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Author says it's time to Think, not Blink Sunday, February 5th, 2006

Reviewed By Douglas J. Johnston

Think Why Crucial Decisions Can't Be Made in the Blink of an Eye By Michael R. LeGault
Threshold Editions , 355 pages , \$34.50

THINK is a rebuttal to Canadian, and New Yorker staff writer, Malcolm Gladwell's 2005 non-fiction bestseller Blink. Blink derived its title from the phrase "in the blink of an eye," and celebrated the accuracy and power of firecracker-fast intuitive decisions. Michael LeGault, an American journalist currently plying his trade in Canada as an editor with the National Post, doesn't think much of Blink. He disparages the idea that "our minds possess a subconscious power to take in large amounts of information and sensory data and correctly size up a situation, solve a problem, and so on, without the heavy, imposing hand of formal thought." According to him, the way our minds work isn't that simple. And when our minds do work that simply, the results frequently are neither happy nor productive. But LeGault validates at least one thing about Blink -- best summed up by that old saw about imitation being the highest form of flattery. Physically, Think the book is a dead ringer for Blink, the book. Same white cover, same typeface of title and subtitle, same size and format of tome. Presumably this is his publisher's deliberate marketing ploy. Deliberate or not, it treads perilously close to trademark infringement. In fairness to Gladwell, while Blink perhaps oversold the merits of what he terms "rapid cognition," his book did address the risks of first impressions, and when they lead you astray. He even gave tips about how to distinguish beneficial rapid cognition from bad rapid cognition. Still, there are fundamental problems with Gladwell's laudatory take on instant judgments and snap decisions that LeGault canvasses. One fault with Blink is that it soft-peddled individual extremes and subjective biases. There are people whose "rapid cognition" or intuition -- call it what you will -- is a mask for thoughtlessness or chronic lack of reflection. Their rushes to judgment are frequently a product of prejudices, personal idiosyncrasies or mass-media-bred popular misconceptions. And where Gladwell wants to extend the uses of intuitive decision-making, LeGault thinks we've already got too much of it. "Bombarded by a glut of information, spin, marketing messages, and demands on one's time, snap judgments have become the norm," he writes. "We are living, and in some cases, dying by snap judgments." He contends "the case is closed about the superiority of critical thinking to improve decision-making," yet "the mystery remains why subjectivity, emotion and instinct have come to predominate in the lives of people and the wider society." LeGault doesn't confine himself to rebutting the message of Blink. Placing himself in contradistinction to Gladwell's book affords him a convenient excuse, and handy springboard, to launch broad social, philosophical and political criticisms of American -- and by implication, Western -- society. His targets are many -- "trash culture, marketing, reliance on therapy, aversion to risk, the self-esteem industry, lack of standards in the workplace and classroom, and lax, hands-off parenting." Simply listing LeGault's culpable trends that way makes him sound a bit like a neo-con rantier. But in truth his analysis is frequently erudite, his sources and examples on point, and his arguments logical, lucid and, sometimes, even funny. Think's major achievement isn't its originality -- others have made many of the same points elsewhere. (Something he readily acknowledges.) But LeGault has nicely synthesized a lot disparate yet linked ideas in one volume. And for that, praise is due. Douglas J. Johnston is a Winnipeg lawyer and writer who always thinks before he blinks.