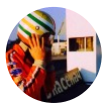


# Malcolm Gladwell Doesn't Care If You Agree With Him

In his new book 'Talking to Strangers,' the author courts criticism



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Malcolm Gladwell speaks onstage at Featured Session: Self-Driving Cars: The Future is When? with Malcolm Gladwell & Chris Urmson during the 2019 SXSW Conference and Festivals at Austin Convention Center.

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July 10, 2015, a state trooper named Brian Encinia pulled over a silver Hyundai Azera on a tree-lined street in the city of Prairie View, Texas. The driver, who had failed to signal before changing lanes, was a 28-year-old African American woman named Sandra Bland. Asserting that she was not under arrest, Bland refused to comply with several of Encinia's orders. Their interaction quickly became contentious. Once Bland exited her vehicle, Encinia and another officer physically restrained her. She was arrested and charged with assault for kicking Encinia during this altercation. Three days later she was found hanged in police custody, an apparent suicide.

Malcolm Gladwell's new book *Talking to Strangers* is not about how Bland died, but about why — how a lane change and a seemingly routine traffic stop turned into a tragedy. Critics of Gladwell's work accuse him of boiling down complex social and scientific research into books of 21st-century fables for business-class Kindle-flippers; in *Strangers*, he's confronting some of the more difficult questions raised by an increasingly off-the-rails world. But it's still a Malcolm Gladwell book, fueled by counterintuition and the thrill of the hunt for surprising connections. Putting a pin in Prairie View, Gladwell takes us from Castro's Cuba to Sylvia Plath's kitchen, from Wall Street to the equally remote Trobriand Islands near Papua New Guinea, all in service of a somewhat quicksilver thesis — based largely on the communications researcher Timothy R. Levine's "truth-default theory" — about the way our beliefs and misapprehensions shape and sometimes derail our interactions with strangers.

The internet-discourse truism known as Godwin's law holds that any online debate has outlived its usefulness (and probably should end) the minute someone brings up Adolf Hitler; Gladwell gets to history's greatest monster on page 30, in a chapter exploring how and why der Führer was able to bamboozle British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain regarding his expansionist ambitions when they met in Munich in 1938. Several villains of recent history pass through Gladwell's narrative as well, including Jerry Sandusky, Bernie Madoff, and Brock Turner. Even in a culture that seems to pivot more rapidly than ever from one horror to the next, the stories of these bad actors are still pretty raw-nerve material, and sometimes the book reads like Gladwell ducking under crime-scene tape with his toolkit of anecdotes and studies, hustling readers past a few stages of grief in the process. But it's also an earnest attempt to draw some actionable, useful conclusions

from events a less optimistic observer of current events might dismiss as further proof that everything is f\*\*\*\*\*.

What follows is an edited transcript of a conversation between Gladwell and myself, a less-optimistic observer of current events.

**GEN: Early on in this book, you write about not wanting to put the Sandra Bland case aside, even once the cultural conversation moved on. Later you talk about reviewing the evidence over and over and becoming angrier and angrier at how Bland's interaction with Brian Encinia went down. It's understandable, of course, but it's also surprising — I can't recall anything you've written in the past that seemed like it came from a place of anger.**

**Malcolm Gladwell:** It's funny. I kept my emotions out of my books for a long time. And then I started doing a podcast. And the podcast is such an inherently emotional form that you can't do that anymore. You can't do a good podcast unless you're willing to inject something of yourself into it. Usually that's delight, or irony. But in this case — I just found that story, of Sandra Bland, to be so deeply upsetting. And I was so disheartened at the way the case was dealt with in the popular imagination that I was no longer able to hide my emotions anymore. But you're right. I don't think I've ever authored a book out of anger before. That's a totally new thing.

**How much of it was contextual? Did it feel to you like this moment in history demanded something other than a regular Malcolm Gladwell book?**

A little bit, yeah. You have to match what you wanna write to the time that you're writing it in. Police have been having deeply problematic encounters with African Americans in this country for hundreds of years. But I feel like we suddenly became deeply concerned about them really recently. This book is built off that. It's like, all right. So now we're willing to talk about this — let's talk about it. And let's try and analyze our own culpability in this phenomenon. I don't think I could have written this book in 2000, when I came out with *The Tipping Point*. People weren't having these conversations. And I don't think an author, all by him or herself, can create a conversation. I think you have to capitalize on currents that are out there.

**You're someone who wants to make sense of the world, and your work has been about helping other people make sense of it. But there are moments in this book, particularly in the Bland chapters, where it feels like you're up against the limits of what your method of inquiry can explain — where you're attempting to apply the tools of social science to things like human deceit and human wickedness, to problems that can seem like they're beyond the reach of rational thinking, in some way.**

Yeah. I don't consider this the final word. It's not the only way to think about Sandra Bland or the only way to make sense of her. It's a particular interpretation of her, of her death, and of the larger dysfunction that it sheds a light on. My work is rarely definitive or exhaustive. It is always idiosyncratic. I'm always gonna come at something at an angle. And this is very much coming at things at an angle. I'm jumping from Sandra Bland to spies and pedophiles and torturers, and ending up in the weeds of modern criminology. I don't think any one person can give the final word on something this complicated. It's, I just want to give readers a little bit of a lane, into thinking about this problem a certain way.

**When you look at a case like Sandra Bland's and ask what happened, you're asking a question that many people think they already know the answer to — that this was a pretty cut-and-dried case, and that her death was the result, indirect or not, of racist policing.**

Yeah, except that the cut-and-dried approach doesn't give us any avenues for preventing another case like that. My point is that there's a kind of fatalism involved in just saying, "Oh, it's racism." And then what do you do? You don't do anything? And these cases happen — y'know, Sandra Bland is not a one-off. It happens year in, year out, month in, month out, day in, day out, these things. And we don't do anything about it. So this book is like, OK, let's try and understand it. Clearly our conventional ways at making sense of this case are not working. Right? They're not making any progress. And if you're fine with that, that's one thing. But I'm not fine with it. And I feel like if this reductionist, "Oh, it's just racism" explanation gets us nowhere, it's time for a different explanation. So that was sort of what motivated me.

My point is that there's a kind of fatalism involved in just saying, "Oh, it's racism."

**I guess it's just hard to not see this as a story about how the cops can ruin your life if they decide to, and there's not a whole lot you can do about it.**

But you can! You can do something about it, in the sense that you can change the philosophy of policing. I mean, David Weisburd [a criminologist whose theory of "hot-spot policing," Gladwell argues, has been misapplied by law enforcement] did do a roadmap into what you can do about it. You can address the core issue, which is [the police] don't understand how and why crime occurs and where it occurs, and they have not addressed that in their policing strategy accordingly. So there's a way to approach this on a policy level that actually could make a tremendous difference. If we have chosen not to take that way, then that's an error. But if your answer is simply "We need to make sure cops aren't racist," you tell me how well that works.

**Sure.**

Good luck. Right. Um. The whole thing is deeply depressing, and I'm looking — I try very hard in the book to find the little bright spots, a window of opportunity. And I understand that not everyone is as convinced as I am that there is a window of opportunity, but that's fine. I mean, that's the nature of writing a book. You know?

**I guess the criticism is that whether or not it's an interesting thought experiment, analyzing a traffic-stop situation like this one without factoring in racism is like trying to do physics while pretending gravity doesn't exist. Like it's the force that defines everything that happens.**

I don't think — I'm not saying race is irrelevant. I'm saying that race isn't useful. It's absolutely racial in a million different dimensions, but I'm interested in preventing the next one. I'm just saying here's a different way to think about these things. But I'm not denying racism. I mean, are you kidding me? If Sandra Bland is a 60-year-old white woman in a Cadillac, she's alive today, right? There's just no question about that.

I guess I'm disposed to taking people at their word.

**This is a book that's in large part about deception, but you're remarkably credulous about the motivations of some of the people you write about. Maybe I'm too cynical, but I feel like in some of these cases, you're minimizing the possible impact of selfishness or self-protection. The Madoff story is a good example. Does the fact that none of his peers blew the whistle on him really prove that people default to truth? Couldn't you just as easily say it proves that nobody on Wall Street cares if somebody else is crooked, possibly because they're all crooked themselves?**

So it's funny. I guess that's not the way my mind works. I'm the least cynical person that I know. I believed them, in the Madoff case! If they honestly thought this guy was completely crooked, they would call the SEC. I mean, it's their industry. The credibility of their own work is at stake here. If no one trusts anyone in the financial markets, they don't make any money anymore. So they have every reason to do so. I just think they honestly didn't think that he was up to something, or that they didn't think the doubts were great enough to justify them taking the extraordinary step of ratting out one of their peers. But I'm quite generous. I hold Brian Encinia responsible for what he did. But in the final accounting, I believe him when he says he was scared, as opposed to him making up that story to justify some really idiotic policing. I guess I'm disposed to taking people at their word, in keeping with the themes of the book. That's me.

**When you talk about Harry Markopolos, the one guy who did blow the whistle on Madoff, it brings up the question of cultural background. He's the only one willing to believe that Madoff could be crooked, and you trace that back to his upbringing — he comes from a restaurant family, he's seen theft as a fact of life. All that shrimp walking out the door.**

Yeah. That was not my experience as a child.

**Has digging into these stories made you question the criteria by which you confront reality? Did you encounter anything that shook your belief system?**

Well, I'm now awfully impressed by the ability of human beings to be deceived. [laughs] That's not something I had actually thought about before. But the flip side of Levine's argument, I really believe, which is that being easily deceived is a very small price to pay for a functioning society. And I'm happy to pay that price. And maybe that goes back to

my own essential optimism — I am that person who's essentially trusting, so I'm at threat of being deceived. But I'm happy the way I am. I think my life is a lot more satisfying for defaulting to truth than it would be if I was Harry Markopolos.

**I think what we've determined in this conversation is that we have almost nothing in common in terms of sensibility and outlook, which is fascinating. How much do you think is nurture and how much of it is nature?**

Well, Levine's point is that this is nature. That we may vary at the margins, where our threshold is and at what point we transition out of default-to-truth. But fundamentally, we're all this way. You and I are different, but we're different at the margin. We're not fundamentally different. You called this number assuming it was me.

**That's true!**

Right? And I could be any jackass! But you believe it and that's why you're able to do your job. You couldn't do your job unless you default to the truth.

**In the Bernie Madoff chapter of this book, you talk about how the hedge fund Renaissance Technology opted to continue investing money with Bernie Madoff even after they became concerned about the validity of the profits he was reporting. Aren't there cases — perhaps such as this one — where people who appear to be defaulting to truth actually have some external, self-interested motivation for going along with a premise they know to be false, such as not wanting to get involved in an SEC investigation?**

I mean, it's funny you mention that. So, the example of Renaissance Technology not ratting on [him] — if it was just that they didn't want to get involved with an SEC investigation, they would've sold their stake. They hung on to their stake, right? They didn't flip. They had 30 million, and they cut it in half, to 15 or whatever it was. They legitimately did not know what to think with Bernie Madoff. They had a debate, couldn't resolve it, and held on to their stake in Madoff's fund, and that's the incredible fact.

**That is an incredible fact, but what it says to me is that they looked at the numbers and said, "This might be bullshit, and we're going to reduce our**

**exposure, but we're gonna hang in there on the off-chance that it doesn't all come crashing down."**

Except that, as they point out in their email correspondence — I forgot where I put this in the book, but the fake returns they were getting from Madoff were lower than the real returns that Renaissance was making itself! So this is a bad use of their own money. [A] 12% [return] is not impressive for Renaissance. I mean, these are guys who did in the 20's year in, year out. That's why it's weird. It made no rational sense, except if they just couldn't bring themselves to disbelieve.

And the, the killer example is the parents in the [Larry] Nassar case, parents who love their children. The mom who looked at Nassar and he has an erection while he is treating her daughter, and she cannot bring herself to believe the man is up to no good. I mean that is — you're getting into some core human things here, because no one is saying that that parent is somehow complicit in that, or negligent, or uncaring, or unloving of their own child.

I don't need someone to agree with me. I'm past the point of my career where that's a necessary condition of my happiness.

**But part of that is about authority, though. There's something about a person in that position of power, especially a doctor — it's enough to make you bend your reality. This guy's a doctor, he wouldn't behave that way.**

*[An interruption; an inaudible coffee-shop patron interrupts on Gladwell's end. Gladwell says "That is very kind of you. Thank you so much."]*

I should probably go soon. I have to get on to my next thing. But I really like this conversation. This is exactly the kind of reaction I want. I want people to argue with this book.

**I argued with this book in the margins so much.**



All I want to do is jolt people out of their complacency. And if I can do that I'm happy. I don't need someone to agree with me. I'm past the point of my career where that's a necessary condition of my happiness.

**There's a school of thought that regardless of what conclusions you end up drawing, just the act of asking questions and bringing nuance to these stories — to even suggest that Sandra Bland's actions played a role in what happened to her, or that Emily Doe's drinking should factor into the conversation about what Brock Turner did — is inherently disrespectful to the suffering of the people involved.**

I don't believe that you shouldn't write something that you believe to be important and relevant and truthful just because you're scared of the reaction of some portion of your readership, A. and B., I would say the opposite — that it is the height of negligence to interpret these kinds of cases in a way that allows them to happen again and again and again and again. If you don't talk about alcohol with respect to campus sexual assault, you will perpetuate campus sexual assault. It does not mean that the whole explanation for campus sexual assault is alcohol. It's that alcohol is a powerful engine of these kinds of incredibly tragic encounters. And we have been idly standing by now for a generation while campus sexual assault has grown to epidemic levels on college campuses.

And, so, we're back to Sandra Bland. Where has this kind of narrow moralism got us? Nowhere. Now, unless you have the courage to say, "Now, wait a minute — the way that alcohol is being consumed on campus is turning young men into criminals. You have to say that if you want to prevent that from happening again, right? These are not dry academic analyses of specific cases — they are attempts to come to grips with an ongoing social problem. And these cases are intended to guide us into how to better ask the question. How do I prevent the next sexual assault or the next Sandra Bland? And I don't see a way to prevent campus sexual assault without in part addressing the alcohol issue. There's no way around it, right? You have to deal with the fact that if people are blackout drunk, bad things will happen.

**In terms of alcohol, though, isn't that kind of a guns-don't-kill-people argument? I mean, there are plenty of people who push the blood-alcohol envelope in college and don't commit sexual assault. By coming at it from this angle, it seems like you're trying to reframe these fundamental and**

## sometimes impossible questions of human behavior in order to render them solvable.

Well, if you're a racist because deep in your heart you're an evil person, there's a limited amount I can do about that. You committed sexual assault because you're two times or three times greater than the legal limit for drinking, there is something I can do about it. Once again: I am trying to locate the conversation in an area that makes constructive engagement possible. Whereas these other arguments just leave us with no solution. Jumping up and down and saying people like Brock Turner are inherently evil does not help me. I want a lower epidemic rate of sexual assault, and other than, y'know, starting same-sex colleges and quarantining all the men, you have to do a better job at figuring out how to change the context.

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