

Joe the Salamander
by Timothy Gager
Golden Antelope Press \$19.95
<https://tinyurl.com/ypazfw53>

Review by Doug Holder

At first glance it may seem that a novel about an autistic boy and his struggles, might not be a ripe subject for fiction. After all, this population is characterized by repetitive behaviors, and non-verbal communication, hardly the stuff for rich dialogue, and action-filled pages. But in Tim Gager's latest novel, "Joe the Salamander" the author brings an autistic boy named Joe alive, and follows him from a newly-slapped baby-- to his maturation as a man. This is a survival story in many respects because if Joe can't adjust to a hostile environment, he would be

doomed to be some ward of the state or even worse. Often the sins of our fathers are passed on, and as it happens Joe's dad Adrian is autistic as well, and doesn't have enough distance from the disorder to help his son. The women in his life—Millie his mother, and Laurie—a caring nurse, are the stalwarts in Joe's travails.

Gager, who is a social worker, and who once worked out of a state office in Davis Square, Somerville, brings his knowledge of this disorder to the forefront. We experience the agonizing and grinding progress of Joe; we are able to get a fascinating look at his skewed thought process, and his profound confusion with emotion.

Joe when he was a young kid, often adorned a Superman costume. This is a great conceit Gager brings into play. The use of an all-powerful, flying superhero, transcending the fray—saving the day—breaking the nefarious bubble that surrounds our protagonist is inspired.

Not to give anything up, but in the end Gager ties things up beautifully.

Gager, to my mind brings the skills of a clinician to fiction, but this is not a dry, clinical work. Having worked in the mental health field at McLean Hospital for 37 years, this book rings powerfully true for me. This book is an accomplished work of fiction--but it should be required reading for aspiring mental health professionals, as well.

