

## **Outliers, Chapter 1 (excerpt)**

This is a book about outliers, about men and women who do things that are out of the ordinary. Over the course of the chapters ahead, I'm going to introduce you to one kind of outlier after another: to geniuses, business tycoons, rock stars, and software programmers. We're going to uncover the secrets of a remarkable lawyer, look at what separates the very best pilots from pilots who have crashed planes, and try to figure out why Asians are so good at math. And in examining the lives of the remarkable among us - the skilled, the talented, and the driven - I will argue that there is something profoundly wrong with the way we make sense of success.

What is the question we always ask about the successful. We want to know what they're *like* - what kind of personalities they have, or how intelligent they are, or what kind of lifestyles they have, or what special talents they might have been born with. And we assume that it is those personal qualities that explain how that individual reached the top.

In the autobiographies published every year by the billionaire/entrepreneur/rock star/celebrity, the story line is always the same: our hero is born in modest circumstances and by virtue of his own grit and talent fights his way to greatness. In the Bible, Joseph is cast out by his brothers and sold into slavery and then rises to become the pharaoh's right-hand man on the strength of his own brilliance and insight. In the famous nineteenth-century novels of Horatio Alger, young boys born into poverty rise to riches through a combination of pluck and initiative. "I think overall it's a disadvantage," Jeb Bush once said of what it meant for his business career that he was the son of an American president and the brother of an American president and the grandson of a wealthy Wall Street banker and US senator. When he ran for governor of Florida, he repeatedly referred to himself as a "self-made man," and it is a measure of how deeply we associate success with the efforts of the individual that few batted an eye at that description.

"Lift up your heads," Robert Winthrop told the crowd many years ago at the unveiling of a statue of that great hero of American independence Benjamin Franklin, "and look at the image of a man who rose from nothing, who owed nothing to parentage or patronage, who enjoyed no advantages of early education which are not open - a hundredfold open - to yourselves, who performed the most menial services in the businesses in which his early life was employed, but who lived to stand before Kings, and died to leave a name which the world will never forget."

In *Outliers*, I want to convince you that these kinds of personal explanations of success don't work. People don't rise from nothing. We do owe something to parentage and patronage. The people who stand before kings may look like they did it all by themselves. But in fact they are invariably the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot. It makes a difference where and when we grew up. The culture we belong to and the legacies passed down by our forebears shape the patterns of our achievement in ways we cannot begin to imagine. It's not enough to ask what successful people are like, in other words. It is only by asking where they are from that we can unravel the logic behind who succeeds and who doesn't.

## **Outliers, Chapter 6 (in its entirety)**

Harlan, Kentucky "DIE LIKE A MAN, LIKE YOUR BROTHER DID!"

1.

In the southeastern corner of Kentucky, in the stretch of the Appalachian Mountains known as the Cumberland Plateau, lies a small town called Harlan.

The Cumberland Plateau is a wild and mountainous region of flat-topped ridges, mountain walls five hundred to a thousand feet high, and narrow valleys, some wide enough only for a one-lane road and a creek. When the area was first settled, the plateau was covered with a dense primeval forest. Giant tulip poplars grew in the coves and at the foot of the hills, some with trunks as wide as seven or eight feet in diameter. Alongside them were white oaks, beeches, maples, walnuts, sycamores, birches, willows, cedars, pines, and hemlocks, all enmeshed in a lattice of wild grapevine, comprising one of the greatest assortment of forest trees in the Northern Hemisphere. On the ground were bears and mountain lions and rattlesnakes; in the treetops, an astonishing array of squirrels; and beneath the soil, one thick seam after another of coal.

Harlan County was founded in 1819 by eight immigrant families from the northern regions of the British Isles.

They had come to Virginia in the eighteenth century and then moved west into the Appalachians in search of land. The county was never wealthy. For its first one hundred years, it was thinly populated, rarely numbering more than ten thousand people. The first settlers kept pigs and herded sheep on the hillsides, scratching out a living on small farms in the valleys. They made whiskey in backyard stills and felled trees, floating them down the Cumberland River in the spring, when the water was high. Until well into the twentieth century, getting to the nearest train station was a two-day wagon trip. The only way out of town was up Pine Mountain, which was nine steep miles on a road that turned on occasion into no more than a muddy, rocky trail. Harlan was a remote and strange place, unknown by the larger society around it, and it might well have remained so but for the fact that two of the town's founding families -- the Howards and the Turners -- did not get along.

The patriarch of the Howard clan was Samuel Howard. He built the town courthouse and the jail. His counterpart was William Turner, who owned a tavern and two general stores. Once a storm blew down the fence to the Turner property, and a neighbor's cow wandered onto their land. William Turner's grandson, "Devil Jim," shot the cow dead. The neighbor was too terrified to press charges and fled the county. Another time, a man tried to open a competitor to the Turners' general store. The Turners had a word with him. He closed the store and moved to Indiana. These were not pleasant people.

One night, Wix Howard and "Little Bob" Turner -- the grandsons of Samuel and William, respectively -- played against each other in a game of poker. Each accused the other of cheating. They fought. The following day, they met in the street, and after a flurry of gunshots, Little Bob Turner lay dead with a shotgun blast to the chest. A group of Turners went to the Howards' general store and spoke roughly to Mrs. Howard. She was insulted and told her son Wilse Howard, and the following week, he exchanged gunfire with another of Turner's grandsons, young Will Turner, on the road to Hagan, Virginia. That night one of the Turners and a friend attacked the Howard home. The two families then clashed outside the Harlan courthouse. In the gunfire, Will Turner was shot and killed. A contingent of Howards then went to see Mrs. Turner, the mother of Will Turner and Little Bob, to ask for a truce. She declined: "You can't wipe out that blood," she said, pointing to the dirt where her son had died.

Things quickly went from bad to worse. Wilse Howard ran into "Little George" Turner near Sulphur Springs and shot him dead. The Howards ambushed three friends of the Turners -- the Cawoods -- killing all of them. A posse was sent out in search of the Howards. In the resulting gunfight, six more were killed or wounded. Wilse Howard heard the Turners were after him, and he and a friend rode into Harlan and attacked the Turner home. Riding back, the Howards were ambushed. In the fighting, another person died. Wilse Howard rode to Little George Turner's house and fired at him but missed and killed another man. A posse surrounded the Howard home. There was another gunfight. More dead. The county was in an uproar. I think you get the picture. There were places in nineteenth century America where people lived in harmony. Harlan, Kentucky, was not one of them.

"Stop that!" Will Turner's mother snapped at him when he staggered home, howling in pain after being shot in the courthouse gun battle with the Howards. "Die like a man, like your brother did!" She belonged to a world so well acquainted with fatal gunshots that she had certain expectations about how they ought to be endured. Will shut his mouth, and he died.

2.

Suppose you were sent to Harlan in the late nineteenth century to investigate the causes of the Howard-Turner feud. You lined up every surviving participant and interviewed them as carefully as you could. You subpoenaed documents and took depositions and pored over court records until you had put together a detailed and precise accounting of each stage in the deadly quarrel.

How much would you know? The answer is, not much. You'd learn that there were two families in Harlan who didn't much like each other, and you'd confirm that Wilse Howard, who was responsible for an awful lot of the violence, probably belonged behind bars. What happened in Harlan wouldn't become clear until you looked at the violence from a much broader perspective. The first critical fact about Harlan is that at the same time that the Howards and the Turners were killing one another, there were almost identical clashes in other small towns up and down the Appalachians. In the famous Hatfield-McCoy feud on the West Virginia-Kentucky border not far from Harlan, several dozen people were

killed in a cycle of violence that stretched over twenty years. In the French-Eversole feud in Perry County, Kentucky, twelve died, six of them killed by “Bad Tom” Smith (a man, John Ed Pearce writes in *Days of Darkness*, who was “just dumb enough to be fearless, just bright enough to be dangerous, and a dead shot”). The Martin Tolliver feud, in Rowan County, Kentucky, in the mid-1880s, featured three gunfights, three ambushes, and two house attacks, and ended in a two-hour gun battle involving one hundred armed men. The Baker-Howard feud in Clay County, Kentucky, began in 1806, with an elk hunting party gone bad, and didn't end until the 1930s, when a couple of Howards killed three Bakers in an ambush.

And these were just the well-known feuds. The Kentucky legislator Harry Caudill once looked in a circuit court clerk's office in one Cumberland Plateau town and found one thousand murder indictments stretching from the end of the Civil War, in the 1860s, to the beginning of the twentieth century -- and this for a region that never numbered more than fifteen thousand people and where many violent acts never even made it to the indictment stage. Caudill writes of a murder trial in Breathitt County -- or “Bloody Breathitt,” as it came to be known -- that ended abruptly when the defendant's father, “a man of about fifty with huge handlebar whiskers and two immense pistols,” walked up to the judge and grabbed his gavel:

The feudist rapped the bench and announced, “Court's over and ever'body can go. We ain't agoin' to have any court here this term, folks.” The red-faced judge hastily acquiesced in this extraordinary order and promptly left town. When court convened at the next term, the court and sheriff were bolstered by sixty militiamen, but by then, the defendant was not available for trial. He had been slain from ambush.

When one family fights with another, it's a feud. When lots of families fight with one another in identical little towns up and down the same mountain range, it's a *pattern*.

What was the cause of the Appalachian pattern? Over the years, many potential explanations have been examined and debated, and the consensus appears to be that that region was plagued by a particularly virulent strain of what sociologists call a “culture of honor.”

Cultures of honor tend to take root in highlands and other marginally fertile areas, such as Sicily or the mountainous Basque regions of Spain. If you live on some rocky mountainside, the explanation goes, you can't farm. You probably raise goats or sheep, and the kind of culture that grows up around being a herdsman is very different from the culture that grows up around growing crops. The survival of a farmer depends on the cooperation of others in the community. But a herdsman is off by himself. Farmers also don't have to worry that their livelihood will be stolen in the night, because crops can't easily be stolen unless, of course, a thief wants to go to the trouble of harvesting an entire field on his own. But a herdsman does have to worry. He's under constant threat of ruin through the loss of his animals. So he has to be aggressive: he has to make it clear, through his words and deeds, that he is not weak. He has to be willing to fight in response to even the slightest challenge to his reputation and that's what a “culture of honor” means. It's a world where a man's reputation is at the center of his livelihood and self-worth.

“The critical moment in the development of the young shepherd's reputation is his first quarrel,” the ethnographer J. K. Campbell writes of one herding culture in Greece. “Quarrels are necessarily public. They may occur in the coffee shop, the village square, or most frequently on a grazing boundary where a curse or a stone aimed at one of his straying sheep by another shepherd is an insult which inevitably requires a violent response.”

Why was Appalachia the way it was? It was because of where the original inhabitants of the region came from. The so-called American backcountry states -- from the Pennsylvania border south and west through Virginia and West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, North Carolina and South Carolina, and the northern end of Alabama and Georgia -- were settled overwhelmingly by immigrants from one of the world's most ferocious cultures of honor. They were “Scotch Page Irish” -- that is, from the lowlands of Scotland, the northern counties of England, and Ulster in Northern Ireland.

The borderlands -- as this region was known -- were remote and lawless territories that had been fought over for hundreds of years. The people of the region were steeped in violence. They were herdsman, scraping out a living on rocky and infertile land. They were clannish, responding to the harshness and turmoil of their environment by forming tight family bonds and placing loyalty to blood above all else. And when they immigrated to North America, they moved into

the American interior, to remote, lawless, rocky, and marginally fertile places like Harlan that allowed them to reproduce in the New World the culture of honor they had created in the Old World.

“To the first settlers, the American backcountry was a dangerous environment, just as the British borderlands had been,” the historian David Hackett Fischer writes in *Albion's Seed*.

Much of the southern highlands were “debatable lands” in the border sense of a contested territory without established government or the rule of law. The borderers were more at home than others in this anarchic environment, which was well suited to their family system, their warrior ethic, their farming and herding economy, their attitudes toward land and wealth and their ideas of work and power. So well adapted was the border culture to this environment that other ethnic groups tended to copy it. The ethos of the North British borders came to dominate this “dark and bloody ground,” partly by force of numbers, but mainly because it was a means of survival in a raw and dangerous world.<sup>1</sup>

The triumph of a culture of honor helps to explain why the pattern of criminality in the American South has always been so distinctive. Murder rates are higher there than in the rest of the country. But crimes of property and “stranger” crimes like muggings are lower. As the sociologist John Shelton Reed has written, “The homicides in which the South seems to specialize are those in which someone is being killed by someone he (or often she) knows, for reasons both killer and victim understand.” Reed adds: “The statistics show that the Southerner who can avoid arguments and adultery is as safe as any other American, and probably safer.” In the backcountry, violence wasn't for economic gain. It was personal. You fought over your honor.

Many years ago, the southern newspaperman Hodding Carter told the story of how as a young man he served on a jury. As Reed describes it:

The case before the jury involved an irascible gentleman who lived next door to a filling station. For several months he had been the butt of various jokes played by the attendants and the miscellaneous loafers who hung around the station, despite his warnings and his notorious short temper. One morning, he emptied both barrels of his shotgun at his tormenters, killing one, maiming another permanently, and wounding a third... When the jury was polled by the incredulous judge, Carter was the only juror who recorded his vote as guilty. As one of the others put it, “He wouldn't of been much of a man if he hadn't shot them fellows.”

Only in a culture of honor would it have occurred to the irascible gentleman that shooting someone was an appropriate response to a personal insult. And only in a culture of honor would it have occurred to a jury that murder under those circumstances was not a crime.

I realize that we are often wary of making these kinds of broad generalizations about different cultural groups and with good reason. This is the form that racial and ethnic stereotypes take. We want to believe that we are not prisoners of our ethnic histories.

But the simple truth is that if you want to understand what happened in those small towns in Kentucky in the nineteenth century, you have to go back into the past and not just one or two generations. You have to go back two or three or four hundred years, to a country on the other side of the ocean, and look closely at what exactly the people in a very specific geographic area of that country did for a living. The “culture of honor” hypothesis says that it matters where

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<sup>1</sup> David Hackett Fischer's book *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* is the most definitive and convincing treatment of the idea that cultural legacies cast a long historical shadow. (If you read my first book, *The Tipping Point*, you'll remember that the discussion of Paul Revere was drawn from Fischer's *Paul Revere's Ride*.) In *Albion's Seed*, Fischer argues that there were four distinct British migrations to America in its first 150 years: first the Puritans, in the 1630s, who came from East Anglia to Massachusetts; then the Cavaliers and indentured servants, who came from southern England to Virginia in the mid seventeenth century; then the Quakers, from the North Midlands to the Delaware Valley between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; and finally, the people of the borderlands to the Appalachian interior in the eighteenth century. Fischer argues brilliantly that those four cultures -- each profoundly different -- characterize those four regions of the United States even to this day.

you're from, not just in terms of where you grew up or where your parents grew up, but in terms of where your great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents grew up and even where your great-great-great-grandparents grew up. That is a strange and powerful fact. It's just the beginning, though, because upon closer examination, cultural legacies turn out to be even stranger and more powerful than that.

3.

In the early 1990s, two psychologists at the University of Michigan - Dov Cohen and Richard Nisbett - decided to conduct an experiment on the culture of honor. They knew that what happened in places like Harlan in the nineteenth century was, in all likelihood, a product of patterns laid down in the English borderlands centuries before. But their interest was in the present day. Was it possible to find remnants of the culture of honor in the modern era. So they decided to gather together a group of young men and insult them. "We sat down and tried to figure out what is the insult that would go to the heart of an eighteen-to-twenty-year-old's brain," Cohen says. "It didn't take too long to come up with 'asshole.'"

The experiment went like this. The social sciences building at the University of Michigan has a long, narrow hallway in the basement lined with filing cabinets. The young men were called into a classroom, one by one, and asked to fill out a questionnaire. Then they were told to drop off the questionnaire at the end of the hallway and return to the classroom, a simple, seemingly innocent academic exercise.

For half the young men, that was it. They were the control group. For the other half, there was a catch. As they walked down the hallway with their questionnaire, a man - a confederate of the experimenters - walked past them and pulled out a drawer in one of the filing cabinets. The already narrow hallway now became even narrower. As the young men tried to squeeze by, the confederate looked up, annoyed. He slammed the filing cabinet drawer shut, jostled the young men with his shoulder, and, in a low but audible voice, said the trigger word: "Asshole."

Cohen and Nisbett wanted to measure, as precisely as possible, what being called that word meant. They looked at the faces of their subjects and rated how much anger they saw. They shook the young men's hands to see if their grip was firmer than usual. They took saliva samples from the students, both before and after the insult, to see if being called an asshole caused their levels of testosterone and cortisol - the hormones that drive arousal and aggression - to go up. Finally they asked the students to read the following story and supply a conclusion:

It had only been about twenty minutes since they had arrived at the party when Jill pulled Steve aside, obviously bothered about something.

"What's wrong?" asked Steve.

"It's Larry. I mean, he knows that you and I are engaged, but he's already made two passes at me tonight."

Jill walked back into the crowd, and Steve decided to keep his eye on Larry. Sure enough, within five minutes, Larry was reaching over and trying to kiss Jill.

If you've been insulted, are you more likely to imagine Steve doing something violent to Larry?

The results were unequivocal. There were clear differences in how the young men responded to being called a bad name. For some, the insult changed their behavior. For some it didn't. The deciding factor in how they reacted wasn't how emotionally secure they were, or whether they were intellectuals or jocks, or whether they were physically imposing or not. What mattered - and I think you can guess where this is headed - was *where* they were from. Most of the young men from the northern part of the United States treated the incident with amusement. They laughed it off. Their handshakes were unchanged. Their levels of cortisol actually went down, as if they were unconsciously trying to defuse their own anger. Only a few of them had Steve get violent with Larry.

But the southerners. Oh, my. They were *angry*. Their cortisol and testosterone jumped. Their handshakes got firm. Steve was all over Larry.

"We even played this game of chicken," Cohen said. "We sent the students back down the hallways, and around the corner comes another confederate. The hallway is blocked, so there's only room for one of them to pass. The guy we used was six three, two hundred fifty pounds. He used to play college football. He was now working as a bouncer in a

college bar. He was walking down the hall in business mode - the way you walk through a bar when you are trying to break up a fight. The question was: how close do they get to the bouncer before they get out of the way? And believe me, they always get out of the way."

For the northerners, there was almost no effect. They got out of the way five or six feet beforehand, whether they had been insulted or not. The southerners, by contrast, were downright deferential in normal circumstances, stepping aside with more than nine feet to go. But if they had just been insulted, less than *two* feet. Call a southerner an asshole, and he's itching for a fight. What Cohen and Nisbett were seeing in that long hall was the culture of honor in action: the southerners were reacting like Wix Howard did when Little Bob Turner accused him of cheating at poker.

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That study is strange, isn't it? It's one thing to conclude that groups of people living in circumstances pretty similar to their ancestors' act a lot like their ancestors. But those southerners in the hallway study weren't living in circumstances similar to their British ancestors. They didn't even necessarily have British ancestors. They just happened to have grown up in the South. None of them were herdsman. Nor were their parents herdsman. They were living in the late twentieth century, not the late nineteenth century. They were students at the University of Michigan, in one of the northernmost states in America, which meant they were sufficiently cosmopolitan to travel hundreds of miles from the south to go to college. And none of that mattered. *They still acted like they were living in nineteenth-century Harlan, Kentucky.*

"Your median student in those studies comes from a family making over a hundred thousand dollars, and that's in nineteen ninety dollars," Cohen says. "The southerners we see this effect with aren't kids who come from the hills of Appalachia. They are more likely to be the sons of upper-middle management Coca-Cola executives in Atlanta. And that's the big question. Why should we get this effect with them. Why should one get it hundreds of years later? Why are these suburban-Atlanta kids acting out the ethos of the frontier?"<sup>2</sup>

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Cultural legacies are powerful forces. They have deep roots and long lives. They persist, generation after generation, virtually intact, even as the economic and social and demographic conditions that spawned them have vanished, and they play such a role in directing attitudes and behavior that we cannot make sense of our world without them.<sup>3</sup>

So far in *Outliers* we've seen that success arises out of the steady accumulation of advantages: when and where you are born, what your parents did for a living, and what the circumstances of your upbringing were all make a significant difference in how well you do in the world. The question for the second part of *Outliers* is whether the traditions and attitudes we inherit from our forebears can play the same role. Can we learn something about why people succeed and how to make people better at what they do by taking cultural legacies seriously? I think we can.

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen has done other experiments looking again for evidence of "southernness," and each time he finds the same thing. "Once, we bothered students with persistent annoyances," he said. "They come into the lab and they are supposed to draw pictures from their childhood. They are doing this with the confederate, and he's being a jerk. He does all these things to persistently annoy the subject. He'll wad up his drawing and throw it at the wastebasket and hit the subject. He'll steal the subject's crayons and not give them back. He keeps on calling the subject 'Slick,' and he says, 'I'm going to put your name on your drawing,' and writes 'Slick.' What you find is that northerners tend to give off displays of anger, up to a certain point, at which point they level off. southerners are much less likely to be angry early on. But at some point they catch up to the northerners and shoot past them. They are more likely to explode, much more volatile, much more explosive.

<sup>3</sup> How are these kinds of attitudes passed down from generation to generation? Through social heritage. Think of the way accents persist over time. David Hackett Fischer points out that the original settlers of Appalachia said: "whar for where, thar for there, hard for hired, critter for creature, sartin for certain, a-goin for going, hit for it, he-it for hit, far for fire, deaf for deaf, pizen for poison, nekkid for naked, eetch for itch, boosh for bush, wrassle for wrestle, chaw for chew, poosh for push, shet for shut, ba-it for bat, be-it for be, narrer for narrow, winder for window, widder for widow, and young-uns for young one." Recognize that? It's the same way many rural people in the Appalachians speak today. Whatever mechanism passes on speech patterns probably passes on behavioral and emotional patterns as well.