

Book Review: Brick Dust

Craig Jordan-Baker, *époque press*, 2025, 150pp, ISBN: 978-1-0687-162-3-2, £9.99 (paperback)

Natasha Jane Kennedy

The first rule about *Brick Dust* is, talk about *Brick Dust*. After a detour around the Bann in *If the River is Hidden* (2022), co-written with poet Cherry Smith, Jordan-Baker returns to the Nacullian family in a multi-voiced, multi-generation assembly of stories.

Jordan-Baker's knack for compelling and polyphonic narratives is redoubled in his latest novel which questions how stories are told, and whose. In *Brick Dust*, the Nacullians' lives are retold from snippets, cuttings of an obsessive collector's archive, scraps from within the confines of a mouldy flat. There is a certain urgency in the novel, a desire to be exhaustive while knowing all too well that there are things that a narrator can simply not cover in a couple hundred pages, before the damp trickles down, or before the council dumps everything in a

'A raucous tour de force'
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skip. The stories are interlaced with excerpts of letters, documents from voting polls, newspaper articles, and lists of acronyms men love! "There are things documents can do, and things documents can't" (p.2) and these documents come to life between the nooks and crannies of this hoarder-turned-storyteller's collage of them. But a narrator is arbitrary, never impartial, and so the tales of Greg, of Shannon, Shawna-Seanán, or Nandad become a kaleidoscope of impressions, peppered by a voice that wishes to be so faithful, yet inevitably distorts the narrative with his own observations, reactions, touches of humour, and wittiness. It plays with what a novel can and cannot do.

There is an interesting take here on the role of the narrator with moments where the reader may guess at an omniscient one, but frequent allusions to the damp creeping into the crowded rooms the stories are being told from dislodge this assumption. Readers may wonder who this narrator is. Why these records of the Nacullian family? Where did they come from? Does it even matter? As a literary device this narrator almost disappears behind his stacks of stories. Until he doesn't. Until he seeps into the dialogues, the quips, the passing comments about weirdos, or immigrants taking all the jobs.

Brick Dust pays meticulous attention to detail: from the Nacullians' library fines, their Monday night dinners, saveloys by the polling station, to cutting a hole in young Nandad's... well... I'll let you find that out. And bricks. Lots of bricks. It is funny, maybe even heartwarming at times, and devastating all at once. It will catch you unawares while leading you precisely down the path it has intended you take – the one the narrator has frantically taken.

"I've told you about the Nacullians, but I could have told you about them in so many other ways. I could have made them look better, and made them look worse too."
 (pp.165-166)

Written within the framework of the Cartographies of the Political Novel in Europe project (CAPONEU), Jordan-Baker pokes at what it means for a book to engage in political discussion – or not to. For everyday conversations to be political. For minutes of a Morris Dancers' group meeting to be political. And always with more than a touch of satire. The narrator picks up on the characters' views, opinions, behaviours. Their choice of slang. The irony of an Irish woman's idolisation of the Iron Lady. The categories we assign to boys with absent fathers and their mothers' part in getting knocked up in the first place. The things contained in Police Sergeants' desktop's hard drive and in which years these would be deemed problematic or illegal. Funding and discontinuation of a local Gazette. Ireland. Normalness. Girls holding hands.

Brick Dust doesn't make statements, or maybe it does, but it reveals the statements that arise from the banal, the innocuous voiced or unvoiced thoughts, the action or inaction and how these things manifest in the world. *Brick Dust* is enigmatic but will spark questions and opinions of your own.

Jordan-Baker has made leaps from an exciting new voice at époque in 2020 with his débüt novel *The Nacullians*, to an established and daring author who is not afraid to provoke and prod at readers' curiosity.



Dr Craig Jordan-Baker (University of Brighton) read from his new novel, *Brick Dust*, and discussed its content with Dr Liam Connell (University of Brighton) as part of the University of Brighton's series of author readings with the CAPONEU project.
 24th April 2025



You can watch the discussion by scanning this QR code or by following this link:

<https://caponeu.eu/cdp/materials/brick-dust-a-novel-pre-launch-discussion>