

Troubled mind

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

With *A Beautiful Mind*, director Ron Howard (*Apollo 13*, *Cocoon*) and screenwriter Akiva Goldsman (*Batman and Robin*, *A Time to Kill*) have produced a polished and carefully crafted piece of Hollywood glitter that seems intent on celebrating (to borrow from Faulkner) humanity's ability "not merely to endure, but to prevail." The sojourner in question is John Forbes Nash Jr., a real man and acclaimed mathematician. Nash was born in West Virginia in 1928, attended the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and ended up at Princeton in the late 1940s, exhibiting all the intellectual promise of a man who might someday change the way we view the world. (He believed strongly in something called "governing dynamics.")

But Nash suffered from paranoid schizophrenia. This led to years of anguish and confinement in psychiatric hospitals, where he received both drug and shock therapy to help burn the corrosion off his once "beautiful mind." The somewhat happy ending of this painful story is that Nash, who is still alive and working at Princeton, learns to live with his illness, and even wins the Nobel Prize for economics for groundbreaking work in game theory he formulated as a graduate student.

Anyone who has charted the course of this well-received Oscar-hopeful is aware that the filmmakers played fast and loose with many of the facts of Nash's life. (The movie is based on the 1998 biography by Sylvia Nasar.) Goldsman (who spent ten years working with emotionally disturbed children before turning to moviemaking) defends his script by saying that "the sheer act of omission is creation," and besides, it was never meant to be a "bio-pic" (Hollywoodese for a straight biographical version of a person's life).

The question--one that Hollywood usually considers only on a case-by-case basis--is just how true filmmakers need to be to a person's life when they are presenting that person's story as the real deal. If Goldsman simply wanted to borrow the "idea" of John Nash, why not create a fictitious mathematician who attended an Ivy League school, went slightly mad, and later won the Nobel Prize?

My chief problem with presenting the film as "the John Nash Story" is not that it's always wrong to twist the facts of a life when making a movie (Hollywood has made a business out of sanitizing all-too-human lives on the silver screen) but that in this case it has made the story far less interesting. After all, it tends to be the flaws, the temptations, and the falls from grace that draw us to a character.

What are some of the facts that the makers of *A Beautiful Mind* decided to keep under wraps? In no particular order: Nash had a premarital affair, fathered a child with the woman, and later left his wife, Alicia, and their son (also named John) in the lurch. He had a series of relationships with other men, and was arrested for solicitation in a public washroom. He was 73 when he and Alicia remarried. His politics were anything but "my country, do or die," and he claimed to hear messages from aliens.

The point is not that the movie should sully a living man's life and make him relive painful episodes but that Nash's journey to semirecovery, not to mention personal and profession redemption, seems all the more remarkable given the long road he had to travel. Besides, struggle and the ability to overcome obstacles are keys to successful drama.

Even in its streamlined, family-friendly version, the film has its strengths. Russell Crowe is wonderfully quirky as the eccentric and oftentimes unpleasant genius. (He is much better at being nasty and sarcastic than he is being kindly and forgiving.) Jennifer Connelly gives a thoughtful and understated performance as Alicia, Nash's loving and infinitely patient wife, who fixes John's tie, tucks a lucky handkerchief into his suit pocket, and manages to keep him on track for over 40 years. And the steely-eyed Ed Harris, all "mister!" this and "soldier!" that, is the perfect choice to play the Department of Defense cold-war operative who seeks out Nash's unique skills as a code-breaker.

As a movie that seeks to celebrate one man's tenacity and desire to overcome obstacles, *A Beautiful Mind* should not be overlooked. But by neglecting to explore the depths of pain and degradation a man can fall to before pulling himself up by his own bootstraps (aided by some major intelligence and modern medications), the filmmakers have offered less a beautiful film than one that is nice to look at.