To agree, or not to agree
Malcolm Gladwell sees the value of pushing the envelope

By Bryan Reesman
Considering that author Malcolm Gladwell explores tales of long shots turned success stories in his inspiring new book, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants*, it might be tempting to compare him to a humble David who became a writing Goliath. But the fact is that the celebrated author and *New Yorker* staff writer achieved his current fame serendipitously. His career and worldview have been powered by the passion of his convictions, as well as his ability to absorb ideas and learn from his subjects. No toppling required.

Despite his incredible success as a literary giant—four international best-sellers, well-paid corporate and college speaking engagements, honorary degrees and being named an influential person by *Time* magazine—Gladwell is a down-to-earth individual. When we meet for a lunchtime interview at Morandi, a picturesque Italian trattoria in New York’s West Village, the slender, curly-haired writer, who recently turned 50 but looks years younger, inquires if he is late, although we are both early. He is casually dressed in a T-shirt and sneakers.

Gladwell was a champion runner in high school in Canada and is a huge sports fan.

**Inspired by the improbable**

Gladwell is the opposite of disreputable, the word he uses to describe many of the underdogs chronicled in his new book, people who overcame perceived disadvantages to change their lives and the world. The word is not meant to be a stigma but a way to identify those people who, through means, motivation and even luck, managed to make their mark in unusual and unorthodox ways.

These disreputable folks include Gary Cohen, the president and chief operating officer of Goldman Sachs, who learned to use his verbal skills and chutzpah to compensate for his dyslexia; the Impressionist painters, who, after mostly being rejected by the prestigious Salon in Paris, started their own modest art gallery to gain notoriety; Wyatt Walker, Martin Luther King Jr’s right-hand man, who knew how to strategize and how to manipulate the media to advance the cause of civil rights; and Emil Freireich, the blusterous, imposing doctor who used unconventional and even controversial means to battle childhood leukemia.

"Doing something disreputable is doing something that is frowned upon by your peers, that is offensive to your peers and that requires you as a person to take extraordinary social risks," Gladwell tells *The Connection.*

Sometimes that strays into things that are downright questionable. In Freireich’s case, he was breaking lots of rules, but his argument would’ve been the rules are dumb. In retrospect, he was right. He also had to be cold-blooded, like when I tell the story about him jabbing the needles into the kids to get the bone marrow. It’s really hard to do. Most people didn’t want to do it and were looking for reasons not to do it. He didn’t let those kinds of considerations get in the way of what he knew had to be done, and I think that’s an incredibly disreputable act and an incredibly heroic act at the same time. I think he’s an extraordinary figure.”

**Beginnings of brilliance**

There is a bit of the disreputable in Gladwell’s own family. The writer was born to an English father and Jamaican mother who met in college in England. "For a black person and a white person to marry in the late 1950s was a fairly radical act, so they’re not shrinking violets," observes Gladwell. "My father is quite indifferent to what the world thinks. He does what he thinks is right. So there’s a tradition of iconoclasm in my family." He feels that seeing the world through the "unfamiliar eyes" of outsiders, of immigrants, has been a real advantage and served him well in his journalistic endeavors.

The seeds of Gladwell’s career were sown during his formative years. After his British birth, the family moved around, including spending time in Jamaica, but Gladwell essentially grew up in Ontario, Canada. His father was a professor of mathematics and engineering at the University of Waterloo and his mother was a psychotherapist. "My mother is a wonderful writer who has the gift of saying complicated things very simply and clearly," says Gladwell. "I always wanted to write like her.”

After graduating from the University of Toronto’s Trinity College in the summer of 1984 with a degree in history, Gladwell landed a gig writing for *American Spectator* magazine for a few months. He then worked for the now-defunct *Insight* magazine for a year, did a few odd jobs, then landed at *The Washington Post* in 1987, writing about science and business and becoming their New York bureau chief.

Once his tenure at that position ended, Gladwell did not want to return to Washington, D.C. He had already written four or five stories for *The New Yorker*, so they felt comfortable hiring him as a staff writer in 1996. He

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**The Costco Connection**

*David and Goliath* is available in most Costco warehouses.
has been there ever since and published five books since 2000: The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference, Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking, Outliers: The Story of Success, What the Dog Saw: And Other Adventures, and the new David and Goliath. His latest tome took more than two and a half years to write while he was also working on stories for The New Yorker.

Taking time to reflect

The way Gladwell views the world is refreshing. Whether he's discussing how a spontaneously strategic Vietnam vet best a highly prepared Pentagon team during pre-Iraq war games in Blink, analyzing the time and place factors that led to Bill Gates rising to prominence in Outliers or chronicling underdog ascensions in David and Goliath, the author exposes clarity of thought, learning to sift through and filter out the noise of the world to focus on what is essential to one's life, and to perceive people and situations for who and what they are rather than what one thinks they are.

"I feel that people are experience-rich and theory poor," asserts Gladwell. "That is to say, most people have lots and lots and lots of experiences but don't have the time to try to make sense of them. It's a luxury to be able to sit and theorize and read psychologists, sociologists and historians and to attach explanations to events. The reason people read books like my own is that they're searching for those kinds of explanations, of ways of making sense of things. There is this tremendous body of knowledge in the world of academia where extraordinary numbers of incredibly thoughtful people have taken the time to examine on a really profound level the way we live our lives and who we are and where we've been. That brilliant learning sometimes gets trapped in academia and never sees the light of day. I'm trying to give people access to all of that brilliant thinking. It's a way of going back to college long after you've graduated."

Ideas have always propelled Gladwell's writing, which is clear when interviewing him. While some authors or intellectuals pontificate dramatically, he is neither soft-spoken and thoughtful, but still passionate, in his delivery, sometimes surreptitiously fiddling with his utensils as we await our meal. He quips that if you think going to a library is an exciting event, you will probably enjoy his books.

"I write for people who are curious and who don't mind having their beliefs challenged," he says. "I don't shock people's belief systems, but I do nudge them sometimes. Some people are fine with that, and those are my readers." Several authors and columnists have challenged assertions or claims in his books, but that at least proves he knows how to stimulate debate among his readers.

Has his work on all of his books given him a new worldview or altered the one he has? "The last three books in particular have made me very suspicious of the way that all of us, human beings react to the world," the author replies. "The assumptions that we carry around in our head aren't very good. Our first impressions of things can sometimes be terribly terrible. This book is basically about how we view situations and misread them. The more I write these books, the less convinced I am of my own inherent wisdom. I've convinced myself that I'm pretty bad at making sense of the world and need a lot of help."

The Gladwell school of thought

WHEN IT COMES to dispensing advice, Malcom Gladwell is all about "hanging out" with other experts. He cites books that he has been inspired by over the years, his unique perspective comes from looking at people and events that fascinate him but are often removed from his personal experience.

"I'm always an outlier in these words," he stresses. "What I think about the field of psychology, I'm not bound by any of the assumptions and preconceptions within the field. I'm looking at it as a kind of outsider, and that's very freeing; I spend a lot of time in libraries. What I love about a library is everything is all mixed up together. There isn't a sociology library and a psychology library and a history library, there's just books with all that stuff in it. So that's how I see the world of ideas. It's all mixed up together. And the best way to do that is to just hang out in one corner of the intellectual world, you should be able to go around."