
THE *Jewish Reader*

A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL YIDDISH BOOK CENTER
JUNE 2007 ♦ LARGE PRINT EDITION ♦ WWW.JEWISHREADER.ORG

The Ministry of Special Cases

by Nathan Englander

339 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$25.00.

REVIEW BY GERALD SORIN

It has been eight years between Nathan Englander's *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, a widely acclaimed collection of short stories, and his first novel, *The Ministry of Special Cases*. It was well worth the wait, but given the depth, poignancy, humor, thoughtfulness, complexity, irony, and writerly maturity we find here, many readers, including me, will want his next book to come out much sooner.

It is 1976, the beginning of the bloodless military coup that removed Isabella Peron from the Presidential Palace in Argentina, and the start of the "Dirty War" in which tens of thousands of "subversive elements," mostly students and unionists, will be "disappeared." Kaddish Poznan, Jewish and poor, the bastard son of a prostitute (*hijo de puta*), is an inveterate, ambitious dreamer with persistently unfeasible "get-rich-quick" schemes, who is also engaged in a type of "disappearing." But unlike the military that wipes out young people's futures, Kaddish is paid to "disappear" the unsavory pasts of assimilated middle-class Jews in Buenos Aires.

In the cemetery of the Society of the Benevolent Self ("a disgrace beyond measure for every Argentinean Jew"), the graves of such underworld characters as One-Eyed Whitey, Hezzi Two-Blades, and Bryna the Vagina are separated by a wall from the burial places of more "respectable" Jews. Kaddish uses a hammer and a chisel to erase names engraved on headstones. He desperately wants his only son, a nineteen-year-old university student, to help him in this bizarre vocation. Pato (née Pablo) does lend a hand on occasion but with deep-seated resentment and shame. The relationship between father and son, which resonates with the spirit and skill of Turgenev, is central to Englander's novel and to the universality of this extraordinarily well-paced, suspenseful and often surreal story. The fabulism recalls Isaac Bashevis Singer and Bernard Malamud, and serves well to intensify the absurdity of the very real horrors of the Dirty War.

As I write this review (May 2007), a former Argentine military officer is on trial for human rights abuses. He has already confessed to playing a role in the *velos de la muerte* – the infamous “death flights” during which drugged abductees were dropped from planes into the ocean-like Rio de Plata. It is not giving away anything to disclose that Pato is abducted. Kaddish and Pato’s mother Lillian, a determined, complex, and brilliantly rendered woman (who “sees through” her husband but still loves him and has faith in him until their connection is stretched to the breaking point by the most awful of circumstances), were dedicated to protecting their son. Lillian spends more than the working-class family can afford on a steel door for their small apartment, and Kaddish, to Pato’s horror and violent rage, burns what he thinks are his son’s more incriminating books.

Nothing works. The “suits” get in; they find three “dangerous” books Kaddish missed; Pato is snatched, and his parents become obsessed with finding him. Kaddish distrusts the “system” and is stubbornly convinced that neither the government nor the established Jewish community (few of whose members we get to know, unfortunately) will help. He searches for clues in the nether world of lower-class Buenos Aires, while Lillian finds herself caught up in a Kafkaesque, Orwellian universe shuttling between the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Special Cases. The depiction of the workings of the military junta’s bureaucracy is haunting, yet even when it evokes quivers, it also borders on the comical (à la Gogol’s “The Inspector-General,” “The Overcoat,” and “The Nose”). Indeed, there is a very humorous and revealing episode in which one of Kaddish’s “clients,” a well-known but cash-strapped (through his addiction to gambling) plastic surgeon, convinces him to accept two free nose jobs (Pato won’t hear of it) in exchange for Kaddish’s hammer and chisel “identity adjustment,” his own version of a “face-lift for the family name.”

With calm and terrifying logic, Englander, throughout, raises weighty universal questions of identity. And for the Poznans the idea of absence acquires its own fierce momentum. When Lillian, whose rhinoplasty is a disaster, gazes into the mirror, she can no longer find any hint of Pato in her refashioned, “de-Judaized” face. And her search for her son grows into a neurotically optimistic waiting at the window. Kaddish, on the other hand, grows more pessimistic. Increasingly convinced that Pato is dead, he nonetheless wants to do right by his son and to reconcile with his more hopeful wife. He even seeks help from the old rabbi who named him and who once headed the community that had made Kaddish an “outsider.” He gets good advice here: no body, no burial; rejoin Lillian in the search for Pato. Kaddish is driven to a stunningly audacious “bone-napping” plan in order to squeeze money from the rich. He wants to use the “ransom,” in turn, to ransom his son from anyone who might have him in this country where no one sees and no one hears, and where only the relatives of *los desaparecidos* try to speak. As Cacho, the Poznans’ neighbor across the hall, says, “Everyone is sleeping deeply.”

Although Nathan Englander would rightly deny any specific political goals for his novel, he does cite in his acknowledgements Seymour Hersh's *New Yorker* article, "The Gray Zone," which examined the part played in the Abu Ghraib torture scandal by the Defense Department. And there are chilling reminders in *The Ministry of Special Cases* of contemporary America: the continuing war against an amorphous enemy; the theory and practice of "the unitary executive"; government spying on American citizens; and the holding of unnamed and uncharged detainees.

The subtext of *The Ministry of Special Cases* deals with Argentina and part of the Jewish community of Buenos Aires in the late twentieth century. But the larger story points up timeless questions about identity, aspiration, moral ambivalence, the politics and psychopathology of family and, not least, human agony. Englander, like Saul Bellow, Cynthia Ozick, and Philip Roth, the greatest practitioners of the craft, rejects the label "Jewish writer" as too restrictive. He is right to do so, for he confronts and wrestles with the most important universal questions of meaning and justice. On the other hand, what could be more Jewish?

EXCERPTS

Jews bury themselves the way they live, crowded together, encroaching on one another's space. The headstones were packed tight, the bodies underneath elbow to elbow toe to toe. Kaddish led Pato through uneven rows over uneven ground on the Benevolent Self side. He cupped his hand over the eye of the flashlight to smother the light. His fingers glowed orange, red in between, as he ran his fist along the face of a stone.

They were searching for Hezzi Two-Blades' grave, and finding it didn't take long. His plot rose up sharply. His marker tipped back. It looked to Kaddish as if the old man had tried to claw his way free. It also looked like Two-Blades' daughter had only to wait another winter and she wouldn't have needed to hire Kaddish Poznan at all.

Marble, Kaddish had discovered, is chiseled into not for its strength but for its softness. As with the rest of the marble in the graveyard of the Society of the Benevolent Self, Hezzi's marker was pocked and cracked, the letters wearing away. Most of the others were cut from granite. If nature and pollution didn't get to those, the local hooligans would. In the past, Kaddish had scrubbed away swastikas and cemented back broken stones. He tested the strength of the one over Two-Blades' grave. "Like taking a swing at a loose tooth," Kaddish said. "I don't know why we bother – a little longer and no sign of the place will remain." (PAGE 3)

Lillian hadn't gotten involved at the start and chose to stay out of it now. She took another glance, though, and saw Pato looking her way while he laid into Kaddish. Pato was testing her as

well, feeling out his mother to see if she'd allow such an unbridled assault. He wanted to see if she'd let him go at his father with all that he had. It was between them, is how she saw it. Though it wasn't just. It was between the three of them, between a family – the same one the soldier had studied over the end of his gun.

Unwise in the ways of the world, Pato didn't yet know his own strength. The only thing he was expert in was his father's weakness.

Kaddish told the boy to stop. He yelled at him to stop. Pato continued long enough for Kaddish to give up his yelling and go silent, and then – Lillian tried to deny it – Kaddish drove on, weeping even more loudly and woundedly than Pato had. Kaddish cried and drove and wiped his eyes on a sleeve. Lillian understood that it had gone too far and decided to bring it to a halt.

She was really about to when Kaddish pulled the handbrake, stopping their lane completely, and, engine running, got out. "Too much," he said through tears. He then wove on foot across that wide and beautiful avenue, he'd been admiring. He maneuvered the lanes, slapping at the hoods of cars, directing himself out.

She and Pato sat dumbfounded, thinking Kaddish would turn back. Kaddish's keys were in the ignition, his ID still on the dash. When he didn't, Lillian got out of the car and walked around to Kaddish's side. She sat down in the driver's seat and pulled Kaddish's door closed.

"Should I get in front?" Pato said.

"No," Lillian said. He shouldn't get in front. He should stay right where he was in the back. Right where children belong. (PAGE 61)

Lillian spent Friday night in her chair by the window, watching the corner around which Pato might turn. Kaddish watched TV too loudly, drank too much, and smoked until the taste in his mouth went stale. He went into the kitchen at ten-thirty to freshen his drink and only came out again just before midnight, carrying a salad in a bowl.

"I've mashed potatoes," Kaddish said. "I've burnt you a steak." His own he took bloody, touching it fleetingly to the griddle.

"I'm fine," Lillian said.

Kaddish laid out place settings and served the rest of the dinner. He said to Lillian, "Come eat."

"If we're having Friday night, let's have it."

Lillian put three candlesticks in the center of the table. Two candles for Shabbos and the third a *minhag* from Lillian's house. Some mothers light an extra candle for each of their children. Lillian's mother had lit one for her, and Lillian did the same after Pato was born.

At least she had for the first weeks until Kaddish had used them to light one too many cigarettes, until he'd made her feel it was nothing but superstition, nonsense to light candles when they did nothing else.

Kaddish hadn't felt like he was being a brute. He had no use for laws that saw him a

bastard, and less so for traditions passed on. Let them take the rules that made him mamzer and outcast and use that extra candle to push them deeply up their collective ass.

“You have to do that before dark,” Kaddish said.

“Now you’re a stickler for things you don’t believe in?”

“It’s the one Jewish tradition I keep – a hypocrisy that traces back.” (PAGE 169)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Kaddish, who grew up among the Jewish pimps, whores, and gangsters of Buenos Aires, appears to be the only one of the many children of the Society of the Benevolent Self willing to acknowledge his past. How does he feel, however, about making his living by obliterating the names on the Society’s headstones in the cemetery that contains his heritage? Does Kaddish see himself as something more than a mere opportunist?
2. Why does Kaddish coerce Pato into working with him in the cemetery, and why does he physically force him to hammer the chisel that will break the name off the stone? It seems inevitable that Pato will suffer injury in this scene; and as they drive home from the hospital Pato tells Kaddish, “You’re lazy. You’re a failure. You’ve kept us down. You embarrass us. You cut off my finger. You ruined my life.” Here, the narrator refers to “the grand Jewish tradition of the *dayeinu* ... And central to the form is the notion that each accusation, if that had been Kaddish’s only shortcoming, still it would have been enough.” Does Pato really believe the accusations he makes against his ne’er-do-well father, or is something more complicated going on?
3. After a violent struggle between Pato and Kaddish, who is caught burning Pato’s questionable books in a bathtub, Pato tells his father that he hates him, and Kaddish responds: “I wish you had never been born.” This would seem to seal the possibility of reconciliation. But what does Pato mean in his parting statement, as he is taken away by state agents: “Fathers are always fathers. Sons always sons?” And why did Pato attempt to rescue his books despite the risk to him of owning them?
4. Favorita, Kaddish’s mother, led a life of virtual slavery as a prostitute in the brothels of Buenos Aires, where she served along with other poor, powerless young Jewish women whose origins lay in the *shtetlekh* of Eastern Europe. Kaddish, himself, had “never expected a happy life; only moments of joy to carry him through.” How much is this attitude a product of his having been a *hijo de puta*?
5. What tactics and overall strategies does *The Ministry of Special Cases* employ in dealing with the families of *los desaparecidos*? What does it tell us about Lillian that she puts up with the interminable bureaucratic frustrations, and about Kaddish who won’t deal with the

government, but has his own ways of confronting his grievous loss? With whom do you identify more, Lillian and her persistent hope, or Kaddish in his belief that Pato is dead?

6. Is anyone at any of the ministries willing to help? What about the military priest who takes Lillian's money as a first installment for paying the "powers that be" for information about Pato? Are any of the leaders of the Jewish community sincerely sympathetic? Who, and in which scene(s)?

7. An unnamed young woman discovers Pato's notes to his parents in the mattress of her prison cell. Discuss Englander's decision to keep the girl anonymous, the contents of the notes secret, and the notes themselves undelivered. What do you think about this passage from the omniscient narrator: "The memory is the girl's alone, and that's how it will stay. Still, in this horrible time when the junta would weave a nation's truth from lies, Lillian would have been happy and Kaddish would have been happy that independent of them, one fine girl for one fine day believed in Pato Poznan...."

8. The girl who finds Pato's notes thinks: "It was such a civilized act, writing one's name, a concrete act. It made her think she could leave a history herself." What is the significance of this thought in a novel so deeply concerned with questions of identity – the reconstruction of faces, the obliteration of names, the alteration of the past?

9. The rabbi who originally blessed Kaddish had said: "Let his name be Kaddish to ward off the angel of death. A trick and a blessing. Let this child be the mourner instead of the mourned." Given what happens to Kaddish, and the general arc of the larger story, is his name fitting? And why might the name Pato, which means "duck" in Spanish, be fitting as well?

10. Kaddish's desire to mourn his son with at least the ritual of burial comes up against the rabbi's kind, but admonishing reminder that a person cannot be interred without a body or even body part to bury. Does this prohibition mark Kaddish's ultimate alienation from Jewish tradition and from the Jewish community? Or does his final act in this story tell us that the attachment continues?

11. Because the Argentine people seem to "surrender" to a "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" moral style, does the novel imply that the people deserve the corruption and savagery of the junta? What are the roots of this kind of capitulation in a population?

12. At one point the plastic surgeon agrees that everyone is being watched by the junta, but the Jews even more so. Is the Jewish identity of the Poznan family a factor in Pato's arrest, or in the arrest of any of the other abductees?

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