

Review of *The Beautiful Miscellaneous*

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He's no genius, but he's hardly normal; a boy struggles with this quandary in this finely modulated second novel (*The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre*, 2006).

Nathan Nelson is an only child burdened by expectations of genius. The problem is not his high-minded but practical mother; it's his father Samuel, a college physics professor in their Wisconsin town. Samuel has large ambitions of his own (he is looking for the ghost particle), but he takes Nathan's mild precocity for genius. He subjects him to frequent math and science drills. For his tenth birthday in 1980, Samuel plans a surprise trip to California. Disneyland, hopes Nathan, but no such luck; they visit Samuel's shrine, the Stanford Linear Accelerator. The fact is Samuel, while trying to do the best by his son, is clueless about kids and has no people skills. A crisis erupts at the seventh-grade science fair when Nathan, seeing the rest of his childhood gobbled up by similarly dreary events, deliberately flubs the championship question and gains a respite. This is where an interesting novel becomes even more so. Nathan's grandfather, drunk, causes a deadly highway accident. The old man dies; after a brief near-death experience, Nathan emerges from a coma to find he has synesthesia—some sensory boundaries have dissolved; words have colors and tastes; he can perform astonishing feats of memory; his father's hopes of genius surge back. Nathan attends an Institute for the unusually gifted, but again he disappoints his dad, who will soon learn he has an inoperable brain tumor. There are moving scenes before and after his death as Nathan realizes that behind his difficult exterior, Samuel did harbor unconditional love for him. There are also plenty of lighter moments, and the unerringly true dialogue is a delight; one dinner-table conversation of a "normal" family, eavesdropped on by Nathan, deserves to be anthologized.

A luminous addition to novels about fathers and sons.