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## 'Blink': Hunch Power

By DAVID BROOKS

**M**ALCOLM GLADWELL has written a book about the power of first impressions, and every review, including this one, is going to begin with the reviewer's first impression of the book.

Mine was: Boffo.

Gladwell opens "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking" with the story of a kouros, an ancient Greek statue of a youth that came on the art market and was about to be purchased by the Getty Museum in California. It was a magnificently preserved work, close to seven feet tall, and the asking price was just under \$10 million.

The Getty did all the normal background checks to establish the authenticity of the piece. A geologist determined that the marble came from the ancient Cape Vathy quarry on the island of Thasos. It was covered with a thin layer of calcite, a substance that accumulates on statues over hundreds or perhaps thousands of years. After 14 months of investigation, the Getty staff concluded the thing was genuine, and went ahead with the purchase.

But an art historian named Federico Zeri was taken to see the statue, and in an instant he decided it was fake. Another art historian took a glimpse and sensed that while it had the form of a proper classical statue, it somehow lacked the spirit. A third felt a wave of "intuitive repulsion" when he first laid eyes on it.

Further investigations were made, and finally the whole scheme unraveled. It transpired that the statue had been sculptured by forgers in Rome in the early 1980's. The teams of analysts who did 14 months of research turned out to be wrong. The historians who relied on their initial hunches were right.

THERE is in all of our brains, Gladwell argues, a mighty backstage process, which works its will subconsciously. Through this process we have the capacity to sift huge amounts of information, blend data, isolate telling details and come to astonishingly rapid conclusions, even in the first two seconds of seeing something. " 'Blink' is a book about those first two seconds," Gladwell writes.

### **BLINK**

**The Power of Thinking Without Thinking.**

By Malcolm Gladwell.

277 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$25.95.

Well, I'm impressed. Here we have a guy who has already written one of the best and most successful nonfiction books of the past few years, the ubiquitous "Tipping Point." He's the author of dozens of unfailingly fascinating articles in *The New Yorker*. And he's opened his new book with a crisp anecdote that suggests each of us possesses a hidden power, which we could use to improve our lives if only we knew how to tap it more fully. That's the essential formula for self-help-book greatness.

I'm ready to be sucked in.

And indeed, "Blink" moves quickly through a series of delightful stories, all about the backstage mental process we call intuition. There is the story of the psychologist John Gottman, who since the 1980's has worked with more than 3,000 married couples in a small room, his "love lab," near the University of Washington. He videotapes them having a conversation. Reviewing just an hour's worth of each tape, Gottman has been able to predict with 95 percent accuracy whether that couple will be married 15 years later. If he watches only 15 minutes of tape, his success rate is about 90 percent. Scientists in his lab have determined they can usually predict whether a marriage will work after watching just three minutes of newlywed conversation.

Gottman believes that each relationship has a DNA, or an essential nature. It's possible to take a very thin slice of that relationship, grasp its fundamental pattern and make a decent prediction of its destiny.

Gladwell says we are thin-slicing all the time -- when we go on a date, meet a prospective employee, judge any situation. We take a small portion of a person or problem and extrapolate amazingly well about the whole. A psychologist named Nalini Ambady gave students three 10-second soundless videotapes of a teacher lecturing. Then she asked the students to rate the teacher. Their ratings matched the ratings from students who had taken the teacher's course for an entire semester. Then she cut the videotape back to two seconds and showed it to a new group. The ratings still matched those of the students who'd sat through the entire term.

"We are innately suspicious of this kind of rapid cognition," Gladwell observes. We assume that long, methodical investigation yields more reliable conclusions than a snap judgment. But in fact, "decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately."

This book is only 277 pages long, but there are dozens of stories about thin-slicing. There's one about a Pentagon war game. There's one about New Coke, which seemed to test so well, but flopped in the marketplace. Gladwell shows how the New York City police officers who killed Amadou Diallo made a series of horrendous snap judgments.

Gladwell has us flying around the world and across disciplines at hectic speed, and he's always dazzling us with fascinating information and phenomena. Take priming, for example. Two Dutch scientists asked their subjects to play a demanding game of Trivial Pursuit. They asked one group to think beforehand about what it would be like to be a professor and the other group to think about what it would be like to

be a soccer hooligan. The people who were in a professorial frame of mind did much better than the "hooligans."

One group of African-Americans was asked to take a test without identifying their race on the pretest questionnaire. Another group was asked their race and "that simple act," Gladwell writes, "was sufficient to prime them with all the negative stereotypes associated with African-Americans and academic achievement." The African-Americans who identified their race did much worse than the people who didn't. The number of questions they got right was cut in half.

MY first impression of "Blink" -- in blurb-speak -- was "Fascinating! Eye-Opening! Important!" Unfortunately, my brain, like yours, has more than just a thin-slicing side. It also has that thick-slicing side. The thick-slicing side wants more than a series of remarkable anecdotes. It wants a comprehensive theory of the whole. It wants to know how all the different bits of information fit together.

That thick-slicing part of my brain wasn't as happy with "Blink," especially the second time through. Gladwell never tells us how the brain performs these amazing cognitive feats; we just get the scattered byproducts of the mysterious backstage process. (There have been books by people like Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner that go deeper into the brain chemistry of it.)

The thick-slicing side isn't even sure what this book is about. Is it about first impressions, or intuition, or that amorphous blending of "what is" with "what could be" that we call imagination? In some of his stories, it's regular people who are making snap judgments; in others, it's experts who have been through decades of formal training. In some experiments, the environment matters a great deal; in others, the setting is a psychologist's lab. In some, the snap judgments are based on methodical reasoning -- as with a scientist who has broken facial expressions into discrete parts; in others, the snap-judgment process is formless and instinctive. In some, priming is all-important; in others, priming is disregarded.

MOREOVER, the thick-slicing part of my brain is telling me that while it would be pleasing if we all had these supercomputers in our heads, Gladwell is overselling his case. Most of his heartwarming stories involve the lone intuitive rebel who ends up besting the formal, bureaucratic decision-making procedure. Though Gladwell describes several ways intuition can lead people astray, he doesn't really dwell on how often that happens. But I've learned from other books, notably David G. Myers's more methodical but less entertaining "Intuition," that there is a great body of data suggesting that formal statistical analysis is a much, much better way of predicting everything from the outcome of a football game to the course of liver disease than the intuition even of experts.

The thick-slicing part of the brain reminds me that not long ago I read Michael Lewis's great book, "Moneyball," about a baseball executive who used rigorous statistical analysis to clobber fuzzy-minded old pros who relied on their gut impressions. Now I'm reading "Blink" on how impressions can be as reliable as data. This part of my brain wants to know how I should reconcile Lewis with Gladwell. What is the relationship between self-conscious reason and backstage intuition? Which one is right more often?

For example, if I have to cast my vote for either George "I go with my gut" Bush or John "I deliberate until the cows come home" Kerry, how should I evaluate their rival cognitive styles? Most important, that thick-slicing part of my brain, which is blessed and burdened by self-consciousness, wants to know the meaning of what Gladwell is telling it. When he is talking about the cognitive powers of the brain, he's not just reviewing a cool piece of software. He's talking about us, the thinking process that is the essence of who you and I are.

I am perfectly willing to accept that the brain processes huge amounts of information on a subconscious level, thus freeing up conscious neurons for major tasks, like writing, gossiping or remembering humiliating moments from the distant past. I am willing to accept that we are all to some large extent strangers to ourselves, unaware of how we make the decisions that shape our lives.

But I am not willing to assume, as Gladwell sometimes seems to be doing, that our brains are like computers -- uniform pieces of hardware that can be tested and reverse-engineered by scientists or psychologists in a lab. Isn't it as possible that the backstage part of the brain might be more like a personality, some unique and nontechnological essence that cannot be adequately generalized about by scientists in white coats with clipboards?

"Blink" is part of a wave of books on brain function that are sweeping over us as we learn more about the action inside our own heads. This literature is going to have a powerful effect on our culture, maybe as powerful as the effect Freudianism had on our grandparents' time (the last time somebody tried to explain the brain's backstage process).

WE should be a little wary of surrendering this field to the scientists. Philosophers ranging from Vico to Michael Oakeshott to Isaiah Berlin were writing about thin-slicing (which they called "wisdom") long before the scientists started picking apart our neurons, and long before psychologists started showing people snippets of videotape. And much of what they observe is more profound than anything you can capture with some ginned-up control group test in a psychology lab.

I'm sure Gladwell knows all this. Perhaps it's unfair to expect him to write a book that encompasses Isaiah Berlin and the "love lab." It's just that in the general culture the psychiatrists and neuroscientists are eclipsing the philosophers, and that's horrible.

If you want to trust my snap judgment, buy this book: you'll be delighted. If you want to trust my more reflective second judgment, buy it: you'll be delighted but frustrated, troubled and left wanting more.

Or just go to the bookstore, look at the cover and let your neurons make up their own damn mind.

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