



Real Genius

Real Genius is a 1985 American science fiction comedy film directed by Martha Coolidge, written by Neal Israel, Pat Proft, and Peter Torokvei, and starring Val Kilmer and Gabriel Jarret. The film is set on the campus of Pacific Tech, a science and engineering university similar to Caltech. Chris Knight (Kilmer) is a genius in his senior year working on a chemical laser. Mitch Taylor (Jarret) is a new student on campus who is paired up with Knight to work on the project.

The film received positive reviews from critics, and it grossed \$12 million at the North American box office.

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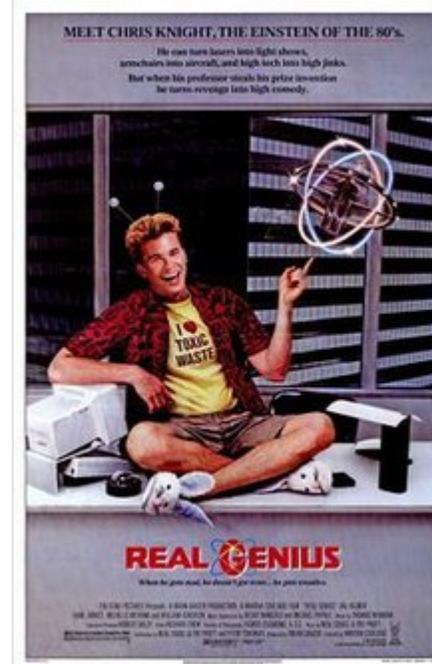
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Plot

The CIA is secretly developing "Crossbow", a space shuttle-mounted laser weapon precise enough to incinerate a single target from outer space, planning to use it for illegal political assassinations. However, they struggle with its power source, and have covertly hired Professor Jerry Hathaway at Pacific Technical University to develop this. Hathaway has assembled a group of brilliant physics students to do the work for him, though, outside of his graduate student Kent, purposely does not tell them the reason for their research. Hathaway is also embezzling the CIA provided funds intended for research so that he can upgrade his house.

Hathaway recruits high school student Mitch Taylor to attend Pacific Tech and join the "laser weapon" development team. Mitch is roomed with Chris Knight, also a member of the team, and known to

Real Genius



Theatrical release poster

Directed by	<u>Martha Coolidge</u>
Produced by	<u>Brian Grazer</u>
Screenplay by	<u>Neal Israel</u> <u>Pat Proft</u> <u>Peter Torokvei</u>
Story by	<u>Neal Israel</u> <u>Pat Proft</u>
Starring	<u>Val Kilmer</u> <u>Gabe Jarret</u> <u>Michelle Meyrink</u> <u>William Atherton</u>
Music by	<u>Thomas Newman</u>
Cinematography	<u>Vilmos Zsigmond</u>
Edited by	<u>Richard Chew</u>

Mitch as a "legend" in the fictitious "National Physics Club". Mitch becomes dismayed that Chris is more of a goof-off than a hard-working student. Chris introduces Mitch to some of the other exceptional students, including Jordan, "Ick" Ikagami, and his nemesis, the less intelligent Kent. Despite Mitch's age and inexperience, Hathaway assigns him to lead the team due to his innovative and original ideas in the field of laser physics, hoping that he will encourage Chris to straighten up his act, and that perhaps together, the two exceptionally bright minds will solve the crucial power problem that is the only remaining obstacle to completing the weapon.

Hathaway begins to be pressured by the CIA to hurry the project and is given a deadline, and he in turn assigns the team a rigorous timetable. Chris, however, continues his carefree attitude, eventually inviting Mitch to a pool party. Kent reports this to Hathaway, pulling him away from filming his television show. In front of Kent at the party, Hathaway lambastes Mitch, who in tears calls his parents and tells them he wants to go home (unaware that Kent and his friends were recording the call). The next day, Kent plays the recording over the school's public address system at lunch, humiliating Mitch. Mitch begins packing, now intent on leaving Pacific Tech, and Chris tries to reason with him as to why he should reconsider his decision by advising him on how to deal with the pressures and burdens of being highly intelligent and relating his own history and former student, Lazlo Hollyfeld's at Pacific Tech. Lazlo, as a result of "cracking", dropped off the map apparently, and Chris felt that the same could happen to him or any other super-intelligent person unless they lighten-up and enjoy life *in addition* to devoting themselves to their work. Mitch agrees to stay, and Chris suggests that their first priority is to exact revenge on Kent (by placing his car in his dorm room cycling the Citroën's air suspension so it appears to be sleeping).

As the project is still lagging, the CIA continues to put pressure on Hathaway to produce the laser. Hathaway, now intimidated and afraid, angrily informs Chris that he is no longer of any use to him and that he is not only off the project, but that he intends to fail Chris in his final course needed for graduation. To further add insult to injury, he is giving a coveted "after-graduation" job, which was promised to Chris, to Kent instead and will take steps to ensure that Chris will never be able to find work in the field of laser physics. Now faced with his mentor having to leave in disgrace, Mitch uses the same logic and reasoning used by Chris on him to convince Chris to stay and persevere, and with help from Lazlo and their other smart friends, the two commit themselves to attain their goal with the laser and for Chris to pass Hathaway's final exam and graduate. Their hard work and dedication begin to pay off, and they are close to achieving their objective. Chris passes the exam, but in a final effort to humiliate and exact revenge on Chris and Mitch, Kent sabotages their latest apparatus, which showed the promise of succeeding, but inadvertently gives himself away as the perpetrator. Unable to actually prove it was Kent, Chris is left to brood over the injustice, and in a moment of inspiration, he comes up with a whole new approach to the design problem. In the impressive demonstration of his innovative solution that follows, Hathaway relents and congratulates Chris and assures him that he will now graduate and get his promised job. The jubilant Chris and Mitch go out to celebrate their apparent success with their friends, blissfully unaware of the real reason for the creation of the laser. Lazlo unexpectedly arrives to join their celebration apparently, but actually was looking for them to tell them his theories and suspicions regarding the possible use of their unique design. They finally realize that they have been duped. By the time they return to the lab, all of the laser equipment, along with a mirror built by Kent for a target tracking system, has been taken by Hathaway and is already in the hands of the nefarious government agency who contracted the project.

Production company	Delphi III Productions
Distributed by	TriStar Pictures
Release date	August 7, 1985
Running time	106 minutes
Country	United States
Language	English
Budget	\$8 million ^[1]
Box office	\$13 million (North America)

The students are able to implant a radio transmitter in Kent's mouth, and Mitch uses it to speak to him through it making Kent believe Mitch is Jesus; Kent divulges the location of a nearby Air Force base where Hathaway will be demonstrating the equipment. Chris and Mitch sneak onto the base and reprogram the onboard computer to allow them to control it so Lazlo can reposition the target of the laser. Along with the rest of their team, they go to Dr. Hathaway's home and prepare something involving a small prism mirror on the outside of one of the windows and many boxes inside. They gather outside of the home to watch with one of the school's other professors and a Congressman. Kent, who was told by "Jesus" to go to the house but remain outside, arrives and goes inside. As the laser test begins, the changes cause the target to be Hathaway's house so it hits the mirror prism, heating and popping the large amount of popcorn inside. Before long, the house fills with popcorn, eventually causing it to burst at the seams, sending Kent out through the front door. Due to the laser hitting the wrong target, Hathaway investigates where the blast did go, only to find that it hit his house instead. Chris, Mitch, and the others look on at the popcorn mess in amusement as kids jump around in it like snow as Tears for Fear's *Everybody Wants to Rule the World* plays. Lazlo, who had submitted numerous entries for a sweepstakes contest with calculated mathematical odds, arrives in his recently-won RV and other prizes with his lady love. At dusk, Hathaway arrives to see what has become of his house.

Cast

- Val Kilmer as Chris Knight
- Gabriel Jarret as Mitch Taylor
- Michelle Meyrink as Jordan Cochran
- William Atherton as Prof. Jerry Hathaway
- Robert Prescott as Kent
- Jon Gries as Lazlo Hollyfeld
- Mark Kamiyama as "Ick" Ikagami
- Ed Lauter as David Decker
- Louis Giambalvo as Major Carnagle
- Patti D'Arbanville as Sherry Nugil
- Severn Darden as Dr. Meredith
- Beau Billingslea as George
- Joanne Baron as Mrs. Taylor
- Sandy Martin as Mrs. Meredith
- Dean Devlin as Milton
- Yuji Okumoto as Fenton
- Deborah Foreman as Susan Decker
- Stacy Peralta as shuttle pilot

Production

To prepare for *Real Genius*, Martha Coolidge spent months researching laser technology and the policies of the CIA, and interviewed dozens of students at Caltech.^[2] The screenplay was extensively rewritten, first by Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel, later by Coolidge and Peter Torokvei.^[3]

Producer Brian Grazer remembers that when Val Kilmer came in to audition for the role of Chris Knight, he brought candy bars and performed tricks. Kilmer remembered it differently. "The character wasn't polite, so when I shook Grazer's hand and he said, 'Hi, I'm the producer,' I said, 'I'm sorry. You look like

you're 12 years old. I like to work with men."^[4]

To achieve the house filled with popcorn for the film's climax, the production team popped popcorn continuously for three months. The popcorn was treated with fire retardant so it would not combust and covered so that it would not be eaten by birds and possibly poison them. The popcorn was then shipped to a subdivision under construction in Canyon Country, northwest of Los Angeles, and placed in the house.^[5]

To promote the film, the studio held what it billed as "the world's first computer press conference" with Coolidge and Grazer answering journalists' questions via computer terminals and relayed over the CompuServe computer network.^[6]

The dorm in the film is based on Dabney House at Caltech, and Caltech students served as consultants and played extras in the film.^[7]

Reception

Box office

Real Genius was released on August 9, 1985 in 990 theaters grossing \$2.5 million in its first weekend. It went on to make \$12,952,019 in North America.^[8]

Critical response

Colin Greenland reviewed *Real Genius* for White Dwarf #85, and stated that "yet another celebration of the anxious wonder of growing up white, middle-class and heterosexual in America. The lovable weirdos squabble in the lab, play hi-tech pranks in the dorm and party in the lecture theatre. Nerds just wanna have fun. Nerds have feelings too. Hug a Nerd today."^[9]

As of May 2020, *Real Genius* holds a rating of 73% on Rotten Tomatoes based on 30 reviews.^[10]

In her review for The New York Times, Janet Maslin wrote, "the film is best when it takes [the students] seriously, though it does so only intermittently".^[11] David Ansen wrote in his review for Newsweek, "When it's good, the dormitory high jinks feel like the genuine release of teen-age tensions and cruelty. Too bad the story isn't as smart as the kids in it".^[12] In her review for the Washington Post, Rita Kempley wrote, "Many of the scenes, already badly written, fail to fulfill their screwball potential... But despite its enthusiastic young cast and its many good intentions, it doesn't quite succeed. I guess there's a leak in the think tank".^[13]

Chicago Sun Times film critic Roger Ebert awarded the film three and a half stars out of four, saying that it "contains many pleasures, but one of the best is its conviction that the American campus contains life as we know it".^[14] In his review for The Globe and Mail, Salem Alaton wrote, "Producer Brian Grazer craved a feel-good picture, and she [Martha Coolidge] turned in the summer's best, and she didn't cheat to do it. There's heart in the kookiness. *Real Genius* has real people, real comedy and real fun".^[15] Richard Schickel of Time praised the film for being "a smart, no-nonsense movie that may actually teach its prime audience a valuable lesson: the best retort to an intolerable situation is not necessarily a food fight. Better results, and more fun, come from rubbing a few brains briskly together".^[16]

Scientific accuracy

In the *MythBusters* episode "Car vs. Rain", first broadcast on June 17, 2009, the *MythBusters* team tried to determine whether the final scene in the film, the destruction of Dr. Hathaway's house with laser-popped popcorn, is actually possible. First they used a ten-watt laser to pop a single kernel wrapped in aluminum foil, showing that popping corn is possible with a laser. Then they tested a scaled-down model of a house. The popcorn was popped through induction heating because a sufficiently large laser was not available. The result was that the popcorn was unable to expand sufficiently to break glass, much less break open a door or move the house off its foundation. Instead, it ceased to expand and then simply charred.^[17]

It was also specifically stated in the program that a five-megawatt laser still did not exist, even in military applications, and that the most powerful military laser they knew of was 100 kilowatts.^[17]

In January 2011, it was further demonstrated on video^[18] in a home setting that a kernel of corn directly exposed to laser light from accessible consumer level lasers could be popped as reported by *TechCrunch*.^[19]

The solid xenon-halogen laser proposed and built by Chris in the latter half of the film, though in the realm of science fiction, was based on a theory of the time. *Real Genius*, through consultant Martin A. Gundersen (who played the math professor), was later cited in an academic publication that detailed the scientific basis behind the laser.^[20]

Television series

Reports surfaced in September 2014 that a potential television series was in the works.^[21] NBC was set to produce the comedy series with Sony TV, Happy Madison and 3 Arts Entertainment.^[22] As of December 2017 there are no updates on the production.

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External links

- *Real Genius* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089886/>) on IMDb
 - *Real Genius* (<https://www.allmovie.com/movie/v40548>) at AllMovie
 - *Real Genius* (https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/real_genius) at Rotten Tomatoes
 - *Real Genius* (<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=realgenius.htm>) at Box Office Mojo
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