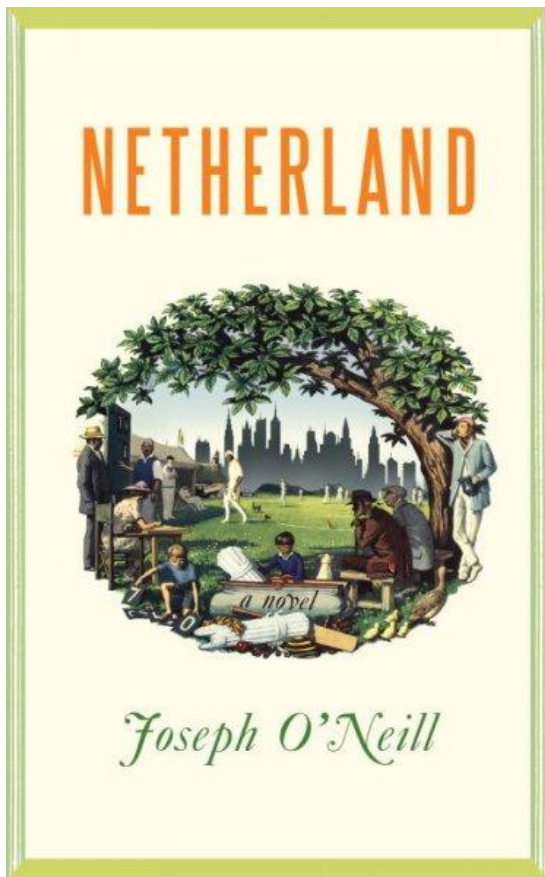


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1345745>

### About the Book



In a New York City made phantasmagorical by the events of 9/11, Hans—a banker originally from the Netherlands—finds himself marooned among the strange occupants of the Chelsea Hotel after his English wife and son return to London. Alone and untethered, feeling lost in the country he had come to regard as home, Hans stumbles upon the vibrant New York subculture of cricket, where he revisits his lost childhood and, thanks to a friendship with a charismatic and charming Trinidadian named Chuck Ramkissoon, begins to reconnect with his life and his adopted country. Ramkissoon, a Gatsby-like figure who is part idealist and part operator, introduces Hans to an “other” New York populated by immigrants and strivers of every race and nationality. Hans is alternately seduced and instructed by Chuck’s particular brand of naivete and chutzpah--by his ability to hold fast to a sense of American and human possibility in which Hans has come to lose faith.

## About the Author



O'Neill, who has Turkish ancestry, was born in Cork, Ireland, in 1964, and grew up in The Netherlands, where he attended boarding school at The Hague. He read law at Girton College, Cambridge, preferring it over English because "literature was too precious" and he wanted it to remain a hobby. After a year off to write his first novel, O'Neill became a barrister at the English Bar, where he practiced for ten years at The Temple, principally in the field of business law.

O'Neill is the author of three novels, the most recent of which, *Netherland*, was published in May 2008 and was featured on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review* [http://www.litlovers.com/guide\\_netherland.html](http://www.litlovers.com/guide_netherland.html) - [cite\\_note-0#cite\\_note-0](#) where it was called, "the wittiest, angriest, most exacting and most desolate work of fiction we've yet had about life in New York and London after the World Trade Center fell". Literary critic James Wood called it "one of the most remarkable postcolonial books I have ever read". Among the books on the long list, it was the favorite to win the Man Booker Prize. However, on September 9, 2008, the Booker nominee shortlist was announced, and the novel stunningly failed to make the list. The book was also nominated for the Warwick Prize for Writing (2008/9) and made it to the long list of that prize announced in November 2008.

He is also the author of a non-fiction book, *Blood-Dark Track: A Family History*, which was a New York Times Notable Book for 2002 and a book of the year for the *Economist* and the *Irish Times*. Additionally, O'Neill writes literary and cultural criticism, most regularly for the *Atlantic Monthly*.

## Awards

*Netherland* was nominated for the Warwick Prize for Writing in 2008 ([http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/prizeforwriting/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/prizeforwriting/)), and won the 2009 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction (<http://www.penfaulkner.org/>), as well as the 2009 Kerry Group Irish Fiction Award. It was also shortlisted for the 2010 Dublin Literary Award (<http://www.impactdublinaward.ie/>).

## Reviews

### *Library Journal*

Hans van den Broek, the main character in this ruminative third novel (and fourth book) by Irish/Turkish/English author O'Neill (*Blood-Dark Track*), is a Dutch-transplanted Londoner working in New York City at the start of the 21st century. Though a successful equities analyst, Hans is given more to reverie than to action. When his wife announces she is taking their young son back to London, Hans, stunned, remains in New York. He gets drawn into a friendship of sorts with Trinidadian entrepreneur Chuck Ramkissoon, who dreams of making cricket a great American sport, and who Hans hears later-is eventually found dead in a canal. Hans's meandering, somewhat old-fashioned narrative takes a patient reader in and out of past and present: from his cricket-playing, fatherless childhood through his distant relationship with his mother, rocky marriage, and his own fatherhood, gradually revealing the appeal of the slowly unfolding game of cricket and fast-talking Chuck Ramkissoon to a man in his early thirties finding his way in a post-9/11 world. Recommended for literary fiction collections.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Novelist and memoirist O'Neill (*Blood-Dark Track: A Family History*, 2001, etc.), born in Ireland and raised in Holland, goes for broke in this challenging novel set largely in post-9/11 New York City. Dutch banker Hans, who narrates the story from the perspective of 2006, and his British wife Rachel, a lawyer, get more than they bargain for when they transfer their jobs from London to Manhattan for an American experience. After the World Trade Center bombing, they move out of their Tribeca loft into the Hotel Chelsea, and soon Rachel decamps with their baby son back to London. Hans visits regularly but the marriage flounders. Distraught and lonely, he joins a Cricket league made up mostly of Asian and Caribbean immigrants. Soon he (along with the reader) falls under the sway of Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian umpire. Chuck is a charming entrepreneur who has opened a kosher sushi restaurant; an inspiringly patriotic immigrant with plans to save America with Cricket; and a petty gangster running a numbers game. A classic charismatic rogue, Chuck leads Hans on a "Heart of Darkness" tour of New York's immigrant underbelly. As Hans begins to realize that Chuck might be a dangerous friend to have, Hans and Rachel's marriage disintegrates. At Chuck's recommendation, Hans moves back to England to win her back. Throughout, O'Neill plays with the nature of time and memory: Hans's Dutch childhood with his single mother, for

example, still haunts him in New York. The shifting truths of who Chuck has been, who Hans's mother was, who Hans and Rachel are to each other, depend on what O'Neill calls "temporal undercurrents." This love story about a friendship, a place and a marriage is not easy to read, but it's even harder to stop thinking about.

### *The New York Times*

Joseph O'Neill's stunning new novel, *Netherland*, provides a resonant meditation on the American Dream...[he] does a magical job of conjuring up the many New Yorks Hans gets to know. He captures the city's myriad moods, its anomalous neighborhoods jostling up against one another, its cacophony and stillness, its strivers, seekers, scam artists and scoundrels...Most memorably, he gives us New York as a place where the unlikeliest of people can become friends and change one another's lives, a place where immigrants like Chuck can nurture—and potentially lose—their dreams, and where others like Hans can find the promise of renewal.

### *New York Times Book Review*

Here's what *Netherland* surely is: the wittiest, angriest, most exacting and most desolate work of fiction we've yet had about life in New York and London after the World Trade Center fell. On a micro level, it's about a couple and their young son living in Lower Manhattan when the planes hit, and about the event's rippling emotional aftermath in their lives. On a macro level, it's about nearly everything: family, politics, identity. I devoured it in three thirsty gulps, gulps that satisfied a craving I didn't know I had...[O'Neill] seems incapable of composing a boring sentence or thinking an uninteresting thought.

### *The Washington Post*

*Netherland* doesn't turn on plot. In both form and content, it questions the idea that a life can be told as a coherent story. It is organized not chronologically but as a series of memories linked by associations...At times, the novel's exacting descriptions felt less like a man's memory than a tour of his consciousness, and I wondered why a particular scene merited such detail, but Hans is a person who has lost his bearings after a shock and his myriad perceptions bear the stamp of this estrangement. Always sensitive and intelligent, *Netherland* tells the fragmented story of a man in exile—from home, family and, most poignantly, from himself.

### *Barnes & Noble Review*

O'Neill's *Netherland* is the rare fiction that is unabashed at the fact of its having been written. Hans, the pensive narrator, is a foreigner twice removed—a Dutchman arrived in New York City by way of London—and his voice has an outsider's relish for the stranger words and usages of English. With a keenly perceptive eye, Hans takes us through his solitary New York existence in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks: his wife has left, taking their young son back with her to England, and Hans faces sudden, stark awareness of his own isolation. A tip-off from a cab driver leads him to a largely immigrant-driven cricket scene in New York's outer boroughs, and Hans falls into an unlikely friendship with a soliloquizing Trinidadian named Chuck Ramkissoon, whose grandiose plan is to turn an unattended patch of park near JFK airport into an international cricket mecca. What follows is an awakening of sorts for Hans—a chance for the recovery of a lost self—and a less fortunate outcome for Chuck, whose racketeering operation introduces Hans to a seamier side of New York. While it would be easy to lump *Netherland* into the burgeoning school of post-9/11 fiction, its fixations have more to do with how a singular mind navigates the atomized world of the modern city (in this respect, O'Neill's Irish inheritance is plainly visible). The novel is low on action and heavy on musing, but the sharpness of O'Neill's reflective sensibility is more than enough to keep things moving: he packs into Hans all the revelation and despair of a man able to tunnel into his own depths.

## Literary Criticism

I first caught sight of this intriguing book while observing a family of four in the international departures lounge of "Washington National" on a hot summer day in June 2008. A woman in her late thirties was engrossed in *Netherland*, while her two teen-aged boys larked about with bags of expensive tennis gear and her husband stared blankly at his toyish I-Phone. I awaited a connection through Newark to Belfast, after a consultancy in "research methods" at the Folger Institute, but was thinking about my two young boys and their disaffected mother back home in Ireland. I had been raised within a large, "extended," immigrant Irish family in the States, yet had encountered for the first time in my life the inner machinations and hidden torments of small, "nuclear", bourgeois family life in the green tracts of upwardly mobile South Belfast. *Netherland* is composed not only by an Irish author who has lived and worked in Ireland and the United States but comprises a brilliant study of the stories and lives of small families and hidden, often deleterious, deep narratives beyond the boundaries and in the nether regions, the dark labyrinthine caves, of psychic motivations. As Joseph O'Neill's main character and retrospective narrator Hans van den

Broek asserts early on: "It is truly a terrible thing when questions of love and family and home are no longer answerable" (p. 21).

*Netherland* involves a first-person narrative that could well be called "The Adversity of Hans van den Broek," as O'Neill's self-deprecating narrator ventures to call his own story once he declares he has hit "rock bottom" (p. 212). It is an agonisingly personal story that takes in retrospectively the narrator's young life in The Netherlands, his early career and marriage in England, and the drift and desolation of his life and marriage in post-9/11 New York City. This fascinating narrative does not involve anything overtly Irish or anything directly rooted in Ireland. However, this third novel by an Irish barrister at work in the US rightfully shouldered its way onto bestseller lists on both sides of the Atlantic in 2008 and 2009. It brilliantly narrates the murky underworld that opens up when middle-class lives turn brutally bankrupt.

Hans van den Broek's "adversity" is never explained or, more importantly, explained away, psychologised or ethnicised in some definitive fashion. Layers of familial crises, silences and betrayals emerge from the depths of what appears to be the ideal secondment of a Dutch equities analyst to the "boomtown" of turn-of-the-millennium Manhattan. However, Hans' superficially ideal life conceals faultlines fully contemporaneous with the post-9/11 world of George W Bush, William Cheney, Tony Blair and the assault on Iraq in March 2003: "we were at a crossroads," Hans' wife Rachel contends "that a great power had 'drifted into wrongdoing'" (p. 92). As a high-flying oil stocks and futures analyst, Hans finds himself "a political-ethical idiot" in the midst of ethical, political and marital adversities which he seems little able to comprehend, much less command. He turns inward, harbouring for two years (October 2001 to November 2003) on the ninth floor of the Chelsea Hotel on West 23rd Street, just north of the Twin World Trade Towers netherworld. The Chelsea, by the way, is the rather bohemian hotel in which Joseph O'Neill, his wife Sally Singer and their three boys have resided since 1998 because neither parent had a reliable enough credit history to secure a mortgage in the USA when they first arrived. (1) O'Neill's van den Broek, wife Rachel and infant son are refugees in the Chelsea, trapped in their elegant loft apartment by the wreckage and chaos of lower Manhattan in the weeks and months following 11 September 2001 (see pp. 17-29, in particular). "The unfathomable and catastrophic atmosphere" of "a city gone mad" (pp. 18, 20) eats into their dreams, their domestic lives and the future hopes of their marriage. Rachel gives up and turns silently inward (p. 38), while Hans continues to work "for M--, a merchant bank with an enormous brokerage operation" (p. 23), not unlike

Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley, or the infamous Lehmann Brothers, all merchant banks with heavily-leveraged brokerage operations that brought the world to the brink of a fathomless financial abyss in mid-September 2008.

Rachel and her son retreat to her parents' home in London; and she indulges in a wasteful, pointless and futureless affair with a self-involved and manipulative restaurateur. Hans works, plays cricket and strikes up an unusual relationship with an eloquent West Indian gambler, the Trinidadian faux-entrepreneur Chuck Ramkissoon.

Chuck's slowly unfolding series of stranger and stranger stories leads Hans deep into the dark underworld of New York's past and present nightmares. On the surface Chuck wants to recover the neglected history and sporting possibilities of cricket in New York City; he lectures immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean on race, cricket and fair play (see especially, pp. 4-16) and tries to secure financing for "The New York Cricket Club," "Floyd Bennett Field," "Corrigan Field," or "Bald Eagle Field"--a project as slippery as its insecure and shifting names demonstrate (pp. 76-9). Hans registers Chuck's "vision" as one of "waste and ice" (p. 79), yet cricket is a crucial point of reference for the two opportunistic friends. Chuck articulates American as any subsequent sport that now appears as typically American (baseball, basketball, etc.), yet Chuck also makes much of the notion of "not cricket" (pp. 12-3). And the latter notion is the key to the book's darkest vision: lurking in the netherlands of our rhetorics and visions of the future we encounter the impulses, obstacles, compromises and betrayals that turn us from our best selves and talk of fair play toward that which is "not cricket", including infidelities, lies, vileness and evil.

O'Neill tells a tale that stands as *The Great Gatsby* for our contemporary era of economic and ethical boom and bust. Chuck Ramkissoon's vision of the recovered greatness of American cricket is undercut by his own gambling, betrayals and ghastly murder. Hans van den Broeck, O'Neill's Nick Carraway, tells the progressively unfolding stories of personal aspirations and familial horrors, yet he escapes his opportunistic friend's sordid death in the end. O'Neill partners Hans' tale of adversity with final recovery. In a world "far away from Tipperary" (p. 116), Hans finds an unexpected measure of justice beyond the unsettling losses of his life. The end of the book turns away from plumbing the depths of melodramatic horrors toward recognising the small gestures of ordinary lives (p. 247). Perhaps this is the sort of insight and resolution that can only happen in novels, whether Irish or American, but it is moving nevertheless. Hans now knows tragically his own duplicity as well as that of his murdered

Trinidadian friend, but he relishes the recognition that "there is to be no drifting out of the moment" of fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, parents and children, who must in the end turn toward one another and embrace and smile again, beyond the netherworld of collapsing towers, fraudulent bankers and self-deluding visionaries.

Source: Caraher, Brian G. "Netherland." *Estudios Irlandeses - Journal of Irish Studies* 6 (2011): 165+. Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe the structure of *Netherland*. Why does the author open with Hans moving to New York City and then quickly jump into the future with Chuck's death and then jump back? Do you think these flashbacks and forward leaps relate to the narrative arc of the story? Is this simply how we tell stories? When you tell a story do you tell it chronologically? Why?
2. Childhood often slips into the story--that of both Hans and Chuck. Early on in the novel, Hans mentions that he doesn't connect to himself as a child ("I, however, seem given to self-estrangement"), then proceeds to produce numerous memories of his childhood and of his mother. How is this reconnecting with his heritage and his past important to the story? How is Chuck often the catalyst for these memories?
3. Chuck is more connected to his heritage than Hans. He socializes with others from the West Indies; he's marries to a woman from his birth country, et cetera. How do flashbacks to his childhood differ from Hans's and how do they affect the novel as a whole?
4. How does nostalgia play into *Netherland*? Who is nostalgic and for what? Why does O'Neill open the novel with someone being nostalgic for New York City?
5. Discuss the title. What does "netherland" mean and what do you think it refers to?
6. Chuck's motto is "Think fantastic." How does this both help and hinder him? Can you create an appropriate motto for Hans? How about for yourself?



7. What does the United States represent for Hans and Chuck? How are their relationships with their new country similar, and also polar opposites?
8. How are both Han's and Chuck's experiences typical of American dream of immigrant stories? Compare *Netherland* to other stories of the immigrant experience (*The Joy Luck Club*, *The House on Mango Street*, *House of Sand and Fog*) or to what you imagine immigrating to a new country to be like.
9. Is the American Dream the same after 9/11? How are Americans both united and divided after 9/11? How is the world of *Netherland* particular to the United States after 9/11?
10. Describe the narrator's voice. Do you trust and like Hans as a narrator? Do you sympathize with him and understand his motives? Do you identify with him?
11. Describe the Chelsea Hotel when Hans lives. How is it a character in the novel? How are the various inhabitants and the oddness of the place appealing and comforting to Hans?
12. What is Han's relationship with his mother? How does the relationship continue to affect him after his mother's death? How does it affect his being a father?
13. Discuss the theme of male friendship in the novel and its connection to sports. Early in the novel, Hans describes playing cricket with Chuck: "The rest of our lives--jobs, children, wives, worries--peeled away, leaving only this fateful sporting fruit." While Hans's friendship with Chuck goes beyond cricket, the sport is what initially brings the two men together. Why do you think cricket is so important to Hans? How does his friendship with Chuck change him?
14. *Netherland* is also the story of a marriage. Why is Hans and Rachel's marriage falling apart? What brings them together again in the end?
15. Discuss the theme of betrayal and forgiveness in *Netherland*. How do both Rachel and Hans betray each other and why? What about Chuck? Do the characters ever lead themselves astray and betray themselves. Does America betray both Chuck and Hans in the end?

## **Multimedia**

### ***Novelist Joseph O'Neill Revisits 'Netherland' (Radio Broadcast)***

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106392287>

NPR discussion of the novelist and his book.

## Further Reading

***Cricket for Americans: playing and understanding the game*** by Tom Melville

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1087860>

(Call number: 796.353 Me)

Written specifically for Americans, who persist in considering cricket a primitive form of baseball, explains the rules, the strategies, the terminology, the statistics, and how the game is organized around the world. Also includes a chapter on teaching cricket to Americans. For teachers and potential players and fans.

***In the wake of 9/11: the psychology of terror*** by Thomas A. Pyszczynski

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1203627>

(Call number: 155.535 Py)

The authors analyze reactions to the attacks of 9/11 through the lens of terror management theory, an existential psychological model that explains why humans react the way they do to the threat of death and how this reaction influences their post-threat cognition and emotion. The theory provides ways to understand and reduce terrorism's effect and possibly find resolutions to conflicts involving terrorism.

## Read-Alikes

***House of Sand and Fog*** by Andre Dubus III

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1149353>

(Call number: Fiction Dubus)

In this riveting novel of almost unbearable suspense, three fragile yet determined people become dangerously entangled in a relentlessly escalating crisis. Colonel Behrani, once a wealthy man in Iran, is now a struggling immigrant willing to bet everything he has to restore his family's dignity. Kathy Nicolo is a troubled young woman whose house is all she has left, and who refuses to let her hard-won stability slip away from her. Sheriff Lester Burdon, a married man who finds himself falling in love with Kathy, becomes obsessed with helping her fight for justice. Drawn by their competing desires to the same small house in the California hills and doomed by their tragic inability to understand one another, the three converge in an explosive collision course.

***The Air We Breathe*** by Andrea Barrett

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1294684>

(Call number: Fiction Barrett)

In fall 1916, Americans debate whether to enter the European war.

"Preparedness parades" march and headlines report German spies. But in an isolated community in the Adirondacks, the danger is barely felt. At Tamarack Lake the focus is on the sick. Wealthy tubercular patients live in private cure cottages; charity patients, mainly immigrants, fill the large public sanatorium. For all, time stands still. Prisoners of routine and yearning for absent families, the patients, including the newly arrived Leo Marburg, take solace in gossip, rumor, and "sometimes" secret attachments. An enterprising patient initiates a weekly discussion group. When his well-meaning efforts lead instead to a tragic accident and a terrible betrayal, the war comes home, bringing with it a surge of anti-immigrant prejudice and vigilante sentiment.

***Empire Rising*** by Thomas Kelly

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1235032>

(Call number: Fiction Kelly)

As the novel opens, it is 1930--the Depression--and ground has just been broken for the Empire State Building. One of the thousands of men erecting the building high above the city is Michael Briody, an Irish immigrant torn between his desire to make a new life in America and his pledge to gather money and arms for the Irish republican cause. When he meets Grace Masterson, an alluring artist who is depicting the great skyscraper's ascent from her houseboat on the East River, Briody's life turns exhilarating--and dangerous, for Grace is also a paramour of Johnny Farrell, Mayor Jimmy Walker's liaison with Tammany Hall and the underworld. Their heartbreaking love story--which takes place both in the immigrant neighborhoods of the Bronx and amid the swanky nightlife of the '21' Club--is also a chronicle of the city's rough passage from a working-class enclave to a world-class metropolis, and a vivid reimagining of the conflict that pitted the Tammany Hall political machine and its popular mayor against the boundlessly ambitious Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

***The Match*** by Romesh Gunesequera

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1302579>

(Call number: Fiction Gunesequera)

Gunesequera tackles some soulful topics, including the effects of time and spatial relations on life, the meaning of home and family, and friends from past lives and lost loves. In a skillfully drawn narrative, we are shown glimpses of Sunny

Fernando's childhood and adolescence in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Sunny moves to London to attend engineering school but withstands his father's disapproval to drop out and eventually become a photographer.

**\*Book Club To Go!\*** *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1209428>

(Call number: Fiction Lahiri)

*The Namesake* is a finely wrought, deeply moving family drama that illuminates this acclaimed author's signature themes: the immigrant experience, the clash of cultures, the tangled ties between generations. *The Namesake* takes the Ganguli family from their tradition-bound life in Calcutta through their fraught transformation into Americans. On the heels of an arranged wedding, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Ashoke does his best to adapt while his wife pines for home. When their son, Gogol, is born, the task of naming him betrays their hope of respecting old ways in a new world. And we watch as Gogol stumbles along the first-generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalties, comic detours, and wrenching love affairs.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

### **Extra!**

Just as sports play a role in "*Netherland*," they often play a role in the development of many friendships. Go around the group and describe instances where they got to know a person better through playing a sport (or game) with them.

