

SUMMARY
Talking to
Strangers
Malcolm Gladwell



QuickRead
FREE BOOK SUMMARIES

Summary of Talking to Strangers by Malcolm Gladwell

Written by Lea Schullery

Perfect for learning how humans are notoriously bad at judging strangers through the stories of high-profile cases like Sandra Bland and Amanda Knox.

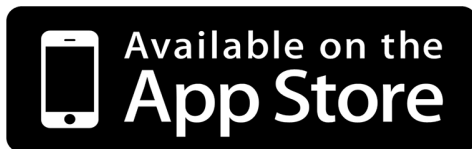


QuickRead

F R E E B O O K S U M M A R I E S

Go to QuickRead.com/App now to download our app and get access to thousands of free book summaries as both text and audiobooks.

Get the key insights of non-fiction books in minutes instead of hours. Listen to our free audiobooks while you workout or on your commute to work.



Introduction

Ever heard of the term “Stranger Danger?” We teach our children this term to keep them safe from the “bad” people of the world, from those who seek to harm children. We might even apply this term in our adult-life when we get “creepy vibes” from a stranger, so we avoid the interaction. But why do we do this? Why do we make these snap judgments based on a person’s manner? Is it their looks? Their actions? Malcolm Gladwell would argue that it’s both and that these judgments could make for harmful, detrimental, and sometimes deadly mistakes.

Gladwell discusses cases ranging from the British Prime Minister who mistakenly judged Hitler’s character and intention to high-profile cases like those of Jerry Sandusky and Larry Nassar. All of which have one common theme - misreading people. Gladwell discusses how society mistakes other’s intentions and is prone to draw false conclusions about a person based on their reputation and demeanor. Amanda Knox spent years in prison for a murder she didn’t commit because the Italian police mistook her teenage, bubbly demeanor as a sign of guilt. In fact, mistakes like these happen all the time and throughout this book, Gladwell attempts to prove that a person’s judgments of “mismatched” behavior can have severe, and sometimes deadly, consequences.

Looking for the Red Flags in Fidel Castro's Revenge

What's a red flag? Imagine going on a first date and initially ignoring small warning signs that might've indicated a much bigger issue in the long run. Those small warning signs? Those are red flags! Those gut feelings that you typically ignore because you initially want to trust your partner; however, ignoring these small warning signs can lead to sometimes catastrophic scenarios years later. As humans, we tend to try and see the good in others, we ignore the red flags and then deal with the consequences later.

While ignoring a red flag on a first date might only lead to prolonging a doomed relationship, what about when agents ignore red flags while working in the CIA? Well, that can lead to embarrassment, betrayal, treason, and even death. Even the most sophisticated agency in the world can be deceived by others, deceived by people they assumed they could trust based on reputation and looks.

Take Florentino Aspillaga, a Cuban Intelligence agent working in Czechoslovakia, a popular figure in the agency, even named the best by Fidel Castro himself the year before. Florentino was respected and trusted, but he saw Castro's corruption and knew he had to speak up. On June 6th, Florentino walked right up to the US Embassy and offered sensitive information about the Cuban Intelligence.

Once transported safely to Germany, Florentino requested to speak to CIA operative Mountain Climber. Unbeknownst to the USA, Mountain Climber was about to reveal one of the biggest betrayals in history by revealing a list of CIA agents who were working as double agents for Cuba and the U.S. Fidel Castro went on to reveal a documentary of footage collected over the years of agents revealing sensitive information to Cuba, betraying the United States.

Where were the red flags? Was Cuba so sophisticated that they were able to turn agents without any evidence? Were others just lazy? No, the signs were

there, but they were ignored. Aldrich Ames, a top-ranking U.S. agent whose double-crossing led to the deaths of many undercover agents, was ignored because of his drunken lifestyle and his ability to appear loyal.

We assume that we know the truth about people, but that's rarely the case. We may see some warning signs, but we choose to ignore them because of our willingness to trust others and dismiss those signs as paranoia or coincidence.

More Red Flags in The Queen of Cuba

In Cuba once more, the CIA can't seem to learn from their mistakes. Still ignoring the red flags, America sees betrayal once again from double-crossing agents that are helping Fidel Castro. As a whole, we tend to blindly trust those that have good reputations, but as we've seen time and time again, a respected reputation doesn't make a person immune from corruption.

Almost a decade after Fidel Castro's revenge, tens of thousands of Cuban citizens flee Cuba to escape Castro's regime. With so many people fleeing, America put together rescue efforts to help those fleeing. Trying to save Cuban civilians, American planes begin to fly closer and closer to Cuba, releasing pamphlets to encourage the overthrow of Castro. Eventually, the Cuban military caught on to these tactics and shot down these civilian planes despite them flying in international air space.

While many dismissed the attack as mere coincidence, Reg Brown began to grow suspicious about the events and started digging. It was revealed that Castro had a plant inside the airforce out of Miami telling him about the plans. Brown discovered a colleague, Ana Montes, had been acting suspiciously in the days prior to the attack. From scheduling meetings to excusing herself from the situation room, Brown had enough evidence to bring Montes to higher authorities under suspicion.

Ana Montes, however, had a reputation of being one of the best Latin Intelligence agents and when accounting for her mistakes, she seemed trustworthy so her excuses were accepted as the truth. Not only was she loved by everyone, her connections to Cuba truly seemed coincidental until 5 years later when Ana Montes is convicted of being a spy.

Where were the red flags? Well, taking phone calls during sensitive meetings surely doesn't immediately correlate to being a spy. But those minor warning signs, those red flags, they can be indicators of something bigger, something more meaningful.

As humans, our default is to assume truth. We have a bias towards the truth, and we are bad at picking out liars. We need near certainty to finally change our minds about someone we've met. So in the case of Ana Montes, there certainly was some doubt, but was there enough doubt?

Why are We more Likely to Ignore the Red Flags?

While the CIA has certainly made mistakes putting their trust in the wrong person, few people have made such a mistake as Neville Chamberlain. British Prime Minister Chamberlain made plans to meet with Adolf Hitler for fear they were on the brink of a world war. During the meeting, however, Chamberlain noted that Hitler's appearance seemed more of that of an artist, and when asked if he planned to take any land beyond Czechoslovakia, Hitler responded that he did not. Satisfied with his answer, Chamberlain returned to England and relayed his trust in Hitler.

Why were Chamberlain and many others so quick to trust Adolf Hitler? While many leaders immediately disliked Hitler and wrote him off as a tyrant, there were many others that put their trust in Hitler, so how does that happen? Well, mannerisms and social cues are something we rely on to base our decisions. We are impressed when people have a firm handshake, maintain eye contact, and speak well.

For example, Solomon, a bail judge in New York City must make decisions simply by looking at the person in the eye and asking them a few questions. Certainly, face-to-face interactions can tell you more about a person than something you read on file, or on the internet. How many times do you make judgments about someone online, but still give them a chance to impress you in person? We value face-to-face encounters and believe we can tell more about a person by looking at them and speaking to them.

Well, when compared to a machine, Solomon's judgments might not be as credible as he thinks. Looking at over half a million New York criminal cases, when compared to human judgement, the people let out on bail by the machine were 25% *less* likely to commit a crime and *more* likely to show up to court. Proving that a machine can make better judgments about a criminal than a bail judge.

Sure there are red flags. There were red flags when Chamberlain met with Hitler, and there are red flags when Solomon makes his bail decisions. So

why do we ignore those red flags? Simply put, humans are more likely to be fooled by a person's manner and body language. There were many leaders that never met Hitler and never trusted him, they never gave Hitler the chance to deceive them through a trustworthy manner and handshake. Similar to the machine, the machine couldn't be fooled by a criminal's demeanor and did a much better job at judging them, while Solomon allows criminals to fool him through impressing him with eye contact and speaking well, causing Solomon to ignore the red flags and make judgmental mistakes.

How we Treat People that Notice the Red Flags

Surely, not everyone ignores the red flags in situations like these. And that is true! There are certainly times when people notice the warning signs and take their concerns to a higher authority, but why does nothing happen right away? This can be seen in many scenarios in recent years.

Take Bernie Madoff, an investor with several clients and funds in New York City. A company called, The Ren, had a large investment with Madoff but started to grow suspicious when no one in the company could figure out how he was making the money. He presented claims, but Bernie had no numbers to back up his claims. While The Ren had their suspicions, there wasn't enough evidence to cast him off completely, so they simply cut their investment in half rather than pulling out completely. They ignored the red flags.

While Bernie Madoff was running the biggest Ponzi scheme in history, sure, people had their suspicions. But only one person was confident enough to bring Bernie to the attention of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). For almost a decade, Harry Markopolos and his team of fraud investigators continuously brought the SEC proof of a 50 billion dollar scheme. Each time, they were ignored. Markopolos admits that if anyone investigated Bernie, they would find that Bernie wasn't doing business in any of the domains he was claiming, it was an easy case. But people chose to ignore suspicions and put their trust into someone that had a good reputation.

You see, Markopolos is different from the rest of us. He doesn't default to the truth. He's what is called a holy outcast, a type of person who is isolated from society because he is different. Being isolated grants him access to the truth in a way others are not because he is not blind by the bias created by social constructs. Markopolos is a skeptic, and there are many disadvantages to being a constant skeptic. One of those is that skeptics don't gain many friends and they lack influence which is why Harry wasn't taken seriously on 4 separate occasions. So while there are drawbacks in defaulting to the truth, there are also drawbacks to accessing the truth as well.

Case Study: The Boy in the Shower

How many times have you seen a scenario unravel on the news and wonder, what were they thinking? Why didn't they contact the authorities sooner? This is normal. In fact, it's human nature to believe that you will handle a situation differently than others. People especially believe this in the Jerry Sandusky case in 2011.

Jerry Sandusky was accused of rape, and many influential people at the school including the school's president and head coach knew about the rape allegations and didn't immediately speak up. Many people are quick to blame the school for staying quiet, but would we have behaved any differently?

Jerry grew up around sports and children, and his father even ran a community center for children. In Jerry's ironically titled autobiography *Touched*, he details his love for children and make-believe. Even with individual stories and witnesses, there was simply not enough evidence to make a strong case against Sandusky. There wasn't one case that seemed to allow the adult figures to stray from their default of truth and simply let the situation rest. There was too much truth bias about Sandusky because of how people perceived Sandusky as a well-respected coach within the community.

However, a more severe example comes from the Olympic gymnastics physician, Larry Nassar who used a vaginal medical procedure as a cover to sexually abuse women. Despite the dozens of witnesses and hundreds of victims, it still took years for Nassar to be taken to trial. This isn't to say that people were trying to cover up the truth, it simply means that there was a bias towards the idea that nothing sexual was happening. In fact, a majority of the parents were in the room while he assaulted their children and they simply believed Nassar was just being a good doctor.

Many victims even defended Nassar until the week they testified, confessing they just couldn't defend him anymore. Even the victims defaulted to

truth even in such an extreme situation. Humans are more likely to assume the best when they should have seen this worst. This just makes them human, not bad people.

The *FRIENDS* Fallacy

Take everyone's favorite television series, *Friends*. While there are several characters and storylines, the show is surprisingly quite simple. Dartmouth professor Jennifer Fugate analyzed the facial expressions used during the scene in which Ross discovers his best friend Chandler is romantically involved with his sister, Monica. Jennifer explains that Ross's facial expressions reach the highest point of intensity, almost stereotypically. In fact, viewers can understand what's going on during an episode of *Friends* with absolutely no sound. The audience knows exactly how the characters are feeling which creates a bond between audience and characters. However, real-life strangers are much more difficult to understand.

An episode of *Friends* is transparent, and people today adopt this transparency in real-life scenarios, believing that a stranger can be transparent just by their facial expressions, but life is far different from an episode of *Friends*.

Like we've mentioned before, judges tend to make decisions based on their interactions with the defendants; however, what happens when a judge can't see the facial expressions of the people in the courtroom? Well, in the case of a Muslim woman wearing a veil that covered everything but her eyes, the judge threw out her complaint against the defendant stating that he can't make a decision unless he is able to see her face.

As a whole, we believe that facial expressions create a shared culture. We think we know what people are thinking based on their facial expressions despite not knowing the other person's background, or not even being able to speak the same language. But how can we know if facial expressions are an accurate representation of what someone is feeling or thinking? Simply put, we can't.

One study proved this facial expression theory by setting up a horror scenario where people were completely surprised by a variety of creepy scenarios. While most reported feeling shocked and assumed their faces expressed

shock and awe, the reality is less than a fifth of the facial expressions were associated with shock.

So, what does this all mean? Life is not like an episode of *Friends*, and when we think strangers are being transparent, we can't always trust our judgments. It's almost impossible for us to make accurate judgments to be able to know and trust the strangers around us.

A (short) Explanation of the Amanda Knox Case

How do you know when someone is lying? Do liars fidget, avoid eye-contact, or just simply look agitated? Do truth-tellers seem confident and calm? As a whole, we like to think that we can pinpoint a liar based on their actions, but as we've said before, life isn't an episode of *Friends* and people in real-life aren't as transparent as they seem on TV. In fact, liars can very much lie straight to your face without flinching at all; however, we choose to think that we know if someone is lying based on their actions and the way they look, and this can have serious consequences.

For example, on November 1, 2007, Merideth Kercher was brutally murdered while studying abroad in Italy. Her roommate, Amanda Knox, who called the police when she stumbled upon her roommate's body was immediately deemed a suspect. Despite there being zero physical evidence against Amanda, she didn't "act" the way a distraught friend would act. The Italian police created a picture of a drug-fueled sex party during which Kercher was killed, even though there was no evidence leading the police to make this conclusion.

So why was Amanda Knox accused of murder so quickly? Why did the police vehemently argue that Amanda was the killer? The police simply believed Amanda was transparent and that they could read her behavior. The lead investigator quoted saying that Amanda Knox's guilt was evident in her goofy and offbeat behavior. She wasn't sad and wasn't acting like her friends who were also grieving the death of Merideth. From showing affection with her boyfriend just moments after discovering her friend's body to purchasing sexy underwear in the days following, Amanda acted guilty. Her behavior wasn't transparent like an episode of *Friends* and resulted in her spending years in prison because of it.

Tim Levin once conducted an experiment to try and correctly identify liars through videos of people accused of cheating. Experts in psychology were asked to watch the videos and identify which people were lying and which ones were telling the truth. While these experts were better than the

average person at identifying truth-tellers, they were much worse at identifying liars whose behavior didn't "match" the accepted behavioral norms. In fact, they even nicknamed one of the participants "Nervous Nelly" due to her agitated behavior, fidgeting, and overall defensiveness and pegged her immediately as a liar. But, Nervous Nelly was telling the truth, she just wasn't as transparent as a character on *Friends*.

Case Study: The Fraternity Party

Stanford University, the pinnacle of prestige and success; however, even a university like Stanford isn't immune to the ambiguity of sexual consent which was made apparent in the sexual assault case against Brock Turner. Around midnight on a night in January, two Swedish cyclists came across a man and woman on the ground. Thinking the two were having a private moment, they soon realized the seriousness of the situation.

Brock Turner was sexually assaulting the unconscious woman, known as Emily Doe to protect her identity. The case of Brock Turner and Emily Doe is certainly not an isolated incident and is a frequent occurrence among college campuses. Why are encounters like this so prevalent? To answer this, we need to look at how college students view sexual consent.

There is much data that measures college student's views on consent. For instance, only 44% of women think that taking off your clothes equals consent compared to 50% of males that believe this. 51% of women and 58% of men agree that just a nod equals consent. Both men and women mostly agree that not saying "no" is not enough consent; however, this data only proves that sexual consent is ambiguous. There are no set boundaries, and consent only gets into murkier territory when alcohol is added to the equation.

Alcohol doesn't cause inhibition, but myopia, which is a state where you lack imagination and can't process anything beyond the immediate experience. In other words, alcohol narrows your focus and pushes all other thoughts to the back of your head, including long-term consequences. This also means that people are not their true selves when under the influence. While society largely believes that alcohol brings out the person's true personality, myopia proves that this is not true.

In truth, both Brock Turner and Emily Doe were in altered states and were nearly blacked out throughout their encounter, and we know Emily was too incapacitated to give consent to Brock. So while Brock believes that schools

need to focus on drinking culture and believes drinking will inevitably lead to sexual assault, Emily Doe released a statement stating that campus should focus on teaching young men respect. But, schools should focus on teaching both, respect and drinking culture.

The Case of Sandra Bland

As mentioned several times before, we don't understand strangers and, unfortunately, there are many cases in which people fall victim to another's inability to understand them. One such example is that of Sandra Bland. Sandra Bland was pulled over by Brian Encina after failing to signal a lane change. When prompted, Bland explained that she saw Encina quickly approaching her and simply changed lanes to get out of his way.

Making her irritation to Encina quite clear, Encina asked "are you done?" which prompted further provocation from Bland. In an attempt to calm herself, Bland lit a cigarette. Encina asked Bland to put it out, but Bland refused, as she had every right to. Encina then proceeded to pull her out of her car, and when she resisted, they shouted at one another. Encina called for backup and Bland was arrested on a felony charge.

Three days later, Bland died in police custody to an apparent suicide. So, what lessons can be taken away here? That officers need to be more patient? No, it goes much deeper than that.

If you look at Brian Encina's record, you'll see the number of times he pulled people over for traffic violations. Following the belief that traffic violations create an opportunity for more serious crimes, Encina often pulled people over for minor infractions. Does this make the streets safer? The author argues no. In fact, Sandra Bland was in a low crime area on the highway, so this tactic most likely won't work.

Bland was in a peaceful neighborhood near a college campus in the middle of the afternoon, so why take the time to pull her over? Simply put, Encina believed he could assume the truth about Bland's character. Life isn't an episode of *Friends*, so while Bland may have appeared agitated, she was more likely stressed than hiding something criminal. Encina couldn't read Bland, what he thought was transparency, was a misunderstanding.

Encina made an assumption about a stranger, something that we do every day. Therefore, it's important to remember that we cannot understand strangers, and we should stop assuming that we can. In the case of Encina and Bland, Encina didn't understand Bland and blamed Bland for his actions when in reality, he should also blame himself for making assumptions in thinking that he knew her character.

Final Summary

Trust your gut. We hear this term all the time when a person expresses his or her feelings and suspicions about another. When a woman feels unsafe at the shopping mall because she believes a man is following her, we tell her to trust her gut. When families are playing at the park with their children and see a suspicious person lurking around the playground, we tell them to trust their gut. Even when someone in a relationship feels that their partner is being unfaithful, we tell them to trust their gut. We feel initial instincts as humans, and we are constantly told to trust them. And while all of this still holds true, Malcolm Gladwell has successfully proven that we as humans cannot understand strangers.

In fact, we are incredibly bad at understanding strangers. We have an intuition that, while helpful at times, also reflect prejudices and preconceptions about strangers that are most likely false. So while we think we may know a person based on their reputation and manner, we don't actually have the capability to truly understand the strangers walking among us, or even the people that live around us.



QuickRead

F R E E B O O K S U M M A R I E S

Go to QuickRead.com/App now to download our app and get access to thousands of free book summaries as both text and audiobooks.

Get the key insights of non-fiction books in minutes instead of hours. Listen to our free audiobooks while you workout or on your commute to work.

