

Review of *The Beautiful Miscellaneous* *Boston Globe*, August 20, 2007

A beautiful mind and the coming of age

It's a strange condition, synesthesia. Often the result of some kind of trauma to the brain, synesthesia literally means "joined perception," the ability to see colors in letters of the alphabet or in the sound of a person's voice. It also often engenders the ability to memorize vast amounts of information -- stock market figures, bible verses, the phone book. The rare condition is the fate that befalls 17-year-old Nathan Nelson after a car accident leaves him in a prolonged coma. When he awakens, Nathan is a changed young man, one who must learn to cope with seeing the world in a completely different way.

It's an intriguing concept for a novel, and in "The Beautiful Miscellaneous," Dominic Smith, who burst onto the literary scene last year with "The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre," conjures Nathan's colorful, mysterious new existence with vivid detail. But the deeper delight of "The Beautiful Miscellaneous" is that Smith doesn't just dwell on Nathan's biological anomaly. The real story in this touching, gracefully wrought novel lies around the edges of the plot. It is really about the weight of family dreams and expectations, and the story unfurls as a son's search for his father's approval amidst the travails of growing up, forging and accepting his own identity.

In the beginning, the novel vividly draws us into Nathan's pre-accident life as the only child of two parents living in a Victorian house in Wisconsin. His mother has a taste for exotic food and clothing, and his brilliant father's preoccupation with quantum theory keeps him internally focused most of the time, but it is basically a world of well-meaning normalcy and familial contentment. Yet Nathan's father continually attempts to cultivate in his son some unique intellectual gift, some extraordinary ability that the above-average Nathan cannot find in himself. "Being less than brilliant with a genius parent is like being the bum who stares, midwinter, through the restaurant window at the plump diners inside. There was my father, on the other side of that window, eating food so delicate and sumptuous it made my teeth ache. The seat opposite him was empty and expectant, but I never made it past the glass."

But when the accident leaves Nathan with a totally altered sense of perception, his father becomes convinced that this is his son's special gift and sends him to a "brain camp" near Iowa City. The Brook-Mills Institute for Talent Development specializes in those rare individuals with highly developed, inexplicable aptitudes and skills. For Nathan, the synesthesia is both blessing and curse, somehow encouraging yet still subtly defying his father's expectations. "Every word and fact had its own secret, vibrant life. Sometimes the associated sounds and images were lovely to watch, as delicate as nets of smoke. The world was miscellaneous and random, but sometimes beautifully so -- a yard sale of fine, unpaired shoes."

Yet without application, it sometimes feels to Nathan like a "ticker-tape parade of random data bytes." He searches for signs of normalcy all around him, in the relationships he establishes with his quirky friends at the institute and in the families he spies on once he comes home. And when tragedy strikes, turning Nathan's world upside down and inside out, the barrage of information that floods his brain begins to dwindle, making his world feel dull and meaningless.

The book offers some fascinating insights into quantum physics, as Nathan recounts pilgrimages to the Stanford Linear Accelerator where his father desperately attempts to "coax a new particle into measurable existence." But fundamentally, "The Beautiful Miscellaneous" is a simple coming-of-age tale, and Smith's writing is direct yet eloquent, distilling the disappointment we all feel at not being able to meet the expectations of those we love.

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