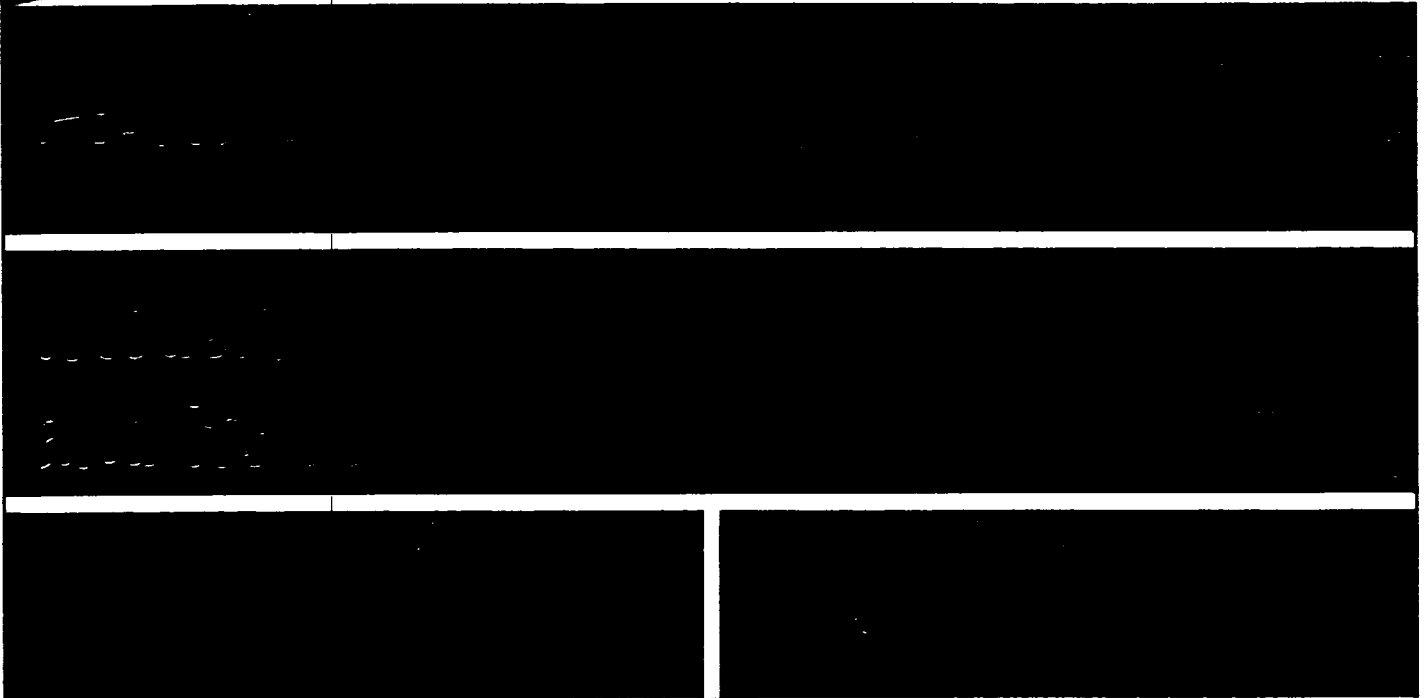
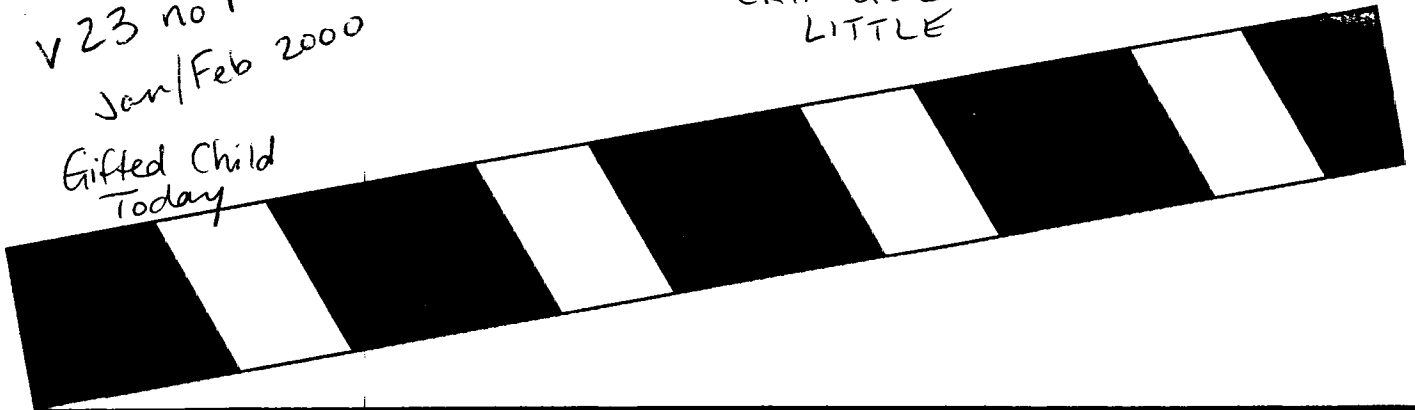


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"Amadeus to Young Einstein: Modern Cinema and its Portrayal of Gifted Learners"

by
Jennifer
Cox

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ifted children have held many pivotal roles in modern, popular cinema. *The Neverending Story* (1984) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) both featured misunderstood young adults who spent more time with their nose in a book than in reality. The plots of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), *Explorers* (1985), and *The Goonies* (1985) all depended on ingenious, mischievous, and clearly gifted children. Movies

like *The Cutting Edge* (1992), *The Natural* (1984), and *The Sandlot* (1993) center around children or young adults with remarkable athletic talents. Despite the abundance of characters, the actual children are typically presented as one-dimensional oddities or abnormalities. By being aware of how the media portray gifted children, teachers, parents, and other adults may have a better idea how the gifted children in their lives perceive themselves.

Children are influenced by the mass media. Music, television, and movies all play a large role in shaping the opinions of children. Palmerton and Judas (1994) found that children's behavior is directly influenced by the commercials and cartoons that they see on television. A look back at the 1980s and the number of teenaged girls who wore off-the-shoulder, torn sweatshirts à la *Flashdance* (1983) is a clear demonstration of Hollywood's influence on popular fashion. A group of Vanderbilt women admitted to going on a steady diet of carrots in middle school after learning from the movie *Sixteen Candles* (1984) that carrots can have a dramatic effect on a woman's body.

Unfortunately, the information that children receive from movies about themselves or other people is not always correct. In a recent study, Safran (1998) found that movies do not accurately represent people with disabilities or the true school environment of people with disabilities. Some films actually support a number of incorrect stereotypes. There is a substantial amount of information available on how mass media and the movies have portrayed people with disabilities (Biklen & Bogdan, 1982; Byrd, 1989; Norden, 1994). There is limited research, though, on how the movies have portrayed gifted children (Newton, 1995). The small amount that exists suggests that gifted children have not fared much better in the eyes of popular media. One teacher in Australia found creative ways to help gifted children deal with the stereotypes they see on the screen by using the films in lessons (Farrall, 1996). Hollinger (1991) found that the career choices of gifted adolescents are influenced by stereotypes perpetrated by American culture. On the smaller screen, there is a deficit of appropriate role models for gifted children (Abelman, 1992). Whether or not modern cinema has provided appropriate

role models is still up for debate. This article takes a brief look at some of the celluloid role models for gifted children and how adults can help young adults deal with the stereotypes they see.

Sample

For this article, the definition created for the Federal Javits Gifted and Talented Education Act of 1988 (Ross, 1993) was used as a guideline when selecting movies that feature gifted children. "Children or youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment." Gifted children in the movies also demonstrate above-average intelligence, skills, or abilities. This demonstration may appear in product form (i.e. art or music), academic proclivity (i.e., comprehension of high-level mathematics), athletic ability (i.e., outstanding physical dexterity and hand-eye coordination), and/or are described by another character in the movie as being gifted, talented, a genius, a prodigy, or other terms reflective of a child with high intelligence, abilities, or skills, including those that are derogatory in nature (e.g., geek, nerd, brain).

The movies selected were gathered from several sources. An informal "brainstorming" session was held during a meeting of the course "Introduction to the Nature and Needs of Gifted Learners" at Vanderbilt University. A list of approximately 50 movies was generated. The class members were asked to name movies that, in their opinion, featured a gifted child. Interestingly, one of the movies mentioned by several members of the class, *Billy Madison* (1995), does not feature a gifted child. One of the lead characters in the movie is a well-spoken, shy boy with only a few friends, but he does not demonstrate any of the

qualities listed above. Without intending to, members of the class were actually perpetrating the myth that gifted children are shy, solitary loners who only find popularity and peer acceptance by being swept under the wing of the "cool" kid in the school.

The *Internet Movie Database* (<http://us.imdb.com>) has a searchable database of movie plots. A search, using the terms *child* and *gifted*, *genius*, *brilliant*, and other terms, resulted in a list similar to the one created by the students in class. The search also uncovered some movies that either were not released in America or had a limited engagement. Since most students have not seen these particular movies and most likely will not be influenced by them, they were not included. After reviewing the movies' plots in Leonard Maltin's *Movie and Video Guide* (1997), the author's own recollection of the movies and select viewing identified four distinct representations of gifted children in the movies emerged:

1. *The brilliant rebel*. Turbulent and misunderstood, the gifted young adult, similar to the Will Hunting character in *Good Will Hunting* (1997), demonstrates characteristic of asynchronous development (Silverman, 1993).

2. *The "super-crip"* (Safran, 1998). Courageous and stoic, the child with a disability who overcomes a disability to develop an amazing gift or talent. Sara, the deaf protagonist in *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), is an excellent example. The "unrealized" potential for the character is used frequently throughout the movie to portray Sara as a pitiful character. Eventually, Sara is able to conquer her disability and find happiness. A popular group of gifted-disabled portrayed in movies is people with unique dual exceptionalities—autism and savant abilities. Safran (1998) devoted much of his paper on disability portray-

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al in Academy Award-winning films. Although *Rain Man* (1988) presents an accurate picture of autism, it perpetrates the myth that "all individuals with autism have a 'hidden genius'" (Safran, 1988, p. 228).

3. *The geek, complete with black, plastic glasses and cowlick, is the perpetual sidekick and a staple of almost every movie featuring children or young adults.* When seen in movies, this version of Hollywood's gifted learner is frequently found against the wall at school dances watching the hero dance with the heroine (*Sixteen Candles*, 1984), falling in love with the unattainable heroine (*Pretty in Pink*, 1986), or coming up with the necessary words or actions to save the day (*The Breakfast Club*, 1985).

4. *The environmental genius.* Frequently played as the genius in hiding, this is the character who is waiting for a patient mentor to come along and save them from themselves. If movies like *Dangerous Minds* (1995) and *Stand and Deliver* (1987) are to be believed, without teachers, some gifted students would waste away. Although this stereotype is not necessarily harmful to children, it does present a predicament for teachers. If none of their children blossom into geniuses under their tutelage, does that mean that they failed as a teacher?

Giftedness and Childhood Angst

"Brilliant Rebel"

It is almost impossible to capture the depth and true nature of any person in a 90-minute movie. When a gifted child is the lead character, the writers and directors must rely on stereotypes to fill in blanks in the story and limit the time needed for character development. The stereotype that frequently emerges presents gifted children in a constant state of inner turmoil. In one of the most pivotal moments

in *Good Will Hunting* (1997), Robin Williams, in the role of a therapist named Sean, tries to come to terms with what Will Hunting's brilliance means. Sean is sharing his thoughts about Will's gifts when he turns to him and admits, "Then I remembered that you're just a kid" (Affleck & Damon, 1997). Despite his brilliance, despite his ability to understand math concepts that baffle professors at MIT, Will Hunting is just a kid. Although the movie does do an excellent job of portraying Will's desire to be just one of the boys, it only briefly touches on the confusion that asynchronous development creates. Silverman (1993) defined giftedness in the frame of asynchronous development as a part of inner experiences that are "qualitatively different from the norm." At one point in the movie, Will apologizes to a math professor, an intellectual peer, when he is able to solve the problem, and the professor is not. "I'm sorry you can't do this! If you could, I wouldn't have to sit here and watch you [mess] it up" (Affleck & Damon, 1997). Though he desires to remain with his chronological peers, he eventually realizes that it is beneficial to him and his future to pursue a career that involves his gifts. The movie can be used as an excellent conversational piece for parents or teachers of gifted children. Addressing the disparity between a child's chronological and mental wants and needs, and working with the child to find balance can help a child avoid Will's flamboyant and violent form of self-expression.

The asynchronous construct of giftedness appears in other films. The title character of *Little Man Tate* (1991) is a seven-year-old who "has ulcers from worrying about world hunger and ozone depletion" (Kempley, 1991). It takes a series of disruptive events for the child to develop friends and realize that he is the son and his mother is the adult. *Contact* (1997), another Jodie Foster movie, is an example of a child who is "wise beyond her years." As a child, Ellie had a deep

understanding of what her "destiny" was and planned her life to meet that goal. "For as long as I can remember, I've been searching for something..." (Sagan & Druyan, 1997). The character of Ellie is not a negative portrayal of a gifted child; but, unlike Will Hunting, who only finds balance in his adult life, Ellie, throughout her life, ignores the playful child part of herself in favor of her gifts.

What is significant about the use of asynchronous development in the film is the strong message it carries. Characters such as Will and Ellie are portrayed as being inherently *different* than other young adults in the movie. Watching movies that present a gifted child in a constant state of distress, destined for either greatness or failure, may support a gifted child's belief that he or she must choose one extreme or the other. Again, adults can help gifted children by talking with them and allowing them to process the feelings or perception of being different than other children.

"Super-Crip"

Although many of the examples of the gifted-disabled in the movies are based on true stories of actual people (*My Left Foot*, 1989; *Shine*, 1996), it is still difficult to present an accurate portrayal of a gifted learner with a disability without using stereotypes. Even teachers and parents can be misled by the stereotypes surrounding children with dual exceptionalities (Johnson, Karnes, & Carr, 1997). *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) tells the story of a deaf woman and her relationship with a hearing teacher. In a review by Maltin (1997), he refers to Sara as "an obviously intelligent woman" (p. 229). During the course of the movie, we learn that Sara used to be a very "bright" girl. Watching this film and others that feature "unsuccessful" gifted people with disabilities (*The Boy Who Could Fly*, 1986), a young viewer may be left with the impression that the person did not try or apply themselves as a child.



The unique dichotomy represented by children with dual exceptionalities in popular films can lead to a variety of misconceptions about children with gifts or children with disabilities. If Hollywood is to be believed, children with dual exceptionalities can be risks to national security (*Mercury Rising*, 1998) or freaks of nature (*Powder*, 1995). Again, conversations or activities that address what gifted children see in films can help them come to terms with what they see and feel. Since many of the films that deal with the lives of adults or children with dual exceptionalities are based on true stories, teachers of gifted children should encourage their students to investigate the story presented in the film. By comparing autobiographies or biographies and other historical evidence about the character within the film, the students may find concrete proof of how Hollywood distorts reality to tell a better story.

The Loyal Sidekick

An understated example of the geeky, brainy, sidekick stereotype is in *Stand by Me* (1986). The adult Gordie is established as a successful and prolific writer, but the young Gordie is unsure of his abilities. During a camping excursion with his friends, it takes a pep talk from Gordie's cooler and more popular best friend to commit himself to his writing.

In the popular movie *The Goonies* (1985), the brilliant young inventor, Data, loyally sticks by his friends and ends up saving the day several times. Duckie in *Pretty in Pink* (1986), is referred to as a "geek" and is unquestionably devoted to his best friend. He also spends several scenes in the movie deliberately feigning stupidity in order to get the pretty girl to spend time with him. The impression gifted and typical children alike may get from the movie is that, without their more popular, cooler

friends, gifted children might find themselves living a life of utter despair. There are few exceptions to the rule that being gifted automatically makes a student unpopular. One of the most recent exceptions is *Clueless* (1995). The lead character that inspired thousands of girls to master the art of head tossing and using the phrase "As if!" appropriately teaches a protégée that books and studying are vital to popularity. It is important to note that a popular, beautiful, smart character in a successful movie saw nothing wrong with reading books on the weekends and using large words in casual conversation.

The use of a gifted child as a sidekick may not affect younger children, but during the high school years, when conformity is often a key to success, being viewed as a brain may discourage a child from exploring their strengths. If a successful gifted child suddenly stops doing work, or no longer seems interested in enrichment activities, it is very possible that the student has made the decision to mute his or her intelligence in response to the social atmosphere at his or her school. An evening around the TV with *Stand by Me* or *Clueless* can provide a starting point for parents and children to discuss the realities of being a gifted child.

Environmental Geniuses

Bruce: Do you know what it means to have "contempt" for your opponent?

Josh: No.

Bruce: It means to hate them. You have to hate them, Josh; they hate you.

Josh: But I don't hate them.

Bruce: Well you'd better start. (Waitzkin, 1993)

Searching for Bobby Fischer (1993) is not only an excellent movie, but it also takes a sensitive approach to the issue of child prodigies. The director made a

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clear decision to portray the lead character as a multi-dimensional child and not just a brain with a cute smile and legs. The talent of the main character goes undeveloped until his parents find a chess coach for him. As in the dialogue above, the coach attempts to teach the child to become tough like Bobby Fischer. By the end of the movie, there is a communal understanding that Bobby Fischer was not a healthy man, and in order for Josh to remain healthy, he has to stay a child for as long as he can. Other movies are not as careful about presenting the complex issues that gifted children face.

Movies like *Dangerous Minds* (1995) and *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995) shamelessly present their gifted children as potential "failures" without the intervention of the main character. Mentoring has been successful for gifted children and is recommended (Swassing & Fichter, 1991), but it is unfair to place the responsibility for a gifted child's future and intellect on the shoulders of one person. Excellent teachers notwithstanding, a gifted child needs more support than one good teacher alone can provide. The environmental genius scenario is more frequently seen in the form of an ordinary child developing his or her gifts and talents when faced with extraordinary circumstances (*Braveheart*, 1995; *Mulan*, 1998). Gifted children cannot make it on their own and need support and encouragement to develop their talents—and not from just one person, but from a multidisciplinary team that can address the child as a whole being.

Conclusion

There are dozens more movies that feature gifted learners. This article deals with only a few of them, and more in-depth research, including an annotated

list of movies with gifted learners, could provide teachers with an excellent resource. A list generated by gifted children themselves could provide multiple opportunities for discussion, analysis, and self-reflection for the gifted children. A compilation of reviews of movies about gifted children by gifted children would create a resource for teachers and adults around the country. A class might also be interested in writing a script or screenplay featuring a gifted child. Teachers and parents need to be aware of the stereotypes that children are exposed to at the movies. Adults should not hesitate to bring up the topic after seeing a movie that has a gifted character. Was the character accurately portrayed? Did the writer rely on stereotypes to tell the character's story? Asking the child questions and allowing the child to ask questions can help the child determine his or her own identity, without the biased influence of Hollywood.

Teachers of gifted children find it difficult to combat the stereotypes and clichés presented by the mass media.



Regardless of the problems teachers will face, the problems will not be as difficult as dealing with the stereotypes on a first-hand basis. One of the most famous "geeks" to emerge from the 1980s summed up the entire issue at the end of the movie, *The Breakfast Club*:

We think you're crazy to make us write an essay telling you who we think we are. What do you care? You see us as you want to see us. In the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions, you see us as: a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Correct? That's the way we saw each other at seven o'clock this morning. We were brainwashed. (Hughes, 1985)

It is the responsibility of influential adults in the lives of all gifted students to ensure that our students, gifted or not, are not "brainwashed" and shoved into "convenient definitions" created by the movies. Instead of seeing them as a genius struggling with constant inner turmoil and angst, a "super-crip" (Safran, 1998), a prodigy-in-waiting, or a geeky sidekick just waiting for a cool kid to worship, we should treat them as they deserve to be treated—as children with something extra to offer the world.

GGT

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Movies Containing Gifted Children Class List and the Internet Movie Database

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|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Amadeus</i> (1984) | <i>Goonies, The</i> (1985) | <i>Rain Man</i> (1988) |
| <i>Anna to the Infinite Power</i> (1983) | <i>Good Will Hunting</i> (1997) | <i>Real Genius</i> (1985) |
| <i>Breakfast Club, The</i> (1985) | <i>Hackers</i> (1995) | <i>Sandler, The</i> (1993) |
| <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (1991) | <i>Heathers</i> (1989) | <i>Say Anything</i> (1989) |
| <i>Boy Who Could Fly, The</i> (1986) | <i>Little Man Tate</i> (1991) | <i>Searching for Bobby Fischer</i> (1993) |
| <i>Braveheart</i> (1995) | <i>Matilda</i> (1996) | <i>Sixteen Candles</i> (1984) |
| <i>Can't Buy Me Love</i> (1987) | <i>Mercury Rising</i> (1998) | <i>She's All That</i> (1999) |
| <i>Children of a Lesser God</i> (1986) | <i>Mighty, The</i> (1998) | <i>Shine</i> (1996) |
| <i>Class Act</i> (1992) | <i>Mr. Holland's Opus</i> (1995) | <i>Some Kind of Wonderful</i> (1987) |
| <i>Clueless</i> (1995) | <i>Mulan</i> (1996) | <i>Stand and Deliver</i> (1987) |
| <i>Contact</i> (1997) | <i>My Left Foot</i> (1989) | <i>Stand by Me</i> (1986) |
| <i>Curly Sue</i> (1991) | <i>Natural, The</i> (1984) | <i>Think Big</i> (1990) |
| <i>Cutting Edge, The</i> (1992) | <i>Neverending Story, The</i> (1984) | <i>Twister</i> (1996) |
| <i>Dangerous Minds</i> (1995) | <i>Pi</i> (1998) | <i>Weird Science</i> (1985) |
| <i>Dead Poets Society</i> (1989) | <i>Paper</i> (1995) | <i>Young Einstein</i> (1988) |
| <i>Ferris Bueller's Day Off</i> (1986) | <i>Presby in Pink</i> (1986) | |