Connecticut College American Studies Senior Seminar
“The Globalization of American Culture” Book Review

Author: Malcolm Gladwell
Title: Outliers
Publisher: Back Ray Books, 2009
Reviewed by: Elizabeth Kaplan

“Outliers” by Malcolm Gladwell

Malcolm Gladwell’s third book, “Outliers,” is an incredibly good read. Not only is this book appealing to just about every type of person, but it is also a hybrid between a collection of stories about extraordinary people and a fascinating study in social science. Gladwell is a masterful storyteller with a wonderful ability to translate complex scientific social theories into an understandable narrative that is sprinkled with vignettes about rock stars, billionaire software tycoons, geniuses and everyday people.

The name “Outliers” comes from Gladwell’s thesis that society’s outliers — those people who achieve much more success in their life than the average person — are created not strictly because of their raw talent, but because of the various opportunities that are presented to them throughout their life, many by luck. As opposed to the common and often cited “American Dream” myth that anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and achieve greatness, Gladwell demonstrates that almost all of society’s success stories become this way because of a chain of fortunate events.

The main triumph of Gladwell’s book is the vast research that he has conducted on the topic of successful people. Citing many longitudinal psychological, sociological, and biological studies and theories of success, Gladwell picks apart the very “American” notion that anyone can succeed if they try hard enough, and instead convinces the reader that the mega-successful people whose names we all recognize (such as Bill Gates or the
Beatles) got to where they were because of things such as their geographic location, their specific college experiences, the opportunities that they were presented with in high school, or even the month in which they were born.

Gladwell’s thesis seems to suggest that a lot of people, given the opportunities that these outliers were exposed to, could have ended up in the exact same position. While the people highlighted in the book are, without a doubt, incredibly smart and successful on their own, there are a lot of people who fall under that category as well and don’t strike it big. It is because of the way that their communities and the societies in which they live were set up that provided all the tools for extra-greatness.

With an incredibly clear and succinct style of writing, Gladwell has produced a true page-turner that will make all of his readers view celebrities and other major “success stories” as a product of taken opportunities as opposed to individuals who simply won the gene lottery or are “naturally gifted.” The implications of this book are numerous; by sharing his research and findings with the world, Gladwell has given Americans — who are often obsessed with dreams of fame and fortune — some sort of explanation for the outliers, a way to explain how some people just seem to have won the lottery of life.

“Outliers” is a riveting book that will leave the reader refreshed and enlightened, and, hopefully, critical of the paradigm of success in America.