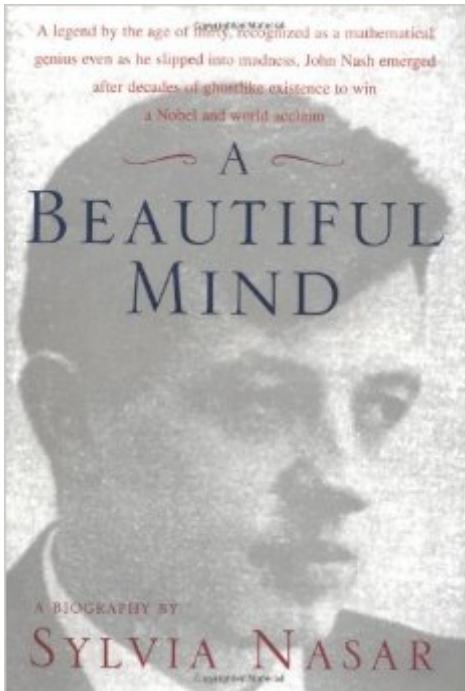


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# A Beautiful Mind : A Biography Of John Forbes Nash, Jr.



## Synopsis

In this dramatic and moving biography, Sylvia Nasar re-creates the life of a mathematical genius whose brilliant career was cut short by schizophrenia and who, after three decades of devastating mental illness, miraculously recovered and was honored with a Nobel Prize. *A Beautiful Mind* traces the meteoric rise of John Forbes Nash, Jr., from his lonely childhood in West Virginia to his student years at Princeton, where he encountered Albert Einstein, John von Neumann, and a host of other mathematical luminaries. At twenty-one, the handsome, ambitious, eccentric graduate student invented what would become the most influential theory of rational human behavior in modern social science. Nash's contribution to game theory would ultimately revolutionize the field of economics. As a young professor at MIT, still in his twenties, Nash dazzled the mathematical world by solving a series of deep problems deemed "impossible" by other mathematicians. As unconventional in his private life as in his mathematics, Nash fathered a child with a woman he did not marry. At the height of the McCarthy era, he was expelled as a security risk from the supersecret RAND Corporation -- the Cold War think tank where he was a consultant. At thirty, Nash was poised to take his dreamed-of place in the pantheon of history's greatest mathematicians. His associates included the most renowned mathematicians and economists of the era: Norbert Wiener, John Milnor, Alexandre Grothendieck, Kenneth Arrow, Robert Solow, and Paul Samuelson. He married an exotic and beautiful MIT physics student, Alicia Larde. They had a son. Then Nash suffered a catastrophic mental breakdown. Nasar details Nash's harrowing descent into insanity -- his bizarre delusions that he was the Prince of Peace; his resignation from MIT, flight to Europe, and attempt to renounce his American citizenship; his repeated hospitalizations, from the storied McLean, where he came to know the poet Robert Lowell, to the crowded wards of a state hospital; his "enforced interludes of rationality" during which he was able to return briefly to mathematical research. Nash and his wife were divorced in 1963, but Alicia Nash continued to care for him and for their mathematically gifted son, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia as a teenager. Saved from homelessness by his loyal ex-wife and protected by a handful of mathematical friends, Nash lived quietly in Princeton for many years, a dreamy, ghostlike figure who scrawled numerological messages on blackboards, all but forgotten by the outside world. His early achievements, however, fired the imagination of a new generation of scholars. At age sixty-six, twin miracles -- a spontaneous remission of his illness and the sudden decision of the Nobel Prize committee to honor his contributions to game theory -- restored the world to him. Nasar recounts the bitter behind-the-scenes battle in Stockholm over whether to grant the ultimate honor in science to a man thought to be "mad." She describes Nash's current ambition to pursue new mathematical

breakthroughs and his efforts to be a loving father to his adult sons. Based on hundreds of interviews with Nash's family, friends, and colleagues and scores of letters and documents, *A Beautiful Mind* is a heartbreakingly inspiring story about the most remarkable mathematician of our time and his triumph over a tragic illness.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

If you enjoyed the movie "A Beautiful Mind" you will love this book. It is far richer in detail, context, and lets us a bit deeper into why what Nash accomplished was so beautiful. If you find the movie a bit of a problem because it seems a bit too glossy for the facts, again, you will love this book. For me, the movie did a marvelous job of embodying the spirit of the book. To delve more deeply into the facts of Nash's life and accomplishments and his illness would require a documentary or a mini-series. The movie is really a narrative poem about Nash. This book is about the people and their experiences. It is NOT a direct exposition of Nash's technical achievements. There are other books such as "The Essential John Nash" that provide that information. In this masterful book we find out more about his youth, his life at college, his work after he received his doctorate and his breakdown and illness as well as the nature and scope of his recovery. There is real sorrow and loss in the book, but there is also strength and tenacity that refuses to yield to hopelessness and despair. This is a book about the people and how they lived during the storms of his achievements and his illness. I am not qualified to discuss the quality of Nash's achievements, but from the admiration lavished on him by his peers and how they rallied round him it is clear that Nash was given immense gifts that he developed and used in ways that have benefited all of us even if we are

unaware of it. It seems that this is the nature of the gifts scientists and mathematicians give us. We are unaware of them until another person makes them part of other products, services, and policies that directly affect us.

John Forbes Nash, Jr. was a genius who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and was in and out of mental institutions for most of his life. Nasar's book, as she states so succinctly in her prologue, is Nash's story, "in three acts: genius, madness, reawakening." Naturally introverted, even at a young age, Nash was described as being "bookish and slightly odd." His mother had him reading by the time he was four and instead of coloring books, his father gave him science books to read. But despite his parents' efforts, the young Nash was prone to daydreaming in school, which led his teachers to describe him as an underachiever. A loner and the ultimate nerd, his best friends were books, his bedroom resembled a science lab, he was always the last to be chosen for baseball, and at a school dance, he danced with chairs rather than girls. Although his elementary school math teachers complained he couldn't do the work, his mother noticed he wasn't following the teachers' instructions because he had devised a simpler way of solving the problems. By high school, he was deciphering problems his chemistry teacher wrote on the blackboard, without using pencil or paper. In college, his math professors would call on Nash when they themselves ran into problems solving complex equations they were presenting to their classes. But together with his brilliance were eccentricities that became more evident as Nash aged. Those close to him characterized him as "disconnected" and "deeply unknowable." He had little use for textbooks and was known for solving difficult (and often previously unsolvable) problems using "no references but his own mind."

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