



Montclair literary festival: Malcolm Gladwell looks in



D.T. Max talks with Malcolm Gladwell. COURTESY SUCCEED2GETHER

By PATRICIA CONOVER

For Montclair Local

“We need to approach strangers with caution and humility,” Malcolm Gladwell said.

According to author and New Yorker essayist D. T. Max, who moderated a standing-room-only conversation with Gladwell on Thursday, Feb. 6, at First Congregational Church, Gladwell had a distinctive voice from the beginning.

“There was this amazing change in how we write stories... we used to write about people but Malcolm wrote about ideas,” Max said, describing Gladwell, who was born in England and grew up in Canada, as an outsider looking in.

Gladwell joined the Washington Post in 1987, and was different from other writers: Gladwell’s first book “The Tipping Point” (2000) sold over three million copies and stayed on the New York Times Bestseller list for eight years. His other books, “Blink,” “Outliers,” “What the Dog Saw” and “David and Goliath,” have all been bestsellers.

The conversation between Gladwell and D. T. Max was a fundraiser for [Succeed2gether](#), an organization working to close the achievement gap for students in Greater Montclair and Essex County. Succeed2gether presents the Montclair Literary Festival, which will take place March 25-29.

Next up, Succeed2gether will present novelist Colum McCann, on March 12.

Gladwell was in Montclair to talk about his new book, “Talking with Strangers: What We Should Know About The People We Don’t Know.” In it, Gladwell tells stories that link humans’ inherent difficulty in communicating with, and understanding, each other.

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“We misread each other all the time,” Gladwell said. “There are misunderstandings between strangers. We can’t tell who someone is by looking at them.”

“Talking to Strangers” begins with the story of Sandra Bland, a young African American woman, and Brian Encinia, the white police officer who began following her and stopped her for failing to signal a lane change when she pulled over to allow him to pass. Encinia demands that Bland extinguish her cigarette as she sits in her car. The trooper orders Bland out of her car, but she refuses. The trooper then threatens to use his stun gun on her. When she emerges from her car he arrests her and takes her to jail. The story ends tragically with Bland’s death by suicide three days later.

The encounter is “a collective failure,” Gladwell said.

“Brian Encinia suspected Sandra Bland of wrongdoing. He completely misinterpreted her actions,” Gladwell said. Encinia tells investigators that Bland seemed agitated and that she might harm him. “This is dangerously flawed thinking.”



Malcolm Gladwell talks to the crowd at First Congregational Church. COURTESY SUCCEED2GETHER

“Talking to Strangers” also includes stories from the headlines such of Amanda Knox, the exchange student

accused of murder in Italy; Bernie Madoff, the conman behind the Ponzi Scheme that shook the investment world; and the Mountain Climber, a spy who ascended the highest heights of espionage in the CIA.

People tend to trust those in power, Gladwell said. "That's the reason people get away with so much for so long."

And he added that looks can be misleading.

Some people look as though they are up to no good, but are simply distressed, Gladwell said.

"There are some people who sweat or their facial expressions are scary but it's because they have anxiety and stress. We don't know what they're thinking."

Similarly, odd behavior may not mean what we assume it does, he added.

Amanda Knox laughed and kissed her boyfriend the day after her roommate was killed. Knox "didn't behave the way a young woman was expected to behave when she is grieving the death of a friend," he said.

So, the Italian police decided that she was guilty of murder. Knox was eventually exonerated of the murder charge after spending four years in an Italian prison.

"She was an innocent person who acted guilty. Sometimes people behave in a way that doesn't go along with our expectations."