“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 invariable 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”

(Gladwell 19).

These few statements pretty much sum up the first half of Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers*. By questioning the basic theories of modern success, Gladwell makes his readers question every idol they have in the world. How did they really become so successful? Are they lying when they tell you their everything-from-nothing tales? How can we know for sure what factors were involved in one person’s life when they themselves may not even be aware of it?

To introduce his theory, Gladwell began *Outliers* with a fairly boring list of famous Canadian hockey players and their birth dates. At first, I had no idea how the days these men were born on could in any way be related to their success, but as Gladwell went on, I started to understand where he was coming from. In Canada most cut-off dates for enrollment in school and other activities is January 1st. Because of this, Gladwell points out that boys born on January 2nd would be placed with children more than five months younger, smaller, and inexperienced than them. After he stated this, I went back to the list of hockey players and realized that over half of them were born in the months of January, February, and March, making them—potentially—the largest children in their grades. If this were true, then all of these players would have had an advantage their classmates couldn’t bargain or buy for, time.

Five months is more than enough time for children to develop both physically and mentally, as well as get in some extra practice in the ice rink. These boys would have gotten the most playing time when they reached competition age—six or seven years old in Canada—because they had those extra months. This advantage could very well have followed them through middle and high school, and once they reached recruiting age for the National Hockey League (NHL) they would be the prime suspects for recruiting; they would be the best.

Gladwell’s reason for this example is to prove that there are advantages no one can control, and that many of them are ignored. If one of the NHL recruits in the group in Gladwell’s example were to claim they “worked hard and achieved his dream on his own,” he may believe he was right but in reality, he would be lying. If the same recruit had been born in the winter as opposed to the early months of January, February, or March, he may never have developed his skills enough to be considered for the NHL.

*Outliers* uses the examples of unsuccessful people as well, many of them differing in generations. For example, Gladwell tells the story of a father who had all the education but none of society’s economic resources, to become what could have been the best lawyer of his time. This father was born just earlier enough to graduate from college in the heart of the depression, making nearly all business ventures impossible. However his son was born in the late years of the depression, allowing him to enter the workforce just as it was beginning to thrive again and was in desperate need of a good lawyer. But how often does this kind of thing happen? Don’t we all know someone who is incredibly talented, but just can’t catch a break? What makes
the people who are equally as talented—if not a little less talented—more deserving of success, other than their birth year? Anything? Gladwell’s examples and arguments are making me wonder if any of the great minds we learn about like Newton, Einstein, or even Bill Gates—who in Gladwell’s opinion was only successful because of his unique accessibility to computers when they were scarce—are really the greatest minds. What if there was a brilliant scientist born too early to utilize the instruments they needed, or just late enough to be overshadowed by Einstein? Would these people have contributed more to our society than the men we credit with great discoveries? Were they smarter?

“Smarter” is an idea Gladwell also address in Outliers as he tries to explain what makes any great mind, greater than the other. Gladwell compares the I.Qs of countless men and women, trying to determine what the magic number was that makes someone the smartest in the world (195 being the highest Gladwell records). While I expected Gladwell to conclude that the I.Qs of the subjects would determine who was the smartest, that is not what happened. Gladwell figured out that if someone is smart enough, their IQ becomes irrelevant past that point. If a person has an IQ of 160, which is well above average, and another has an IQ of 185, it doesn’t necessarily mean the latter is the smarter individual. This made me think of the “street smarts vs. book smarts” debate, and whether common sense had anything to do with the true intelligence of people in general. In my opinion, it does, but in Gladwell’s opinion, common sense can do nothing for you if you were born in the wrong time, place, and under the wrong circumstances.

I’m hoping Outliers will focus less on birth dates, and more on the environmental factors that affect success, in the second half of the book. However I am definitely enjoying Gladwell’s argument.