The Imitation Game: "Am I a machine? Am I a war hero? Am I a criminal?"

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Directed by Morten Tyldum; screenplay by Graham Moore; based on the book by Andrew Hodges

In *The Imitation Game*, screenwriter Graham Moore and director Morten Tyldum attempt to come to terms with the complicated life and work of Alan Turing (1912-1954), the brilliant British mathematician, computer scientist, cryptanalyst and logician. Turing played an important role for British intelligence during World War II in breaking German ciphers. He was later prosecuted for homosexuality and committed suicide a few weeks before his 42nd birthday.

According to Andrew Hodges, in his thorough and fascinating biography, *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (first published in 1983), on which *The Imitation Game* is very loosely based, Turing arrived, in the mid-1930s, at the conclusion that "one particular machine could simulate the work done by any machine. He called it the universal machine. It would be designed to read description numbers, decode them into tables, and execute them. … It would be a machine to do everything."

As Douglas Hofstadter's preface to Hodges' book suggests, "the universal machine of 1936 … became the general-purpose digital computer in 1945." Turing's conception "became known immediately as 'the Turing machine' but now it is impossible not to see Turing machines as computer programs, or software." That same preface also notes that the scientist was "a multifaceted man whose honesty and decency were too much for his society and his times, and who brought about his own downfall."

The film opens in 1951, as police investigate a robbery at Turing's home (the mathematician is played by Benedict Cumberbatch) in Manchester. His rude manner suggests to one of the cops that the professor doesn't want anyone looking into his personal affairs, and determines to do just that. "Alan Turing is hiding something," he asserts. Scenes of the police investigation recur throughout.

After this quasi-prologue, *The Imitation Game* jumps back in time to the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Alan Turing has been recruited to work for the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) at Bletchley Park, in southern England, Britain's codebreaking center. During an unpleasant first encounter with the bullying Commander Denniston (Charles Dance), he explains "Politics is not my area of expertise." Alan sets to work with his fellow team members to break the German Enigma machine.

The machine is considered unbreakable by various intelligence agencies because to decode its messages, as Denniston points out, "you need to know the machine's settings. The Germans switch settings every day, promptly at midnight." Turing and company quickly calculate that there are "over one hundred and fifty million million [in fact, some 159,000,000,000,000,000,000] possible settings."

Alan has difficulty collaborating with the rest of the team, which includes Hugh Alexander (Matthew Goode), John Cairncross (Allen Leech) and Peter Hilton (Matthew Beard), along with two others. In front of them all, he tells his superiors, Denniston and Stewart Menzies (Mark Strong) of MI-6, "I don't have time to explain myself as I go along, and I'm afraid these men will only slow me down."

Scenes of Alan's time at secondary school (Alex Lawther plays the young Turing) in the late 1920s underscore his eccentricity and isolation. His only friend at school, on whom he has a powerful crush, is Christopher Morcom (Jack Bannon). Unhappily, the relationship is short-lived and Alan is left entirely alone.

Back in wartime, Turing has determined to design "a machine that will allow us to break every message, every day, instantly." The others scoff, and his refusal to take part in their own efforts at first infuriates them, Alexander in particular. Turing, obstructed in his attempts to obtain parts and equipment for his massive machine, writes a letter to Prime Minister Winston Churchill and soon finds himself in charge of the operation. He fires two of the team, and looks for new recruits. Mathematician Joan Clarke (Keira Knightley) is one of two applicants who make the grade. She and Alan become friends.

Joan has read his paper on the "universal machine," a machine not only programmable, but "*re*-programmable." Yes, he explains, he has in mind a device that has the ability "to make a calculation, and then to determine what to do next. Like a person does. Think of it: An electrical brain. A digital computer."

Denniston continues to demonstrate hostility toward Turing and ultimately tries to shut down the entire machine-building project. Meanwhile, Joan convinces Alan to be friendlier to Alexander and the others, since "you're going to need all the help you can get. And they are not going to help you if they do not like you."

In the end, Turing and his team find a means of speeding up the machine's operations. The war comes to an end, and all the team members are sworn to absolute secrecy about their activities in Bletchley Park. *The Imitation Game* then treats Alan's sad fate at the hands of others and his own.

Turing's story is fascinating and disturbing. No doubt all those involved were moved by it to one extent or another. One cannot read Hodges' book without developing an immense admiration and deep feeling for this extraordinary, "schoolboyish" man, about whom his wartime colleague Hugh Alexander once commented, "He was always impatient of pompousness or officialdom of any kind—indeed it was incomprehensible to him; authority to him was based solely on reason and the only grounds for being in charge was that you had a better

grasp of the subject involved than anyone else." Another friend once commented that Turing "had a lack of reverence for everything except the truth."

Hodges pointedly notes that "money, commerce and competition … played no obvious part in the central developments in which Alan Turing was enmeshed." He was also, writes the biographer, "an anti-technocrat, subversively diminishing the authority of the new priests and magicians of the world. He wanted to make intellectuals into ordinary people."

Turing asked himself a great many complex questions and his principal motivation, Hodges suggests, was "a fascination with knowledge itself, in this case with an understanding of the magic of the human mind." As the scientist himself once remarked in the late 1940s, in regard to the nascent computer, "I am more interested in the possibility of producing models of the action of the brain than in the practical applications to computing." Hodges writes, "At every stage his life raised questions about the connection (or lack of it) between the mind and the body, thought and action, intelligence and operations, science and society, the individual and history."

Does *The Imitation Game* do justice to all this? No, but comprehensively summing up such a life would probably be difficult for any art work. One feels the screenwriter, given all the limitations of our day, has made a sincere effort to capture some of the major questions bound up with Turing's life. Cumberbatch, a gifted performer, does a remarkable and moving job of bringing a contradictory individual to life. Keira Knightley is more restrained than usual, and also comes off well.

For the purposes of making a point, and in somewhat of a shortcut, the script tends to emphasize Turing's personality idiosyncrasies, to the point of making him semi-autistic. Hodges' biography, on the other hand, establishes clearly that Turing participated in all sorts of everyday activities, had a well-developed sense of humor and, although shy and considered somewhat child-like by acquaintances, was generally well-liked.

The filmmakers have made the breaking of Enigma into a thriller and that genre has its own demands, which are effectively adhered to. *The Imitation Game* has genuinely suspenseful moments, but, on the other hand, the film also has formulaic elements, including the inevitable "Eureka!" sequence and the contrived "break-up" scene. Along these lines, as far as one can gather from Hodges' book, the writer and director have taken considerable artistic license in regard to both the scientific and the personal. And there is no reason why the film needs to hammer home its fairly banal tagline, "It is the very people who no one imagines anything of who do the things that no one can imagine," with slight variations, on three occasions.

Certain voices have complained that *The Imitation Game* is "not gay enough," but all things considered, that is probably a back-handed compliment. Screenwriter Graham Moore comments justly, "I think he saw himself as a mathematician that just happened to be gay, not a gay mathematician." Turing's cruel persecution by the police and by the state, which he had loyally served only a few years before during the war, is painfully and compassionately presented.

Without belaboring the issue, it is surely indicative of the times we live in that the hounding of Turing for his sexual orientation is sensitively and thoughtfully treated, while such matters as the character of the British state, its intelligence apparatus, figures such as Churchill (against whom Turing voted as soon as the war was over) and the nature of the Second World War itself are treated in the most conventional, uncritical manner. Millions, including Turing, went to war to defeat Hitler and fascism, but the conflict was one between the great imperialist powers for world domination.

Something about Turing's own fate hints at the brutality and crisis of the British ruling elite and the unresolved contradictions of postwar British society. Some of the most perceptive sections of Hodges' book are devoted to the implications of Turing's arrest and his eventual suicide.

He writes: "In 1951 Britain had lost control over Iran and Egypt, countries so successfully held against German encroachment not ten years before. As during the crisis of imperialism in the 1890s, military loss of control could be identified with sexual loss of control." Conservatives "sought a non plus ultra to the pretensions of mental determinism, a barrier against the flood of threats to traditional values unleashed by the Second World War."

Furthermore, Hodges describes the growing obsession of the various intelligence agencies, at the height of the Cold War, with the security danger that "sex perverts" represented. Wrote one official source, their "lack of emotional stability … makes them susceptible to the blandishments of the foreign espionage agent."

In Britain, "It was considered time for a repeat of the [Oscar] Wilde trials which had so successfully deterred dissidence for fifty years. … Torn between a subservient trust and a resentful anxiety regarding American machinations, to which British power had been surrendered, a panic over spies and homosexuals provided Great Britain with a suitable diversion."

Quite concretely, did the British and American intelligence agencies, in the wake of the defection of Soviet spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean in 1951, consider Turing a grave risk? Hodges observes that "he had been the top-level liaison between the two countries in 1943, and admitted into secret American establishments. Besides knowing so many technical details, he was a person 'on top of intelligence problems'. He knew how the systems worked as a whole—the people, the places, the methods, the equipment."

A question certainly poses itself: was Turing seriously threatened and did that threatening have something to do with his decision to do away with himself? This, and a good many other thorny questions go unanswered by *The Imitation Game*. Nonetheless, the film deserves credit for pointing viewers in the direction of such a compelling individual and historical drama.