

An Acre of Barren Ground by Jeremy Gavron.
Scribner, 2005.

Brick Lane, in the East End of London, stands as a paradigm of the waves of immigration to these shores that stretch back over many centuries, most especially of Huguenots, Jews and Bangladeshis. But the history of the street itself is not so much one of peoples, nations and ethnic groups as of human beings; human beings in all their pettiness, generosity, venality and altruism.

It is the story of this complexity that Jeremy Gavron brings out in this clever, beautifully written and thought-provoking novel. The book is divided into a number of stories, each one pegged to a particular house or number in Brick Lane itself, and ranging from prehistoric to modern times.

Some of the tales are amusing, others subtle, others intriguing, but Gavron manages to make them all hang together as a whole in spite of their different time frame, religious or other background.

After reading this book the strong inclination of the reader is to make a journey with it to Brick Lane, and to see how many of the ghosts of the characters created by Jeremy Gavron can be discerned hovering around the street and its doorways. There can be few greater tributes to a work of fiction than this.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh