

The Ministry of Special Cases by Nathan Englander. faber and faber 2007.

Kaddish and Lillian Poznan are an Argentinian couple who live on the edge, financially, societally and Jewishly. Kaddish is the son of a prostitute who makes his living removing names from gravestones for successful Jewish children who are embarrassed about their parents' dubious past, Lillian sells insurance and they have a son, Pato, with whom Kaddish is constantly at loggerheads.

When the generals take over Argentina their lives, together with all those who were not part of the junta, change and become intensely fragile: then, one night, in spite of precautions to prevent such an eventuality, Pato is seized by the secret police and disappears. The impact of this on the Poznans as a couple, and as individuals, is immense and terrible.

The Ministry of Special cases is a quirky book with quirky characters, but it brings to life to an extraordinary extent the impact of a government sponsored disappearance on the parents of the disappeared, and the helplessness that is their lot as they struggle to make sense of what has happened and to find their son. The depiction of a malicious bureaucracy is as fine as one could wish to read and remains for me the most haunting aspect of this hugely entertaining and finely crafted novel.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh