

*An Acre of Barren Ground* by Jeremy Gavron (Scribner)

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Hard on the heels of Monica Ali's spectacularly successful *Brick Lane* comes Jeremy Gavron's novel set in the same part of the East End of London. His acre of barren ground is, in fact, Brick Lane, and he must have had a bad moment when Ali's novel appeared.

Like Ali, Gavron uses Brick Lane's rough hospitality to immigrants as his narrative centre, and like her, he is intrigued by the history of the many Bangladeshi in the area. He even has a prospective immigrant with the surname Ali.

But that is where the similarity ends; in Gavron's novel Brick Lane itself is the main character, and the novel takes us through various stages of its history, and various waves of immigrants: French Huguenots, Russian Jews. The human beings then become mere bit players in the larger drama of the street and the city. In this respect, Gavron's novel resembles Peter Ackroyd's *London: the Biography* or even Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days*, in which New York is a more central presence than the characters who inhabit it.

Gavron refers to his own novel as a "narrative jigsaw", and that's a fair if not exhaustive description of his method: various apparently disparate stories gradually start to fit together, elucidating and extending one another's significance. In one story, "Curry Paradise" a Bangladeshi peasant sells his land in order to buy a passage to London, where he hopes to earn enough money to give his new-born son a start in life. Cheated by the buyer, he discovers that he has far too little money to reach London. End of story; but he literally falls from the sky into another story, set in the London of his ambitions.

In "The Lost Years", in a complete change of setting and period, Shakespeare's newly widowed sister reminisces, in Stratford, about her escape, as a young girl, to join her brother in London, only to be recalled to Stratford to marry the prosperous but brutish Master Brown. She feels that now it is too late to return to London; but in "A True and Faithful Narrative" we are told that one Mistress Brown has been killed as a witch in Brick Lane. She had in her possession "Quartos of banned plays the sort that no ordinary and good old woman or widow would keep".

In "The White Van" a brother and sister, second-generation Bangladeshi immigrants, argue over the brother's means of livelihood; in "alluever.com", an extract from a graphic novel about a go-getting young dotcom entrepreneur, the van reappears, and we incidentally discover the nature of the Bangladeshi's livelihood.

As this last example will demonstrate, Gavron plays around not only with his characters, but with genre. In "Le Bryk Place" he gives us, with more humour than poetic finesse, a parody of a sixteenth-century verse epic in the story of one young Hugh Branston, who first started making the bricks which gave the lane its name: "That so much could be made from simple clay/he'd never dreamed. And what poetic/ justice to charge those liveried fuck-/ers the earth to build their houses out of muck."

A later story, "Snecockswell", purports to be a description of a series of woodcuts, in effect a verbalised medieval graphic novel, recounting the tragic tale of a love affair between a young lay sister in the monastery hospital of St Mary Spital and a cook's boy in the hospital – who turns out to be none other than a young Hugh Branston, before he

made his fortune out of muck. Going back to “Le Bryk Place”, we now realise what happened to the lay sister.

The stories are not only linked horizontally, but also superimposed vertically, palimpsest as well as jigsaw. Thus in “Lull’s Wyrth”, we are in prehistoric Britain: a stalwart Briton, Otha, lives with his wife Brunna and son Snecka; by the end of the tale, for reasons obscure to the reader, he is confronted by a mysterious and murderous antagonist, Lull. In “Lolesworth” a woman, Brenda, visits her gangster brother Larry in prison in modern-day England; it transpires that Larry has killed Brenda’s husband Arthur and her son Stephen. Through the story of Arthur, Larry and Brenda we can reconstruct and reinterpret the history of Otha, Lull and Brunna.

A bit too neatly contrived? Possibly; but the point is that both stories could, if need be, stand on their own as independent narratives; indeed on a first reading it is quite possible to miss the correspondences between the stories.

One of the more intriguing aspects of the book is Gavron’s readiness to share with his reader his own methods of composition. “Two Brewers” is a straightforward account of Gavron’s researches into the lives of two influential figures in early nineteenth-century Brick Lane, dominated as it was by the great brewery of Truman & Hanbury. Apart from its intrinsic interest, his researches also furnish him with the raw material for another story, “East London Female Total Abstinence Society”, in which he juxtaposes his source material and the story that he fashions around it, as it gradually takes shape. The story is that of an heiress to a brewing fortune who, guilt-stricken at the misery caused by liquor, destroys a huge vat of beer. End of story; but in another story, “Shores”, a young woman makes a living out of dredging the sewers of London for valuables. Into this story and into the sewers comes rushing a tidal wave of beer ...

*An Acre of Barren Ground* is a mixture of fiction, archaeology and history; but above all it is a fascinating collection of stories. That some of them are true and some not matters less than that they all reflect light upon one another, upon the city as a place in history, and upon fictional method. It’s a virtuoso display of writing that more than repays the effort of reading it – even of reading it twice, which is what it more or less compels one to do.