



**Pomeranski**  
By Gerald Jacobs  
Quartet, £14

# From Brick Lane to Brixton

## Stoddard Martin

**A** WRITER SHOULD ONLY write about what he knows best, Hemingway thought. This is often but not always the case. There was much to admire in Gerald Jacobs's previous novels, *Sacred Games* (1995) and *Nine Love Letters* (2016). The first tracked one man's vicissitudes during and after the Shoah, the second two families' progress in London upon fleeing Baghdad and Budapest, with an interweaving of fortunes bringing history up to the day before yesterday. *Pomeranski* settles closer to Jacobs's home turf in time and space. Most of the story takes place in the 1950s when he was a boy and around Brixton, where he spent his formative years.

The *dramatis personae* is of gritty Jewish men and their women. Many have originated in the environs of Brick Lane — an East End of immigrant gangs and petty crime. Migration to the area of Electric Avenue and its markets comes in early adulthood; a group forms in a cafe called the Astoria. Jacobs's tableau is of these Astorians, so-called. Colour is dabbed in via "obligatory nicknames" such as Spanish Joe, Fancy Goods Harry and Sam the Stick. At the centre of the group portrait is Benny the Fixer, whose tag like others' derives from Yiddish — *Macher*.

These men have "lived-in faces". They are instinctive rule-breakers. They like *shprauancy* accoutrements and, while settling into bourgeois marriages, take on glamorous mistresses. Benny, wed to Bertha, falls in love with Estelle, a torch-singer who works in a club alongside Ruth Ellis. Later she will grieve over Ellis's fate — the last woman to be executed in Britain — and Benny supports her in the belief that the man Ellis shot had it coming. The gun Ellis used has passed through the hands of further characters in Jacobs's tale. Such interweaving, as in his previous work, is an indicator of both his skill at plotting and what is central to his interests.

Connectedness, community, whether for good or ill, is the milieu. Rivalries blow up into hatreds. Cuckolding and humiliation ride unforgiven. If a boxer agrees to fix a fight, he'd better deliver. Retributions occur, and everyone susses the truth of how and by whom without the facts becoming explicit.

This is a world beyond police and courtroom, with its own code of right and wrong. Benny, who is surprisingly literate without having had much education except on the street, reads *Brighton Rock*. The ethical realm of Pinkie and Ida is only a train ride away.

Ever alert to what passes from one generation to another, Jacobs paints in Benny's son Simon getting accepted to Cambridge, studying English literature to his mother's bemusement (what is the practical value of such an endeavour?) and becoming a theatre director. Meanwhile, a jazz club owner who gets knocked off is succeeded by a son bent on vengeance.

A plot twist takes care of one of his two suspects, while pursuit of the other results in tables being turned and the would-be avenger begging for mercy. This is not accidental. Revenge is shown as useless, and usually misdirected, and reconciliation is what ought best to come for all in the end.

The point is driven home in a final scene in which Benny's wife and mistress meet unexpectedly over his grave. Recognising that they alone have the knowledge and feeling to understand one another's loss, the rivals become friends. Jewish life has moved on and the intrigues of a struggling generation dissipate. Nostalgia for a world so near yet now so far sounds in the mind like handfuls of soil hitting the lid of a coffin — "a brush caressing a drum." ☺



"I'm afraid you've stimulated the economy enough now, sir."

**Stoddard Martin** is a writer and publisher. His most recent fiction, under the name of Chip Martin, is *Argonaut: commencement tales* (Starhaven)