

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

WITH A NEW  
INTRODUCTION BY  
THE AUTHOR

*The*  
TIPPING POINT

*How Little Things Can  
Make a Big Difference*



MALCOLM  
GLADWELL

*"A fascinating book that makes you see the world  
in a different way." —FORTUNE*

Copyright © 2000, 2002 by Malcolm Gladwell

All rights reserved.

Little, Brown and Company  
Hachette Book Group  
237 Park Avenue  
New York, NY 10017

Visit our website at [www.HachetteBookGroup.com](http://www.HachetteBookGroup.com).

The Little, Brown and Company name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

First eBook Edition: January 2002

The author is grateful for permission to include the following previously copyrighted material:  
Excerpts from interviews on Market Mavens videotape by Linda Price, Lawrence F. Feick, and Audrey Guskey. Reprinted by permission of the authors; Exerpts from Daniel Wegner, "Transactive Memory: A Contemporary Analysis of the Group Mind," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1991), vol. 61, no. 6. Reprinted by permission of the author; Excerpts from Donald H. Rubinstein, "Love and Suffering: Adolescent Socialization and Suicide in Micronesia," *Contemporary Pacific* (Spring 1995), vol. 7, no. 1, and "Epidemic Suicide Among Micronesian Adolescents," *Social Science and Medicine* (1983), vol. 17. Reprinted by permission of the author; Excerpts from *Paul Revere's Ride* by David Hackett Fisher. Copyright © 1994 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 978-0-7595-7473-1

# Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Introduction](#)

[ONE: The Three Rules of Epidemics](#)

[TWO: The Law of the Few](#)

[THREE: The Stickiness Factor](#)

[FOUR: The Power of Context \(Part One\)](#)

[FIVE: The Power of Context \(Part Two\)](#)

[SIX: Case Study](#)

[SEVEN: Case Study](#)

[EIGHT: Conclusion](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Endnotes](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

## Acclaim for Malcolm Gladwell's

### *The Tipping Point*

#### *How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*

“An elegant exploration of how social epidemics work, whether they are fashion trends, diseases, or behavior patterns such as crime. . . . One of the most interesting aspects of Gladwell's book is the way it reaffirms that human beings are profoundly social beings influenced by and influencing other human beings, no matter how much technology we introduce into our lives.”

— Deirdre Donahue, *USA Today*

“Undeniably compelling . . . terrifically rewarding.”

— Claire Dederer, *Seattle Times*

“A wonderful page-turner about a wonderfully offbeat study of that little-understood phenomenon, the social epidemic.”

— *Daily Telegraph*

“One of the year's most anticipated nonfiction titles. . . . *The Tipping Point* is propelled by its author's voracious but always amiable curiosity. . . . Gladwell has a knack for rendering complex theories in clear, elegant prose, and he makes a charismatic tour guide.”

— Christopher Hawthorne, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“As a business how-to, *The Tipping Point* is truly superior, brimming with new theories on the science of manipulation.” — Aaron Gell, *Time Out*  
“*The Tipping Point* is one of those rare books that change the way you think about, well, everything. The book sets out to explain nothing less

than why human beings behave the way they do, and, astonishingly, Malcolm Gladwell has the smarts and panache to pull it off.”

— Jeffrey Toobin, author of *A Vast Conspiracy*

“With passion and eloquence, Gladwell argues for the proposition that minor alterations, carefully conceived and adeptly enacted, can produce major consequences for individuals, organizations, and communities.”

— Barry Glassner, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Gladwell is intelligent, articulate, well-informed, and thought-provoking. . . . *The Tipping Point* is full of interesting stuff.”

— *Observer* (UK)

“It’s hard not to be persuaded by Gladwell’s thesis. Not only does he assemble a fascinating mix of facts to support his theory — from the impact of Paul Revere to a rash of suicides in Micronesia — but he also manages to weave everything into a cohesive explanation of human behavior. What’s more, we appreciate the optimism of a theory that supports, as another pundit once called it, the power of one.”

— Diane Brady, *Business Week*

“Having read this book I have thought deeply about my own business and can now see much more value in small-scale below-the-line activity. Worth a read for marketers and students of human nature alike.”

— Phil Riley, *Marketing* (UK)

“It’s the flight of Gladwell’s thought that captures your imagination.”

— Jon Garelick, *Boston Phoenix*

“Startling and convincing. . . . Gladwell may be about to start an intellectual epidemic that could shake up the way we think about everything from selling shoes to planning cities. And how cool is that? . . . Nimble juggling a remarkable assemblage of anecdotes and facts, he presents a convincing case that, contrary to the prevailing wisdom of mass trends and focus-group marketing, a few individuals or a single haphazard event can set off a social epidemic that profoundly alters the culture.”

— Liz Seymour, *Attache*

“Fascinating. . . . While *The Tipping Point* is largely a popularization of earlier scientific work in epidemiology, psychology, sociology, and group dynamics, it is valuable because it synthesizes this knowledge, bringing insights gleaned from these disparate fields together and applying them to an impressive array of contemporary social behaviors and cultural trends. Such knowledge, properly applied, could have enormous potential.”

— Paula Geyh, *Chicago Tribune*

“Well-written and lively. . . . *The Tipping Point* is a smart attempt to show us why epidemics are useful metaphors for shaping our thinking about social life.”

— Marcellus Andrews, *Emerge*

“Anyone interested in fads should read *The Tipping Point*. . . . An ambitious, well-written book on how seemingly small ideas can change the world.” — Carmela Ciuraru, *Us* “A great read... Gladwell holds our attention with anecdotes about tipping point personalities as well as little-known tidbits... *The Tipping Point* is thought-provoking.”

— Blake Elizabeth Newmark, *Jerusalem Post*

“An intriguing book. . . . Gladwell has succeeded in gathering an array of fascinating related material and presenting it with an ease that makes it accessible and unforgettable.”

— Bill Duryea, *St. Petersburg Times*

“In a fascinating look at research from the disparate fields of anthropology and business, Gladwell makes a convincing case that there is actually a magic number — 150 — beyond which human groupings become dysfunctional.”

— Gary Kenton, *News & Record* (Greensboro, NC)

“As informative and thought-provoking a book as I have read in some time. . . . Gladwell’s arguments and examples are persuasive. The chapter on children’s TV programs is riveting.”

— Robert Worcester, *Management Today* (UK)

“In a compelling blend of scientific and cultural analysis, Gladwell argues

that trends — in fashion, art, and politics — spread just as germs do. . . . The most notable thing about Gladwell’s style, both in his writing and in person, is the excitement with which he approaches his subjects.”

— Casey Greenfield, *Newsday*

“Fascinating enough for the general reader, Gladwell’s work is a particular boon for businesspeople looking for inspiration on how to tip their own ideas into popular crazes.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“What someone once said about the great Edmund Wilson is as true of Malcolm Gladwell: he gives ideas the quality of action. Here he’s written a wonderful page turner about a fascinating idea that should affect the way every thinking person looks at the world.”

— Michael Lewis, author of *Liar’s Poker*  
and *The New New Thing*

“Genuinely fascinating and frequently startling. . . . It’s the kind of book from which you’ll be regaling your friends with intriguing snippets for weeks to come, in addition to being, potentially, a powerful, practical tool for anyone with an idea to peddle or a campaign to promote.”

— *Scotland on Sunday* (UK)

“*The Tipping Point* assembles talking points from childhood development, marketing, and social epidemiology, and holds them up at an angle that lets one distant notion attach to another. . . . An ingenious guide.”

— Richard Lacayo, *Time*

“The thrust of Gladwell’s book is that seemingly small gestures can have fantastically large and rapid outcomes. . . . *The Tipping Point* could well prove to be an influential text for political activists.”

— Timothy Noah, *Washington Monthly*

“Hip and hopeful, *The Tipping Point* is like the idea it describes: concise, elegant, but packed with social power. A book for anyone who cares about how society works and how we can make it better.”

— George Stephanopoulos,

author of *All Too Human*

*To my parents,  
Joyce and Graham Gladwell*

## *Introduction*

For Hush Puppies—the classic American brushed suede shoes with the lightweight crepe sole—the Tipping Point came somewhere between late 1994 and early 1995. The brand had been all but dead until that point. Sales were down to 30,000 pairs a year, mostly to backwoods outlets and small town family stores. Wolverine, the company that makes Hush Puppies, was thinking of phasing out the shoes that made them famous. But then something strange happened. At a fashion shoot, two Hush Puppies executives—Owen Baxter and Geoffrey Lewis—ran into a stylist from New York who told them that the classic Hush Puppies had suddenly become hip in the clubs and bars of downtown Manhattan. “We were being told,” Baxter recalls, “that there were resale shops in the Village, in Soho, where the shoes were being sold. People were going to the Ma and Pa stores, the little stores that still carried them, and buying them up.” Baxter and Lewis were baffled at first. It made no sense to them that shoes that were so obviously out of fashion could make a comeback. “We were told that Isaac Mizrahi was wearing the shoes himself,” Lewis says. “I think it’s fair to say that at the time we had no idea who Isaac Mizrahi was.”

By the fall of 1995, things began to happen in a rush. First the designer John Bartlett called. He wanted to use Hush Puppies in his spring collection. Then another Manhattan designer, Anna Sui, called, wanting shoes for her show as well. In Los Angeles, the designer Joel Fitzgerald put a twenty five foot inflatable basset hound—the symbol of the Hush Puppies brand—on the roof of his Hollywood store and gutted an adjoining art gallery to turn it into a Hush Puppies boutique. While he was still painting and putting up shelves, the actor Pee wee Herman walked in

and asked for a couple of pairs. “It was total word of mouth,” Fitzgerald remembers.

In 1995, the company sold 430,000 pairs of the classic Hush Puppies, and the next year it sold four times that, and the year after that still more, until Hush Puppies were once again a staple of the wardrobe of the young American male. In 1996, Hush Puppies won the prize for best accessory at the Council of Fashion Designers awards dinner at Lincoln Center, and the president of the firm stood up on the stage with Calvin Klein and Donna Karan and accepted an award for an achievement that—as he would be the first to admit—his company had almost nothing to do with. Hush Puppies had suddenly exploded, and it all started with a handful of kids in the East Village and Soho.

How did that happen? Those first few kids, whoever they were, weren’t deliberately trying to promote Hush Puppies. They were wearing them precisely because no one else would wear them. Then the fad spread to two fashion designers who used the shoes to peddle something else—haute couture. The shoes were an incidental touch. No one was trying to make Hush Puppies a trend. Yet, somehow, that’s exactly what happened. The shoes passed a certain point in popularity and they tipped. How does a thirty dollar pair of shoes go from a handful of downtown Manhattan hipsters and designers to every mall in America in the space of two years?

## 1.

There was a time, not very long ago, in the desperately poor New York City neighborhoods of Brownsville and East New York, when the streets would turn into ghost towns at dusk. Ordinary working people wouldn’t walk on the sidewalks. Children wouldn’t ride their bicycles on the streets. Old folks wouldn’t sit on stoops and park benches. The drug trade ran so rampant and gang warfare was so ubiquitous in that part of Brooklyn that most people would take to the safety of their apartment at nightfall. Police officers who served in Brownsville in the 1980s and early 1990s say that, in those years, as soon as the sun went down their radios exploded with chatter between beat officers and their dispatchers over every conceivable kind of violent and dangerous crime. In 1992, there were 2,154 murders in New York City and 626,182 serious crimes, with the weight of those crimes falling hardest in places like Brownsville and East New York. But then something strange happened. At some mysterious and critical point,

the crime rate began to turn. It tipped. Within five years, murders had dropped 64.3 percent to 770 and total crimes had fallen by almost half to 355,893. In Brownsville and East New York, the sidewalks filled up again, the bicycles came back, and old folks reappeared on the stoops. “There was a time when it wasn’t uncommon to hear rapid fire, like you would hear somewhere in the jungle in Vietnam,” says Inspector Edward Messadri, who commands the police precinct in Brownsville. “I don’t hear the gunfire anymore.”

The New York City police will tell you that what happened in New York was that the city’s policing strategies dramatically improved. Criminologists point to the decline of the crack trade and the aging of the population. Economists, meanwhile, say that the gradual improvement in the city’s economy over the course of the 1990s had the effect of employing those who might otherwise have become criminals. These are the conventional explanations for the rise and fall of social problems, but in the end none is any more satisfying than the statement that kids in the East Village caused the Hush Puppies revival. The changes in the drug trade, the population, and the economy are all long term trends, happening all over the country. They don’t explain why crime plunged in New York City so much more than in other cities around the country, and they don’t explain why it all happened in such an extraordinarily short time. As for the improvements made by the police, they are important too. But there is a puzzling gap between the scale of the changes in policing and the size of the effect on places like Brownsville and East New York. After all, crime didn’t just slowly ebb in New York as conditions gradually improved. It plummeted. How can a change in a handful of economic and social indices cause murder rates to fall by two thirds in five years?

## 2.

*The Tipping Point* is the biography of an idea, and the idea is very simple. It is that the best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or, for that matter, the transformation of unknown books into bestsellers, or the rise of teenage smoking, or the phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of the other mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do.

The rise of Hush Puppies and the fall of New York’s crime rate are

textbook examples of epidemics in action. Although they may sound as if they don't have very much in common, they share a basic, underlying pattern. First of all, they are clear examples of contagious behavior. No one took out an advertisement and told people that the traditional Hush Puppies were cool and they should start wearing them. Those kids simply wore the shoes when they went to clubs or cafes or walked the streets of downtown New York, and in so doing exposed other people to their fashion sense. They infected them with the Hush Puppies "virus."

The crime decline in New York surely happened the same way. It wasn't that some huge percentage of would be murderers suddenly sat up in 1993 and decided not to commit any more crimes. Nor was it that the police managed magically to intervene in a huge percentage of situations that would otherwise have turned deadly. What happened is that the small number of people in the small number of situations in which the police or the new social forces had some impact started behaving very differently, and that behavior somehow spread to other would be criminals in similar situations. Somehow a large number of people in New York got "infected" with an anti crime virus in a short time.

The second distinguishing characteristic of these two examples is that in both cases little changes had big effects. All of the possible reasons for why New York's crime rate dropped are changes that happened at the margin; they were incremental changes. The crack trade leveled off. The population got a little older. The police force got a little better. Yet the effect was dramatic. So too with Hush Puppies. How many kids are we talking about who began wearing the shoes in downtown Manhattan? Twenty? Fifty? One hundred—at the most? Yet their actions seem to have single handedly started an international fashion trend.

Finally, both changes happened in a hurry. They didn't build steadily and slowly. It is instructive to look at a chart of the crime rate in New York City from, say, the mid 1960s to the late 1990s. It looks like a giant arch. In 1965, there were 200,000 crimes in the city and from that point on the number begins a sharp rise, doubling in two years and continuing almost unbroken until it hits 650,000 crimes a year in the mid 1970s. It stays steady at that level for the next two decades, before plunging downward in 1992 as sharply as it rose thirty years earlier. Crime did not taper off. It didn't gently decelerate. It hit a certain point and jammed on the brakes.

These three characteristics—one, contagiousness; two, the fact that

little causes can have big effects; and three, that change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment—are the same three principles that define how measles moves through a grade school classroom or the flu attacks every winter. Of the three, the third trait—the idea that epidemics can rise or fall in one dramatic moment—is the most important, because it is the principle that makes sense of the first two and that permits the greatest insight into why modern change happens the way it does. The name given to that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at once is the Tipping Point.

### 3.

A world that follows the rules of epidemics is a very different place from the world we think we live in now. Think, for a moment, about the concept of contagiousness. If I say that word to you, you think of colds and the flu or perhaps something very dangerous like HIV or Ebola. We have, in our minds, a very specific, biological notion of what contagiousness means. But if there can be epidemics of crime or epidemics of fashion, there must be all kinds of things just as contagious as viruses. Have you ever thought about yawning, for instance? Yawning is a surprisingly powerful act. Just because you read the word “yawning” in the previous two sentences—and the two additional “yawns” in this sentence—a good number of you will probably yawn within the next few minutes. Even as I’m writing this, I’ve yawned twice. If you’re reading this in a public place, and you’ve just yawned, chances are that a good proportion of everyone who saw you yawn is now yawning too, and a good proportion of the people watching the people who watched you yawn are now yawning as well, and on and on, in an ever widening, yawning circle.

Yawning is incredibly contagious. I made some of you reading this yawn simply by writing the word “yawn.” The people who yawned when they saw you yawn, meanwhile, were infected by the sight of you yawning—which is a second kind of contagion. They might even have yawned if they only heard you yawn, because yawning is also aurally contagious: if you play an audiotape of a yawn to blind people, they’ll yawn too. And finally, if you yawned as you read this, did the thought cross your mind—however unconsciously and fleetingly—that you might be tired? I suspect that for some of you it did, which means that yawns can also be emotionally contagious. Simply by writing the word, I can plant a feeling

in your mind. Can the flu virus do that? Contagiousness, in other words, is an unexpected property of all kinds of things, and we have to remember that, if we are to recognize and diagnose epidemic change.

The second of the principles of epidemics—that little changes can somehow have big effects—is also a fairly radical notion. We are, as humans, heavily socialized to make a kind of rough approximation between cause and effect. If we want to communicate a strong emotion, if we want to convince someone that, say, we love them, we realize that we need to speak passionately and forthrightly. If we want to break bad news to someone, we lower our voices and choose our words carefully. We are trained to think that what goes into any transaction or relationship or system must be directly related, in intensity and dimension, to what comes out. Consider, for example, the following puzzle. I give you a large piece of paper, and I ask you to fold it over once, and then take that folded paper and fold it over again, and then again, and again, until you have refolded the original paper 50 times. How tall do you think the final stack is going to be? In answer to that question, most people will fold the sheet in their mind's eye, and guess that the pile would be as thick as a phone book or, if they're really courageous, they'll say that it would be as tall as a refrigerator. But the real answer is that the height of the stack would approximate the distance to the sun. And if you folded it over one more time, the stack would be as high as the distance to the sun and back. This is an example of what in mathematics is called a geometric progression. Epidemics are another example of geometric progression: when a virus spreads through a population, it doubles and doubles again, until it has (figuratively) grown from a single sheet of paper all the way to the sun in fifty steps. As human beings we have a hard time with this kind of progression, because the end result—the effect—seems far out of proportion to the cause. To appreciate the power of epidemics, we have to abandon this expectation about proportionality. We need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that sometimes big changes follow from small events, and that sometimes these changes can happen very quickly.

This possibility of sudden change is at the center of the idea of the Tipping Point and might well be the hardest of all to accept. The expression first came into popular use in the 1970s to describe the flight to the suburbs of whites living in the older cities of the American Northeast. When the number of incoming African Americans in a particular neighborhood reached a certain point—20 percent, say—sociologists