

# KIRKUS REVIEWS

## TITLE INFORMATION

### **BRAINSTORM**

Joe Kremer

Old Stone Press (200 pp.)

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## BOOK REVIEW

A troubled emergency medical technician develops psychic abilities in this debut SF novel.

Even in 2020, medical science is not 100% certain why electroconvulsive therapy (formerly known as electroshock therapy) is so markedly effective in treating a variety of moderate to serious mental disorders. And, in the classic SF tradition, that's as much of a wedge as Kremer needs for his book, in which electroconvulsive therapy is the fulcrum on which the outlandish plot turns. Paxton Gahl, an Everyman EMT and ambulance driver, learns that his wife, Gwen, wants a divorce, and this sends him into a tailspin of self-destructive behavior and excessive drinking ("The cheapest swill Walmart had on the shelf"). He impulsively buys a boat that he navigates on the Ohio River, but his life spirals out of control through a cancer diagnosis and, eventually, admission into the hospital, where he becomes a candidate for electroconvulsive therapy. His treatment has far more than the standard therapeutic benefits: Instead of merely feeling better, Gahl develops superpowers. Suddenly, he's a human EMT dispatch, able to supernaturally sense people in need (and help 911 dispatchers get them the aid only he knows they require). He takes the name Vulcan and is soon involved with police Sgt. Malika Kelly and the hunt for a cache of gold coins. Kremer risks testing readers' patience by giving them more than ample details of Gahl's deterioration, but the gamble pays off. The hero feels entirely believable long before he falls headlong into the tragedy that changes his life. The author is less successful in developing his secondary characters, but his talent for pacing carries the entire narrative forward. The supernatural elements that Kremer introduces are fitted seamlessly into the plot as Gahl slowly and haltingly comes to terms with his new, enhanced mental abilities. But ultimately the book's most winning aspect is the deepening of the personal elements, the slow deployment of emotional development to the point where readers aren't just wondering what Vulcan's future will be but whether or not Gahl will end up whole and happy at the end of the story.

An engrossing tale of an EMT who gains superpowers.

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