

by Arthur Salm - CNS

"The Ministry of Special Cases" by Nathan Englander; Knopf; 339 pages; \$25

The first time I encountered "to disappear" as a transitive verb was in "Catch-22" (1962), when Yossarian learned what had happened to his friend Dunbar. "They disappeared him," he was told. Yossarian countered with, "That's not even a word," which was a good comeback at the time. It's not any more.

DEATH TAKES NO HOLIDAY - Death takes no holiday in 'The Ministry of Special Cases.' CNS Photo.

Argentina's brutal, fascist purges that began in the mid-1970s, known as the "Dirty War," elevated inflections of "to disappear (someone)" to common parlance and the concept to be numbed, workaday quotidian horror. In this updated version of Winston Smith's memory hole, citizens of questionable loyalty - intellectuals, students, leftists and/or anyone who hung out with them - were simply plucked off the streets or dragged from their apartments, never to be seen again. The authorities claimed to know nothing about them. The people no longer existed; they had never existed. End of story.

Or rather, beginning of story.

Eight years ago, Nathan Englander electrified the literary world with "For the Relief of Unbearable Urges," his debut collection of assured, touching, unnerving, nightmarish and hilarious short stories set both in the U.S. and Israel. His next work, he said, would be a novel, and here it is: "The Ministry of Special Cases," set in Buenos Aires' Jewish community during the Dirty War. Dazzling, profound and deeply unsettling, it marks Englander as a major American writer for anyone who might have had the notion that a volume of brilliant stories could somehow be a fluke.

Although a tale of the Disappeared - at a certain point, having done nothing else whatsoever, one feels obligated to go with honorific capitalization - "The Ministry of Special Cases" is more a consideration of the bending of reality that results. Much as matter warps space, a person's inexplicable vanishing alters in the collective human consciousness not only the present (obviously) and the future (inevitably), but the past. And no one, in this novel, knows more about altering the past than Kaddish Poznan.

Poznan comes from the wrong side of whatever tracks there are in Buenos Aires' Jewish community. The outcast son of a prostitute, he now makes his living by taking commissions from Jews feeling weighed down by the thieves, grifters, extortionists and murderers in their family trees. For a sizable fee, Poznan will sneak into the Jewish cemetery - the special area, for those not deemed worthy of burial with good, upstanding folk - and chisel names off gravestones, thus conferring retroactive respectability upon the miscreants' descendants.

Poznan and his infinitely patient wife, Lilian - he's a bit of a handful, obviously - are having not atypical squabbles with their son Pato, a university student who most definitely does not want to follow in his father's shady footsteps. But with the military coup, the situation intensifies geometrically; arguments about loud music are now about books. Specifically, books they tell Pato that for safety's sake, he must get rid of.

"'They're cowards,' Pato said. 'They're supposed to burn banned books in the street. That's how it's done, with big bonfires and evil intent. This is the only ruthless, coercive system that expects us to destroy them ourselves. Do I have to ransack my own room while I'm at it? It's like - ' Pato said, looking around for an example, 'it's as if - ' and he looked down at his parents, together on the couch, Lilian's hand on Kaddish's knee from where she put it to still him. 'It's like what you've done to your faces. It's like the horror of a nation with one acceptable nose.'"

(Kaddish and Lilian have had their appearances enhanced - yet another bending of history - by a plastic surgeon for whom Pato performed one of his graveyard slate-cleanings.)

And then some men come to the apartment and take Pato away.

Except, officially, they didn't: "The idea of absence had acquired its own fierce momentum. It was like snatching a ball from a baby and hiding it behind one's back - there was the initial shock and then, like that, Pato was no more."

Eventually, Lilian ventures to the Ministry of Special Cases, a bureaucracy Orwell somehow overlooked. It's a place where nothing ever happens, no information is given out, it's next to impossible to get an appointment - yet it's the only thing devastated, desperate family members of the Disappeared have left. Lilian pays huge bribes they can't afford for scraps of what must surely be erroneous information, refusing even to consider that Pato might be dead; indeed, she banishes Kaddish from their home for even suggesting the possibility.

As for Pato ... well, Englander shifts into the eerie hyper-prose he employed to such stunning effect in his story-within-a-story in "The Twenty-Seventh Man," a tale from his first book. Instead of telling of Pato, he introduces a nameless, very young prisoner, lying on a cot still redolent of him:

"Let's make it clear that it's a girl from the start. There should be no expectation of its being Pato when we see the body, long and lank (and living still). It would be an easy mistake. The boys are so much like girls these days, all long hair and slouchy posture - the posture anyway irrelevant in her position; the space cramped and suffocating, the girl lying down. She, the girl, shifted a knee, rolled onto a hip. The cell is so low and narrow and long it's like being laid out on a morgue tray. It's like already being dead."

Pato is a Disappeared; not even the author can summon him. The best he can do is detect variations in the human continuum disturbed by his absence. His report: "The Ministry of Special Cases."- Arthur Salm

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