



# Salaam Brick Lane: A Year in the New East End

*Tarquin Hall*

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## **Salaam Brick Lane: A Year in the New East End** Tarquin Hall

After 10 years living abroad, Tarquin Hall wanted to return to his native London. Lured by his nostalgia for a leafy suburban childhood spent in south-west London, he returned with his Indian-born, American fiancée in tow. But, priced out of the housing market, they found themselves living not in a townhouse, oozing Victorian charm, but in a squalid attic above a Bangladeshi sweatshop on London's Brick Lane. A grimy skylight provided the only window on their new world—a filthy, noisy street where drug dealers and prostitutes peddled their wares and tramps urinated on the pavements. Yet, as Hall got to know Brick Lane, he discovered beneath its unlovely surface an inner world where immigrants and asylum seekers struggle to better themselves and dream of escape. *Salaam Brick Lane* is a journey of discovery by an outsider in his own native city.

## **Salaam Brick Lane: A Year in the New East End Details**

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Author : Tarquin Hall

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## From Reader Review Salaam Brick Lane: A Year in the New East End for online ebook

### John Brookes says

This is my first review of many on Goodreads that will chart my journey on a Round the World trip through literature... which commenced May 22nd 2009. I am travelling the globe through literature (fiction and narrative non-fiction), starting in London, England.

I have mapped out a route around the world, as well as a book (or books for larger countries) to represent each nation that I am travelling to.

Just so you know, my constraints are:

- 1) Book must be fiction or narrative non-fiction (i.e. not a Lonely Planet-type Travel Guide) written by a native-born author\* and set in the country of origin;
- 2) Book must not have been written, or be set, any earlier than 1990;
- 3) Books must be translated into English (or French at a push) - sorry, was never that good at languages...
- 4) Travel from one country / continent to another must be realistic (i.e. from one neighbouring country to another - such as France to Spain - or between landmasses which have an actual air/shipping route - e.g. Australia to Antarctica to Argentina:- a planned part of my trip much later on);
- 5) Books must be reasonably representative of the country - with a certain degree of cultural / social representation etc - even if this is as a background to a wider plot... what I am after is a sense of the country in question in recent times...

\* where absolutely necessary I will go with a suitable non-native author.

My first choice, starting in London, England, was "Salaam Brick Lane" - a narrative non-fiction by a public-school-educated Londoner who returned from 10 years abroad to live in the modern East End, and so incorporating an interesting breadth of class, as well as cultural, diversity in contemporary England.

Tarquin Hall's "Salaam Brick Lane" should not be confused with the popular novel called "Brick Lane" by Monica Ali, although it is set in the same part of London, currently known for its large Bangladeshi population. The author of this work returned to the UK from abroad after 10 years and found himself spending a year in a tiny bedsit in the East End of London...

The reason I liked this novel is that - living near and working in London, I get a real sense of the city as a place of diversity and cosmopolitanism - not only in the modern day but historically. An amusing example of this is where at one stage the author meets an Indian anthropologist who is searching for the 'true' English EastEnder and who is appalled to find that there are no residents who can trace their pure Englishness beyond a generation or two... and this I think, sums up a very key element of 'Englishness' (and why Englishness is so hard to define) - the English are a mongrel race that have always incorporated other cultures and will no doubt continue to do so. Tarquin Hall acknowledges this as a key strength of our culture, and also - being an upper-class public-school educated graduate who grew up in 'posh' West London - demonstrates how prejudice can just as easily be experienced across CLASS in England, as RACE. The fact that his girlfriend who joins him in his 'bijou' bedsit (mistakenly) expecting a city of glitz and glamour is an Indian-born American, adds to this wide perspective of class and culture.

The book itself is an enjoyable read, with a series of interesting - and often tragicomic - characters such as his landlord Mr Ali - "an unlikely mixture of South Asian and Estuary", and his Albanian neighbours. This is narrative non-fiction in the vein of Bill Bryson (with aspirations to Paul Theroux), and I'd recommend it as a

taste of how London is perceived and experienced by its own residents.

A particularly striking part of the book is the description of the author's many hours spent gazing out of his attic window at a single bagel store across the street. In the space of 24 hours a whole cross-section of London drifts into its doors without ever meeting... cleaners in the early hours, builders later on, commuters grabbing breakfast at rush hour, tramps and beggars during the day, clubbers in the evening and prostitutes & drug dealers throughout the night. A whole panorama of interlinked humanity that combine to make up London, yet move in very different worlds - all intersecting at a humble bagel store in Brick Lane... next stop France!

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### **Susan says**

I enjoyed reading this. It is not fiction but an entertaining account of the author's year living on Brick Lane. It was made all the more interesting for me as my son had a flat almost exactly the same as the one Tarquin Hall describes. The author is an excellent observer of human characteristics and captures accents to a T.

He describes cultural characteristics and describes delicious foods. He meets people from many different countries who arrived in Brick Lane through different routes and for different reasons.

I found it not only interesting but also entertaining and educational as well. well worth the read and a nice easy way of learning a bit more about immigrants to London and the East End generally.

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### **Samantha says**

Really enjoyed this book. I was amusing & easy to read. Takes you back through the ages, a history of the East End & all of the different people that have passed through it & settled over the years. From as far back as the Huguenot silk weavers back in the 1700's to the Irish, the Jews & more recently, the Bangladeshis. What I found amusing was, these so-called 'British' people that shout the loudest about getting foreigners out of the country, when they traced back through their family trees, they too were born of foreign descent & the authors' quest to find a true East Ender proved rather difficult!

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### **Max says**

I'm reading this book because of the author-To the Elephant Graveyard won me over. Salaam got good reviews and I'm thinking that it will get me acquainted with our ever changing world. When we are familiar with something we are less afraid of it and hence less threatened by it. Our culture is changing and I'm thinking this book will help me understand it without prejudice as well as be a very good read.

Only into this a few chapters but already I have a sense of what it is like to have been uprooted from your country and culture and forced to find another place to live and make a go of it. And just the same. to be living in a place and watch as it changes through time by the influx of new immigrants.

did i mention learning to be poor in the us of a?

and now that i finally finished the book, yes it is a good book and i understand how peolpes can get fundamental. it also confirmed that the male's sexuality is the root cause of a lot of humanity's problems. or i should say the female's problems.

## Susan says

Enjoyable read about the inhabitants of London's East End - a true melting pot of people and cultures - as seen through the eyes of an Englishman a bit down on his luck.

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## Lauren says

A memoir of living in London's East End, *Salaam Brick Lane* is an enjoyable if overly pointed tale.

Moving back to London after several years abroad, Tarquin Hall discovers the only place he can afford is the East End, London's notorious neighborhood known for its poverty and crime. For centuries, it's stood as the place where immigrants begin their life in England, and the current iteration is composed of immigrants from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Mr. Hall does a nice job of interweaving his own experiences with the history of the area. It makes for an interesting read, even if I wish he had settled on a more objective tone in places and let the stories tell themselves. Recommended.

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## Smitha says

After reading 'The Case of the Deadly Butter Chicken' by Tarquin Hall, I started checking out the other books by the author. The one which caught my eye was not one of the Vish Puri series, but this one- 'Salaam Brick Lane'. The fact that it was non-fiction, set in London's East End sounded very interesting.

Tarquin Hall returns to England after 10 years abroad. Returning back he realizes to his dismay that he cannot afford to live in the leafy suburbs of his childhood. He had been priced out of the nicer London areas and the only place he could afford was a tiny, squalid attic, above a Bangladeshi sweatshop in London's East end – Brick Lane. A place whose reputation precedes it. A place which he hopes is temporary, a place from where he hopes to move from before his Indian born, American fiancée lands in London.

Things don't quite work as he planned, as most things in life. He ends up staying for a little longer than he had planned to. It was not quite the London he had planned to introduce his fiancée, Anu to. Living on a street filled with drug peddlers and prostitutes peddling their fare, it was not quite the London to write home about. And yet, despite the unsavoury characters and the reputation of the place, Hall discovers people and their stories just as any other place in the world. He discovers the world that immigrants have made their own. Some out of choice, some because they don't have a choice at all.

East End has a history of having been the place where immigrants have settled and have got absorbed into British Society. From the Jews to the latest in the line, the Bangladeshis. It was funny to read how some people who had come to Britain as immigrants now consider themselves British and are ready to campaign against the new immigrants. It was interesting to read how the East End has moulded itself over the years and taken over the characteristics of its latest inhabitants while absorbing them into a unique but still British Identity.

Hall's narrative is interesting and non-judgemental and is a fascinating read. It has a great set of characters, a lot of variety and their stories bring out a perspective to the East End some of us might have never known about. The life some of the immigrants lead, looked at with suspicion by some, being in a place, they never wished to be in the first place, was an insightful read. For others it was still a life much better than the one they left behind in the countries they came from. He adds in his personal story as well, which just adds to the flavour. His life with his fiancée, who is initially horrified by their surroundings (being mistaken for a prostitute doesn't help, I'm sure!) but slowly comes to terms with Brick Lane, warts and all. As they chart their lives together, Brick Lane provides a fascinating backdrop in its character and colour. An intriguing narration of life as an East Ender by someone as far removed as possible from it, someone who has had a privileged upbringing, in London suburbs which are as different as they can be from London's East End.

For me, it was full of insights and bits of history, which I found very interesting. An account of London's immigrant hub, so to speak which seemed to have been the place immigrants have always migrated to. A place which has sheltered them and taken on their idiosyncracies and flavour, transforming into Jew town when the main immigrants were Jews and now, in its latest avatar, Banglatown. Who knows what its future holds, but whatever it might be, East end promises to be interesting and vibrant.

All in all, a great read. It's a 4.5/5 from me. I have to say, I enjoyed Hall's non-fiction a lot more than his fiction (I've just read one).

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### **Leo Africanus says**

A kaleidoscopic account of a posh man's brush with the East End of London.

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### **Sally Coupal says**

Fascinating partial autobiography and a grand story of immigrants both legal and illegal who live in the originally cockney part of London. How this very diverse group of people manage to get along with one another and times when they don't. All the striving to better themselves and at the same time how they can come together when threatened. The excitement of the author and his fiancée to be able to move out of their dismal quarters that they had improved greatly over when they moved in. The cultural conflict for the families of our two main characters.

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### **Richard Thompson says**

Probably our favorite Tarquin Hall book so far. We have read and enjoyed all the titles in the Vish Puri detective series, and TO THE ELEPHANT GRAVEYARD.

After working as a reported in India for three years, Hall comes back to England with the intention of settling back into the life he remembers growing up there. But things have changed. He had very little money and London is now a much more expensive place to live. The only marginally suitable place he can find in decrepit third story apartment in Brick Lane in the East End.

His new home is not a pretty place, but it is full of characters with fascinating (sometimes horrifying) stories. And it has history. And color.

A very good read-aloud.

SALAAM BRICK LANE has been selected for my bestalltime shelf, on its own merits and as a representative of several other Tarquin Hall titles which we have enjoyed including THE CASE OF THE DEADLY BUTTER CHICKEN (and the others in the Vish Puri series) and TO THE ELEPHANT GRAVEYARD.

32. MemoryWalk: The apartment blocks on Ahbua Street at Rainbow. The apartment's are old and crumbling. There are bums sleeping doorways and trash piled on the street. The people going in and out of the buildings and walking along the street represent a rich ethnic mix. This day the street is closed and vendors have set up stalls for a Street Market where wares from fruit and vegetables to phoney Rolex watches are for sale.

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### **Rachel Stevenson says**

The problem I had when I started reading this book is that I didn't believe it. I didn't believe that all the people that Hall met in his year in the east end were quirky, eccentric, tragic, funny. I didn't believe that the taxi driver who drove him from South Ken to Brick Lane was a traditional black cab racist. I didn't believe Hall's public school connections or well off Harrods-shopping parents couldn't have helped him out with a job or a loan when he had no other prospects and no other choices. I didn't believe that E1 was quite so run down as Hall writes – by 1999, it was already changing from Little Sylhet to Party Central, with the Truman's Brewery refurb, and bars like Vibe and 93 Feet East opening up. The run down slums, the sweatshops were no doubt still there, but the area had already fundamentally changed.

I think the book might have been better off written as a novel: the classic tale of the class outsider, following in Jack London or Arthur Harding's footsteps, indeed, Hall references the classic Victorian/Edwardian Shoreditch books - Child of the Jago, People of the Abyss, and East End, My Cradle and the book itself is now somewhat of a period piece, written in 1999/2000: before 9/11, before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Abu Hamza was still in the country then, but the only fundamentalist Muslims mentioned are a couple of people at a Bangladeshi wedding. It's not just Bangladeshis that Hall lives amongst, there are Afghani and Kosovan asylum seekers, Somali taxi drivers, a Sikh newsagent, a Bengali intellectual, an Indian matchmaker, an Albanian prostitute, a mockney activist, a Jewish widow, pearly kings and queens (from Epsom), and a cockney chancer.

It's a good job that Hall is an engaging, engaged, lightly humorous and interested person, who connects with people, who in turn are keen to divulge their histories to him. Each chapter is a mini-essay, reminding me of Joseph Mitchell's tales of 1940s New York oddballs in McSorley's Wonderful Saloon and Up In The Old Hotel. Hall begins the tale of two British Asian entrepreneurs setting up an international call centre where the people of Brick Lane come to get good or bad news from their families at home, with the death of a cat. The most touching story is of Naziz, who was put in a sweatshop by his father aged 12, then got involved in a gang, was stabbed and imprisoned but educated himself in jail, and began studying an open university degree whilst saving money to get he and his non-English speaking mother away from his emotionally abusive father.

What Hall does cleverly, implicitly, is to show the similarities between the different ethnic groups who have

lived in the area, but not in a sentimental "we're all the same underneath" way. Rather, he shows the pig headed, bloody mindedness of the mostly male inhabitants. The cockneys who refuse to move away, the slum landlord who won't let his daughter go to Cambridge, the father who won't let his son go to school, the Jewish parents who disowned their kid for marrying a goy. Even Hall's posh parents disapprove of his relationship with a middle class American – because she's of Indian heritage. The theme seems to be that whilst the younger generation assimilate, the elders hold closely and stubbornly to their traditions.

Perhaps it would have been easier for him to take a loan from Papa and set up in Islington or one of the nicer bits of Hackney, but Hall chose the east end. Never pretending to be bohemian, or one of *le peuple*, he nonetheless fits in.

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### **Jim Dressner says**

The author chronicles his experiences and relationships in one year of living in a small attic apartment on Brick Lane in East London. He does an admirable job of unearthing the background stories and ongoing drama of a rich set of characters. He exposes the common thread linking the old East End of Victorian times through the changes to the current situation with Asian immigrants.

Perhaps the most interesting idea was that the British have always assimilated peoples, ideas, and food. I have heard this said of India (but I cannot find the quote) so I found it intriguing that the author, having spent years in India, should discover this about his own country.

While filled with interesting characters and some good concepts, it seemed to lack the spark of life and joy that I was expecting. This book is no "City of Joy" or "Shantaram" that wins your heart--even as it breaks it.

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### **Laura says**

Proof that you need not travel to the ends of the earth to write a gripping travel narrative; humility, a sense of humor and keen observation skills will open up even the city of your birth in fascinating ways. I liked the fact that Hall's book touches on many very timely topics, such as English vs. British identity, who is "really" English, asylum seekers, etc. but not in a heavy handed or preachy way. He meets a wide variety of people and relays their stories but does not condescend to his reader by connecting all the dots. There was also exactly the right balance between personal memoir and describing the community he lived in. The story of his American fiancée, their interracial relationship and the bumps they navigated over the course of this year were wonderfully described too.

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### **Barbara says**

I approached 'Salaam Brick Lane' with some trepidation, fearing it might be rather a patronising 'Posh lad slums it in the East End' take on life in one of London's most dynamic and challenging communities. It's fair to guess that Brick Lane's marvellous melting pot of nationalities and names doesn't include too many people called 'Tarquin'.

I shouldn't have worried. It's a lovely book. Mr Hall is down on his luck, short on cash and can't afford to live in even the rougher parts of the big city, forced to downgrade his expectations and settle for a rather nasty flat with a roof that leaks into the bathroom and some strange Heath Robinson 'mending' by his wily landlord.

Hall is a great observer of both events and voices. His ear for accents is excellent -whether it's his Bangladeshi landlord, recent immigrant Kosovars, or Afghan refugees, you can't help but smile at his capturing of both what's said and done. He never comes over as 'superior', and even though his year in Brick Lane is a step towards something better and not the end of the line as it is for so many of his neighbours, I found the affection for his down at heel neighbourhood very endearing.

'Salaam Brick Lane' is like an insect in amber, a moment in time that's been captured and preserved. Undoubtedly 20+ years later, the area has reinvented itself again. His is the ear of international call centres being a place where you go to call your relatives in far off lands - from the days before mobile phones and internet when good news and bad news were delivered in such places. It's the era of dodgy cab companies - before the rise of Uber and other such alternatives. And his neighbours are the diaspora of world conflicts of that era - Kosovars, Albanians and others fleeing the Balkans, Afghans and Iraqis fleeing wars back home. Today we'll probably see a different mix and 20 years from now, another complete turn-over of nationalities and conflicts. This is a time when Docklands was still on the rise, before the 'War on Terror', before the 24/7 connectedness of today. And as such, it should be treasured like that insect in amber as a precious and endearing account of a troubled community.

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## **Melanie says**

Three and a half stars, really. I love Hall's Vish Puri mystery series, and knowing he is also a journalist, I wanted to read some of his non-fiction. This is a beautifully written account of one year early in his life that he spent living on Brick Lane in London, not the neighborhood he was hoping for when he moved back to his home city after some years abroad in India--but all he could afford.

Brick Lane and its East End surrounds used to be the Cockney neighborhood of Eliza Doolittle fame, but is now an international "melting pot" of immigrants and refugees mainly from the middle east. The book is a series of vignettes about the people Hall meets there: who they are, how they got there, where they are going. What it lacks in momentum (it took me a long time to finish), it makes up for in both exquisite prose and interesting reflections on what it means to be truly "English".

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