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

Written by Malcolm Gladwell

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trangers: What We Should Know about the People We

By Malcolm Gladwell

Talking To Strangers Malcolm Gladwell

In July 2015, a young black woman named Sandra Bland was pulled over for a minor traffic violation in rural Texas. Minutes later she was arrested and jailed. Three days later, she committed suicide in her cell. What went wrong? Talking to Strangers is all about what happens when we encounter people we don't know, why it often goes awry, and what it says about us.

Talking To Strangers Audiobook

How do we make sense of the unfamiliar? Why are we so bad at judging someone, reading a face, or detecting a lie? Why do we so often fail to 'get' other people?

Talking To Strangers Review

Through a series of puzzles, encounters and misunderstandings, from little-known stories to infamous legal cases, Gladwell takes us on a journey through the unexpected. You will read about the spy who spent years undetected at the highest levels of the Pentagon, the man who saw through the fraudster Bernie Madoff, the suicide of the poet Sylvia Plath and the false conviction of Amanda Knox. You will discover that strangers are never simple.

Talking To Strangers Book

No one shows us who we are like Malcolm Gladwell. Here he sets out to understand why we act the way we do, and how we all might know a little more about those we don't.

As I sat at the airport, head deep in a book, I suddenly heard, "Hi!" What? To my left stood a handsome man. "I just thought I should say hi since I see you're reading Talking to Strangers."

I too thought Malcolm Gladwell's new book was going to teach me how to literally talk with people I don't know, but as always he turns all my assumptions on their head with this book. If that's what the book was about, that stranger and I might be on a date by now.

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If I can convince you of one thing in this book, let it be this: Strangers are not easy... We think we can easily see into the hearts of others based on the flimsiest of clues.

At the 2019 book conference BookExpo America, Malcolm pointed out that the problems exemplified by the death of Sandra Bland, a black woman arrested by a white policeman, are everywhere, not just in the darkest areas of America. It lies not only with these individuals but within each of us.

In his book, he takes huge scandals (and who doesn't love to read about a scandal?), reaches deep inside like you would your skinniest jeans and then pulls them inside out. Except that when he does this, you suddenly realize your jeans had actually been inside out before. It is mind bending, which means that you have to follow along to at least page 54 before you start to understand where Malcolm is going. You will either find this too convoluted to keep going at some point or you will read it all in one sitting, as I did flying from NY to CA. My one frustration with this book is that at the very end Malcolm spends only 2 pages (2!) saying what we should do about all he just taught us. After speeding through the book, that feels like an abrupt stop. On the other hand, I can't stop thinking about what he reveals along the way. I can't unsee what he has shown me and now my framework of looking at the world is different. And isn't that the mission of any good book?

SPOILER ALERT: For those of you who don't keep reading the book, here are my key insights. But to really understand what happened in cases like Fidel Castro's fooling of the CIA, the deceptions of Bernie Madoff, the trial of Amanda Knox, the suicide of Sylvia Plath, the Jerry Sandusky pedophilia scandal, and

the death of Sandra Bland you need to read the whole book.

1. THE DEFAULT TO TRUTH PROBLEM We do not behave, in other words, like sober-minded scientists, slowing gathering evidence of the truth or falsity of something before reaching a conclusion. We do the opposite. We start by believing. And we stop believing only when our doubts and misgivings rise to the point where we can no longer explain them away.

For a very few, there is no high threshold before doubts turn into disbelief - dishonesty and stupidity is everywhere. In Russian folklore, this archetype is called yurodivy, the "Holy Fool." We should be strategically inserting these people where our society has a blind eye, to be whistle blowers, however we don't want these to blanket their judgement on everyone. While we think we want our guardians to be alert to every suspicion, that is actually key to where the police officer so tragically failed Sandra Bland. It wasn't that he didn't do what he was trained to do, but that he did exactly what he was trained to do. He was taught to blanket perfectly innocent people with suspicion in case of the rare instance of a criminal. This kind of thinking leads to the distrust we see between police and the community today. To assume the best of another is the trait that has created modern society. Those occasions when our trusting nature is violated are tragic. But the alternative - to abandon trust as a defense against predation and deception - is worse.

2. THE TRANSPARENCY PROBLEM Transparency is a myth.

How people are feeling inside often does NOT perfectly match how they appear on the outside, which means we are misjudging other's intentions. This doesn't matter as much with close friends where you understand what their idiosyncratic expressions mean (I had a friend who would often abruptly get up and leave. Other people would think she was very angry at something someone had said, but I saw nothing wrong because I could tell she wasn't angry at all.) When we are confronted with a stranger, we have to substitute an idea - a stereotype - for direct experience. And that stereotype is wrong all too often. However while this strategy for dealing with strangers is deeply flawed, it is also socially necessary. The requirement of humanity means that we have to tolerate an enormous amount of error. That is the paradox of talking to strangers. We need to talk to them. But we're terrible at it... we're not always honest with each other about just how terrible at it we are."

3. THE MISMATCH PROBLEM We are bad lie-detectors in those situations when the person we're judging is mismatched.

A mismatch is where someone's level of truthfulness does NOT correspond with the way they look. I think someone is honest based on how they look and act but in actuality they are lying and I can't tell the difference.

Malcolm dissects the case of Brock Turner, where because these two strangers were blind drunk, myopia removed the highest order constraint on their behavior. Myopia makes it hard to consider the long-term consequences, so a sexually aggressive teenager's impulses are no longer kept in check by an

understanding of how inappropriate those behaviors are and the long term risks of those behaviors. Combine that with mismatching and transparency problems and it's a disaster. If you want people to be themselves in a social encounter with a stranger - to represent their own desires honestly and clearly - then they can't be blind drunk.

4. THE COUPLING PHENOMENON The first set of mistakes we make with strangers... have to do with our inability to make sense of the stranger as an individual. But there's a second category of error that has to do with our inability to appreciate the context in which the stranger operates... Coupling is the idea that behaviors are linked to very specific circumstances and conditions.

For instance, both crime and suicides are coupled - tied to very specific places and contexts. Outside of those places and contexts, the rate of both go down drastically. That means when you confront the stranger, you have to ask yourself where and when you're confronting the stranger - because those two things powerfully influence your interpretation of who the stranger is.

SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

 We could start by no longer penalizing each other for defaulting to truth... We should also accept the limits of our ability to decipher strangers... But far more important than a little grace and humility over what we cannot do, we should be clear about what we can [do]... There are clues to making sense of the stranger. But attending to them requires humility and thoughtfulness and a willingness to look beyond the stranger, and take time and place and context into account.

Malcolm Gladwell was motivated by a need to understand the truth of what happened with Sandra Bland and other recent scandals. His conclusion is that the "truth" ... is not some hard and shiny object that can be extracted if only we dig deep enough and look hard enough. The thing we want to learn about a stranger is fragile (just by stressing someone out you can affect their memory of what happened) ... We need to accept that the search to understand a stranger has real limits. We will never know the whole truth. We have to be satisfied with something short of that. The right way to talk to strangers is with caution and humility.

Because we do not know how to talk to strangers, what do we do when things go awry with strangers? We blame the stranger.   ...more

Talking To Strangers Audible

I always feel lucky when I get to read a book before its official publication date. A fascinating, accessible examination of the miscommunications that can arise when we talk to strangers. We're going to interview Malcolm Gladwell for the Happier podcast, can't wait for that.

Never Trust a Blood Relative

Talking to Strangers is an elaboration of a simple (trivial?) idea: It's very difficult to tell when people are lying. According to Timothy Levine, the academic psychologist on whom Gladwell relies for his basic argument, the presumption that people tell the truth is almost universal, a few Holy Fools (and, I suppose, Judge Judy) excepted. Levine calls this his Truth Default Theory. Gladwell applies it entertainingly, if rather repetitively, to cases of duplicity rang   Never Trust a Blood Relative

Talking to Strangers is an elaboration of a simple (trivial?) idea: It's very difficult to tell when people are lying. According to Timothy Levine, the academic psychologist on whom Gladwell relies for his basic argument, the presumption that people tell the truth is almost universal, a few Holy Fools (and, I suppose, Judge Judy) excepted. Levine calls this his Truth Default Theory. Gladwell applies it entertainingly, if rather repetitively, to cases of duplicity ranging from double agents in government agencies to international financial fraud.

The interesting part of Gladwell's thesis is that we can't be trained out of our predisposition to believe what 'credible' people, that is, folk who exhibit facial traits and body language which conform to cultural conventions, have to say. Police, judges, regulatory officials, even counter-espionage experts have equally poor records for detecting falsehood compared to the rest of us (it also works the other way round: truth-telling appears as lying if accompanied by 'mis-matched' behavioural signals). We are genetically programmed to be dupes (I suspect sex as the evolutionary motive!). And there is no reliable technology that does any better.

The implication for me is that the more anyone is familiar with expected conventional behavioural responses, and can perform these as needed, the more credible they will be. Not a terribly innovative conclusion admittedly, but it does suggest that Gladwell has the wrong end of the authenticity-stick. We may have to worry about strangers being honest; but the real danger is the mendacity of those closest to us, those who know what we find credible, namely intimate family members, not strangers.

There's another issue as well. It's clear that most 0f us lie to ourselves from time to time, that is, we conveniently and selectively recall events which confirm our self-rationalising narratives. We cannot observe our own physical behaviour to determine the extent of mismatch. Nor would it make any difference if we could since we may actually believe our own press, as it were. I know academics and business people who act this way as a matter of routine. It's part of their strategy for success. They speak and write with total conviction about things they really know nothing about. One of these may be

the president of the United States. Who knows, perhaps even Gladwell is amongst these experts at self-delusion and is simply scamming the rest of us with complete sincerity.

Or am I merely projecting a sort of cynicism about Gladwellâ€™s slick rapportage? Possibly. But he does seem to have a somewhat murky past as a defender of several dodgy industries like tobacco and pharmaceuticals (See: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1...). Presumably he was quite handy at spinning credible publicity out of otherwise damaging facts. â€œTransparency,â€• Gladwell says, â€œis a mythâ€"an idea weâ€™ve picked up from watching too much television and reading too many novels.â€• One wonders to what degree his book might be an instance of the phenomenon he is describing.

Oh, and as an aside, the attribution of the death of a black student in the custody of a Texas jail to an â€˜escalating miscommunication between strangersâ€™ verges on the obscene. His use of this example to book-end his narrative and his references to it as a recurring theme suggest some serious judgmental deficiencies. I donâ€™t feel myself defaulting to truth, or Gladwellâ€™s purported truth, in the least.

Postscript 18Sept19: it appears that Gladwellâ€™s bubble is bursting: https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/arc...   ...more

Talking To Strangers App

I was trying to work through my thoughts on this book when Goodreads did an interview with Malcolm Gladwell and this one thing he said just made everything clear for me:
 â€œI've never been a writer who's looked to persuade his readers; I'm more interested in capturing their interest and curiosity.â€•
Because, truthfully, I don't know that Gladwell did fully convince me of his way of thinking with this book. I don't know that I actually agree that he can draw a link between the police officer â€œmisund   I was trying to work through my thoughts on this book when Goodreads did an interview with Malcolm Gladwell and this one thing he said just made everything clear for me:
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Because, truthfully, I don't know that Gladwell did fully convince me of his way of thinking with this book. I don't know that I actually agree that he can draw a link between the police officer â€œmisunderstandingâ€• Sandra Bland and Neville Chamberlain â€œmisunderstandingâ€• Hitler and make that work. And I don't know that I agree - actually, no, I'm pretty sure I don't - about the way he views the Stanford rape case as a "misunderstanding".*

But, still, I couldn't look away from this book. It's the first book I've read by Gladwell and I can see now why he has become something of a pop-nonfiction writer because he definitely knows how to capture your attention. It's got some psychology, a bit of anthropology, a touch of politics, a dash of espionage... what's not to like?

I found it absolutely fascinating and horrifying when he shows how a "blind" machine can more correctly judge the character and bail risk of criminals than human judges and trained law enforcement. I really enjoyed learning about the way we characterize and judge facial expressions and how this is both misleading AND differs across cultures, so not only do we often incorrectly judge those in our own society and culture, but we've got no chance when faced with someone from a different country.

You ever been to a foreign country and thought people were looking at you weird? Turns out their face might just be in "neutral" or they're even being friendly!

He backs things up with respectable studies and acknowledges limitations when appropriate, which I liked. I do thing he umbrellas a lot of very different examples under the "Talking to Strangers" label, and not all of them seem realistically linked to me. But they are interesting, nevertheless.
   We think we can easily see into the hearts of others based on the flimsiest of clues. We jump at the chance to judge strangers. We would never do that to ourselves, of course. We are nuanced and complex and enigmatic. But the stranger is easy.
If I can convince you of one thing in this book, let it be this: Strangers are not easy.
In the end, though, he brings all this information, all these studies and examples together to leave us with an idea that is nothing new, but that I think we are all too quick to forget: people are more complex

than they first appear. Donâ€™t judge a book by its cover, if you will. Some people are assholes; others are just socially-challenged (me!). Some people are guilty; others just get that shifty look when walking through the metal detectors at the airport (also me!).

I can't deny that I now want to read all his other books.

*In Gladwell's defense, he spoke with a number of sensitivity readers for this chapter and he discusses it in far more depth than I've given the impression of. He goes out of his way to stress that he isn't making excuses for the culprit, but is mostly critical of blackout drinking culture and how this makes an understanding of consent impossible.

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9/2/2019--I'm knocking this down to two stars. Gladwell's really bad takes on things like race and sexual assault just don't deserve an okay rating.

Wow, does this book ever suffer from a severe case of foot-in-mouth disease!

I almost didnâ€™t make it past the introduction. In my pre-publication copy, Gladwell writes, â€œThe Sandra Bland case came in the middle of a strange interlude in American public lifeâ€• and then goes on to discuss a series of cases of police violence against black people that ha   9/2/2019--I'm knocking this down to two stars. Gladwell's really bad takes on things like race and sexual assault just don't deserve an okay rating.

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â€œStrange interlude.â€• Really?

That phrasing suggests that this treatment was some sort of aberration in American history and that the violence only happened during the few years he references. Did Gladwell really mean to ignore Americaâ€™s long history of this problem?

I donâ€™t think so? I think he may have meant that the attention paid to police violence was unusual, but dude, choose your words much more carefully.

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Later on, there are some good points made about how and why we tend to misunderstand each other.

But, again, I almost put the book down, this time while reading the chapter on the Brock Turner sexual assault case. Without going into detail, that chapter could only have been written by someone who's buried his head in the sand over the past five years or so.

Itâ€™s tough to ignore the problematic elements of Talking to Strangers. I could absolutely see the discussion of the causes of sexual assault offending some readers to the point that they abandon the book altogether. Iâ€™ve definitely enjoyed other books by the author a lot more than this one. Three stars, but thatâ€™s being generous.

Thanks to NetGalley and Little, Brown and Company for giving me a DRC of this book, which will be available for purchase on September 10th.   ...more

Talking To Strangers Malcolm

I'm glad that those nice people at Goodreads chose me randomly to receive an old-school paper copy of this book, free of charge. It will be a novel feeling to actually have read a controversial book before it hits the shelves and generates the predictably shallow hot takes in the few moments before the world's attention moves onto something else.

Perhaps I'm engaging in a display of unwarranted optimism to think that a mere book can have an effect on the way people think, but this is what Talking   I'm glad that those nice people at Goodreads chose me randomly to receive an old-school paper copy of this book, free of charge. It will be a novel feeling to actually have read a controversial book before it hits the shelves and generates the predictably shallow hot takes in the few moments before the world's attention moves onto something else.

Perhaps I'm engaging in a display of unwarranted optimism to think that a mere book can have an effect on the way people think, but this is what Talking to Strangers attempts to do, to its credit.

I lump this book in with two others I've read recently (see here and here) which champion or criticize attempts to find â€œthird wayâ€• solutions to our problems. This pretty damn eccentric book actually only directly addresses its main issue in the initial and concluding five percent or so of the text. The rest is a long trip through apparently (at first) unrelated phenomena (including Cuba-US relations, Amanda Knox, and waterboarding) before returning to the main point.

Reading books about third ways is an exercise in optimism, because third way books imply that there are always new and interesting ways to look at old problems. (In addition, as the Long-Suffering Wife (LSW) recently said, â€œReading Malcolm Gladwell always makes you feel smart.â€•) Since I suffer a chronic deficit of optimism, I am constantly mainlining any literature which seems to say that the world could be a better place, non-fiction or no.

The issue which gets the third way treatment here is the alarming number of police traffic stops in the US which end up with someone (usually the driver of the car) dead. This is a problem which is ripe for a third way analysis, because as it stands now it seems like you either must be in the tribe that says â€œPolice are racistsâ€• or the tribe that says â€œLiberals are apologists for criminalsâ€• .

I admire Gladwell for defying the large number of people who are so vested in one of these orthodoxies that he will no doubt find, for years to come, his Twitter feed polluted with poorly-proofread denunciations of everything he has ever done or said.

Sometimes Gladwell demonstrates an obvious truth so clearly that you are almost ashamed to be surprised by it, like when he describes an psychology experiment which demonstrates that while most of us regard ourselves as creatures of unknowable complexity and depth of character, we also tend to

engage in ridiculous reductions of the personalities of others into easy-to-dismiss stereotypes based on the flimsiest of evidence.

On the other hand, reading Gladwell means spending a lot of time saying to yourself, â€œHey, wait a minute, what about [fill in thing you know a little something about here]?â€ For example, Gladwell has a long chapter about someone who managed to be a mole for Cuban intelligence in the US bureaucracy for many years. Having toiled in the vineyards of the sprawling federal bureaucracy myself, I felt that Gladwell missed some very important details about how people act there, and why. Without getting into too much spoiler-ish detail, I think Gladwell doesn't really understand the intensity with which fecal matters rains down on those who rock the boat here in the nation's capital, a factor that certainly influenced the events he narrates.

Overall, though, I was very happy to have been gifted this smart book and look forward to seeing if the world can, for once, defy my grouchy pessimism and actually allow a mere book to increase the amount of understanding in world and improve how we live.   ...more

In Talking to Strangers, I believe all Malcolm really wants to tell us, is everything our parents use to tell us: 1. Donâ€™t believe everything you read in the papers (or in magazines, or the internet.) 2. Trust only family, not strangers; but be careful everywhere. 3. Donâ€™t believe anything anyone tells you until you check it out first. (This couldâ€™ve meant, ask Mom and/or Dad, go to the library, ask someone we know and is smart.)
Most people have their default setting at TRUST; we want to believe   In Talking to Strangers, I believe all Malcolm really wants to tell us, is everything our parents use to tell us: 1. Donâ€™t believe everything you read in the papers (or in magazines, or the internet.) 2. Trust only family, not strangers; but be careful everywhere. 3. Donâ€™t believe anything anyone tells you until you check it out first. (This couldâ€™ve meant, ask Mom and/or Dad, go to the library, ask someone we know and is smart.)
Most people have their default setting at TRUST; we want to believe you; we really want you to tell us the truth, and we really hope thatâ€™s what youâ€™re doing. We have high hopes! And if you grew up in America you just canâ€™t help being positive and optimistic. Well, most people, not all.
Growing up in New Jersey, in a second-generation, Italian American family; our default setting was SKEPTICAL; meaning you have to prove yourself trustworthy first. My parents would try to figure out if someone was lying rather than discuss the topic. Thatâ€™s what their immigrant parents taught them. (Living in NJ just added to sarcasm.) I taught my kids the same thing; never believe someone at face value, consider your source first. Then try to figure out what theyâ€™re asking or telling you, based on what you already know. THINK!
Obviously, Malcolm delves deeper into why we trust strangers, and why we initially believe them. What cues are we missing, what didnâ€™t we hear, what in their tone didnâ€™t I pick up on?! As is his way, Malcolm brings several nationally known examples and valuable research to explain why and how this happens, frequently.
The case that stuck with me the most is the Sandra Bland case in Texas, from 2015. The case where the young officer stopped her for a minor traffic error, but because she acted nervous, he thought she was hiding something and misread as suspicious. He bullied her every action, ending up pulling her out of

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the car, to ground in cuffs. She died three days later, in jail, by suicide. Malcolm describes the entire encounter, case, and final trial in the book. (In the audio, which is excellent, Malcolm plays all original recordings; such as this encounter.) This story alone is worth reading this book! My opinion.

Many examples you will recognize are discussed, theories are raised and labeled. No need for me to list them here; better to encounter them with the case they match, and Malcolmâ€™s words to describe them.

Very interesting book wanders some here and there, but solid. Superb audio.

Thank you Netgalley, Little, Brown and Co. and Malcolm Gladwell   ...more

Talking To Strangers Online

Thanks so much for choosing me as winner in the giveaway !

I loved this book !! I always thought about the disparity of meeting someone who seemed 'so nice' and someone you wanted to develop a friendship or relationship with, only to have an opposite view shortly after. Did I misjudge ? Am I too picky, critical and judgmental ? Are they really a sociopath ?

This book explains a lot of that thru mismatching, which is basically how someone appears at a given time as opposed to who they really are. A   Thanks so much for choosing me as winner in the giveaway !

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This book explains a lot of that thru mismatching, which is basically how someone appears at a given time as opposed to who they really are. Another theory in misjudging strangers is the fact that some people appear to be 'not nice', 'guilty' or some other trait which many would deem as a red flag that proves false. Not everybody who is sad cries, not everyone who big hearted is a smiley face.

High recommended reading !
A++++++   ...more

What I love about Gladwell's books is the thing that I think many people find frustrating: I don't agree with everything he says. But what brings me back is that he finds interesting threads and premises and manages to weave them together in such a way that it makes me think about my own beliefs a little different.

This book begins with the Sandra Bland case. Why did she die? Why did this situation even occur? It then goes into looking at a series of incidents of the CIA overlooking spies from C   What I love about Gladwell's books is the thing that I think many people find frustrating: I don't agree with everything he says. But what brings me back is that he finds interesting threads and premises and manages to weave them together in such a way that it makes me think about my own beliefs a little different.

This book begins with the Sandra Bland case. Why did she die? Why did this situation even occur? It then goes into looking at a series of incidents of the CIA overlooking spies from Cuba who embedded themselves in US operations and how because, as humans, we default to truth, we are really bad at sniffing out those who are deceiving us. This is the case even for the most highly trained.

A few people, however, don't default this way. And this is precisely why Bernie Madoff played such a ponzi scheme -- one person who spoke up and out because things didn't feel right was made to feel as

though he was overreacting. That no way could someone like Madoff, who looked too good to be involved in something like that, be a master criminal.

Gladwell then takes us to the Amanda Knox case and explores why it is she was believed to be a key suspect in the death of her roommate. The answer is that Knox's behavior doesn't align with how people think it ought to be in the midst of a crisis and grief. She's goofy by nature, and her actions after such a crime didn't fit with the model people have of how she should act. So, they read her behaviors as signs of guilt, rather than considering that, perhaps, she acted the way she always did.

The Brock Turner rape case is explored, too, and it's looked at not from the perspective of rape culture and toxic masculinity -- the narrative we all know and agree with because those aren't incorrect -- but rather, it's looked at from the point of alcohol and how it inhibits cognitive function. This was the case both for the victim and for Turner, making it impossible for a truthful account of what happened that night. There's no rape apologizing here; instead, it's a look at the context of the case that makes piecing it together challenging. This is coupling: alcohol was linked here.

So what of the Bland case then?

Gladwell talks about research done in academia about crime and how context matters there. "Dangerous" places often aren't. The problem is almost always isolated to a tiny portion of a place, like a few blocks in a city. This understanding led to Kansas City trying out a new method of policing, being highly concentrated in the worst areas in order to decrease crime.

It worked.

Why? People were willing to give up some of their privacy for the safe of their safety. They live in an area with high crime and significant drug use and gun violence, a visit from the police didn't bother them knowing that it had a direct effect on their environment.

The problem was when that tactic was used outside the context. This was what Gladwell links together for the Sandra Bland story. A police officer, trained in the Kansas City method, removed the context from the situation. He also leaned heavily into not defaulting to truth. Bland? Her behavior didn't conform to the ideas of how someone "should" behave in the situation. The same pieces of the puzzle -- the coupling, the lack of context -- allows the Kansas City policing method to default to fault, as opposed to truth, too easily. See what happens in Ferguson (and not just the Michael Brown case, but in additional cases of unnecessary policing of a community).

It's a really interesting premise and one that makes a good bit of sense. What Gladwell doesn't do, though, is address sexism here. He does touch on race -- especially about how black communities are already over policed -- but gender doesn't come into it quite enough. I wish we'd seen that layer here, especially as it tied into the Knox case AND how to relates back to the Bland case.

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Overall, it's one that will make me think a lot more about interactions with strangers, both those I have and those I don't. It's fascinating to think about how this might, too, connect with social media and how we do/don't connect with other people who are strangers to us. Rather than default to truth, it seems that in places like Twitter, we've come too quick to ignore the context, ignore the coupling effect, and we quickly default to anywhere but the truth. Something to really chew on, and surprisingly connected to the powerful first essay about Twitter in Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion.

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Talking To Strangers Book Review

Malcolm Gladwell's latest foray into human folly is its seemingly innate trust in strangers. We assume strangers are transparent, and can take what they do and say at face value. Sometimes we are wrong, but assuming everyone is evil is far worse. Talking To Strangers focuses (mostly) on a number of very high profile criminal cases we are all likely to be familiar with. They include the Amanda Knox case, the Jerry Sandusky case, the Brock Turner case, the Sandra Bland case, Khalid Sheik Mohammed, Malcolm Gladwell's latest foray into human folly is its seemingly innate trust in strangers. We assume strangers are transparent, and can take what they do and say at face value. Sometimes we are wrong, but assuming everyone is evil is far worse. Talking To Strangers focuses (mostly) on a number of very high profile criminal cases we are all likely to be familiar with. They include the Amanda Knox case, the Jerry Sandusky case, the Brock Turner case, the Sandra Bland case, Khalid Sheik Mohammed, and the Bernie Madoff case.

Gladwell looks at them differently. He looks at them not from simple guilt or innocence, but from the misread signals that have surrounded them. The result can be a ruined life, prison or even death, unearned. On the other side (the investigator side), they can result in self-delusion, missed opportunities and complete wastes of time achieving nothing. It's an imperfection he exploits repeatedly throughout the book.

It all hinges on the notion of transparency, what people assume about strangers just by looking at them. Judges make decision about bail, college students make decisions about having sex, investigators make assumptions about guilt — all just by looking and talking to strangers. Gladwell shows we do pretty poorly, especially compared to machines given raw data. Systems have a far better record of assigning or withholding bail, for example. Judges, even after decades of experience, fool themselves daily.

There is a side trip into coupling, where people fixate on something. In his chapter on the suicide of Sylvia Plath, he examines the role of town gas, saturated with carbon monoxide, which was the favorite method of suicide until it was phased out in favor of natural gas. As it disappeared, the suicide rate plunged. If people didn't have their town gas, they didn't kill themselves. They did not, as expected, look for alternatives. It was town gas, or nothing. Similarly, the Golden Gate Bridge is a favorite suicide tool, even though faster and easier methods are readily available.

Gladwell discovers that different cultures appreciate facial expressions differently. There are no real universals. He finds that people default to trusting others unless they know them already. Otherwise we would all be like television Vikings, constantly killing each other for lack of trust.

Talking To Strangers feels incomplete and unsatisfying. It's no news to anyone that first impressions might not prove correct. It's why it takes five to ten years for a marriage to break up, or months for a teenage relationship. How people we thought we knew could turn out to be evil on some level. We feel betrayed (but we betrayed ourselves). Suspension of disbelief (a term Gladwell does use at any point in

the book) means we ignore the defects and faults we are presented with, and assume the best for this stranger. Later, those same faults become intolerable. But we know this.

Oddly, he does not examine American gun culture as substitute for this normal transparency and trust.

He discovers that alcohol doesnâ€™t reveal, it transforms. There are good drunks and bad drunks, good trips and bad trips. The real you is not revealed by alcohol; you become a stranger to yourself. We drink so much more per session today that blackouts have become common and even measurable and predictable. Drink too much and your brain shuts down so you remember nothing. You leave yourself in the hands of a complete stranger â€" yourself. This is also not news.

Still and as usual, Gladwell is easy to read. He packs his pages with these fascinating sidelights, and confirms much of what we have always suspected. Too trusting is being gullible. Non-trusting means a monster.

The most clear and chilling example he gives was the Ana Montes case, in which a Cuban intelligence mole worked her way up through the US security establishment with such great accomplishments and accolades that no one suspected her, despite the gigantic clues and traceable events. Leaks followed her everywhere. It was a case of suspension of disbelief as clear and dramatic as a teenager watching a terrible sci-fi flick. The CIA counterintelligence officer in charge, who finally outed her and stopped the hemorrhaging, kicks himself for not putting 2+2 together years earlier.

The best quote comes in the Khalid Sheik Mohammed case. Years of torture, both physical and psychological led Mohammed to finally confess. He confessed to pretty much everything in the world. The investigators began to think he was puffing himself up for posterity, knowing under no circumstances would he ever be set free. It made them (as so many have before them) rethink torture: â€œTrying to get information out of someone you are sleep-depriving is sort of like trying to get a better signal out of a radio that you are smashing with a sledgehammer.â€¦It makes no sense to me at all.â€• But we carry on, regardless.

Gladwell has great command of his thoughts. He handles his subject with comfort and ease. He will take you down strange paths and bring you back when heâ€™s ready. And not before. So while it might be incomplete, it is engaging and entertaining.

In the end, Gladwell has so immersed himself in the Sandra Bland case and the psychology and tactics at every level, that he can explain it way beyond simply a cop gone bad. He says according to the known science he has explained, the police should not have been making stops on that stretch of road, and not in broad daylight. That the directions of management to make as many stops as possible was wrong, as was the police manual on obtaining and maintaining control over suspects. Mostly, from the context of this book, the officer took all the clues he found â€" an out of state license, an aggravated driver, fast food wrappers on the floor, no other keys on the keychain, failure to put out a cigarette on command â€" as nefarious instead of ordinary. He was trained to do the opposite of what we all do innately:

assume truth and transparency in a stranger. That drivers should not be suspects; they are simply strangers. While that might let the occasional bad guy get away, the pain for treating everybody as a suspect is the kind of thing that can stop human society in its tracks. Our fundamental baseline must lean toward assuming transparency and trust. It is a necessary illusion.

David Wineberg
    ...more

This was my first Malcolm Gladwell, and now I have to go read everything else! In Talking to Strangers, Gladwell investigates what goes wrong when we interact with people we donâ€™t know, using dramatic scenarios ripped from the headlines, history, psychology, and criminology. Gladwell begins and ends with the tragic death of Sandra Bland, and itâ€™s impossible to ignore how urgently we need better strategies of understanding strangers.

Talking To Strangers Goodreads

Iâ€™m always fascinated and provoked by Gladwellâ€™s workâ€"this book is no exception. But there are some big leaps here that make me itchy. Still processing.

Bottom line: Weâ€™re generally terrible at understanding the actions of strangers, and when things take a turn for the worse/unexpected, we blame the stranger.

Got it. Feel it. And I like how Gladwell sheds light on the Sandra Bland case. The section on Brock Turner? It troubled me.

In Gladwell's latest work, he explores our misconception and often mistakably inconsistence of innocence or guilt, happy or sad, trustworthy or criminal. Reflecting on historic situations, from Hitler to Sylvia Plath, Bernie Madoff to Amanda Knox, humankind has made slow efforts to uncover what someone else is really feeling or who they truly are. This book does not offer any advice for a quick fix but reminds us all how terribly difficult it is to really "see" the person sitting next to you. I   In Gladwell's latest work, he explores our misconception and often mistakably inconsistence of innocence or guilt, happy or sad, trustworthy or criminal. Reflecting on historic situations, from Hitler to Sylvia Plath, Bernie Madoff to Amanda Knox, humankind has made slow efforts to uncover what someone else is really feeling or who they truly are. This book does not offer any advice for a quick fix but reminds us all how terribly difficult it is to really "see" the person sitting next to you. I finished this book feeling a bit underwhelmed and yet quite distressed.   ...more