

Malcolm Gladwell tops best-seller lists with a stealth approach to race. His books probe the way fads catch fire and the mind's ability to process fact and prejudice quickly. **By ANGELA ARDS**

In the T winkling of an eye

RACE IN AMERICA often comes down to the politics of hair: the tighter the curl, the blacker the experience. A few years back, literary phenomenon Malcolm Gladwell discovered this absurd truism when he let his close-cut, blondish locks bolt into an Afro. The son of an English father and a Jamaican mother, Gladwell doesn't "look particularly black, especially to white people," he says, for, in terms of skin color, he inherited his father's. Once he grew out that hair, his Jamaican heritage stood out, quite literally, and police officers began giving him undue special attention: more speeding tickets, more street stops, even once accosting him as a suspected rapist on the loose.

It's an experience most African American men have endured countless times. Gladwell, raised in Canada and biracial—"with the black half being West Indian"—had no points of reference for this particular black American experience. The two seconds it took those officers to link his Afro with criminality "radicalized and racialized" him, he says, more than any experience of his life—and informs the questions shaping his current nonfiction best-seller *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little, Brown and Company, January 2005).

A staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 1996, Gladwell, 41, began his journalism career as a science writer at *The Washington Post*, where he covered the AIDS epidemic and developed a knack for using medical paradigms to understand social issues. In his debut *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Little, Brown and Company, February 2000), he took a phrase from the study of infectious disease to understand how ideas, products and fads, and even political causes reach mass appeal, how they "tip" into popularity. A red-hot best-seller in 2000, *The Tipping Point* itself tipped, staying on *The New York Times* list for weeks and introducing this obscure medical jargon into everyday conversation. (At presstime of this article, *The Tipping Point* was No. 1 in paperback nonfiction after 38 weeks on the list.)

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BROOKE WILLIAMS

Wisdom, Instinct, Prejudice

Blink, released in January and No. 2 in hardcover nonfiction at 16 weeks on the *Times* list as of May 15, mines research in the field of psychology about the unconscious mental processes we all use to size up a person or a situation with just a few telling details—for instance: Afro, male, black. Psychologists call these first impressions “rapid cognition” or “thin-slicing”: rational thinking that has become so ingrained through experience and training that it’s second nature, instinctual. Gladwell presents dozens of fascinating stories about when these honed hunches are right on—as when art historians at the Getty Museum sensed on sight that a classical Greek statue was a forgery—and when they go tragically wrong—like the 1999 police killing in the Bronx of Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo, whose wallet officers mistook for a gun. If “we paid more attention to these fleeting moments,” Gladwell argues, learning when to trust those first impressions and when to check them, it could change our everyday lives for the better.

Blink, as in “blink of an eye,” could just as easily have been titled *Wisdom and Prejudice*. Sure judgments based on experience and training are the very definition of wisdom, while associations based on mere physical attributes constitute prejudice. As a once-aspiring advertising executive, Gladwell has the ad man’s ear for the catchy phrase that creates “buzz.” His blockbuster titles have been topping both the paperback and hardback nonfiction lists. Not since literary icons Toni Morrison and Alice Walker appeared together on the fiction list in the late ’80s, or Terry McMillan’s breakout romance *Waiting to Exhale*, which spent weeks on the list in 1992, has a black writer so dominated national best-selling charts.

Of course, more than buzz is behind Gladwell’s success. With their promised insights into the rational dynamics of change, how the smallest action or a single individual can make a difference, *The Tipping Point* and *Blink* tap into the Zeitgeist, a deep social longing to make sense of an increasingly frenetic and irrational world.

Buzz and the Zeitgeist aside, however, one can never underestimate the power of a good story to captivate audiences, and Gladwell’s a genius of a storyteller. One of his favorite techniques he uses to connect with readers is the direct “you” address: “Imagine you are....” “What if I told you...?” “The feeling that I’m trying to capture is the feeling of having a conversation with me,” he says. “I want the reader to imagine that we’re on a long car drive and I’m telling them a story.”

Throughout *Blink*, Gladwell spins scintillating yarns from an array of situations—World War II code breaking, marriage counseling, speed dating, medical malpractice, an honest car salesman, hitting topspin forehands—to explain how rapid cognition works.

Though he didn’t grow up playing the dozens on the boulevard—“I don’t come from a storytelling tradition. My family is incredibly reserved,” he says—he came by his skills honestly. Thirty years ago, his mother, Joyce Gladwell, wrote a memoir about growing up in Jamaica and moving to England in the 1950s. *Brown Face, Big Master* (MacMillan Caribbean, May



2004; and first published in 1969) is now considered a Caribbean classic.

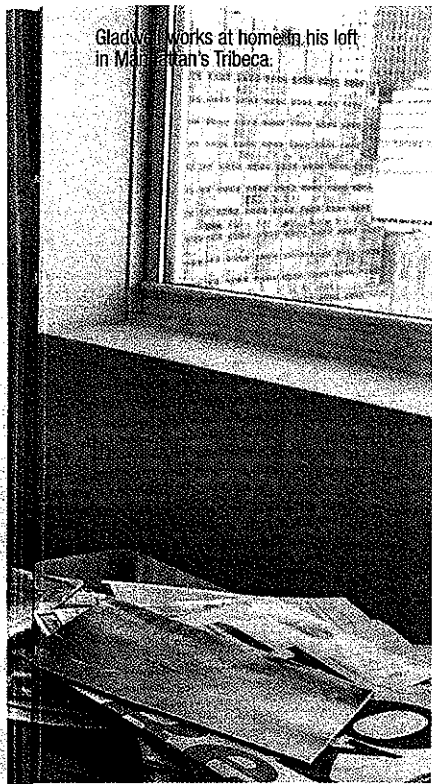
“Her book was the first book I ever remember reading closely, and it really inspired me,” he says. “She is a beautifully simple and clear writer. There is no wasted motion or unnecessary word, and that’s the way I try to write as well.”

The Science of Thought

While lauding Gladwell’s storytelling chops, many reviewers critique *Blink* as failing to formulate a comprehensive theory that unifies these delightful, if disparate, anecdotes. Conservative commentator David Brooks writes in *The New York Times Book Review*: “Gladwell never tells us how the brain performs these amazing cognitive feats; we just get the scattered by-products of the mysterious backstage process.” Kevin Shapiro, a research fellow in neuroscience at Harvard Medical School, writes in *Commentary* that *Blink* is a messy mix of “false analogies and buzzwords”; “The idea seems to be that a diverse set of phenomena—from the gut feelings of experts to the biases of everyday life—are instances of the same kind of thought.”

Critics are so fascinated with the exact science behind *Blink* because it’s part of a wave of recent literature on brain chemistry that promises to revolutionize our understanding of the unconscious mind like nothing has since Freud. What they fail to grasp, however, is Gladwell’s conscious agenda of using science not simply for science’s sake, but to understand and transform, a society.

“*Blink* is quite explicitly a political work—or, rather, a book that is interested in initiating social change,” Gladwell told *BIBR*, after his extensive *Blink* book tour earlier this year. For



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Gladwell, if his writing “is not trying to change people’s beliefs or behavior or opinions, then what is the point?”

His agenda may be explicit, but his approach is not. Gladwell understands that in this conservative political moment, Americans are weary and wary of discussing racial prejudice. Therefore, *Blink* deploys a stealth attack, detailing the dynamics of unconscious bias by discussing how we respond as a society to physical attributes less volatile than skin color. “I chose things like height,” Gladwell says, “because I felt that they were more subtle and more acceptable ways of getting people to take unconscious bias seriously.” For instance, those who suggest social discrimination is over

might rethink that presumption when confronted with the weird fact that, in addition to being disproportionately white and male, 58 percent of corporate CEOs are six feet or taller, even though only 14.5 percent of adult American men are taller than six feet.

The Pervasiveness of Bias

It’s tempting to assume that the “you” Gladwell constantly addressed in *Blink* is the typical *New Yorker* reader, a white intellectual with progressive politics. Certainly, through the rational, value-free context of science, *Blink* exposes the lingering unconscious social bias even white liberals choose to discount. He doesn’t let blacks off the hook, either. *Blink* includes a psychological test that indicates most Americans of any race, blacks included, tend to associate negative attributes to black Americans. And his deep compassion for the four police officers who killed Amadou Diallo seems to argue that prejudice, even with the most tragic consequences, may not be the result of virulent bigotry and criminality, just poor training. “I think of the Diallo chapter as the culmination of the entire book,” he says. “It’s where I want the reader to end up: understanding that what they may have written off as a criminal act by a group of outlier cops was in fact a product of beliefs and tendencies that ALL of us have, in some sense, unless we take specific steps to correct ourselves.”

Judging from the outrage that resulted when New York mayoral candidate Fernando Ferrer articulated that very same argument, many in the African American community may find this “everybody’s a little bit racist” Diallo chapter a hard sell that overlooks the history of police brutality.

Gladwell’s generosity may stem from his nature. In one recent *New Yorker* essay, “Something Borrowed,” he profiled a playwright who plagiarized his work and managed to convey with striking compassion how immoral mistakes can happen without malice. His generous stance about American race relations may also come from the fact that he is an outsider who hasn’t been embittered by the experience of race in America. “I’m quite conscious,” he says, “that I haven’t shared the experience of African Americans, particularly when it comes to being the subject of prejudice.”

Indeed, he argues that the experience of being black in America is profoundly different from the experience of being black elsewhere. “My mother—as a brown, middle-class Jamaican—was educated and raised to be a member of the English middle class,” he says. “She was a scholarship student at a Victorian English boarding school. In some ways, she’s more English than the English. That’s a very Jamaican, middle-class black experience—not a North American one.”

The Fine Points of Race

Gladwell maintains that race has mattered very little in the course of his career. Of the dozens of articles he’s penned for *The New Yorker*, only a handful touch on race. “Largely because I feel that others have done such a good job that I have little to add,” he says. When *The Tipping Point* debuted, Gladwell told *The New York Times*, “I don’t know what I consider myself. It’s too complex. There are too many ways to define yourself, and it’s [race] not a way I have chosen to define myself anymore.”

Then he grew that Afro, and this British-born Canadian of British and Jamaican heritage was stopped and frisked on the streets of America for no other reason than looking like a black American.

“The one takeaway I have from *Blink*, though, in its explorations of race, is an appreciation for how racial prejudice doesn’t respect those kinds of fine distinctions,” Gladwell told *BIBR*. “That to the cop looking at you in that split second, or the employer sizing you up as you walk in the door—black is black is black.”

Angela Ards is a writer finishing a Ph.D. in literature and African American Studies at Princeton University.

Books by Malcolm Gladwell

The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference
Back Bay Books (reprint), January 2002
\$14.95, ISBN 0-316-34662-4

Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking
Little, Brown and Company, January 2005
\$25.95, ISBN 0-316-17232-4