

## GOOD WILL HUNTING \_\_\_\_\_ (9.5/10)

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*"Just playing"... with a little help from his friends*

*Written by Matt Damon*

*Written by Ben Affleck*

*Directed by Gus Van Sant*

Robin Williams ... Sean Maguire

Matt Damon ... Will Hunting

Ben Affleck ... Chuckie Sullivan

Stellan Skarsgård ... Prof. Gerald Lambeau

Minnie Driver ... Skylar

Casey Affleck ... Morgan O'Mally

Cole Hauser ... Billy McBride

*Will: Beethoven, okay. He looked at a piano, and it just made sense to him. He could just play.*

*Skylar: So what are you saying? You play the piano?*

*Will: No, not a lick. I mean, I look at a piano, I see a bunch of keys, three pedals, and a box of wood. But Beethoven, Mozart, they saw it, they could just play. I couldn't paint you a picture, I probably can't hit the ball out of Fenway, and I can't play the piano.*

*Skylar: But you can do my o-chem paper in under an hour.*

*Will: Right. Well, I mean when it came to stuff like that... I could always just play.*

For a subtitle, I was going to use something like political-romantic, psych thriller buddy movie, but the quote above suggests the more descriptive "I could just play." Both Matt Damon and Ben Affleck at that time in their careers (1997) have been in front of a camera a few times... and they're smarter than the average bears. Who knows how the creative process works? Just as Sylvester Stallone hit a grand-slam home run his first time at the plate, writing and acting *Rocky*, Damon and Affleck do the same with *Good Will Hunting*... and they hit their monster homer at Fenway Park in Boston, no less, where they actually grew up as friends.

There's a little bit of life imitating art in this movie, insofar as Matt Damon is concerned; the origin of the screenplay for *Good Will Hunting* is a class project he completed at Harvard, where he was accepted into the English program. (He did not complete his degree, which would have happened in 1992, because he basically devoted himself to acting work instead. Trivia: He got his formal start in movies in the 1988 Julia Roberts' hit, *Mystic Pizza*, in a brief scene as the boyfriend's—the boyfriend with the beautiful 911 Porsche that the Roberts' character dumps a load of dead fish into—kid brother at the dinner table.)

Damon grew up in middle-class communities in the Boston metroplex, yet obviously honed his sensitivity to the Southie (South Boston) Irish-American culture on the other side of the tracks. Matt's Southie character, Will Hunting, is a ruffian street boy from broken and foster homes, who nevertheless has an off-the-charts intellectual capability—particularly in mathematics. His best friend is Chuckie (Ben Affleck), who, with a couple of other potential, borderline Southie hoodlums—Morgan (Casey Affleck) and Billy (Cole Hauser)—picks Will up daily for Will's janitor job at MIT.

As a custodian there, Will happens to be cleaning and polishing floors in a section of the mathematics department classrooms. Specifically, Professor Gerald Lambeau (Stellan Skarsgård), a prestigious Fields' Medal winner, teaches a large class in that section. One day, Lambeau decides to give his students a particularly challenging problem to solve, and he posts the problem on a blackboard in the hallway outside the room.

### ***Following paragraph is minimal spoiler alert:***

In order to explain the Gestalt of the movie, I must reveal here that Will, over a few days' time, solves the problem, secretly providing his answer on the blackboard in the hallway. Lambeau posts a second problem... which he catches Will working on, and Will runs away. Lambeau determines Will's identity, then—because Will has gotten in trouble again on the street and will be sentenced to considerable jail time—

Lambeau intervenes with the authorities. A condition of Will's release into Lambeau's supervision is that Will must undergo psychotherapy.

### ***Resuming my movie review:***

Ultimately, Will winds up doing his mandatory psychotherapy with a college-days friend of Lambeau's, Sean Maguire (Robin Williams). Maguire is a Southie himself. The essence of the remainder of GWH is the question of the nature of Will's inner demons and whether he will conquer them with the help of Dr. Maguire, through his relationship with his homey friends, and/or through his newfound love, Skylar (Minnie Driver). If I have any contrary comments about the movie it's that the relationship between Will and Skylar is drawn too quickly; she comes to see something deeply lovable in him in the span of a few weeks.

And that perception of hers contrasts with the early period of Hunting's therapy with Sean, in which we see him exhibiting a harsh judgmentalism of everyone—all of whom are his intellectual inferiors. We wonder if that harshness will affect his growing affection for Skylar. Combined with the reactive hypercriticism are Will's protests that his common-man existence is ennobling: I'm thinking Jack Nicholson in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) or the Sam Elliot masterpiece *Lifeguard*. Some interesting food for thought in there, especially when one contrasts the relative honor of life as a common laborer vs. being a highly paid government-corporate employee.

The following response to Matt's interview with the National Security Agency I will someday have framed and placed on the wall:

*Will: Why shouldn't I work for the NSA? That's a tough one, but I'll take a shot. Say I'm working at NSA. Somebody puts a code on my desk, something nobody else can break. Maybe I take a shot at it and maybe I break it. And I'm real happy with myself, 'cause I did my job well. But maybe that code was the location of some rebel army in North Africa or the Middle East. Once they have that location, they bomb the village where the rebels were hiding and fifteen hundred people I never met, never had no problem with, get killed. Now the politicians are sayin', "Oh, send in the Marines to secure the area," 'cause they don't give a shit. It won't be their kid over there, gettin' shot. Just like it wasn't them when their number got called, 'cause they were pullin' a tour in the National Guard. It'll be some kid from Southie takin' shrapnel in the ass. And he comes back to find that the plant he used to work at got exported to the country he just got back from. And the guy who put the shrapnel in his ass got his old job, 'cause he'll work for fifteen cents a day and no bathroom breaks. Meanwhile, he realizes the only reason he was over there in the first place was so we could install a government that would sell us oil at a good price. And, of course, the oil companies used the skirmish over there to scare up domestic oil prices. A cute little ancillary benefit for them, but it ain't helping my buddy at two-fifty a gallon. And they're takin' their sweet time bringin' the oil back, of course, and maybe even took the liberty of hiring an alcoholic skipper who likes to drink martinis and fuckin' play slalom with the icebergs, and it ain't too long 'til he hits one, spills the oil and kills all the sea life in the North Atlantic. So now my buddy's out of work and he can't afford to drive, so he's got to walk to the fuckin' job interviews, which sucks 'cause the shrapnel in his ass is givin' him chronic hemorrhoids. And meanwhile he's starvin', 'cause every time he tries to get a bite to eat, the only blue plate special they're servin' is North Atlantic scrod with Quaker State. So what did I think? I'm holdin' out for somethin' better. I figure fuck it, while I'm at it why not just shoot my buddy, take his job, give it to his sworn enemy, hike up gas prices, bomb a village, club a baby seal, hit the hash pipe and join the National Guard? I could be elected president.*

Whew! IMHO[1], Matt Damon just earned the Academy Award for best actor... for this scene and for one of the final scenes with Robin Williams. Awesome performance, simply an incredible performance. [Damon was nominated for best actor (and, with Affleck, won for best screenplay), but Jack Nicholson won best actor that year for *As Good as It Gets*. Competition was monster in 1997: other best actor nominees were Robert Duvall for *The Apostle*, Peter Fonda for *Ulee's Gold*, and Dustin Hoffman for *Wag the Dog*.]

Ben Affleck is outstanding, too, the friendship is memorable. Robin Williams does win the Oscar for best supporting actor.

So in a few ways—the above scene not so subtly—*Good Will Hunting* makes a powerful political statement. It certainly elicits high sympathy from a younger audience seeking to get ahead but not sell out to the evil corporate-government Matrix. How will someone as smart as "the good" Will Hunting solve the problem?

The best coming-of-age movie, at least the most dramatic, of all time.

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[1] in my humble opinion

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*Good Will Hunting* | *Fields' Medal* | *Robin Williams* | *Matt Damon* | *Southies*