



A Beautiful Mind

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John Nash was born in Bluefield, West Virginia, in 1928, and in 1945 he entered Carnegie Institute of Technology on a Westinghouse scholarship. Despite a difficult personality, Nash distinguished himself at Carnegie, and during a brilliant career as a graduate student in mathematics at Princeton University he became obsessed with the game theory that led to the work for which he was awarded a Nobel Prize in economics in 1994.

The mathematical theory of games that John von Neumann devised was a so-called “zero sum” contest in which whatever was won by one contestant was lost by his or her adversary. In a paper published in 1950 entitled “The Bargaining Problem,” Nash developed von Neumann’s theory into a more complex understanding of how games could result in draws when all players were at the top of their game. This paper, hailed by economists for its originality, was the basis for much fertile work by social scientists in the next few decades.

Nash’s career after he left Princeton with his PhD was difficult. An appointment at the Rand Center in California ended in his dismissal after he was apprehended by police in a homosexual sting set-up, and from Santa Monica Nash went to MIT where he fathered a son by a young nurse whom he treated despicably. In 1957 Nash married Alicia Larde, with whom he had a second son.

By 1959 Nash was overtaken by paranoid schizophrenia, and for three decades, he was in and out of treatment centers. His spontaneous recovery astonished everyone and probably enabled the Nobel Award.

Journalist Sylvia Nasar’s account of Nash’s personal and professional lives is moving and perceptive. A BEAUTIFUL MIND is a fine biography of a complex man.

Sources for Further Study

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