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A beautiful minefield

The makers of *A Beautiful Mind* chose to ignore John Nash's love of men. What were they thinking?

By Michael Giltz



Let's start with the obvious. Director Ron Howard's blockbuster *A Beautiful Mind* is a heartwarming movie. It has grossed more than \$130 million and garnered eight Oscar nominations. It has also earned effusive praise from experts and activists who deal with mental illness: With its impassioned lead performances by Russell Crowe as real-life mathematician John Forbes Nash Jr. and Jennifer Connelly as his devoted wife, Alicia, *Mind* provides genuine insight into schizophrenia.

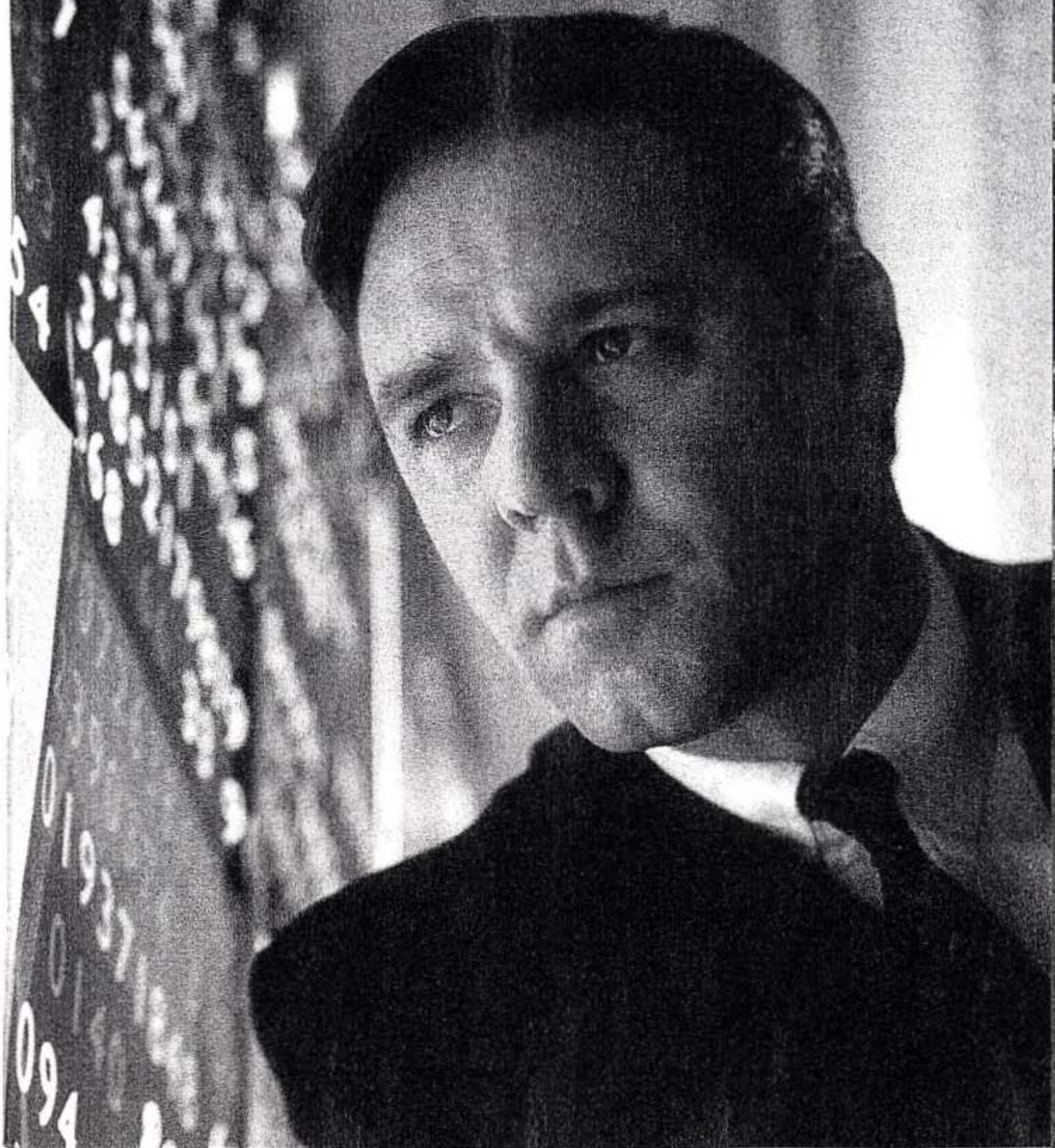
So what's not to like about this movie? Why has it spawned a controversy that keeps on growing?

New York Times critic A.O. Scott put his finger on the problem in his December 21 review, one of the first to question the film's authenticity: "The tears, and the dazzled glow that accompanies them, feel honestly earned," he wrote. "The paradox of Ron Howard's new film, from a script by Akiva Goldsman, is that the story that elicits these genuine emotions is almost entirely counterfeit."

Director Ron Howard politely downplays the idea that the film has kicked up much of a fuss. "I wouldn't characterize it as a firestorm," Howard tells *The Advocate*. "But it has created a bit more debate. I think, quite candidly, there's nothing out there this Oscar season that is legitimately controversial. So we sort of fit the genre in a very faint way."

Well, yes and no. The conflicts stirred by *A Beautiful Mind* go deep. There's no homophobic malice in this ►

Nash in his MIT years (left), in the early '50s. His odd behavior had cost him a faculty position at Princeton.



well-intentioned film—not even its most vocal detractors suggest that. Instead, *A Beautiful Mind* is being taken to task for homophobia by omission.

Is that unreasonable? Or do the critics have a point? The controversy sheds new light on the divide between heterosexual and homosexual ways of seeing—and reminds us that history belongs not to those who make it but to those who write it.

As everybody knows by now, John Nash, 73, is a brilliant academic who did groundbreaking work in game theory. Nash later descended into madness—he suffered from paranoid schizophrenia—but managed after decades of struggle to go into remission and enjoy the sweet victory of winning the Nobel Prize for Economics for his early work. His story became widely known thanks to an award-winning biography by former *New York Times* reporter Sylvia Nasar, on which the movie is based.

Scott's review revived the age-old debate about what duty a Hollywood movie has to the truth when depicting history. He takes issue with a number of the movie's departures from Nasar's biography as well as the film's depiction of the Cold War era.

"Even though the filmmakers haven't disguised the fact they've taken liberties," Scott tells *The Advocate*, "I think it's worth raising the question for critics and for audiences: How much and what kind of liberties should be taken? How much can they invent or subtract? And what are the motives behind the different additions and subtractions they make?"

For gay audiences, the additions and subtractions in *A Beautiful Mind*, however well-intentioned, add up to an all-too-familiar heterosexual take on a story that reverberates with homosexual overtones. Says Scott Seomin, entertainment media director for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, "The audience is cheated by the dismissal of John Nash's inner conflicts about his sexuality."

In the movie, Nash is seen as an arrogant but essentially charming fellow, an awkward socializer who hits on blondes, conceives a theoretical breakthrough while competing with his

buddies for dates, and woos and wins the woman of his dreams, to whom he stays married for the rest of his life.

The truth, as the filmmakers acknowledge, is rather more complex. According to Nasar's National Book Critics Circle Award-winning biography, Nash developed intense emotional attachments to men, was sexually attracted to them, and was belittled as a "homo" during his undergraduate career (when he did his first important mathematical work).

Most significant, Nash was arrested for public indecency in a men's restroom in Santa Monica, Calif. The arrest

According to Nasar's National Book Award-winning biography, John Forbes Nash Jr. (right) developed intense emotional attachments to men, was sexually attracted to them, and was belittled as a "homo" during his undergraduate career.

complexity passed over in the film: Nash and his wife were divorced for decades; they remarried last year.

"It's sort of like they wiped the slate clean at the beginning," Scott tells *The Advocate*. "You don't feel there was a creative effort made to deal with the reality of his life. They decided instead they were going to pluck the most sentimental and conventional story out of the material that was there in Nasar's book and just get rid of the rest."

This wouldn't exactly be a new Hollywood tactic. Howard, who has delivered critical and commercial successes such as *Apollo 13* and *Cocoon*,



cost him his post at the RAND Corp. and, along with it, his national security clearance. (The film places Nash at a think tank where he keeps his job until he's committed to a mental hospital.)

"Although Nash appeared unscathed, the arrest was a turning point in his life," Nasar wrote. "Now he learned, in a particularly brutal fashion, that the emotional connections he sought threatened to destroy all else that he valued—his freedom, his career, his reputation, success on society's terms."

Only after that intense humiliation did Nash get serious about marrying a woman. (He had fathered a son a year earlier but had refused to marry the boy's mother.) Even then, Massachusetts Institute of Technology physics student Alicia Larde courted him, not the other way around. Another

places his approach to *Mind* within a tried-and-true list of strategies for movies inspired by real events. "One is, you're trying as artfully as possible to create a reenactment," he explains. "This is sort of what *Apollo 13* and *Black Hawk Down* were. If you're doing a traditional biopic of a really famous person, you're trying to recreate moments that everyone is familiar with. In some cases—and this is the instance with *A Beautiful Mind*—you're attracted to the story not so much because the person is a household name or because you're going to do a reenactment but because there are aspects of their life that symbolize or dramatize a theme, a point of view, and offer a kind of insight."

"John Nash is not a household name," Howard continues. "And so ▶

I think we always said, 'Look, we're taking a lot of liberties. But we hope at the end of the day we're capturing the spirit of these two characters [Nash and wife, Alicia] and how they navigated these waters.' I feel very, very strongly that we've done a good job and an honorable job of it."

For many veteran Hollywood observers, the film is uplifting simply because Howard and business partner Brian Grazer managed to tackle the hard-sell topic of schizophrenia in a way that won over both the studios and the general audience. Writing in *Variety*, legendary screenwriter

Akiva Goldsman, who was previously best known for writing such by-the-numbers fare as *Lost in Space*, *A Beautiful Mind* is a major creative leap forward. This project is also very personal for him: His parents ran a group home for the mentally ill, and he had long wanted a chance to demystify the subject. "The implication is [that it's] almost a political omission" to leave out the gay content, he says. "I actually take umbrage to that. It wasn't a political omission; it was a creative omission."

Howard also insists that no one veered away from the complexity of Nash's

at Columbia University, says she can't imagine anyone who has read her book calling Nash gay. She studiously avoids labeling Nash in any way.

"Really, every interview I've done, every chat, etc., E-mails coming in from Bosnia: 'Why was Nash's homosexuality [cut out of the movie]?' " a bemused Nasar tells *The Advocate*. "People were talking about Nash as if he were Alan Turing [the openly gay British mathematician who was key in breaking the German Enigma code during World War II]."

It may strike gay readers as odd that despite more than 30 different references to Nash's interest in men and to homosexuality in general, there's no index listing for "homosexuality" in the book *A Beautiful Mind*. [Go to www.advocate.com for our own index.] But Nasar insists it isn't a central or even major thread in her book.

"Obviously, I thought it was appropriate to include [those facts]," she says. "I was interested in everything about Nash and particularly everything that showed his need for and interest in connecting with other people."

"Now, do I think that it's one of the main things in his life? See, I don't. Why? Because, to me, what is really compelling and unique and what makes Nash amazing is the story of someone surviving this illness."

As Howard points out, many of the book's details about Nash's sexual interest in men are secondhand. "I was talking to Sylvia about it at one point," says Howard, "and I said, 'Well, did you ever talk to any lovers or anything like that?' No, she hadn't."

Indeed, Nasar never spoke to any man who had sex with Nash; never uncovered an official record of Nash's public indecency arrest; never spoke to a friend who would describe Nash as gay. And Nash himself denies it.

To gays and lesbians accustomed to getting the dirt about their sexuality encoded or suppressed, none of this necessarily proves a thing. Besides, Nasar did speak to four men who say Nash made sexual advances to them. And although she never interviewed any man who slept with Nash, that's because two of the likeliest candidates are dead—and a third, who ▶



Sylvia Nasar, who wrote the biography on which *A Beautiful Mind* is based, says she never considered labeling Nash as bisexual because "I think it's a very weird category. It implies someone who in a continuous way goes both ways.... I just didn't think much about it."

William Goldman called it the movie of the year and commented, "Maybe the miracle is not that it's so good, but that it got made."

Nevertheless, says *Los Angeles Times* film reporter Patrick Goldstein, who has written perceptively about the film and its marketing, the arguments won't be dying down any time soon. "How much of a person's private life is entitled to remain private when they're not a public figure?" muses Goldstein. "I'm straight, and I've had lots of heated debates with my gay friends, starting with my sister, over this very issue. I'm somewhere in the middle. I think the filmmakers think I've been too critical of the movie. And my sister thinks I haven't been critical enough."

For Oscar-nominated screenwriter

sexuality out of fear that it might paint him less sympathetically or dim the film's box office chances. "It was always a question of, Where is our focus in the movie?" he says. "As intriguing as they were, these other character possibilities were too big to really deal with fleetingly. Either they are major subplots, in which case the movie just gets to be so long and convoluted that you can't follow it, or you have to simplify it and stay on theme."

"I truly think," says Howard, "that trying to wedge in the possibility of homosexuality or bisexuality would have been irresponsible of us as storytellers—especially with Nash always maintaining that it didn't happen."

Sylvia Nasar supports the filmmakers' position. Nasar, currently a professor of journalism

was seriously ill, refused to discuss it with her.

As for Nash's arrest, Nasar spoke with the then-head of security at RAND, who confirmed that the police told him why they'd arrested the mathematician. The head of security confronted Nash, who insisted he wasn't gay and pulled out a photo of his mistress and their son as "proof" he couldn't be queer.

As screenwriter Goldsman points out, Nash still rejects the label of "gay" or "bisexual." "Am I in the business of outing somebody who says they're not gay?" he exclaims. "To me, there is a central single relationship. Whether John dated lots of girls, I don't know. But I do know he had a relationship with one woman before Alicia. That ain't in the movie. John dated lots of men? I don't know, but that ain't in the movie either. What's in the movie is one relationship, the relationship that seemed formative to the healing. And I swear to God, if that relationship had been with someone named Jack, Jack would have been in the movie."

Who exactly do gay people want to celebrate anyway? wonders Goldsman. Someone who rejects the label? The case for Nash as an important gay figure certainly isn't a strong one.

"The fact is, John says he is not bi, and so does his wife," says Goldsman. "Nevertheless, to me, what I read from the book was that John made intense emotional relationships with men. Now, I don't know what that means. But if kissing men in college means you're part of gay history, then I should be part of gay history too."

Less convincing, perhaps, is the filmmakers' argument that moviegoers would have blamed Nash's homosexuality on his schizophrenia. But they insist it was a real concern. Russell Crowe, who's made it clear he is proud of the film, declined several requests to be interviewed by *The Advocate*. But in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, he readily admitted he was sorry that material from the book about "a certain adventurousness in [Nash's] sexuality" didn't fit into the movie.

"And that was a big question for us—how far to go into that," Crowe told *EW*. "It was relevant to his char-

acter, but we didn't want to imply that there was any possibility that schizophrenia and homosexuality are related. That would be ridiculous."

GLAAD's Seomin calls the argument ridiculous. "We didn't want people to equate homosexuality with schizophrenia? That is probably one of the greatest quotes ever thought up by a film publicist," fumes Seomin. "It's a really weak argument. I want to say, 'Thanks, but don't do us any favors.'"

"That's a great example of not trusting the audience," A.O. Scott agrees. "It's like the parents who don't want their kids to be gay, not because they

Mind represents for the many people who suffer from schizophrenia.

To Constance Lieber, the president of the National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression and the mother of a schizophrenic daughter, it's been a long time coming. "Until *A Beautiful Mind*," says Lieber, "there was no movie that portrayed the really horrific problems of schizophrenia. There wasn't any!"

"Movies about mental health can be like going to the zoo," says Goldsman. "Usually there's the person with the disease, and then there's the normal-person surrogate." We're

"I think that trying to wedge in the possibility of [John Nash's] homosexuality or bisexuality [into the film] would have been irresponsible of us as storytellers," says director Ron Howard. "Especially with Nash always maintaining that it didn't happen."



have anything against gay people, not because they themselves are homophobic, but because society has such prejudices that it would make their lives difficult."

Even if gay audiences are miffed, we can also appreciate what the film means to others. Just imagine for a moment you are a member of a misunderstood, often despised minority. All your life, when you've seen yourself depicted in the movies, you've been the butt of offensive jokes, demonized as pathological and even homicidal. Not hard to do, is it?

Now imagine that for the first time in your life, you can go see a movie that lets people know you are a human being who deserves respect and love. That's what *A Beautiful*

asked to identify with the "normal" person. "But John's story," Goldsman continues, "had so [many] tethers, from a narrative perspective, to let people journey with him; I thought it would be an extraordinary chance to let people experience what it might be like to suffer from this disease."

On that level, the film succeeded, according to Scott and many others. "I think the way they chose to dramatize it is something of a gimmick," says Scott. "But I think it's a pretty good one."

All the arguments about creative decisions aside, it turns out there's a much simpler reason why Howard and Goldsman chose not to use any of the homosexual incidents in Nasar's book: Nash himself didn't want it talked about, and they agreed ▶

from the start not to override him.

The *Los Angeles Times*'s Goldstein was first to report that in order to secure the rights to Nash's life story (for a reported \$1.5 million), the filmmakers gave Nash contractual veto control over any details concerning "homosexuality."

Does this bit of information put the lie to the filmmakers' apparent candor? Not necessarily, says Goldstein. "I think they did what they had to do to get the movie made," he says. "If John Nash believes that he is not gay or was not gay or did not have any gay relationships—is it the filmmaker's right to interpret things differently? That's a pretty tough question to answer."

In the end, that veto clause reflects most tellingly on Nash himself. Nasar's book includes countless disconcerting facts about his life, details any reasonable person might prefer not be splashed across a movie screen. But Nash demanded veto power only over the area of bisexuality. In other words, he was more embarrassed that people might know he had once kissed a man than, for example, the ugly fact that he'd fathered a son out of wedlock and abandoned him for years.

Nash may not have noticed, but the movie isn't entirely devoid of gay subtext. Crowe, who has played gay roles in the past, mentions very subtle touches, such as a scene where Nash is walking down a hallway and turns around to stare at a man walking the other way.

Goldsman feels that more texture was provided by Charles, Nash's roommate, played so winningly by Paul Bettany. "For me, the reflection of emotional intimacy with men was really all about Charles," says Goldsman. "Which to me was effective. I don't know, maybe just I'm overly attracted to Paul Bettany. I just think he is so magnetic, so compelling, so beautiful that that kind of connectiveness lives there."

Still, gay readers seem to draw very different lessons from Nash's life than the filmmakers or even his biographer. Nasar says she never even considered labeling Nash as bisexual "because I think it's a very weird category. It implies to me someone who in a

continuous way goes both ways; one month he's with Betty, one month he's [with Bob]."

When one starts to explain that bisexuals are obviously capable of committed relationships, Nasar good-naturedly throws up her hands. "This is beyond my competence already!" she says. "You know what I'm saying. I just didn't even think much about it."

Therein lies the conundrum. It's clear that nobody connected with *A Beautiful Mind* felt strongly enough about the importance of the gay stuff to fight for its inclusion. It's also clear why. Even if we resent Hollywood's history of de-gay-ing both our true and our fictional stories, *A Beautiful Mind* may work best just as it is.

Is that such a loss, after all? Those facts are still in the book. People can always read it if they want more information. But the truth (and here's the part filmmakers don't like owning up to) is that more people saw *A Beautiful Mind* on its opening weekend than will ever read Nasar's biography. For millions of moviegoers, the film is Nash's life, and one of the more beautiful parts of his mind will go unappreciated.

"When I first read the book," says Scott, "which was before I'd seen the movie, I thought, *What an amazing movie this would be! This stuff is too good to be true.*" Seeing the movie, Scott couldn't help feeling that "a really great opportunity had been missed. I don't think anyone's going to make another movie about John Nash."

Actually, he's wrong. Someone is going to make another movie about John Nash. PBS's *American Experience* will air the documentary *A Brilliant Madness* on April 28. The filmmakers decided to produce the documentary after reading Nasar's book and before realizing a feature film was already in the works.

Director Mark Samels says they went ahead with the project without any expectation of getting Nash to sit

for an interview. After all, Nasar had spent years interviewing his friends, relatives, and colleagues, but Nash never granted her an interview for her biography.

But for whatever reason (Samels isn't sure what it was) Nash decided

he would give the documentarians one, even though their 50-minute film covers many details about his private life that *A Beautiful Mind* doesn't. It covers his mistress, Nash's very poor treatment of the son he had with her, his divorce from Alicia, and the sad fact that their son now suffers from schizophrenia too. The documentary covers virtually all the controversial elements of Nash's life that were left out of the movie. All of them except for the ones concerning his sexuality.

"It's been interesting to see the flak the feature film has taken for that," says Samels. "I have to admit that when we first condensed the story, we immediately cast aside that thread of allegations. It just didn't seem to be central to the story we wanted to tell. It didn't seem to lead anywhere."

Samels went to see the Ron Howard version with Nasar—who appears on-screen in his documentary and who served as a consultant.

"*A Beautiful Mind* achieves a lot of what it sets out to do in terms of mental illness," says Samels, "and it's tremendously accessible and moving. That's a success. If the complexity of his character has been sacrificed, I don't feel like it's right for me to comment on that. I'm struggling with my own problems." Besides, adds Samels, "I don't think the movie says it's based on a real life. I think it says 'inspired by'—doesn't it?" ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the *New York Post*.

THE ADVOCATE POLL

Does the knowledge that gay or lesbian themes have been left out affect your enjoyment of a movie?

Sign on to The Advocate's Web site before April 7 to cast your vote and leave your comments. Results will appear in the April 30 issue.

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Find an exclusive index to the gay content of Nasar's book at www.advocate.com