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What *the* Dog Saw



and other adventures

MALCOLM GLADWELL

author of *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, and *Outliers*

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WHAT THE DOG SAW

*And Other
Adventures*

MALCOLM GLADWELL

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What the Dog Saw

And Other Adventures

"Malcolm Gladwell is a writer of many gifts. His nose for the untold back story will have readers repeatedly muttering, 'Gee, that's interesting!' He avoids shopworn topics, easy moralization, and conventional wisdom, encouraging his readers to think again and think different....Some chapters are masterpieces in the art of the essay."

— *New York Times Book Review*

"What makes Malcolm Gladwell so extraordinary is his ability to focus on any topic from the arcane to the apparently banal, research it with shrewd intelligence and wholehearted engagement, then weave in other thoughts and themes that may seem unrelated until he subtly illuminates their relevance. The result is unfailingly riveting."

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"Malcolm Gladwell could probably make a pencil sharpener interesting, given the assignment. Whether analyzing the anatomy of instantaneous decisions in *Blink*, or exploring the reasons behind success in *Outliers*, he's always an accessible and provocative reporter. His talents buttress *What the Dog Saw*, his new collection of nineteen *New Yorker* essays."

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"Gladwell always had an eye for good stories, but at *The New Yorker* he gained the confidence to use these stories to say something larger about American culture."

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more...

“It is Gladwell’s storytelling qualities and his eye for the human drama at the heart of his inquiries that make his essays so compelling.... The key to Gladwell’s popularity is his tone. He never presents himself as an expert who is willing to share some of his knowledge with his lucky readers. He comes across as just another ‘middle guy,’ who thinks about things longer and harder than the rest of us.” — *Sunday Times* (London)

“Gladwell’s reporting, observations, and meditations on systems and practices unfailingly offer insights that have keen relevance for business.... *What the Dog Saw* is full of compelling ideas.” — *Miami Herald*

“As a writer for *The New Yorker* since 1996, Malcolm Gladwell has covered a weird and wonderful array of stories and this collection shows that (a) he really does believe that everyone has a story to tell and that (b) he’s just the sort of writer who can make them fascinating and relevant. These essays are a bunch of curios, covering subjects from why Heinz ketchup has never been threatened by competition, to the history of hair dye, to plagiarism and intellectual property.” — *Sunday Mail* (Australia)

“This book full of short conversation pieces is a collection that plays to the author’s strengths. It underscores his way of finding suitably quirky subjects and using each as gateway to some larger meaning.” — *New York Times*

“Gladwell can write engrossingly about just about anything.... He has a gift for capturing personalities, a Borscht Belt comic’s feel for timing and a bent for counterintuitive thinking. He loves to start a piece by settling you onto a cushion of received ideas, then yanking it out from under you.” — *Bloomberg News*

"Gladwell's writing has the qualities of the best essayists. He is chatty, perceptive, impish, and amiable. Reading him is like having a conversation by the fireside with someone very intelligent. He challenges your preconceptions, and takes nothing at face value, probing deeply into a series of subjects."

— *Daily Telegraph*

"Do yourself a favor and curl up with *What the Dog Saw* this week: It is more entertaining and edifying than should be legal for any book."

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"Malcolm Gladwell is one of the brightest stars in the media firmament....His clear prose and knack for upending conventional wisdom across the social sciences have made *The Tipping Point*, *Blink*, and *Outliers*, as well as his lengthy magazine features on topics ranging from cool-hunting to ketchup, into must reads."

— *Time.com*

"Gladwell owes his success to the trademark brand of social psychology he honed over a decade at the magazine. His confident, optimistic pieces on the essence of genius, the flaws of multinational corporations, and the quirks of human behavior have been devoured by businessmen in search of a new guru. His skill lies in turning dry academic hunches into compelling tales of everyday life: why we buy this or that; why we place trust in flaky ideas; why we are hopeless at joining the dots between cause and effect. He is the master of pointing out the truths under our noses."

— *Guardian*

ALSO BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

Outliers

Blink

The Tipping Point

For Henry and David

Preface

1.

When I was a small child, I used to sneak into my father's study and leaf through the papers on his desk. He is a mathematician. He wrote on graph paper, in pencil — long rows of neatly written numbers and figures. I would sit on the edge of his chair and look at each page with puzzlement and wonder. It seemed miraculous, first of all, that he got paid for what seemed, at the time, like gibberish. But more important, I couldn't get over the fact that someone whom I loved so dearly did something every day, inside his own head, that I could not begin to understand.

This was actually a version of what I would later learn psychologists call the *other minds* problem. One-year-olds think that if they like Goldfish Crackers, then Mommy and Daddy must like Goldfish Crackers, too: they have not grasped the idea that what is inside their head is different from what

is inside everyone else's head. Sooner or later, though, children come to understand that Mommy and Daddy don't necessarily like Goldfish, too, and that moment is one of the great cognitive milestones of human development. Why is a two-year-old so terrible? Because she is systematically testing the fascinating and, to her, utterly novel notion that something that gives her pleasure might not actually give someone else pleasure — and the truth is that as adults we never lose that fascination. What is the first thing that we want to know when we meet someone who is a doctor at a social occasion? It isn't "What do you do?" We know, sort of, what a doctor does. Instead, we want to know what it means to be with sick people all day long. We want to know what it *feels like* to be a doctor, because we're quite sure that it doesn't feel at all like what it means to sit at a computer all day long, or teach school, or sell cars. Such questions are not dumb or obvious. Curiosity about the interior life of other people's day-to-day work is one of the most fundamental of human impulses, and that same impulse is what led to the writing you now hold in your hands.

2.

All the pieces in *What the Dog Saw* come from the pages of *The New Yorker*, where I have been a staff writer since 1996. Out of the countless articles I've

written over that period, these are my favorites. I've grouped them into three categories. The first section is about obsessives and what I like to call *minor* geniuses — not Einstein and Winston Churchill and Nelson Mandela and the other towering architects of the world in which we live, but people like Ron Popeil, who sold the Chop-O-Matic, and Shirley Polykoff, who famously asked, "Does she or doesn't she? Only her hairdresser knows for sure." The second section is devoted to theories, to ways of organizing experience. How should we think about homelessness, or financial scandals, or a disaster like the crash of the *Challenger*? The third section wonders about the predictions we make about people. How do we know whether someone is bad, or smart, or capable of doing something really well? As you will see, I'm skeptical about how accurately we can make any of those judgments.

In the best of these pieces, what we think isn't the issue. Instead, I'm more interested in describing what people who think about homelessness or ketchup or financial scandals think about homelessness or ketchup or financial scandals. I don't know what to conclude about the *Challenger* crash. It's gibberish to me — neatly printed indecipherable lines of numbers and figures on graph paper. But what if we look at that problem through someone else's eyes, from inside someone else's head?

You will, for example, come across an article in which I try to understand the difference between choking and panicking. The piece was inspired by John F. Kennedy Jr.'s fatal plane crash in July of 1999. He was a novice pilot in bad weather who "lost the horizon" (as pilots like to say) and went into a spiral dive. To understand what he experienced, I had a pilot take me up in the same kind of plane that Kennedy flew, in the same kind of weather, and I had him take us into a spiral dive. It wasn't a gimmick. It was a necessity. I wanted to understand what crashing a plane that way *felt* like, because if you want to make sense of that crash, it's simply not enough to just know what Kennedy did. "The Picture Problem" is about how to make sense of satellite images, like the pictures the Bush administration thought it had of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. I got started on that topic because I spent an afternoon with a radiologist looking at mammograms, and halfway through — completely unprompted — he mentioned that he imagined that the problems people like him had in reading breast X-rays were a lot like the problems people in the CIA had in reading satellite photos. I wanted to know what went on inside his head, and he wanted to know what went on inside the heads of CIA officers. I remember, at that moment, feeling absolutely giddy. Then there's the article after which this book is named. It's a profile of Cesar Millan, the

so-called dog whisperer. Millan can calm the angriest and most troubled of animals with the touch of his hand. What goes on inside Millan's head as he does that? That was what inspired me to write the piece. But after I got halfway through my reporting, I realized there was an even better question: When Millan performs his magic, what goes on inside the *dog's* head? That's what we really want to know — what the dog saw.

3.

The question I get asked most often is, Where do you get your ideas? I never do a good job of answering that. I usually say something vague about how people tell me things, or my editor, Henry, gives me a book that gets me thinking, or I say that I just plain don't remember. When I was putting together this collection, I thought I'd try to figure that out once and for all. There is, for example, a long and somewhat eccentric piece in this book on why no has ever come up with a ketchup to rival Heinz. (How do we feel when we eat ketchup?) That idea came from my friend Dave, who is in the grocery business. We have lunch every now and again, and he is the kind of person who thinks about things like that. (Dave also has some fascinating theories about melons, but that's an idea I'm saving for later.) Another article, called "True Colors,"

is about the women who pioneered the hair color market. I got started on that because I somehow got it in my head that it would be fun to write about shampoo. (I think I was desperate for a story.) Many interviews later, an exasperated Madison Avenue type said to me, "Why on earth are you writing about shampoo? Hair color is much more interesting." And so it is.

The trick to finding ideas is to convince yourself that everyone and everything has a story to tell. I say *trick* but what I really mean is *challenge*, because it's a very hard thing to do. Our instinct as humans, after all, is to assume that most things are not interesting. We flip through the channels on the television and reject ten before we settle on one. We go to a bookstore and look at twenty novels before we pick the one we want. We filter and rank and judge. We *have to*. There's just so much out there. But if you want to be a writer, you have to fight that instinct every day. Shampoo doesn't seem interesting? Well, dammit, it must be, and if it isn't, I have to believe that it will ultimately lead me to something that is. (I'll let you judge whether I'm right in that instance.)

The other trick to finding ideas is figuring out the difference between power and knowledge. Of all the people whom you'll meet in this volume, very few of them are powerful, or even famous. When I said that I'm most interested in minor geniuses, that's what I meant. You don't start at the top if you want to find

the story. You start in the middle, because it's the people in the middle who do the actual work in the world. My friend Dave, who taught me about ketchup, is a middle guy. He's *worked on* ketchup. That's how he knows about it. People at the top are self-conscious about what they say (and rightfully so) because they have position and privilege to protect — and self-consciousness is the enemy of "interestingness." In "The Pitchman" you'll meet Arnold Morris, who gave me the pitch for the "Dial-O-Matic" vegetable slicer one summer day in his kitchen on the Jersey Shore: "Come on over, folks. I'm going to show you the most amazing slicing machine you have ever seen in your life," he began. He picked up a package of barbecue spices and used it as a prop. "Take a look at this!" He held it in the air as if he were holding up a Tiffany vase.

He held it in the air as if he were holding up a Tiffany vase. That's where you find stories, in someone's kitchen on the Jersey Shore.

4.

Growing up, I never wanted to be a writer. I wanted to be a lawyer, and then in my last year of college, I decided I wanted to be in advertising. I applied to eighteen advertising agencies in the city of Toronto and received eighteen rejection letters, which I taped in a row on my wall. (I still have them somewhere.) I

thought about graduate school, but my grades weren't quite good enough. I applied for a fellowship to go somewhere exotic for a year and was rejected. Writing was the thing I ended up doing by default, for the simple reason that it took me forever to realize that writing could be a *job*. Jobs were things that were serious and daunting. Writing was fun.

After college, I worked for six months at a little magazine in Indiana called the *American Spectator*. I moved to Washington, DC, and freelanced for a few years, and eventually caught on with the *Washington Post* — and from there came to *The New Yorker*. Along the way, writing has never ceased to be fun, and I hope that buoyant spirit is evident in these pieces. Nothing frustrates me more than someone who reads something of mine or anyone else's and says, angrily, "I don't buy it." Why are they angry? Good writing does not succeed or fail on the strength of its ability to persuade. Not the kind of writing that you'll find in this book, anyway. It succeeds or fails on the strength of its ability to engage you, to make you think, to give you a glimpse into someone else's head — even if in the end you conclude that someone else's head is not a place you'd really like to be. I've called these pieces adventures, because that's what they are intended to be. Enjoy yourself.

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