Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany pair up in two suspenseful dramas centered on overcoming seemingly impossible obstacles. *A Beautiful Mind*, an intense biopic , and *Master and Commander*, a dynamic battle sequence, both rated PG-13.

In *A Beautiful Mind*, after struggling to make a name for himself, John Forbes Nash, Jr. (played by Russell Crowe), a mathematical genius, makes an amazing discovery early in his career, which eventually earns him the Nobel Prize. Nash turns to teaching after graduate school and becomes romantically involved with his student, Alicia. Boosting Nash’s ego, the government asks his help with breaking Soviet codes, which gets him involved with a horrifying conspiracy plot. Nash becomes more and more paranoid until he soon finds himself on a painful and harrowing journey of self-discovery.

*Master and Commander* takes place during the Napoleonic Wars, where the British ship, HMS Surprise, under the command of Captain Jack Aubrey (played by Russell Crowe), has orders to track and sink or capture the French vessel named Acheron. After the initial battle, off the coast of South America, Aubrey learns he is at a huge disadvantage against the much larger and faster Acheron. Along with his close friend and trusted advisor, Stephan Maturin (played by Paul Bettany), Aubrey now faces the choice of admitting defeat and retreating to England or continuing in a seemingly impossible pursuit.

The character development in *A Beautiful Mind* was phenomenal, with Russell Crowe’s character searching for and discovering change within himself. Roger Ebert, a movie critic, says, “He (Crowe) shows a man who descends into madness and then, unexpectedly, regains the ability to function in the academic world.” The growth Crowe’s character made throughout his life is a remarkable accomplishment. However in *Master and Commander*, everything there is to know about Crowe’s character gets disclosed within the first couple of scenes. Movie critic, Roger Ebert says, “Aubrey, the realist, the man of action; Maturin, more intellectual and pensive. Each shares some of the other’s qualities, and their lifelong debate represents two sides of human nature.” I think the director did a great job showing these “two sides of human nature”, but I would have liked to see more growth in their personality. Life continually teaches us about ourselves and redefines our qualities.

In addition to the character development, the conflict is also much stronger in *A Beautiful Mind*. Crowe’s character, in *A Beautiful Mind,* experiences conflict on many levels; with his wife, his roommate (played by Paul Bettany), other acquaintances, as well as internally. Whereas I felt the conflict was one-dimensional in *Master and Commander*, focusing on Crowe’s character’s single-mindedness to prevail.

Despite the differences seen in the conflict and character development, I am drawn to the shared theme of overcoming great obstacles when the odds are against you. I think everyone can relate to being faced with hopeless challenges. I particularly connected with the line in *A Beautiful Mind*, “I need to believe that something extraordinary is possible.” Extraordinary things happen when people think outside the box, as Crowe’s character does in both of these films.

I recommend both films for audiences older than 13. Throughout *A Beautiful Mind*, there are teachable moments. *Master and Commander* may be more interesting if you happen to have a love for history.