatory term that champions the “desirable” qualities of some forms of adversity. In the same way that people are wrong to unquestioningly embrace advantages, then, Gladwell will demonstrate why it’s a mistake to turn away from all kinds of hardship, too.



To outline the concept of “desirable difficulty,” Gladwell presents readers with two questions, both of which comprise the world’s shortest intelligence test, which is known as the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT). The questions are as follows: 1. A bat and a ball cost \$1.10 in total. The bat costs \$1.00 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost? Answer: the ball costs \$0.05. 2. If it takes five machines five minutes to make five widgets, how long would it take 100 machines to make 100 widgets? Answer: it would take five minutes. Though seemingly straightforward, people often get these questions wrong because they measure the test taker’s ability to recognize when something “is more complex than it appears.” The Yale professor who invented this test gave it to students at nine different colleges, and their results were in keeping with their scores on other intelligence tests. On average, Harvard students only get 1.43 of the questions correct, proving that the test is quite hard. Strangely, though, people end up scoring better on the CRT if the test becomes a little harder. In a study at Princeton, the questions were written in a font that was difficult to read, and the average overall score increased to 2.45 from 1.9.

Gladwell argues that the reason Princeton students did better on the CRT when it was harder to read is that it forced them to work just a little more than they would have otherwise. This, he says, is a “desirable difficulty,” or one that brings about positive results. Needless to say, not all challenges are desirable, as evidenced by Caroline Sacks’s experience at Brown. With this in mind, Gladwell asks if dyslexia might be a desirable difficulty and, to answer his own question, points out that one third of all successful entrepreneurs are dyslexic. Gladwell hypothesizes that this kind of success isn’t in spite of a person’s struggle against dyslexia, but *because* of it.

Gladwell introduces David Boies, a man who grew up in rural Illinois and had a hard time in school from a very early age. Nobody knew it at the time, but he suffers from dyslexia, and to this day he has trouble reading because it takes him so long to get through even short passages. Fresh out of high school (which he barely finished), he took a job as a construction worker and eventually got married. When his wife became pregnant, though, she urged Boies to pursue more lucrative professions and the advanced degrees he’d need to do so. Deciding to go to law school, Boies attended to the University of Redlands, which Gladwell says was a small pond in which Boies could “excel.” While taking classes, Boies learned he could apply to law school without graduating college (something that is no longer the case).

There’s no doubt that the questions on the CRT are difficult—even high-achieving Ivy League students struggle with them, as evidenced by the fact that their average score is 1.43 out of 3. But when the questions become even harder, Princeton students improve their overall score. This is because the font change is a “desirable difficulty,” one that forces students to work just a little bit harder to read and, therefore, also forces them to slow down and really think. That this actually works aligns with Gladwell’s belief that disadvantages can sometimes become beneficial.



The experiment with the CRT indicates that disadvantages can be turned into advantages, so it’s natural that other setbacks or hardships in life might lead to positive results. To further explore this concept, Gladwell returns to the topic of dyslexia, a learning disorder that very few people would think of as advantageous. And yet, Gladwell notes that an inordinate amount of successful people have dyslexia, and he even suggests that their dyslexia is partially responsible for their success.



Although Gladwell hasn’t yet finished telling David Boies’s story, it’s clear—given the context in which Gladwell narrates his tale—that he will most likely become successful. What’s especially worth noting, though, is that Boies’s success doesn’t develop in spite of his dyslexia, but largely because of the ways in which he’s forced to make up for his cognitive differences. To that end, readers should bear in mind that Boies has trouble reading but still attends college and law school, where people take it for granted that students can read well. To respond to this, then, Boies will have to come up with alternate methods of navigating his way through his education.



Boies starts as a student at Northwestern Law School, and though his courses require quite a bit of reading, he manages to find synopses of important Supreme Court Cases that enable him to pass his classes. What's more, his listening abilities are far more useful than his peers', so he ends up getting more out of his professors' lectures than anyone else; while everyone is busy furiously taking notes (and consequently missing certain points), Boies manages to absorb everything his professors say. This leads him to such great success that he ends up transferring to Yale Law School.

After law school, Boies decides to become a litigator instead of practicing corporate law, since corporate lawyers have to do a lot of reading to prepare for their cases. Litigators, on the other hand, have to be quick-witted and responsive. This plays to Boies's strengths because he's so good at listening and compensating for his hindered reading skills. Not being able to read well effectively helps Boies hone his listening skills, turning him into an attentive prosecutor capable of picking up on important details and subtleties during cross-examinations. In this capacity, he becomes one of the most respected and high-profile litigators in the United States, taking on famous cases.

There are, Gladwell notes, several traits that psychologists consider when "measur[ing] personality": neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. Innovators, Gladwell says, have to be open to new ideas. They also have to have a very specific kind of agreeability—namely, they have to be disagreeable. This doesn't mean they have to be rude, but that they need to be willing to "do things that others might disapprove of." Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of IKEA, is a perfect example of somebody who is disagreeable. He is an innovative man who thought to sell disassembled furniture in the 1950s, a time when such a thing was unheard of. Moreover, his business was edged out of Sweden because other furniture companies instigated a boycott of the brand. In response, Kamprad took his business to Poland, where he was able to manufacture furniture without any roadblocks.

Forced to find alternative ways of succeeding because of his disadvantages, Boies has developed impeccable listening skills. This is how he responds to the challenge posed by his dyslexia, and it's important to recognize that he doesn't simply get by—he excels. Indeed, his listening skills end up giving him an advantage over his peers during lectures, helping him more thoroughly absorb what his professors are saying. In this regard, then, his disadvantage is his greatest advantage.



Again, Gladwell outlines the ways in which Boies's dyslexia ends up benefitting him. Dyslexia, it seems, can indeed be a "desirable difficulty." Of course, this all depends on Boies's ability to not only cultivate alternative skills, but excel at those skills—not something everyone can do. Nonetheless, though, Boies's story is evidence that Gladwell is perhaps correct in his argument that certain challenges can have positive results in the long run.



Examining the qualities that often lead to success, Gladwell suggests that many innovators are "disagreeable," meaning that they aren't afraid to go against the status quo. In the same way that Vivek Ranadivé decided to coach an unpopular basketball strategy to make up for his team's lack of skill, Ingvar Kamprad devises a business model that is quite unconventional. But instead of shying away from the kind of innovation necessary to succeed, he embraces it wholeheartedly—a wise choice, considering that to this day IKEA is one of the most successful furniture companies in the world.



Gladwell points out that Poland was a communist country and that Kamprad brought his company there at a tumultuous time. It was 1961, the Cold War was becoming increasingly serious, the Berlin Wall was being erected, and the Cuban Missile Crisis would soon bring itself to bear on the world. Going to Poland at this time, Gladwell argues, would be like starting a company in North Korea right now. But even though most people wouldn't have dreamed of "doing business in the land of the enemy for fear of being branded a traitor," Kamprad didn't care. This, Gladwell notes, is evidence of Kamprad's disagreeability. And though something like dyslexia doesn't simply turn people into innovators, it's possible that it could make people just a bit more disagreeable.

The concept of "disagreeability" is important to Gladwell's central argument, since it underscores the fact that it's not particularly easy to break from convention while also overcoming various "desirable difficulties." In fact, it's quite challenging to triumph when going against the status quo, which is why it's helpful if innovators don't care what others think—if, in other words, they're disagreeable. To turn a disadvantage into an advantage, Gladwell intimates, a person must set aside any hesitations about upsetting society in the process of defying tradition. Gladwell suggests that a challenge like dyslexia (which Kamprad also has) could reshape the way individuals approach other challenges: in this case, Kamprad unapologetically seeks unconventional paths and eschews others' doubts—often key factors of successful entrepreneurship.



Gladwell introduces Gary Cohn, a man who—like David Boies—had a hard time in school. Cohn is dyslexic and was held back a grade as a result, though this didn't help him learn to read. He was even expelled from elementary school for fighting back when the teacher put him under her desk and kicked him. Still, he worked very hard, though nobody considered this because they thought of him as nothing but a disruptive presence. Finally, though, Cohn graduated high school and got a job selling window frames and aluminum siding. While on a business trip to Long Island one day, he convinced his manager to let him have the day off, and Cohn made his way to Wall Street, where he was determined to find a job.

Gary Cohn's story is noteworthy because of his determination. Even though nothing in his life has indicated that he will be successful, he doesn't hesitate to take a chance by going to Wall Street to find a job. Needless to say, this is a rather bold thing to do, considering that he barely graduated high school and has trouble reading. And yet, Cohn doesn't back down, instead doing whatever he can to set himself up for success. In a way, then, he too displays an element of disagreeability, since he clearly doesn't care what other people think of him, or at least isn't afraid that people on Wall Street might laugh at his lack of knowledge.



In the lobby of the commodities exchange, Cohn waits to see if he'll be able to talk to somebody. Finally, he hears a well-dressed man loudly telling another person that he has to leave because he's on his way to LaGuardia airport. Upon hearing this, Cohn jumps in an elevator with this man and says he's going to the airport, too. The man agrees to share a cab with him, giving Cohn a full hour to convince him to hire him. This man, it turns out, works at one of the biggest brokerage firms on Wall Street and has been appointed to run a new business buying and selling options. And though Cohn doesn't know anything about options, it seems that the other man doesn't either, so Cohn lies and says he's an expert. By the time they reach LaGuardia, the man tells Cohn to call him on Monday.

Cohn's method of getting a job is unconventional—most people wouldn't dare to fake their way into such a high-stakes industry, nor would they lie about their background in order to get a job. However, Cohn knows that this is perhaps his only chance to succeed. In this regard, his disadvantage (dyslexia) pushes him to skirt convention in ways most people wouldn't. In the end, his boldness leads to a job interview he would never have gotten if he'd played by the rules.



Cohn calls the man on Monday, and they schedule an interview. In the meantime, Cohn reads a book about “strategic investments” and learns about options trading—a difficult task, since it takes him six hours to read just 22 pages. Thinking back, Cohn notes that he never told his boss that he knew essentially nothing about options trading before starting at the company. However, it didn’t matter because he was ready by the time he started in his position. Gladwell suggests that most people wouldn’t have gotten into the taxi with the powerful Wall Street executive. Cohn, however, had nothing to lose. Cohn himself says that his childhood made him “comfortable with failure,” which is a common feeling among dyslexic people because they face so many challenges early in their lives. Gary Cohn is now the president of Goldman Sachs.

At this point, a new aspect of Gladwell’s argument about hardship emerges: not only does adversity lead to innovation, it can also lead to a productive kind of desperation that propels people to pursue opportunities that might otherwise seem hopeless. Because Cohn has grown used to failure, he no longer fears it. Consequently, he’s free to put himself in positions where failure is quite likely. This, in turn, sets him up for success, allowing him to take chances most people would shy away from.



CHAPTER 5: EMIL “JAY” FREIREICH

Emil “Jay” Freireich is the son of Hungarian immigrants who lived in Chicago in the 1920s and 30s. When Jay was a young boy, his father committed suicide. This was shortly after the stock market crash of 1929, when the family lost everything. In the aftermath of his father’s death, Freireich’s mother worked in sweatshops, leaving him with a nanny whom he came to see as his real mother. They were devastatingly poor and only able to eat protein once a week. At one point, Freireich’s mother married an older Hungarian man, but Freireich hated him and came to resent his mother because she fired his nanny, the only person to whom he was close. By the time Gladwell interviews him, Freireich is 84, but he has an impeccable memory. All the same, he can’t remember his nanny’s name because he has blocked out the painful memories of that period.

In this section, Gladwell turns his attention to a different kind of hardship: rather than examining dyslexia, he considers whether or not extreme poverty and a lack of stable parental support can become “desirable difficulties.” The fact that Freireich has blocked out the majority of his childhood memories suggests that his upbringing was quite traumatic, thereby underlining how difficult it must have been to triumph over it—if, indeed, that is what he has managed to do.



Switching tracks, Gladwell describes the British government’s concerns during World War II. The government feared what would happen to London if German forces bombed it, since the city was largely defenseless. There were predictions that 1.2 million people would get wounded and that nearly the entire population would flee to the countryside. For this reason, psychiatric centers were built just outside the city, as the government anticipated the need to calm mass hysteria. Then, in 1940, the Germans actually bombed London, and though 40,000 people were killed and 60,000 were wounded, none of the government’s predictions about the citizens’ reactions came true. Rather than descending into panic, Londoners remained relatively calm. In fact, the vast majority of the citizens showed a sense of “indifference,” and though many people attribute this toughness to the stereotypically British “stiff upper lip,” Gladwell argues that the city’s reaction says more about adversity than temperament.

It makes sense that the British government feared the way Londoners would respond to German bombardments, considering that the city is so densely populated. What’s more, bombings are very traumatic events, so it’s natural to assume that any city facing such violence would descend into chaos. That London managed to maintain its composure, though, indicates that these assumptions are inaccurate. And though Gladwell hasn’t yet revealed how, exactly, the people of London were able to stay so calm, it’s clear that he wants to use this story to underline the notion that even the worst threats—the most harrowing forms of adversity—aren’t always as debilitating as people tend to think.



To make his point, Gladwell references the work of J. T. MacCurdy, a psychiatrist studying morale. MacCurdy divided the London bombing victims into three categories: the directly impacted, the “near misses,” and the “remote misses.” The people who were directly impacted were the ones the bomb killed. The “near misses” were the people close to the explosion who were perhaps injured (or, at the very least, shaken) by the experience. Finally, the “remote misses” were the people who felt the explosion but weren’t close enough to be in true danger. After reading diary entries and speaking with a number of remote misses, MacCurdy learned that people who survived the bombings ended up feeling somewhat invincible. One woman even wrote in her diary that, after hunkering down and feeling the earth shake, she felt “pure and flawless happiness,” and she was elated and refreshed by the experience.

Gladwell argues that the reason London as a whole didn’t descend into chaos during the German bombing (which took place on a nightly basis for eight months) is that the bombardment simply created a large number of “remote misses,” thereby emboldening the vast majority of the citizens instead of demoralizing them. This demonstrates that traumatic events impact people in different ways. In other words, one experience can destroy a person’s life while emboldening and strengthening somebody else. Similarly, dyslexia can make a person’s life too difficult, since not everyone has the ability or resources to overcome the challenges the disorder presents. At the same time, though, it can also push people to do things they might not otherwise have done, thereby leading to their success. Accordingly, Gladwell believes people ought not to make the assumption that there’s only one way to respond to hardship.

When Jay Freireich was a child, he came down with tonsillitis. The doctor who removed Freireich’s tonsils became his hero, and from then on he dreamed of becoming a physician himself. In high school, Freireich’s physics teacher encouraged him to pursue a college education, so his mother borrowed money from a woman in the Hungarian immigrant community to pay for tuition. In this way, Freireich became a doctor and his larger-than-life personality made him stand out among his colleagues. When talking about Freireich, Gladwell says, most of his colleagues tell stories about his temper, though they all have great admiration for him. In one conversation, Freireich complains to Gladwell about the idea of hospice care, arguing that doctors should never simply give up and allow patients to die. To illustrate his point, he says he’s never been depressed or hopeless as a doctor, even when working on the hardest cases of his career.

To become a “remote miss,” Gladwell implies, is to gain a new perspective on life. The woman who survived a nearby bombing without sustaining any injuries felt a happiness that was previously unknown to her. Others felt indestructible. Needless to say, then, the bombing has an opposite effect on people than what was expected—rather than demoralizing them and plunging them into fear, it emboldens them. In the context of Gladwell’s overall argument, this supports the idea that hardship leads to resilience, implying that not all forms of adversity (and, thus, not all disadvantages) have completely negative outcomes.



Gladwell’s overall point about hardship leading to resilience is important to understand, but it’s also worth paying attention to the fact that adversity doesn’t always have positive outcomes. There are, for instance, many people who fight against dyslexia for their entire lives without ever benefitting from their struggle, just like there were 100,000 people in London who were either killed or wounded during the German bombardment. As David and Goliath progresses, readers should keep this in mind, lest it seem like Gladwell thinks tragic afflictions and terrible situations are always beneficial.



Freireich’s optimism is somewhat rare, even in the medical community. Indeed, most doctors undoubtedly experience moments of sadness while working on hopeless cases—this is simply the nature of working in such a challenging field. Freireich, however, is unperturbed by such things because of his difficult childhood. Gladwell’s argument, it seems, is that Freireich’s experiences as a child facing poverty and the loss of a parent fundamentally impacted the way he sees the entire world, turning him into the kind of person who never despairs in moments of hardship.



Gladwell admits that most people want their doctors to empathize with them. Freireich, however, isn't interested in doing this. Instead, he's interested in doing what he can to save his patients, even if that means forgoing emotional pleasantries. Considering the effect Freireich's upbringing had on his adult personality and success as a doctor, Gladwell acknowledges that nobody would wish "a childhood like Freireich's on anyone," since it seems like there's nothing to benefit from such a difficult life. And yet, he also indicates that this assumption might not be all that accurate. The question becomes, then, whether or not a difficult childhood can function like a "remote miss" instead of a "direct hit."

To answer this question about the possible benefits of childhood adversity, Gladwell references a psychological analysis from the 1960s, when a psychologist studying creative and innovative people noticed that an inordinate amount of successful individuals had lost one of their parents at a young age. In keeping with this, a historian studying England's prime ministers discovered the same phenomenon. What's more, 12 of the first 44 presidents of the United States lost their fathers when they were children or adolescents. Gladwell notes that there's also evidence to suggest that, while "gifted children" often fall short of greatness when they've benefitted from healthy, happy childhoods, many geniuses emerge from hardship. This, in turn, indicates that it is, in fact, possible for childhood hardship to function like a "remote miss" instead of a direct hit.

As a young man in 1955, Freireich is assigned to work in the children's leukemia ward of the National Cancer Institute. His superior, Gordon Zubrod, gives him this responsibility knowing it's a very bleak posting. At this point in time, childhood leukemia is one of the most difficult illnesses to treat, since it comes on suddenly and leads to great agony. Worst of all, leukemia makes people bleed, meaning that the children in the leukemia ward start bleeding from seemingly every part of their bodies, including the pores of their skin. The ostensible goal of Freireich's posting is to find a cure for childhood leukemia, but this is a nearly impossible task because he also has to focus on the immediate chaos of keeping children from bleeding to death—not to mention cleaning the floors of blood and trying to get the patients to eat.

The notion that Freireich's difficult upbringing is a "remote miss" suggests that the hardships he faced as a child didn't debilitate him for life. Instead, Gladwell intimates, the emotional turmoil of his childhood simply made him stronger, rendering him extraordinarily capable of working against adversity without succumbing to hopelessness. According to Gladwell, Freireich is like somebody who has survived a bombing and emerged with a new, more resilient perspective on life.



Again, Gladwell makes the case that adversity can have unexpected benefits. This time, he considers people who lost a parent at an early age, asserting that this might have contributed to their eventual success. Overall, though, what's important to take away from Gladwell's point is that people often ignore the fact that positive outcomes can come from terrible circumstances. By presenting this information about difficult childhoods leading to greatness, Gladwell reminds readers that society's view of disadvantages isn't as accurate as it might seem.



Gladwell has already outlined the ways in which Freireich himself has gone through trauma and hardship. Now, as an adult, he faces a new challenge, one that most people would find harrowingly difficult and hopeless. Because of his personal history and overall attitude toward adversity, though, it's unlikely that he'll let his job on the children's leukemia ward demoralize him, at least according to Gladwell's belief that hardship can lead to resilience.



Doctors working on the children's leukemia ward don't last long. Freireich, however, is capable of forging onward, proving that what he said about never getting depressed about a patient's situation is indeed true. Instead of giving up hope, he joins forces with another researcher named Tom Frei, and together they hypothesize that one of the major problems posed by leukemia is that the children aren't producing enough platelets ("irregularly shaped cell fragments that float around in human blood"), which means their blood won't clot. Freireich and Frei's bosses are hesitant to go along with this idea, but the two researchers remain undeterred, determining to give the children multiple blood infusions to help them build up their platelet counts. However, the blood banks won't give them blood. "You're gonna kill people!" Freireich yells, prompting one of his colleagues to warn him against saying such things—but he doesn't care.

Instead of using blood from the National Cancer Institute's blood bank, Freireich recruits donors. He also innovates the process of transforming the infusions themselves, since platelets stick to steel needles: he uses silicon needles and plastic bags. People think Freireich is crazy to give children so much blood at once, since a miscalculation could kill them. And though one of Freireich's bosses threatens to fire him if he doesn't stop, he continues anyway. As a result, the children stop bleeding.

Gladwell considers what it takes for someone to act with courage, determining that "courage is what you earn when you've been through the tough times and you discover they aren't so tough after all." To further illustrate this point, he tells the story of Fred Shuttlesworth, a black preacher and activist in Birmingham, Alabama who survived multiple acts of violence during the civil rights movement. In 1956, the Ku Klux Klan tried to stop Shuttlesworth from executing his plan to ride the city's segregated buses. To do this, they bombed his house the night before the protest, but when police officers and community members saw his smoldering, ruined house, he walked out of the wreckage unharmed. The incident, Gladwell argues, made him even less afraid of going through with his original plan. The following day, he rode the segregated buses.

Freireich is relatively unbothered by how hopeless and heartbreaking his job can be, but he's also fiercely committed to the challenge of finding a cure for childhood leukemia. To that end, he isn't afraid to think outside the box, clearly recognizing that nothing else is working. If every other approach has failed, he reasons, why not turn away from convention? This is why he and Frei decide to give the children blood infusions, and when his colleagues express their hesitations, he chastises them, perfectly willing to enrage them in his attempt to find a cure. In turn, Freireich demonstrates the same kind of "disagreeability" that Gladwell suggests is an important quality for any innovator to possess.



Once more, readers see the benefits of Freireich's "disagreeability" as he defies his boss's orders and, in doing so, manages to stop his patients' bleeding. If he'd cared about what his superiors thought, he would never have found a way to stop the bleeding—a fact that underscores how important it is for some people to remain true to their convictions even in the face of criticism. However, it's also worth noting that although Gladwell uses Freireich as an example of how childhood hardship can turn people into high-achieving adults, this analysis is somewhat imperfect. After all, Freireich's disregard for authority has more to do with his conviction and motivation to save lives than with the fact that he faced adversity as a child. At the same time, though, it's true that his childhood experiences helped him learn to avoid hopelessness, which ultimately enables him to push on with his efforts despite the fact that everyone tells him he'll fail.



Fred Shuttlesworth is yet another example of a person who is emboldened by a bad experience. When he emerges unharmed from his bombed-out house, he gains the kind of strength that comes from being a "remote miss." Like the people in London who survived the German bombardment, Shuttlesworth doesn't let the threat of violence inhibit his overall outlook on life. Rather, he goes through with his plan to ride Birmingham's segregated buses, feeling even more empowered than he did before the Ku Klux Klan tried to kill him.



Several months after the close call at his home, Fred Shuttlesworth takes his daughter to enroll at an all-white high school. When he drives up to the school, an angry mob of white men surrounds the vehicle, but he still gets out. The men break his car windows and beat him, but he's able to get back in the car and drive away without sustaining life-threatening injuries. Shortly thereafter, Shuttlesworth brings a friend to a local church to meet Martin Luther King, Jr., and when they arrive, there's yet another angry mob of white men. Nevertheless, Shuttlesworth calmly gets out and walks through the crowd, safely ushering his guest into the church. In this way, Gladwell suggests, Shuttlesworth is only emboldened by each of the violent encounters he survives.

The more racists try to intimidate Fred Shuttlesworth with violence, the more committed he becomes to the civil rights movement. This is because surviving hardship can lead to resilience and renewed courage. By continuing to harass and threaten him, Shuttlesworth's enemies only make him stronger and less afraid, proving that even the most frightening kinds of adversity often fail to deter people who are morally committed to a cause or belief.



Gladwell returns to Freireich's attempt to cure childhood leukemia. By finding a way to stop children from bleeding to death, Freireich manages to keep them alive long enough to focus on what, exactly, is causing the illness in the first place. He knows of several drugs that effectively attack leukemia, but each drug has toxic side effects that threaten patients' lives in large doses. Instead of letting this discourage him, though, Freireich decides (along with Frei and another colleague) to continue studying the drugs, eventually realizing that they could administer a "cocktail" of medications, since they all have different side effects. This means each drug can still be administered in small amounts without negatively affecting the patients. The combination of drugs also mounts a multi-tiered attack on the illness, not allowing it to regenerate since, when a reasonable amount of one drug stops working, another kicks in.

Once again, it's clear that Freireich's tireless attitude—which Gladwell argues is the result of his difficult childhood—enables him to maintain hope in his attempt to cure childhood leukemia. However, hope isn't the only thing he needs in order to succeed; he also needs to think outside the box, since nothing anyone else has tried in the past has worked to cure leukemia. By challenging convention, then, he comes up with the bold idea to use multiple drugs at once. In this regard, he shares the same kind of innovation as someone like Ranadivé or Kamprad, both of whom had no problem straying from tradition in order to succeed.



Freireich's colleagues and superiors are skeptical of his idea to treat leukemia with so many dangerous drugs, since some of these medications are capable of paralyzing children, causing depression, and generally wreaking havoc on the body. Most people refuse to get on board, but Freireich and Frei's boss, Zubrod, finally gives them the green light. Still, Freireich's colleagues refuse to help him conduct the trial, so he has to do everything himself: prepare the drugs, inject them, monitor the patients' blood, and test their marrow. In the first of 13 cases approved for study, Freireich gives a little girl a dose that is too high, and though she recovers, she later dies. But Freireich doesn't give up, and the approach begins to work on other patients.

Again, Freireich proves his unwillingness to back down. Even though seemingly everyone in the medical community disapproves of what he's doing, he forges onward because he genuinely believes he can make a difference. Of course, it's also worth noting that his patients are in dire circumstances to begin with, meaning that they have little to lose. This enables Freireich to keep trying until he finds something that works, and though experimenting like this on children might seem cruel, Freireich isn't interested in empathy—he's interested in results. Consequently, the downsides of treating desperate patients become, in an odd way, advantages.



Freireich and Frei's idea to treat leukemia with a "cocktail" of drugs works, but not entirely. After a while, the leukemia comes back, so Freireich decides it's necessary to administer the concoction of medication every month for an entire year. This is a hard thing to convince people of, since many of the children in remission seem perfectly fine until their leukemia returns. For this reason, parents and doctors alike think Freireich is crazy for wanting to make these children's lives miserable by giving them toxic drugs on such a regular basis. But he doesn't care what other people think. He continues as planned, and the multiple rounds of treatment work. Freireich is able to do this, Gladwell argues, because he has "been through worse." And because of this, there is now a 90 percent cure rate for this kind of childhood leukemia.

Against all odds, Freireich manages to find a method of treating childhood leukemia that leads to a very successful cure. This, however, requires going against the entire medical community, working on the most depressing cases, and casting aside all emotion in favor of making progress. Among the only kinds of people who can do this, Gladwell believes, are those who have—like Freireich—been through enough hardship that various setbacks and criticisms don't interfere with their ability to keep working.



CHAPTER 6: WYATT WALKER

The most famous photograph of the civil rights movement, Gladwell asserts, is of a black teenage boy getting attacked by two police dogs. It was taken on May 3, 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama during a confrontation between nonviolent black activists and the city's police force, which was following the orders of a racist man named Eugene "Bull" Connor, the public safety commissioner. The picture was taken by a member of the Associated Press and circulated widely throughout the country, inviting widespread criticism of the Birmingham police. A year after the picture was taken, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed in Congress—an act that, according to many people, was all but "written in Birmingham."

Gladwell's interest in this picture is tied not only to the attention it garnered, but also to the fact that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed only a year after its circulation. Because the photograph depicted a harrowing scene in which it seemed that a young black man was in danger for no reason, it incited anger throughout the country. Gladwell's implication here is that the photograph contributed to the nation's eventually legal condemnation of citizens having their rights abused. Therefore, the picture itself becomes evidence of the fact that terrible things—in this case, racism and violence—can lead to positive change.



Before the picture of the young black man getting attacked by police dogs was published, Martin Luther King, Jr., visited Birmingham. The civil rights movement, Gladwell says, wasn't going well for the reverend, since he'd spent the past nine months organizing protests against segregation in Albany, Georgia to no avail. Although the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional in 1954, segregation was still in full effect throughout the South. In Birmingham (which was one of the most dangerous places for black people in the South), Dr. King told his followers that he suspected not all of them would survive their efforts to end segregation. The reverend and his followers, Gladwell notes, were underdogs and were at a severe disadvantage in their struggle against racism. However, Gladwell upholds that the black community had *always* been underdogs, which meant they knew how to fight giants.

Gladwell applies his theory of underdogs to the black community during the civil rights movement, suggesting that the horrors of racism put people like Dr. King in a unique position from which to challenge the status quo. Under this interpretation, the black community at the time knew what it was like to face hardship and, as a result, was capable of great resilience.



Gladwell considers the figure of the “trickster hero” that prevails in many “oppressed cultures.” In particular, he looks at African American slave tales about Brer Rabbit, a cunning rabbit who manages to dupe Brer Fox time and again. Gladwell points out that many of these stories were popular among slaves because they celebrated the ability to outsmart individuals in positions of power—something that resonated with slaves who wanted to sabotage their masters by undermining them in subtle, creative ways. Gladwell then suggests there are several kinds of “desirable difficulty.” The first is the difficulty that comes from struggling with something like dyslexia. The second is the difficulty that comes from surviving a traumatic event like a bombing. And the third, he says, is “the unexpected freedom that comes from having nothing to lose.” After all, “the trickster gets to break the rules.”

Gladwell describes Wyatt Walker, a Baptist minister who works with Dr. King in 1960 to push back against segregation. In Birmingham, both Walker and King know they won’t be able to beat racism using traditional tactics. Luckily for them, though, Walker is a trickster like Brer Rabbit, which is why Dr. King asks him to find a way to incite a crisis in Birmingham, wanting to trick the racist Bull Connor into doing something the civil rights movement could use against him. Unlike Dr. King (who’s so morally principled that he once helped protect a white man from his security guards after the man tried to attack him), Walker is willing to sometimes “alter [his] morality for the sake of getting a job done.” And when it comes to facing Bull Connor, he knows he’s not up against a “moral situation.”

Dr. King knows his and Walker’s efforts in Birmingham must succeed, because the civil rights movement might flounder otherwise. Walker’s main plan is to stage a number of large marches with the intention of forcing the police to make multiple arrests, thereby packing the jails to capacity and forcing Bull Connor to stop responding with force to the civil rights movement. However, this plan proves more difficult than Walker expected, since people are hesitant to join the marches for fear of losing their jobs. After days of recruiting, Walker assembles only 22 protestors. Despite this, something unexpected happens: because so many people know about the impending march, they come outside to watch, but Walker and his protestors are slow to begin. This gives onlookers time to come out to the streets, making the march look significantly larger than it really is.

Gladwell makes it clear in this section that he doesn’t just think the black community is capable of rising up against racists because they’re used to hardship, but also because they have very little to lose. Having faced adversity for a very long time in the United States, the leaders of the civil rights movement have no reason to shy away from trying to make things right. This, Gladwell argues, is a “desirable difficulty,” one that might take an unfortunate situation and achieve a positive outcome. What’s more, it has become rather clear that playing by society’s conventional rules has done little to help the civil rights movement, which is why Gladwell references Brer Rabbit’s trickster ways, intimating that it might be beneficial for certain members of the movement to change the way they challenge racist authorities.



Wyatt Walker’s acknowledgement that Bull Connor isn’t a moral man underscores the value of trying new tactics that might not align with how people normally try to bring about social change. Because the individuals taking part in the civil rights movement have almost nothing to lose, it makes sense that Walker might want to break from convention and use “trickster” strategies to challenge racism in Birmingham. In turn, readers see once again that certain disadvantages can force people to think outside the box in ways that lead to positive outcomes.



It makes sense that it would be hard to rally people to march in such a dangerous city and at such a volatile time, especially if the end goal is to crowd the jails. But when multiple people come to watch the protest, Walker gains an opportunity to use his “trickster” ways—if he can’t put together a band of protestors large enough to pressure the Birmingham police, he can at least trick people into thinking that the movement is larger than it really is. This, readers can see, is the kind of inventive thinking that ultimately helps underdogs effectively challenge “giants.”



The following day, the newspapers print stories about the large protests that took place the day before. Reading this, Walker realizes that the press misinterpreted the circumstances, assuming that any black person on the streets was a protestor. Taking note of this, Walker starts delaying all of his marches, giving spectators time to flock to the streets. Even when they only have 12 people marching, then, the press reports that they have 1,400. Walker partially attributes this to the fact that the white people running the press are blind to the difference between a black protestor and a black bystander. Whereas “underdogs have to be students of the nuances of white expression,” people in power think they don’t need to pay close attention to those they believe are in positions of inferiority.

After a month of marches, Walker and Dr. King decide to up the ante by reaching out to politically active minors. Because part of their movement entails teaching children nonviolent resistance, they pass out flyers instructing young people to meet them at their church, adding that the kids shouldn’t ask for permission. A popular local DJ also puts out a call that attracts many schoolchildren, using code to communicate that anyone who comes should be prepared to spend several nights in jail. It works. Children come in great numbers, marching out of the church holding hands, singing songs, and eventually getting into police cars to be hauled off to jail. At one point, a police officer by the church asks Shuttlesworth—who has also been involved in the planning—how many more children he has inside the church, and he lies by saying, “At least a thousand more.”

The next day, even more children skip school to protest. This time, the authorities are ready with water cannons and police-force dogs. Walker actively wants the police to use these crowd control methods, knowing the Birmingham police department will look terrible if they turn such vicious resources on mere children. And soon enough, when the protestors are about to cross the line separating “black Birmingham” from “white Birmingham”, Bull Connor orders the firemen to turn on their hoses, sending children flying against nearby walls. He also sics the dogs on them, leading to the now-famous photo of a black teenager with an apparently peaceful expression on his face getting attacked by a large German shepherd.

Walker’s realization that white people think they don’t need to pay attention to the supposedly powerless black people of the civil rights movement is critical, since it highlights the ways in which authority can lead to complacency and ignorance. Indeed, the press’s inability to distinguish black protestors from black bystanders not only reveals the white journalists’ racism, but also accentuates the notion that underdogs can sometimes benefit from the very circumstances that put them at a disadvantage in the first place—if, that is, they manage to capitalize on these circumstances in inventive ways.



The idea to send children to the picket line is certainly unconventional, but Dr. King and Walker are desperate to ensure the civil rights movement maintains its momentum, fearing that a lull would destroy all of their previous efforts. In other words, their desperation opens them up to new ideas that they might otherwise discount. What’s more, when Shuttlesworth lies to the officer, he slyly tricks him into thinking that the movement is even stronger than it really is, once again using “trickster” tactics to prevail.



The civil rights movement strategically chose to put children in a somewhat unsafe position, hoping that the white authorities would do exactly what they end up doing. In this way, they use their opponents’ own power against them, turning that power into a disadvantage since the entire nation sees the heartlessness of the local Birmingham government and speaks out against it. Once again, then, readers see that an advantage isn’t an advantage in all circumstances, especially when a clever rival finds ways of using power against people in positions of authority.



Dr. King and Walker receive harsh criticism for putting children in harm's way. The parents of these children assemble in the church while their teenagers are in jail, and Dr. King tries to console them by telling them not to worry, saying that the kids will have ample time to catch up on their reading while waiting for their release. This does little to calm the parents' fears, but Walker and King don't dwell on this, since they ultimately achieved what they set out to do: they incited national anger toward the Birmingham police. The only way for them to do this, Gladwell argues, was by tricking Bull Connor into showing force. Tricksters, Gladwell upholds, aren't tricksters "by nature," but "by necessity."

Gladwell points out that the things society deems acceptable are often closely tied to the ways in which powerful people exclude or oppress underdogs. But there are other ways for underdogs to succeed, and this often requires people to manipulate certain circumstances. If people look closely at the picture of the dog mauling the teenager, for example, Gladwell says they will perhaps notice that the leash the police officer is holding is taut, suggesting that he's trying to keep the dog back. They might also notice that the teenager's knee is raised. Apparently, the young man grew up with dogs and knew to raise his knee to protect himself—he is, according to Gladwell, kicking the dog, not giving himself over to the attack. And yet, the picture tells a different story, one that altered the national conversation surrounding the civil rights movement.

Walker and Dr. King's tactics of inciting anger across the nation are similar to Jay Freireich's willingness to put terminally ill children through discomfort in order to find a cure for childhood leukemia. Unsurprisingly, their decision to call upon young people makes people uncomfortable. But this, Gladwell upholds, is what it takes for them to triumph over the racist Bull Connor.



The narrative that Walker helps create surrounding the civil rights movement is in keeping with reality: the treatment of black people in Birmingham, Alabama is inhumane. In order to properly spread this message, though, he has to think creatively. That the picture at the center of this conversation doesn't depict exactly what it seems to ultimately indicates that it's often necessary to use whatever resources are available, even if this means changing the rules of convention. This, at least, is Gladwell's argument. However, it's worth noting that while it is perhaps true that the teenager is in the process of kicking the dog, this doesn't mean the circumstances surrounding the picture itself are any different than how they appear. After all, the teenager is surely only kicking the dog because it's jumping at him, meaning that the police truly are using unnecessary force. All the same, Gladwell's primary point about using giants' own force against them remains intact.



CHAPTER 7: ROSEMARY LAWLOR

Rosemary Lawlor is a Catholic woman who lived through the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Troubles began in the late 1960s and raged on for over three decades, embroiling the country in a violent conflict between the Protestant majority (which was unofficially backed by the British military) and the Catholic community. In 1969, Gladwell explains, Lawlor and her husband had just had a baby and moved into their new home in Belfast, but they were soon forced to leave because their neighborhood was no longer safe for Catholics. Consequently, they slipped out one night and tricked a cab driver into taking them to Ballymurphy, a Catholic neighborhood in West Belfast, where they stayed with Lawlor's parents. The following year, the conflict escalated, with acts of grave violence taking place more frequently on the open streets. Lawlor and her husband continued to hide out in Ballymurphy.

At this point, Gladwell begins to examine the complicated struggle that took place among Protestants, Catholics, and the British military between the 1960s and 1990s. In doing so, he prepares to apply his argument about underdogs, advantages, disadvantages, and power to a notoriously complex situation. And though the story he tells is largely from the perspective of a Catholic community, it's worth keeping in mind that the power dynamics during the 30-year conflict were extremely fraught—a fact that on its own destabilizes the notion that power remains consistent under all circumstances.



While at her parents in Ballymurphy one day, Lawlor hears a woman named Harriet Carson walking through the streets and calling out to the residents, urging them to come outside. She informs them that the residents of another nearby Catholic neighborhood called Lower Falls are in trouble. Responding to a tip that there are illegal weapons in the neighborhood, British forces have put the entirety of Lower Falls under a curfew, forbidding families from leaving their homes. Harriet Carson explains that children are going hungry because families are running out of food. This enrages the people of Ballymurphy, who take to the streets and make their way to Lower Falls.

Gladwell considers the nature of “insurgencies,” turning to a report written by two economists named Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf Jr. in the aftermath of World War II. In their report, *Rebellion and Authority*, they argue that people in positions of authority don’t need to think about how the people they’re trying to control feel about them. Rather, they simply need to respond harshly when insurgents break the law. Gladwell notes that Ian Freeland—the British general assigned to handle the conflict in Northern Ireland—is somebody who took this message to heart by ordering his troops to respond to adversity with great force, so as to teach insurgents a lesson.

Gladwell uses an educational example to illustrate the mistake the British made in their attempt to enforce law and order in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. He references video footage of a kindergarten classroom in disarray. In the video, the teacher fails to engage the vast majority of the students because she’s focused on helping just one child read aloud. As this happens, the other students begin to fidget and blatantly break the rules, but the teacher doesn’t do anything. Gladwell uses this to suggest that, though many people think of authority as “a response to disobedience,” this dynamic can actually invert itself—disobedience is sometimes a response to authority. What the teacher fails to do, Gladwell upholds, is figure out how to stop her students from misbehaving in the first place.

As the residents of Ballymurphy descend upon Lower Falls, a clear power struggle begins to emerge. The British people occupying Lower Falls are part of the military, whereas the Catholics coming from Ballymurphy are simply concerned citizens. Given these circumstances, it would be natural to assume that the military will easily win the conflict. In the context of David and Goliath, though, readers ought to consider Gladwell’s interest in exploring mismatched power dynamics and how underdogs often surprise “giants.”



It makes sense that Gladwell would be interested in the thinking that fuels any attempt to suppress insurgency, since David and Goliath is about the ways in which power functions. The question in this section, then, is whether or not harsh displays of force are actually effective when it comes to fighting against people who aren’t powerful in conventional ways. The problem with this tactic, of course, is most likely that powerful organizations tend to wield their power in specific, predictable ways that don’t always succeed in discouraging underdogs, as evidenced by Goliath’s loss to David.



Gladwell’s point about the teacher’s failure to engage her students suggests that Wolf and Leites’s belief about authority—that people in power don’t need to pay attention to those they hope to control as long as they enforce great discipline—is incorrect. The teacher’s pedagogical method overlooks the needs of the entire class and tries to enforce a dry, uninspiring educational model, one in which children are expected to sit still and listen even if they’re unlikely to get anything out of the lesson. By creating this kind of environment, the teacher relies upon nothing but her own authority to keep the children from misbehaving. But her authority alone is clearly not enough to do this, demonstrating that people in positions of power would do well to tailor their actions to the people they hope to control.



In another classroom video, a teacher hands out homework and proceeds to read every single word on the worksheet. This bores her students, who immediately lose interest. When one boy begins to complete the homework, the teacher admonishes him. Gladwell suggests that this punishment is ineffective because it will do nothing but make the child frustrated and cynical of the value of the rules. This is known as the “principle of legitimacy,” a theory which upholds that people will only heed authority if they feel as if they “have a voice” in the context of that authority. It also suggests that the rules must remain consistent in order for people to respect them and that they also have to be perceived as fair. According to Gladwell’s argument, this theory applies to insurgents just as much as it applies to schoolchildren.

To further illustrate the principle of legitimacy, Gladwell tells the story of a police officer named Joanne Jaffe. When Jaffe became the head of New York City’s Housing Bureau, it was her job to address the extremely high crime rate in Brownsville, Brooklyn. To do this, she compiled a list of every juvenile offender in Brownsville who’d been arrested for mugging in the past year. The list had 106 names, and Jaffe applied herself to establishing a connection with these young people. To do this, she assembled a team of officers who reached out to every person on the list and explained to them that their information had been added to the Juvenile Robbery Intervention Program (J-RIP). The officers explained that they would do everything they could to help the “J-RIPpers” succeed in life, but that they’d also crack down on them if they were caught committing another crime.

Jaffe’s task force set up trailers in the parking lots outside the housing developments where the J-RIP members live. They keep close watch on them and make sure they know it, too, so that they think twice before breaking the law. At first, this method doesn’t work because families refuse to let the officers into their homes and lives. However, things change when an officer and his colleagues decide one Thanksgiving to put their personal money together to buy a turkey for the family of one particularly misbehaved young man. This young man, Gladwell explains, is considered something of a lost cause, but the officers decide to make this gesture because there are a number of other children in the same family, so they hope to get through to them before they follow in their brother’s footsteps.

The reason this teacher’s scolding will most likely fail to sink in for this child is that her authority doesn’t feel legitimate. After all, the child undoubtedly finds it unfair that he’s just gotten in trouble for doing homework, since actually completing the worksheet is a far more valuable use of time than going over a chunk of text he could easily read for himself. Applying this idea to the Troubles, it’s clear that the Catholic community most likely doesn’t respect the legitimacy of the British military’s authority, which is yet another reason that the people of Ballymurphy are willing to stand up for their fellow Catholics at Lower Falls.



Gladwell’s interest in the Juvenile Robbery Intervention Program is connected to his ideas about authority and “legitimacy.” In order to successfully influence a group of people, he believes, a person or organization must ensure that those people respect them and value the nature of their authority. Joanne Jaffe clearly grasps this, which is why she attempts to make a personal connection with the young people on her list. By engaging with them on a personal level, she hopes to foster a sense of mutual respect that will confirm the police’s “legitimacy” in the community.



By buying this young man’s family a turkey for Thanksgiving, the officers demonstrate that they care about the quality of his life. Rather than sticking to conventional policing tactics—which are impersonal and authoritarian—they make an effort to establish a relationship with the community, thereby going against the status quo to ensure that they’re seen as “legitimate” among J-RIPpers and their families.



Jaffe loves her team's idea to buy a turkey for one of the members of J-RIP so much that she gets her boss to give her the funds to do this for all the families in the program. This has a profound effect, as the families welcome the officers into their homes and show them great appreciation. The reason Jaffe does this, Gladwell notes, is because she doesn't think the people of Brownsville see the police as a "legitimate" form of authority. After all, almost every young person in the J-RIP program has a father, brother, or cousin in jail, making it hard for them to see the law as fair and right. Moreover, this bleak reality makes it all too difficult for the members of J-RIP to believe that police officers would ever actually care about their wellbeing.

Jaffe starts hosting toy drives for J-RIP families at Christmastime. Slowly but surely, she and the other officers develop meaningful relationships with the kids on their list and their family members, doing whatever they can to make their lives easier. As a result, the crime rate in Brownsville falls significantly. Within three years, robbery-related arrests of J-RIP members decreases to under 50 per year from over 350 per year. In turn, Jaffe demonstrates that Leites and Wolf were wrong when they wrote in *Rebellion and Authority* that it doesn't matter what people think of those trying to control them. In reality, it matters a great deal.

During and leading up to the Troubles, Gladwell explains, Protestant "Loyalists" (as they're known) march through the streets every July to celebrate their long-ago victory against the Catholics. In doing so, they burn images of the Pope and shout out various chants disparaging the Catholic community. When the residents of Lower Falls see the British Army entering the neighborhood to search for weapons, then, they are all too ready for some kind of intervention, but they aren't sure if they can embrace the British authorities. The British Army originally came to Northern Ireland to serve as "an impartial referee between Protestant[s] and Catholic[s]," but England is a mostly Protestant country, so it's hard for the Catholics of Lower Falls to feel as if the British Army is there to enforce a form of law and order that will actually benefit them.

Gladwell suggests that one of the reasons most J-RIPpers don't believe in the "legitimacy" of the police has to do with the extremely high number of people from their community who've been sent to jail. This pattern effectively shows them that the police are out to get them and are therefore completely uninterested in their overall wellbeing. Consequently, they're pleasantly surprised when Joanne Jaffe and her team go out of their way to show compassion. This, in turn, demonstrates not only that it's often helpful for people in positions of authority to break from convention, but also that a small amount of empathy can go a long way.



Gladwell uses Jaffe's success story to challenge the idea that people in positions of power need not worry what others think of them. This, Gladwell intimates, is a deeply flawed way of approaching authority, since projects like J-RIP prove that empathy, compassion, and engagement are integral to the process of working productively with disempowered communities.



Once again, Gladwell underscores the importance of "legitimacy" when it comes to authority and power. Even though the British military is supposed to function as an impartial presence that will ensure peace in Northern Ireland, the country's Catholic community is set on edge by its presence. This is because the Catholics don't see the British military as truly impartial, meaning that they don't view them as a legitimate or dependable form of authority and safety. For this reason, the army's presence only exacerbates the Catholic community's fear and misgivings about their surrounding environment.



General Freeland, Gladwell suggests, tries to enforce the law in Northern Ireland without stopping to consider whether or not he has the “legitimacy” to do so. In fact, Gladwell asserts that Freeland *doesn't* have this legitimacy, since he represents a powerful force that the Catholics see as biased against them. Instead of acknowledging this, though, Freeland decides to meet any kind of resistance with extreme force, resulting in 25 deaths in 1970. That year, Rosemary Lawlor’s brother is shot and killed by the British Army because they suspect he’s a member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Even when Lawlor tells this story to Gladwell decades later, she says she’s still distraught and was angry for a very long time.

In Lower Falls, the priest is the most respected individual in the community. When the British Army comes to search the neighborhood for weapons, everyone flees to the church, but this doesn't stop the British from entering and spending 45 minutes searching it for weapons, eventually emerging with multiple guns and a trove of explosives. By this point, a crowd has gathered around the church. A riot breaks out, and when the soldiers turn to leave, some of the angry residents throw stones at their retreating vehicles. In response, the soldiers stop and turn around, shooting tear gas into the crowd. This only further infuriates the residents. Why, Gladwell wonders, did the soldiers turn around? They could have continued on, but they came back to fight. This, he says, is because they’ve been ordered to meet resistance with force.

On the night of the conflict at Lower Falls, 337 people are arrested and 60 are wounded. Several are even killed. Eventually, Freeland calls for backup and institutes a curfew, forcing everyone into their homes. Within days, the residents are starving, so Harriet Carson rallies Catholics in Ballymurphy, urging them to bring food to the people of Lower Falls. A steady stream of women come outside and pack their baby-strollers with bread and other necessities. When they reach Lower Falls, the British soldiers don't know how to respond, not wanting to attack a group of women. Still, a group of soldiers meet the women with force and start pulling their hair and fighting with their fists. However, so many women have joined Harriet and the others that they eventually outnumber the soldiers. Before long, one of the soldiers orders the others to give up, and the British Army lifts the curfew.

Freeland’s decision to meet resistance with relentless force is a dangerous one, since it further complicates the already fraught situation in Northern Ireland. Rather than recognizing that the Catholic community has no good reason to see the British military as a dependable authority, he focuses on using brute force to suppress any conflict that might arise—a tactic that ignores the nuances of the situation and only leads to escalation.



Freeland’s decision to meet force with force only results in escalation and unnecessary violence. While it’s true that the people of Lower Falls (literally) cast the first stone, it would have been easy enough for the British Army to leave. Instead of doing this, though, they turn around and fight, because this is what people in positions of power typically do. By aligning with conventional ideas about how to prevail over others, then, Freeland’s army exacerbates an already fraught and dangerous situation.



The story of Lower Falls is yet another tale that follows the David and Goliath format. Like David, the Catholic community in Northern Ireland uses alternative tactics to get the better of a seemingly indomitable foe, changing the nature of combat by playing on the soldiers’ consciences. Indeed, the people challenging the British are women pushing baby strollers, ultimately putting the soldiers in a precarious position—after all, if word gets out that they’re attacking unarmed women pushing strollers, their “legitimacy” will plummet even further in the Catholic community. In this way, Harriet Carson’s approach is similar to Wyatt Walker and Dr. King’s clever attempt to goad the Birmingham police force into doing something that can be used against it.



CHAPTER 8: WILMA DERKSEN

In June of 1992, Kimber Reynolds comes home from college to attend a wedding. Afterward, she goes with a friend to dinner at a restaurant called the Daily Planet in downtown Fresno, California. After eating, she's about to get back in her car when Joe Davis and Douglas Walker approach on a motorcycle and hit Kimber with it, using it to pin her to the car. The motorcycle is stolen, and both men are meth addicts. Davis has just been paroled from prison, and Walker has been to jail seven times. Davis takes Kimber's purse while Walker blocks her friend from coming to her rescue. Still pinning Kimber to the car, Davis takes out a gun and puts it to her head. When she flinches, he pulls the trigger before driving away with Walker. That night, Kimber's father, Mike, receives a call and rushes to the hospital, but Kimber dies the following day.

Before Kimber dies, Mike holds her hand and promises to do everything he can to "prevent this from happening to anybody else." He then goes on a popular radio show the very day of her death, spending two hours talking to the host about what happened and taking calls. Afterward, he goes home and assembles a meeting, inviting everyone he knows who might have some kind of influence in the community (including three judges, employees at the police department, and other people involved in the legal system). Addressing them, Reynolds talks about Fresno's high crime rate and points out that Douglas Walker was first arrested as a 13-year-old and, on the night of Kimber's murder, had been granted temporary release to visit his pregnant wife but then never returned to prison. Talking to the people gathered in his backyard, Reynolds asks how they can fix the broken legal system.

The conversation Mike Reynolds stages leads to the **Three Strikes Law**, which dictates that serious second-time offenders must serve double the amount of time in prison as their crimes would normally warrant. Third-time offenders, according to the law, go to jail for 25 years to life, even if their third crime isn't serious. By collecting signatures and advocating for this law, Reynolds manages to convince the state of California to instate it. In the coming years, the crime rate in California drops considerably. To this day, Reynolds remains proud of this accomplishment. Despite this apparent success, though, Gladwell questions whether or not Reynolds truly got what he wanted by helping bring about the Three Strikes Law, ultimately suggesting that the effect of punishment on crime has diminishing returns. It is, Gladwell argues, an inverted-U curve.

When Gladwell introduces this story about Kimber Reynolds, he doesn't make it explicitly clear how it will fit into David and Goliath's larger narrative framework. At the same time, though, readers might recall Gladwell's previous consideration of whether or not even the harshest forms of hardship can eventually begin to function as "remote misses." It therefore seems likely that he will apply this question to Kimber's horrific murder, examining whether or not a tragedy of this magnitude could have unexpected outcomes.



The way Mike Reynolds responds to tragedy is noteworthy, especially in the context of a book about how hardship often leads to resilience. To that end, Reynolds is not one to spend time gathering his emotions or wallowing in pain (which would, of course, be a completely understandable reaction to his daughter's death). Instead, he immediately sets to work trying to change the legal system, clearly hoping to alleviate his anger and sadness by making a positive impact on the world. In turn, Gladwell once more underlines the fact that even the worst circumstances can sometimes have unexpectedly positive consequences.



This is a noteworthy section because Gladwell takes his argument about hardship leading to positive outcomes and complicates it by introducing a new idea, which is that believing in something doesn't make it ethical or right. While it's true that Kimber's death urges Reynolds to work hard to make society safer, this doesn't mean that the Three Strikes Law is actually effective. Nonetheless, Reynolds maintains a high level of conviction, one that perhaps makes it difficult for him to recognize the law's shortcomings. Rather than recognizing that such matters require nuanced approaches, Reynolds commits himself to the idea that misbehavior should always be met with harsh punishment—something Gladwell disagrees with because he believes that punishment isn't always effective.



When Reynolds helps to institute the **Three Strikes Law**, he operates on the assumption that more severe forms of punishment will deter criminals from committing crimes. According to him, the punishment for breaking the law (before the Three Strikes Law went into effect) wasn't great enough, which meant that criminals believed it was worth the risk to commit crimes. Gladwell agrees that a lack of punishment leads to more crime, but he doesn't think this is *always* the case. Of course, people would commit more crimes in a society in which there no repercussions at all. However, it's also the case that, at a certain point, having more penal practices doesn't decrease crime. After all, many criminals do their best to not think about what might happen if they get caught, so increasing the severity of punishment doesn't deter them.

One of Reynolds's arguments for the **Three Strikes Law** is that putting criminals in prison and keeping them for at least 25 years removes them from society, thereby decreasing the overall crime rate. Gladwell disagrees with this, insisting that the relevant data doesn't support this theory. The average criminal, he argues, simply does not continue to commit crimes into old age. Looking at graphs comparing arrests to an offender's age, it becomes clear that middle-aged men generally don't break many laws. Gladwell admits that giving young criminals longer sentences does make sense, but that once a criminal becomes middle-aged, the government is no longer protecting society from people who are statistically likely to be of any danger. In turn, the Three Strikes Law unnecessarily crowds prisons, which is a waste of government spending.

Having established that more punishment doesn't always decrease crime, Gladwell asks a more important question: is there a point at which increased punishments begin to have *detrimental* effects on the crime rate? According to some criminologists, the answer is yes. One argument is that putting a person in prison indirectly effects crime by impacting the lives of that person's loved ones, making it more likely that children will grow up to become criminals themselves. In keeping with this, children are up to 400 percent more likely to break the law if they have an incarcerated parent. Worse, people who return to their communities after spending time in prison are often psychologically "damaged" by their experiences as inmates, and coming back home can put yet another strain on their children. In this sense, there can be adverse effects if too many people go to prison and spend too much time there.

In the same way that having more money doesn't always make parenting easier, heaping harsher punishments on criminals eventually stops affecting whether or not people commit crimes. Gladwell's primary point is that strict penal practices are indeed effective up until a certain point. After this point, though, it's not necessarily the case that such practices influence the crime rate. However, Mike Reynolds fails to see this because he's emotionally invested in punishing criminals like Davis and Walker. Accordingly, it is perhaps more difficult for him to see the nuances that come along with such matters, since his convictions are so wrapped up in the fact that he lost his daughter.



Gladwell's analysis of crime rates is an example of what it looks like to thoughtfully challenge convention. Whereas Mike Reynolds's convictions are based on the basic assumption that it's better to lock criminals up for as long as possible, Gladwell looks at the data to determine whether or not this is truly the case. In doing so, he refuses to simply accept what might seem obvious at first, thereby engaging in a more thorough examination of the problem and refusing take anything for granted.



The research Gladwell examines about the negative effects of sending too many people to prison (and for too long) effectively demonstrates that the relationship between punishment and crime rates is indeed an inverted-U curve. Not only does increased punishment stop having a beneficial impact on crime rates at a certain point, it actually begins to make the crime rate worse. As a result, the Three Strikes Law ends up doing exactly the opposite of what Reynolds intended to do. Because he's so invested in his cause, though, he finds it hard to recognize this, ultimately making the easy assumption that more is always better, even when it comes to the penal system.



A more statistically precise way of stating the adverse effects of sending so many people to prison is that “if more than two percent of [a] neighborhood goes to prison, the effect on crime starts to reverse.” Although Mike Reynolds believes that the **Three Strikes Law** ended up saving lives by decreasing California’s overall crime rate, the reality is that the rate began its descent before the law even went into effect. What’s more, the crime rate also decreased in states that didn’t adopt the Three Strikes Law. At the same time, criminologists are divided about the efficacy of the law, since various studies have come up with contradictory answers. Regardless, the state of California made large changes to the law in 2012, significantly walking back its original power.

Turning his attention to another heartbreaking story about murder, Gladwell introduces Wilma Derksen, a woman living in Winnipeg, Manitoba with her family in the 1980s. One night, Wilma’s 13-year-old daughter Candace calls and asks for a ride home. Overwhelmed by the prospect of finishing housework, loading her younger children into the car, picking up Candace, and then going to get her husband from work, Wilma tells Candace to take the bus. Several hours later, she realizes Candace should be home already. Panicked, she picks up her husband, and together they search for their daughter, but they never find her. Seven weeks later, the police find Candace’s body in a shed not far from the Derksens’ house. Her hands and feet have been tied up, and she has frozen to death.

The Derksens’ friends and family visit them the day they learn that Candace has died. Late that night, a man appears at the door. He tells Wilma and her husband that somebody murdered his child, too. He sits at their kitchen table and tells them the story of how his daughter’s murderer was arrested and sentenced to four years in prison. For years now, the man has been trying to bring him to justice. He tells the Derksens how terrible it is, and they can sense that his anger has ruined his entire life. When he leaves, then, they decide to see his visit not as a glimpse at their own future, but as a warning about what their lives could become. The next day, they tell reporters that they hope to find Candace’s killer so they can share “a love that seems to be missing in” the person’s life.

The effects of the Three Strikes Law are difficult to study, though it’s clear that its initial success was most likely unrelated to the law itself. With this in mind, it makes sense that the state of California scaled the law back, since it would be unwise to overcrowd prison systems and negatively impact many lives without knowing for sure whether or not the law has a positive impact. This, it seems, is the prudent and ethical thing to do, though it’s clearly not something Mike Reynolds would support, since his determination to decrease crime in California is perhaps overly influenced by the trauma of losing his daughter.



Again, Gladwell turns his attention to a harrowing tragedy. Having just outlined Mike Reynolds’s experience, Gladwell invites readers to wonder how, exactly, Wilma Derksen will respond to her own daughter’s death. Reynolds, for his part, tried to turn Kimber’s death into something of a “remote miss” with a positive outcome, though his commitment to this may have kept him from recognizing the overall harmfulness of the Three Strikes Law. It remains to be seen, then, whether or not Wilma Derksen will harness her sorrow and try to use it for good.



Wilma Derksen and her husband respond to adversity in a much different way than Mike Reynolds. They are, of course, distraught, but they see no benefit to holding onto their anger. Although it is perhaps possible to use such experiences as motivators to change the world for the better, the Derksens clearly believe that the best possible thing they could do—the thing that would bring about the most good—would be to simply accept what has happened and try to maintain a sense of compassion. This, in turn, is another form of resilience, one that emerges from hardship but doesn’t run the risk of doing any harm. In turn, readers see that there are many different ways to respond to adversity; sometimes, it seems, practicing empathy and compassion is the best way to emerge from tragedy.



Gladwell highlights the difference between the Derksens' and Mike Reynolds's reactions to tragedy. While Mike Reynolds believed he could wield power to make things right, the Derksens didn't invest themselves in "the power of giants." This is perhaps partially because they were raised in the Mennonite religion and taught that people should strive toward forgiveness, even in moments of great hardship. But there's also another reason the Derksens decided to forgive their daughter's killer—they intuitively grasped the concept of the inverted-U curve, understanding that changing the laws wouldn't necessarily do anything to bring about a greater sense of good, nor would it make them feel any better about what happened to Candace.

One of the key principals of the inverted-U curve is the idea of diminishing returns. In the same way that more and more money can begin to have negative effects on a person's happiness, revenge and spite can also take significant tolls. This is what the Derksens gleaned from the stranger whose life was completely upended by his attempt to bring his daughter's killer to justice. Needless to say, all murderers ought to be punished, but the Derksens see no reason to focus on finding Candace's killer, since doing so won't change the fact that they lost their daughter. Whereas most people in their position would fixate on finding and punishing the murderer, the Derksens choose to stray from convention by practicing empathy and compassion, ultimately making their lives easier and more bearable.



In 2007—decades after Candace's murder—the police catch her killer. He has a criminal history full of sexual abuse offenses and has been jailed multiple times. During his trial, Wilma Derksen struggles to be in the same room as him. As she sits there, she realizes that the fact that he tied Candace means he most likely tortured her for his own sexual pleasure. This rattles Wilma to her core, testing her ability to forgive the man. However, she eventually finds it within herself to do so because she recognizes that it would be toxic to hold onto her anger. She knows she would have lost her husband and everything she cares about if she had held onto her fury for the past 20 years. Accordingly, she once again finds a way to let go of her feelings of spite and anger, saving her life once more.

Again, Wilma Derksen demonstrates her ability to break from convention by letting go of the kind of anger that most people assume everyone in her position must feel. Of course, she does experience these emotions, but she recognizes how useless they are in her attempt to lead a happy life. In turn, she intuitively grasps the concept of the inverted-U curve, understanding that more is not always better—harsher punishments for this man will not change what happened to Candace, nor will Wilma's fury lead to anything productive. By spotlighting this dynamic, then, Gladwell shows readers that multiple kinds of resilience can emerge from hardship, suggesting that sometimes the most valuable way to respond to adversity is by exhibiting empathy, compassion, and acceptance.



CHAPTER 9: ANDRÉ TROCMÉ

Gladwell tells a story about a French mountain town named Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. When the Nazis took control of France in 1940, they allowed the country to establish a government run by a former World War I hero, Marshal Philippe Pétain, who acted as a dictator. Pétain pursued the same anti-Semitic agenda as the Nazis and required all French schools to hang the flag and issue fascist salutes each morning. Everyone followed suit—everyone except the people of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a religious town inhabited for centuries by various "dissident Protestant sects." At the time, a Huguenot sect lived in the area with a pacifist named André Trocmé as its pastor. The entire town listened to Trocmé, who urged them to refrain from doing anything the government ordered that might go against their morals. At the Collège Cévenol, the school Trocmé founded, he refused to hang the French flag.

As soon as Gladwell introduces André Trocmé, it becomes clear that he is a man with considerable "disagreeability," the trait Gladwell has previously suggested many innovators and great minds possess. Unafraid of personal persecution, Trocmé doesn't care what the fascist rulers think of him, refusing to do anything that would go against his morals. Accordingly, he rejects Pétain's expectations and exposes himself to danger, exhibiting a wholesome kind of conviction motivated not by anger or a desire for power, but by empathy and morality.



As World War II rages on, Pétain demands more and more from the people of France. For instance, he wants all teachers to sign oaths of loyalty to the French state, but Trocmé and the other teachers at Cévenol refuse to do so. During this time, it becomes less and less safe for Jewish people to live in France. Hearing that Le Chambon is safe, though, a number of Jewish people come to the town for refuge. And though it's dangerous, Trocmé greets them with open arms. For this reason, more and more people make their way to Le Chambon.

In 1942, the youth affairs minister of Pétain's government visits Le Chambon because Pétain wants to establish youth camps around the country. Instead of welcoming the minister by staging a fantastic celebration, though, the people of Le Chambon go out of their way to give him a tepid, flat reception (one server even "accidentally" spills soup down his back). Then, during dinner, a group of students delivers a note to the minister that Trocmé helped them compose. The note criticizes the French government's treatment of Jewish people and expresses concern that officials will begin terrorizing Jewish people in their area of France. It also admits that there are a number of Jewish people in Le Chambon, adding that the townspeople don't distinguish between Jewish and non-Jewish people because to do so would be to go against the Gospel. Finally, the letter ends with the following sentences: "We have Jews. You're not getting them."

Although the French government searched Le Chambon on several occasions, they never found any Jewish people. This is partially because Trocmé would often receive secret warnings before the officials reached town. What's more, when the police did show up unannounced, they would make their presence known and then spend a long time drinking coffee at the local café in order to give everyone in town time to hide or escape. But Gladwell notes that these aren't the only reasons the townspeople of Le Chambon remained unharmed by an otherwise relentless and dangerous government. The real reason, he says, is that the Huguenots had been persecuted for generations and were, as a result, accustomed to this kind of resistance. For hundreds of years, they endured Catholic violence. When it came time to act in support of the Jewish people, Trocmé's wife says, nobody thought twice.

André Trocmé's willingness to go against Pétain and his fascist regime is directly linked to his moral conscience. He is not the kind of person who will set aside his beliefs in order to cooperate with coercive, power-hungry figures of authority. In this way, his convictions are pure and unimpeachable.



André Trocmé's entire community adopts his "disagreeability," setting their moral concerns above all else—even their safety. Despite the fact that it was very dangerous for people to shelter Jewish people during World War II, the people of Le Chambon refuse to be threatened into betraying their beliefs. In turn, they demonstrate that underdogs may go up against powerful enemies simply because they wholeheartedly believe in remaining true to themselves, even in the face of adversity.



Gladwell upholds that the people of Le Chambon are capable of withstanding pressure from fascists because they've developed great resilience over the years. This, he argues, is because they know what it's like to be persecuted—an idea that supports his overarching argument that hardship often leads to unprecedented amounts of courage and adaptability. According to this mindset, then, Pétain's fascist regime is unable to intimidate them into turning away from their morals, meaning that their historical disadvantages have ultimately become advantages now that they're facing yet another terrifying regime.



However, it's not completely true that Trocmé gets away with keeping Jewish families from the Nazis. Six months after the minister visits Le Chambon, he and his friend, Édouard Theis, are imprisoned in an internment camp. One month later, though, they're informed that they'll be released as long as they sign a pledge to obey governmental orders "without question." They refuse, even though it means risking their lives. The guards can't believe it, screaming at them and insisting that the oath doesn't go against their values. But Trocmé points out that signing the pledge would mean he'd have to stop hiding Jewish people—something he has no intention of doing. Exasperated, the guards give up and release him and Theis.

On another occasion, Trocmé is forced to flee Le Chambon with false papers. When he's eventually arrested, he faces a dilemma: if the officers ask him if his papers list his true name, he'll be forced to lie—something he's adamantly against. Fortunately, he manages to slip away with his son before an interaction like this takes place, though he'd already decided to tell the truth if an officer asked for his real name. This, Gladwell says, is because Trocmé is "disagreeable" in the same way as Jay Freireich, Wyatt Walker, and Fred Shuttlesworth. Simply put, he doesn't care what might happen to him, as long as he honors his principles. And this, Gladwell notes, is the hardest kind of person to control or beat. Of course, people in power can always kill individuals like Trocmé, but this kind of behavior tends to backfire.

As a child, Trocmé witnessed the death of his mother in a gruesome car accident. Throughout his life, he remembered this day and committed himself to God as a way of compensating for the sadness and loneliness that came from losing his mother. With this in mind, Gladwell asserts that the majority of the people who helped protect the Jewish people during World War II weren't privileged and powerful, but struggling and disadvantaged. And this, he says, is because hardship can create the kind of courage necessary to take otherwise unfathomable risks.

There are no circumstances in which André Trocmé is willing to compromise his morals. And though most people would assume that this attitude puts him in grave danger, his conviction is so unwavering and unexpected that his fascist persecutors don't know what to do with him. Consequently, his unyielding commitment to honoring his conscience ends up benefitting him, once again proving that it often pays to undermine convention.



The reason that it's ineffective to simply kill "disagreeable" people is directly linked to Gladwell's analysis of what happened during the Troubles. By responding to the Catholic community's actions with unrelenting force, General Ian Freeland only exacerbated the situation, causing the Catholics of Northern Ireland to view the British authorities with even more disdain than before. Similarly, to kill Trocmé would do nothing to stop the Huguenots of Le Chambon from helping Jewish people, since they believe that this is the right thing to do and will not change their minds in response to the threat of violence. This is the same kind of moralistic conviction that Jay Freireich, Wyatt Walker, and Fred Shuttlesworth all have, suggesting that effective champions of change are motivated by their morals, not by revenge or power.



Concluding both Trocmé's story and the book itself, Gladwell returns to one of his central arguments, which is that adversity often leads to positive outcomes. Moreover, he suggests that people who have nothing to lose find themselves in unexpected positions of power, since they're free to do whatever it takes to overcome even the most unlikely challenges. In this way, he illustrates one final time that people ought to reconsider how they define disadvantages, since seemingly terrible circumstances are capable of propelling otherwise disempowered people to greatness.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "David and Goliath." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Jan 2020. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "David and Goliath." LitCharts LLC, January 30, 2020. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/david-and-goliath>.

To cite any of the quotes from *David and Goliath* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Gladwell, Malcolm. *David and Goliath*. Little, Brown and Company. 2013.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gladwell, Malcolm. *David and Goliath*. New York: Little, Brown and Company. 2013.