

The Mona Lisa is smiling

BY MICHELLE JONES

Mid-April 1961: the Bay of Pigs Invasion. May 5, 1961: Alan Shepard becomes the first American in space. Late May 1961: President and Mrs. Kennedy travel to Paris. Of the three events, the last might seem the least significant, but that visit—of which JFK famously quipped “I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it”—led to a spectacular feat. The first lady charmed Parisians with her style, grace and fluent French and scored an even bigger coup when the French Minister of Culture promised to loan her the “Mona Lisa,” the most valuable work in the Louvre. Margaret Leslie Davis perfectly captures the magic of the Kennedy White House, behind-the-scenes maneuvering and the stories of the major players on both sides of the Atlantic in *Mona Lisa in Camelot*.

In the beginning, only Mrs. Kennedy and André Malraux thought the “Mona Lisa” project was a good idea. John Walker, head of the National Gallery, was against it. So was the painting’s guardian, Madeleine Hours, whose intimidating list of conditions for the exhibition made Walker even less enthusiastic. Despite the outcries of French citizens and art experts, Cold War tensions and a disastrous VIP reception, the tour was a resounding success. Even Walker was won over, saying, “This famous portrait stirred some impulse toward beauty in thousands of human beings, who had never felt that impulse before.”

Davis includes some wonderful images as she tells this story, among them: Mme. Hours stealthily watching the opening-day crowd; a little boy smuggling his puppy into the museum; New Yorkers queuing up in the bitter cold; and, during a 1970s tour, a line of Japanese officials bowing as the painting’s plane left Tokyo. Davis also whisks visitors through the first lady’s restoration of the White House and describes her legendary wardrobe (see also: *Jacqueline Kennedy: The White House Years*) all in the context of Mrs. Kennedy’s masterful blending of culture and political life.

Mona Lisa in Camelot is well written, extensively researched and meticulously rendered—a masterpiece in its own right. ♡



Mona Lisa in Camelot

By Margaret Leslie Davis

Da Capo
\$24.95, 272 pages
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NONFICTION

Gladwell’s secrets of success

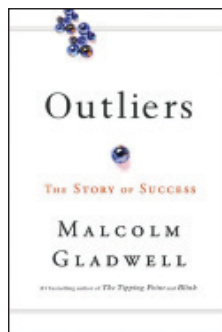
BY JOHN T. SLANIA

After exploring the dynamics of social change in *The Tipping Point*, and decision-making in *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell turns to the subject of success in his new book, *Outliers*. Written in Gladwell’s typical breezy, conversational style, *Outliers* seeks to discover what makes people smart, wealthy or famous. Gladwell argues that in studying successful people, we spend too much time on what they are *like* and not enough time on where they are *from*. In other words, he believes that it is “their culture, their family, their generation and the idiosyncratic experiences of their upbringings” which determines their success.

One of the joys of Gladwell’s writing is the way he explains complex theories using everyday examples. In *Outliers*, he makes the case that success is sometimes shaped by the smallest factors. Take a person’s birthday. The most successful Canadian hockey players are born in January, February and March, Gladwell writes, simply because the cut-off date for age class hockey in Canada is January 1. Thus, those born after that date are held back a year, giving them an age and size advantage.

Environment also plays a big role in success. Gladwell compares the lives of two geniuses: physicist Robert Oppenheimer and a little-known Missouri man named Christopher Langan. Both were tested and found to have high IQs. But Gladwell argues that Oppenheimer had a huge advantage being raised in a wealthy, educated family, while Langan was born into a poor, broken family. Oppenheimer went to Harvard and Cambridge and helped develop the nuclear bomb. Langan had poor grades in school, never finished college and makes money competing on TV game shows.

Then there is the factor of opportunity in shaping success. Why was Bill Gates successful? Well, he was smart, but he also grew up when the personal computer was coming of age, offering him opportunities to tinker and create new software. Gladwell’s unique perspective challenges readers to think about intelligence, success and fame in a new way. *Outliers* is a clever, entertaining book that stimulates readers’ minds and broadens their perspectives. It is, in its own way, genius. ♡



Outliers

By Malcolm Gladwell

Little, Brown
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Also available on audio

WELL READ

The return of Updike’s witches

Some writers like to return to familiar territory, and perhaps none has done so more often than John Updike, who has given us four novels and a coda about Rabbit Angstrom, three collections of stories featuring Jewish writer Henry Bech and a generous helping of stories about the marital ups and downs of Richard and



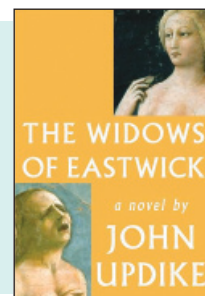
BY ROBERT WEIBEZAHL

Joan Maple. So it comes as no surprise that after almost 25 years, the now-septuagenarian writer has at last resurrected the trio of suburban sorceresses who animated one of his most successful, if enigmatic, novels, *The Witches of Eastwick*.

As its title announces, *The Widows of Eastwick* finds Alexandra, Jane and Sukie much further along in life, each having buried the husband she conjured for herself before fleeing Eastwick at the end of the first book. Thirty years later, the witches have all but lost touch with each other. Alexandra, the arty “earth mother” and the eldest, has spent the last few decades in Taos, New Mexico. Jane, the sharp-tongued cellist, has been in Boston living with her old-money husband and centenarian mother-in-law, while sex-happy, second-rate writer Sukie has settled in suburban Connecticut with an odious salesman as her mate.

As the novel begins, the newly widowed Alexandra is taking a bus tour of the Canadian Rockies, confirming what she already knows—that group travel as a “single supplement” old woman is not for her. So, when she learns of Jane’s husband’s death, she decides to call her fellow widow and rekindle their friendship. Soon after, the two women set off together on a cruise down the Nile. When Sukie’s husband dies (there is a vague hint, never pursued, that Jane may have precipitated his death with a bit of black magic), the coven reunites for the first time and takes a trip to China. But Alexandra’s more limited finances preclude another of these exotic excursions, and while casting about for somewhere affordable to go, the

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widows decide to return to the scene of their ignominious triumphs—the Rhode Island coastal town of Eastwick.

The only summer rental they can find is a condo that, ironically, has been carved out of the old Lenox mansion, better known to readers of the first novel as the place where warlock Daryl Van Horne led Alexandra, Jane and Sukie down the debauched path of *maleficia*. In Eastwick itself, there are still residents, most now as old as the widows, who bear grudges against the women. Significant among these is Greta Neff, widow of one the witches’ former lovers (they had many in the town), herself purportedly a witch. Greta summons Christopher Gabriel, once the boy-toy of Van Horne and the brother of Jenny Gabriel, the witches’ young rival and victim. Not long after Christopher arrives in Eastwick, bent on revenge, Jane begins to suffer terrible, unexplained electrical shocks and is diagnosed with a painful and perilous medical condition. The witches attempt to reignite their “cone of power” to disastrous effect.

As with *The Witches of Eastwick*, a reader must be willing to accept the notion that witchcraft is real, at least within the parameters of the story, for the novel to work. And there has long been debate over what Updike is trying to say about his witches. Are these women good or evil? Is their witchcraft a plausible reaction to the patriarchal world that had pushed them down (remember, the first book was set in the ’70s, before “feminism” became a bad word in certain circles) or just an unleashing of their sexual power? Are we supposed to like these often unlikable women, or merely accept them on their own terms?

The Widows of Eastwick does not provide any more clear-cut answers to these questions than the first book did. Indeed, the three women’s ostensive motive for returning to Eastwick—nostalgia combined with a wish for redemption—remains largely unfulfilled. Aging, grief, waning nature (in the guise of sex), death—these are the gloomy realities that hover over the pages of what is essentially a novel about the end of life. *The Widows of Eastwick* may not be Updike’s finest—or most cheerful—work. Still, this eloquent, ruminative and often wise novel bears the stamp of this masterful storyteller’s art. ♡

The Widows of Eastwick

By John Updike

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