



# Loss and erasure in a time of military coup in Argentina

Fabulist Nathan Englander invents a parallel reality from the components of his mind

writes John Freeman

**N**ATHAN ENGLANDER has a theory about novelists. “There are magpies and then there are the insta-life writers,” says the 37-year-old American, tilted forward in his chair at SoHo House in Manhattan, hair already mad-scientist wild from Englander’s constant tugging at it. “I went to school with people who could go out and come and write the story of us out getting drunk. Magpies live in the world of books and can create stories out of what they read.”

For all his belief in this theory, Englander claims he belongs to neither of these types. Were it not for his wide, unblinking eyes, one might say he is actually closer kin to the great blind writer Jorge Luis Borges: a fabulist who invents a parallel reality out of the mysterious components of his mind. Underscoring this fact, his acclaimed 2007 debut novel, *The Ministry of Special Cases*, is set in Borges’s backyard: Buenos Aires in 1976, the year political dissidents began disappearing by the dozen, many pushed to their death during terrifying flights over the ocean.

In the middle of this tumult Englander sets an anguished father-and-son tale about love, loss and shame. Kaddish Poznan is the son of a Jewish prostitute, who sold her body to pay for the safe passage of her family to a Latin American homeland.

As an adult, Kaddish has learned how to help people with backgrounds like his: for a price he will edit the tainted names from gravestones, cutting them free from the past.

*The Ministry of Cases* is a book about the emotional and psychological costs of these entwined erasures. Once the military coup of 1976 occurs, leftist sons and daughters begin

disappearing, and Kaddish’s son Pato, full of teenage shame at his father’s earnest impoverishment, becomes a target. Meanwhile, the community consumes itself from within. One doctor client turns out to be broke and pays Kaddish by giving the fixer and his wife nose jobs. “I read that quote by Borges — ‘to change a face is murder’ — and that just got stuck in my head,” Englander says.

These issues of loss and erasure have interested Englander since he was very young. He grew up in a closed Orthodox community on Long Island and is secular now, but doesn’t believe these details explain why or what he writes. “Communities in general function based on shame,” he says, tilting forward again. “And for me it’s all about the attempt to control narratives: governments do it, communities do it, and families do it.”

Englander travelled to Buenos Aires several times and interviewed many survivors of Argentina’s “dirty war”, but he says his experience in Israel was just as important to this novel’s conception. “Israel is such a young country and its willingness to look at its history is really impressive. Nobody seals up any papers about what happened in 1948, and so this is being hashed out by historians in the public.”

Also in Israel, Englander experienced the terror as well as the normality of war. “I was there during the start of the second intifada,” he says, referring to the violent uprising of Palestinians that began in 2000, and he remembers how the fear of a suicide bombing defined, but did not always determine, everyday life. “I understand the not wanting to leave, too,” Englander says. “How you can live in absolute insanity.”

In its own oblique way, Englander’s was the second American novel of 2007 to revisit the question of a Jewish homeland, the first being Michael Chabon’s slapstick noir *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, which imagined how life might be if diaspora Jews had settled in Alaska, not Israel. “It’s like we’ve got the northern and southernmost options here,” Englander jokes.

In some ways, Englander knows these questions are at once incredibly intimate, yet set at a certain remove from his life. “I am a fourth-generation American,” he says. “I am two generations removed from the Holocaust, but I was shaped by its narrative. It was given to me here, as a child.”



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Shaped by narrative: Nathan Englander

Englander says this makes him even more interested in writing about it — and studying these narratives — from the realm of fiction. He believes in fiction a greater truth can be gleaned about these stories than from any kind of reporting. “It’s the most flattering thing in the world to be told by someone from Argentina that I got it right,” he says, but it’s also beside the point.

All this does not make him a Jewish writer, though, Englander asserts.

“No one can force me to qualify my characters,” he says firmly. “Kaddish is not a Jewish man; he is a man. If every story I write after this is set in a synagogue, I still will not be a Jewish writer. And no matter where he lives, fiction will be his only and true homeland.”

*John Freeman is president of the National Book Critics Circle.*

*Nathan Englander will be a guest at the Perth Writers Festival. The Ministry of Special Cases is published by Faber (\$32.95).*