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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

Blink

by

Malcolm Gladwell

(New York: Back Bay Books, 2005)

Author:

Malcolm Gladwell has been a staff writer with *The New Yorker magazine* since 1996. His 1999 profile of Ron Popeil won a National Magazine Award, and in 2005 he was named one of Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People. He is the author of three books, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference* (2000), *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005), and *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008) all of which were number one New York Times bestsellers.

From 1987 to 1996, he was a reporter with the Washington Post, where he covered business, science, and then served as the newspaper's New York City bureau chief. He graduated from the University of Toronto, Trinity College, with a degree in history. He was born in England, grew up in rural Ontario, and now lives in New York City. [gladwell.com]

Summary:

How do we think without thinking, seem to make choices in an instant--in the *blink* of an eye--that actually aren't as simple as they seem? Why are some people brilliant decision makers, while others are consistently inept? Why do some people follow their instincts and win, while others end up stumbling into error? And why are the best decisions often those that are impossible to explain to others? Drawing on cutting-edge neuroscience and psychology, the author reveals that great decision makers aren't those who process the most information or spend the most time deliberating, but those who have perfected the art of filtering the very few factors that matter from an overwhelming number of variables. [NoveList Plus]

Questions:

1. Have you ever had a feeling that a couple's future is successful or doomed just by witnessing a brief exchange between them? What do you think you're picking up on?
2. Art historian Bernard Berenson or billionaire George Soros are examples of practiced 'thin-slicers' who have made highly pressured snap judgments based on nothing more than a curious ringing in the ears or a back spasm. What kind of physical, inexplicable cues have you or others you know of experienced which led to successful decision-making? Cosmic unity? Coincidence?

3. Priming refers to when subtle triggers influence our behavior without our awareness of such changes. An example of this occurs in Spain where authorities introduced classical music on the subway and after doing so, watched vandalism and littering drastically decrease. Can you think of situations when priming occurs?
4. The Iyengar/Fisman study revealed that what the speed-daters say they want and what they were actually attracted to in the moment didn't match when compared. What does this say for on-line dating services? Can we really predict what kind of person we will 'hit it off' with? Is it better to let friends decide who is more suited for you as opposed to scanning profiles that correspond with your notion of what you think you are looking for?
5. The Warren Harding error reveals the dark-side of 'thin-slicing'--when our instincts betray us and our rapid cognition goes awry. Looking at the example of that 1920 presidency, can we say that this type of error is happening today in political elections? Do you think this explains why there has never been a black or female president?
6. Roper believed that strategy and complex theory were inappropriate and futile in the midst of battle, "where the uncertainties of war and the pressure of time made it impossible to compare options carefully and calmly." What other 'work' spaces discount rational analysis and demand immediate 'battlefield' decision-making?
7. In the cases of Kenna's music and the Aeron chair we see that first impressions can often lead us astray. What we initially judge as disapproval may just be a case of confusion or mistrust for something new and different. How can we distinguish a decision motivated by fear of the unknown from the ones that stem from genuine dislike towards something? Are we better off leaving it to the experts to tell us what we should like?
8. The Diallo shooting is an example of a mind-reading failure. It reveals a grey area of human cognition; the middle ground between deliberate and accidental. Do you think the shooting was more deliberate or accidental?
9. Mind-reading failures lie at the root of countless arguments, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings. Often, people make excuses for a sarcastic or hurtful remark as "just joking." But if there is no clear-cut line between deliberate and accidental do you agree, "There is always truth in jest?" Do you think when we misread others and get irritated we are in fact only recognizing something in that person that we don't like about ourselves?
10. Autistic patients read their environment literally. They do not, like us, seem to watch people's eyes when they are talking to pick up on all those expressive nuances that Eckman has so carefully catalogued. What do you make of individuals who avoid eye contact during conversation? How do you think this affects their ability to understand or interpret the speaker? Could this explain how lying is often signaled by averted

eye-contact?

11. Just as the National Symphony Orchestra were shocked to find their newly employed horn player was a female, do you think that even as far as we've come with issue of race and gender equality, we still judge with our eyes and ears rather than our instinct? Are our interpretations of events, people, issues etc filtered through our internal ideologies and beliefs? Do you agree that perception is reality? And with this in mind, could improving our powers of rapid cognition ultimately change our reality?

[gladwell.com]