



A Conversation with

NATHAN ENGLANDER *author of*

THE MINISTRY OF
SPECIAL CASES

Q: Your debut short story collection, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, was a national bestseller in hardcover and paperback, winner of the PEN/Malamud award, and drew comparisons to Anton Chekhov and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Eight years later, *THE MINISTRY OF SPECIAL CASES* is your debut novel. What did it feel like to achieve success so early in your career?

A: Before the first book came out, I was living in Jerusalem and writing short fiction, literary short fiction—about Hasidim. I didn't plan on success, early or late. When the collection received the reception it did, it was all very exciting and very humbling and now it's also all very moot. Eight years later, what does it mean? The writing part never stops; that's what I do. But as far as the career part—whatever was achieved—it feels like starting again. And when you publish one book in your late twenties, and then another in your (late) thirties, it becomes clear that a sizable hunk of your future is tied up in what happens with each book. Right now I'm packing my apartment up in boxes—because I know things are going to go one way or the other. I'm either upsizing or downsizing come summer, but everything is going to change.

Q: Have you been working on the book for eight years? What else have you been doing with your time since the publication of *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*?

A: The book has been all consuming. I've failed miserably at my attempts to take a day off every week. And I don't like to have to be anywhere but sitting at my table writing. Due to my inability to have any casual hobby, there's usually some activity I'm obsessed with at the same time, so that it'll be write-and-run for a year or two, and then write-and-swim, or write-and-bike. For the last couple of years I've been obsessed with yoga—which has been fantastic but would have ruined me if I'd started earlier. It makes me too calm and optimistic. My first book would have been called something like, *The Big Book of Daisies and Meadows: There's a Little Good in All of Us*.

Q: *THE MINISTRY OF SPECIAL CASES* is set against the backdrop of Argentina's Dirty War. How did you become interested in the Dirty War and what inspired you to write about it?

A: Simply put, I became interested in what it is to lose your world, to have a city you love change around you. But I think that's an idea that grew as the book did, developing alongside ideas relating to community and identity and (one hopes after spending all these years on it) a host of other themes. If I try and trace the idea to its very inception, I think I'd have to say it started when I went to Israel for a year in 1989. It was the first time I was properly exposed to people from

other cultures (at least to Jews from other cultures—which was already racy for me). I was fascinated by this group of Argentines. I surely didn't have a coherent way to say it then, didn't know what it was I was seeing, but they were this very sweet, very kind, very closed group of guys, whose personalities—who they were as people, not just their worldview but everything that informed them as individuals—were shaped, very clearly, by the political realities of their childhoods. A fascination with the people became a fascination with the place. And when my ideas had taken shape and there was a story ready to be built up, it was clear that Argentina was the base on which to set it.

Q: At the start of THE MINISTRY OF SPECIAL CASES, one character asks another: “Which man is better off, the one without a future or the one without a past?” To what extent do you think this is a choice people are commonly faced with?

A: Every big decision probably forces the choice in some way. There's always a concession involved. Are you going to be truer to the person you want to be (i.e., yourself in the future) or to the person you're supposed to be (i.e., yourself according to the selectively edited history with which you were raised)? In the novel, the idea plays out on a much larger scale. Because in the Argentina I created, in the Dirty War setting as imagined, I became obsessed with the almost quantum-mechanical evil that is a byproduct of disappearing people. To kill a person is to deny that person a future—the basic act that is murder. To “disappear” that same person is also, oddly, to reach in and undo the past. It's not to make them no-more. It's to make them, not-ever. It is to be undone. It's a way of fracturing the seeming unbreakable link between future and past. The question that flows through much of this novel, I guess, is: Despite the best intentions how do we—as individuals, or societies (take your pick)—contribute to our own undoing?

Q: THE MINISTRY OF SPECIAL CASES focuses on a Jewish family in Buenos Aires. To what extent does your own religion influence your writing?

A: This is the kind of answer that gets me in trouble, but the influence of religion on my writing is simply not my concern. I say this while acknowledging the very obvious role religion has played in my fiction until now, and with the awareness that this book, like the last, is chock full of Jews. My obligation is to the story—and I view any sort of outside categorization or conscious acceptance of themes that aren't generated from within the fiction as limiting and potentially corrupting forces. Because to say, as it does in the question above, that the book “focuses on a Jewish family” is true. But it also means that the Poznan family is in some way “other.” The Poznans are the center of this novel. They are *the* family. And they are only “other” to me in the ways that they are other to themselves. That's why I don't think about religion when I work—I am exactly as aware of it as, say, Kaddish is at any given moment, or as that moment demands. Personally, I don't think I could introduce myself to a stranger, or even see my oldest friend, and make it ten seconds without saying that I'm Jewish, or referencing it in some way. That's me. But I don't consider myself a Jewish writer, and I definitely do not look at the work as Jewish. For anyone who'd say, Hogwash! How could he not call himself a Jewish writer? Tell me—after a decade of obsession with it, in a book that is at the very least equally as much about being Argentine as it is about being Jewish—is anyone, anywhere, ever going to call me an Argentine writer? A single person? No, because I'm not Argentine. So if it's not about subject matter, or the characters, or the soul of a book, and it's not about how much time and energy, how much of a writer's life he or she has spent dedicated to a subject, then it must be based on other judgments that should not, and must not, be part of the process.

Q: Would you compare Argentina's Dirty War to events happening in our world today?

A: Do you want me to list by topic: Military coups, state-sanctioned murders, disappeared innocents, silenced journalists...or should we go by victims as percentage of a population or break it down by hemisphere? I don't know if there's ever been a peaceful time on this planet, but at least, from my very-often-protected perspective, there have been times of greater hope. There's definitely no shortage of ways to link those dark times in Argentina to current events—this, I say, while acknowledging the unique nature of the Dirty War (as I don't think a nation that's been through something like that believes any other experience is comparable, and rightly so). What was shocking to me was getting to the end of this novel and lifting my head up to find that one of the larger elements, the part about habeas corpus, was actually in the news in America. If I'd spent all this time writing a children's book about an industrious Central Park squirrel that learns to drive a city bus, I would be no less surprised to have dropped off my manuscript at the publisher and then stepped on the M104 to find Chippy the Opposable-Thumbed Squirrel at the wheel than to find Congress passing laws denying people the right to file a writ of habeas corpus in 2006. I really don't know what to say about it yet; I've got some studying to do. As regards Argentina in 1976 my position is crystal clear.

Q: As much as this book is about Argentina and the Dirty War, plastic surgery also plays a considerable role. How does that theme fit in?

A: In a book where history is being altered on so many levels, I got interested in what's behind people's willingness to physically alter themselves. It's fascinating to me, the idea of one acceptable nose (and, as technology advances, one acceptable body, or one acceptable age). This book is very much about the links between the past and the future, and the altering of identity through surgery is another way that the continuum gets broken. Insert your own body part and the gender of your choice, but how often do you hear someone say, "Her nose is so perfect it can't be real." Well that's an odd thought, that the "perfect" nose would (or even could) be a fake nose. And it's that agreed-upon illusion, and the kind of society that forms around it, that really fit with the novel for me.

Q: What are you working on now?

A: I'm working on a series of e-mails called *In-Box Since 1999*, where I try and salvage a thousand lost friendships. I'm really in trouble with the whole world.

FOR BOOKING INFORMATION:

Sarah Gelman, 212-572-2799 [East Coast Publicist]
sgelman@randomhouse.com

Pam Henstell, 310-452-7411 [West Coast Publicist]
phenstell@randomhouse.com