

BOOK REVIEW

Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About People We Don't Know

By Malcolm Gladwell

Malcolm Gladwell is a best-selling author, renowned for books such as *Outliers*, *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*. Like in his other works, Gladwell analyses real examples of human behaviour with evidence-based research and presents it in a way that is not dry or boring.

He discusses the limitations of human perception of other humans, how we decide on a stranger's character and how wrong it can be, with dire consequences.

Historical examples are quoted, including several interactions between British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain and Adolf Hitler, where no alarm bells were triggered. Six months later, a world war was declared. Highly ranking individuals at the CIA were trusted with many national security matters, and turned out to be foreign enemy agents. Some judges also make mistakes in judging a person's suitability to be granted bail.

Gladwell discusses how we judge a stranger's intentions and integrity. He says that it can sometimes be represented by the "truth default theory" where we generally tend to give people the benefit of the doubt. An example includes undetected and unsuspected sexual abuse by a trusted sports physician who was misjudged because of his mild mannerisms and respectable appearance.

Evidence tells us that nonverbal behaviour is often misinterpreted and stereotypes do not necessarily display the true self, particularly in relation to deceit. The author also quotes studies by sociologists on how different cultures interpret outward behaviour and values, which turns out not to be universal.

Decisions made under the physiological influence of alcohol are also discussed. There is a lengthy description of how crime prevention by the US police force in high crime areas has also gone badly wrong due to these mistaken human perceptions.

This latest work by Gladwell is appealing to the researcher and non-researcher alike. It is well written, convincing and is certainly an interesting read.

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