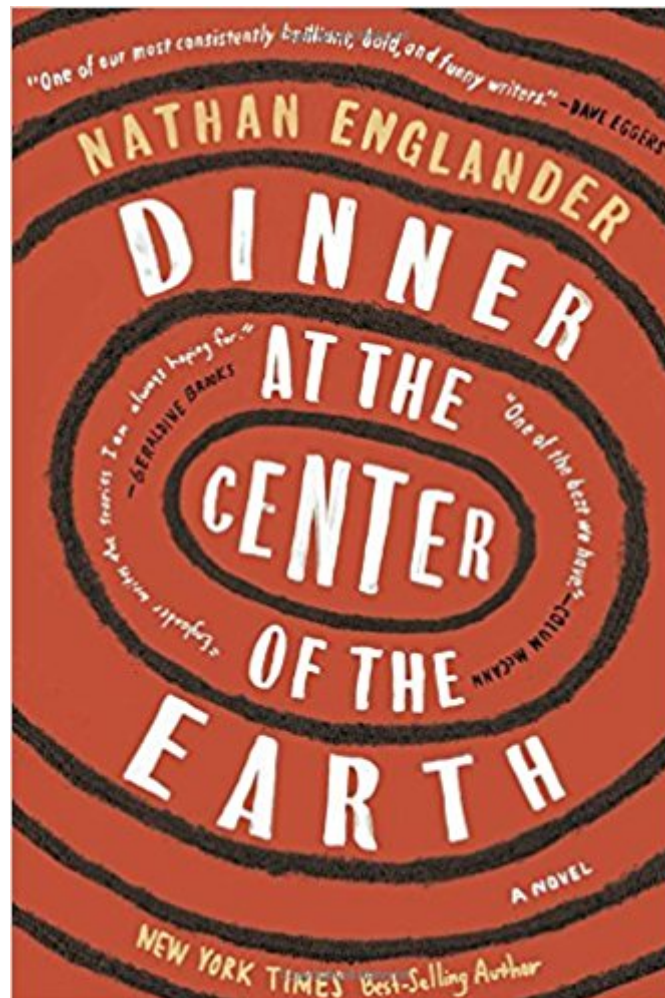




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Dinner At The Center Of The Earth: A Novel



Synopsis

The best work yet from the Pulitzer finalist and best-selling author of *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*--a political thriller that unfolds in the highly charged territory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and pivots on the complex relationship between a secret prisoner and his guard. A prisoner in a secret cell. The guard who has watched over him a dozen years. An American waitress in Paris. A young Palestinian man in Berlin who strikes up an odd friendship with a wealthy Canadian businessman. And The General, Israel's most controversial leader, who lies dying in a hospital, the only man who knows of the prisoner's existence. From these vastly different lives Nathan Englander has woven a powerful, intensely suspenseful portrait of a nation riven by insoluble conflict, even as the lives of its citizens become fatefully and inextricably entwined--a political thriller of the highest order that interrogates the anguished, violent division between Israelis and Palestinians, and dramatizes the immense moral ambiguities haunting both sides. Who is right, who is wrong--who is the guard, who is truly the prisoner? A tour de force from one of America's most acclaimed voices in contemporary fiction.

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Customer Reviews

"Nathan Englander's latest is, as usual, superb: a work of psychological precision and moral force, with an immediacy that captures both timeless human truth as well as the perplexities of the present day." —Colson Whitehead

"Equal parts political thriller and tender lamentation, the latest from Englander explores, in swirling, nonlinear fashion, Israeli-Palestinian tensions and moral conflicts. Ultimately, Englander suggests that shared humanity and fleeting moments of kindness between jailer and prisoner, spy and counterspy, hold the potential for hope, even peace."

•Booklist "Appealing... Clever, fragmented, pithy... Englander is a wise observer with an empathetic heart."

•Publishers Weekly Praise for Nathan Englander "In Englander's hands, storytelling is a transformative act. Put him alongside Singer, Carver, and Munro. Englander is, quite simply, one of the very best we have."

•Colum McCann "Englander tells the tangled truth of life in prose that, as ever, surprises the reader with its gnarled beauty."

•Michael Chabon "Nathan Englander's fiction [is] always animated by a deep, vibrant core of historical resonance."

•Jennifer Egan "The depth of Englander's feeling is the thing that separates him from just about everyone. You can hear his heart thumping feverishly on every page."

•Dave Eggers "Nathan Englander is one of those rare writers who, like Faulkner, manages to make his seemingly obsessive, insular concerns all the more universal for their specificity."

•Richard Russo

NATHAN ENGLANDER is the author of the novel *The Ministry of Special Cases*, and the story collections *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, winner of the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award and finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. His short fiction has been widely anthologized, most recently in *100 Years of the Best American Short Stories*. Englander's play *The Twenty-Seventh Man* premiered at The Public Theater in 2012. He also translated the *New American Haggadah* and co-translated Etgar Keret's *Suddenly a Knock on the Door*. He is Distinguished Writer-in-Residence at New York University, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and daughter.

Although the story line was intriguing, I did not find this book to be a taut, political thriller and, in fact, found it difficult at times to follow as the locales changed as did the time frame. That an American Jew became an Israeli spy and later betrayed his adoptive country had all the elements of a "good" read, but the references to past Israeli governments and policies sounded like a verbatim headline from international newspapers. The site in the desert where the prisoner and his guard live and their

interaction does not make up for what I found to be a just so-so novel.

a spy thriller which begins with a nameless spy imprisoned somewhere in the negev desert in 2014. the skirmishes between israel and palestine form the backdrop to the story. the story is told in scenes from different places and of different characters, each character caught, by us, in the middle of their story with the missing pieces filled in over time. as a page turner, you'll find yourself turning back to reread passages. for prisoner z, as he's known, the story of how he arrived at his dilemma begins in paris in 2002 where he's eluding his pursuers by remaining in hiding. except for a daily trip across city to a jewish restaurant, he seldom leaves his bare room, stripped of any electronic device which could be used against him as a tracking device. this wouldn't be a spy thriller without the femme fatale, also nameless, known as the waitress, the couple meet at the restaurant, z is attracted to her shape, blessedly callipygous, and, for him, it's love at first sight. meanwhile, there is an aging israeli general, connected with z's imprisonment. in his self-described limbo, as a man of action his inability to reflect leaves him without consolation, except from his housekeeper. the general as a character seems borrowed from garcia marquez. the lifted general and the tone of the spy story, derivative of john le carre's spy novels, to which englander's contribution can be traced in an orderly progression of the genre, these borrowings aren't unsubsumed influences, as is common in early novels, they're more like ticks indicative of form to show the spy aficionado his savvy. the twitching body we see as political thriller, and we see as literary fiction, but lacking is englander's unflinching intelligence which, if present, would make this a book impossible to put down.

I was not familiar with author Nathan Englander before reading this book. The novel concerns Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories in/on the West Bank and Gaza, and the way in which the injustices done to the Palestinians have spawned desperate acts of terrorism and disillusion with and within the state of Israel. The focus is on two young men whose lives and decisions place them at the center of events in that sad troubled part of the world. Several other characters, a prison guard, his mother who is the caretaker for an Ariel Sharon-like character, a waitress and a researcher, also figure into the story. Action takes place in Germany, Paris and the Holy Land, and leaps forward and back in time and the history of the 21st century to tell the tale. Many real events

help to shape the narrative, and the skills of Mossad are featured. The novel ultimately seems to illustrate that there could be hope if we could just get to know one another as individuals; if we could break bread with our "enemies" in Israel/Palestine, we would probably find commonalities (love of sailing, backgammon) that would build bridges, friendships, and maybe even lead to love.

Nathan Englander is, without doubt, an IMPORTANT writer; his books have garnered raves and awards from around the world. So, why was I so put off by this, without doubt IMPORTANT book? I'm not sure I can say. Except... maybe... it seems to be so blatantly BY an IMPORTANT writer on an IMPORTANT subject that it just struck me as ponderous. Or Okay, somewhere in, I think it was a chapter on Paris 2002 (The chapters all tell us where and when we are) Englander has two of his characters "...shimmy down a roof on their bottoms", and I stopped reading for several minutes to ponder whether one CAN "Shimmy" on one's bottom or if shimmying is scrambling up/down something using arms and legs. The answer is irrelevant; if you stop reading to ask the question, you are NOT enthralled! I don't doubt this book will garner great praise from better thinkers than I. And it will sell well, which I wish for EVERY writer. So, hey, I'm just talkin' here.

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