

Brick Dust

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Brick Dust (2025) by Craig Jordan-Baker follows the history of the Nacullian family through an archive of letters, diaries, official records, and other documents assembled by an unnamed archivist, creating a non-linear narrative. The novel explores memory, history, and the limits of archival evidence, emphasising that the past can only ever be reconstructed from incomplete traces. Beginning in Northern Ireland in 1953, the family saga spans several generations, examining migration, class, and political divisions as they shape the lives of the Anglo-Irish working class.

Brick Dust (2025) is a novel by Craig Jordan-Baker, a British author and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Brighton. It follows *The Nacullians* (2020), with both novels depicting members of the Nacullian family across multiple generations.

The novel is narrated by an unnamed archivist who lives alone in a rented council flat in England. Threatened with eviction because of the volume of papers he has accumulated, he attempts to reconstruct the history of the Nacullian family before his collection is removed. Rather than collecting objects, he preserves historical records, letters, diary fragments, public documents, and meeting minutes, organising them according to the locations in which they were found rather than chronologically. Throughout the novel, he inserts editorial annotations identifying where documents were discovered, including notes such as "airing cupboard floor" and "under the bedroom window". The narrator is central to the novel's structure, as he functions not only as the collector and organiser of the family's fragmented history but also as the figure through whom questions of memory, evidence, and the construction of narratives are explored. The narrative is presented as a frame story assembled from this archive, combining documentary material with the narrator's own commentary. Because the documents are arranged by their place of discovery rather than by date, the novel does not follow a linear chronology. Instead, records from different decades are juxtaposed, producing frequent shifts between time periods. As the narrator compares, cross-references, and interprets the archive, he gradually establishes chronological connections between otherwise fragmented episodes, allowing the history of the Nacullian family to emerge incrementally. Throughout this process, he reflects on the incompleteness of the surviving records, acknowledges the limitations of his editorial role, and comments on the impossibility of presenting a complete account of the past. At one point, he remarks that a writer cannot give the reader "the whole earth" but only "dust".

The novel's metafictional structure also shapes its political dimension. By presenting the history of the Nacullian family through scattered documents, personal records, and marginal forms of evidence, *Brick Dust* focuses attention on the ways ordinary lives are recorded and remembered. The narrator's attempt to preserve the experiences of an Anglo-Irish working-class family raises questions about whose histories are considered significant and how the lives of socially marginalised communities enter historical narratives. Rather than presenting history as a fixed sequence of major events, the novel depicts the past as something reconstructed from incomplete traces, shaped by survival, memory, and the availability of records.

The reconstructed family narrative begins in 1953 on the banks of the River Bann in Northern Ireland with Nandad Nacullian, a young Catholic who falls in love with a local Protestant girl. After the relationship is discovered, Nandad is assaulted and forced to leave Ireland, while the young woman remains behind after becoming pregnant. He subsequently settles in southern England, moving between London and Southampton, where he works as a bricklayer and establishes the English branch of the Nacullian family. Meanwhile, the daughter born in Ireland grows up separated from her father. Drawing on the narrator's collection of documents, the novel follows subsequent generations of the family in both England and Ireland.

Through the experiences of the Nacullians, the novel depicts the relationship between political and social structures and the everyday lives of the Anglo-Irish working class. The narrative encompasses sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland, migration to England, working-class employment, council housing, and changing political attitudes across generations. These historical conditions are presented through individual experiences rather than through direct political commentary. The family's movements between Ireland and England reflect broader patterns of migration and displacement, while their social circumstances reveal the effects of class, geography, and political history on personal choices. Among the recurring characters is Nandad's sister, who adopts the name Shawna after marrying an Englishman. Other later family members include Nandad's granddaughter Betty Nacullian and Greg, whose involvement with Morris dancing forms part of the narrative. The novel also incorporates the meeting minutes of the fictional Titanic Morris Men, which recur throughout the text as part of the archival material assembled by the narrator. Humorous episodes and comic exchanges are interwoven with the family history, particularly through the narrator's editorial comments and the Morris men's meeting minutes.

The relationship between the narrator and the Nacullian family is not explicitly explained. His effort to collect, arrange, and interpret fragmentary documents provides the structural framework through which the family history is presented.

Brick Dust was a planned deliverable of the Horizon Europe-funded CAPONEU (*The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe*) project.

Critical reception was favourable. Reviewers commented on the novel's documentary narrative structure, its use of archival materials, its self-reflexive treatment of historical reconstruction, and its use of humour alongside depictions of working-class life.

LANGUAGE: English

CENSORSHIP STATUS: