In Joseph O’Neill’s 2008 novel Netherland, a Dutch banker, Hans van den Broek, retrospectively narrates the story of how he was displaced from his lower Manhattan home on September 11, 2001, and moved with his wife and son to the legendarily bohemian Chelsea Hotel. When his wife, frustrated at his passivity, then moves to London with their son, Hans’s story really begins. He joins a group of Caribbean and south Asian immigrant cricketers on Staten Island and befriends a shady entrepreneur, Chuck Ramkissoon, who hopes to establish the sport as a great American game. Michiko Kakutani called Netherland a “stunning” and “resonant meditation on the American Dream” (“Post 9/11”). James Wood pronounced it “one of the most remarkable post-colonial books I have ever read.” Netherland went on to win a place on the New York Times Book Review list of “10 Best Books of 2008” and the 2009 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. It got another boost when Barack Obama told the New York Times that he was in the midst of reading O’Neill’s novel (Leonhardt).

Critics have debated Netherland’s status as a 9/11 novel. While Wood asserted that it had been “consistently misread” as such, Adam Kirsch observed in the New Republic that, “[l]ike all the best novels inspired by September 11, Netherland treats the attacks themselves very obliquely, and thus avoids the painful literalism that afflicted John Updike’s Terrorist and Don DeLillo’s Falling Man.” Zadie Smith agreed that “Netherland is only superficially about September 11 or immigrants or cricket as a symbol of good citizenship” (“Two Paths”). Several scholars have embraced Netherland as a model of how 9/11 can be contextualized through a transnational, even postnational, purview. O’Neill himself, with his Irish–Turkish family background and his years in the Netherlands, Turkey, London, and now New York, speaks from an unusually cosmopolitan position. Although Netherland is mostly set in New York and sharply depicts the anxieties of post-9/11 life in the city, its characters are drawn from all over the world and render the drama in an international, multiethnic frame.

I met Joseph O’Neill in Manhattan on a rainy day in a tiny café with an adjoining door to a hair salon: a quirky holdout against the Starbucks
invasion. While a woman had her hair highlighted behind us, people wandered in and out, ordering espresso and pastries. We talked about cricket, the Euro, and O’Neill’s then novel-in-progress (The Dog, which will appear in 2015) over a soundtrack of Amy Winehouse and bus brakes screeching outside. While O’Neill has been interviewed extensively about many aspects of Netherland, we focused on the novel’s relationship to 9/11.

FROST: I want to begin with your introductory note to the 2010 paper-back edition of Blood-Dark Track: A Family History (2000). You say, “[W]hile I have no quarrel with this tag [the ‘9/11 novel’], I will allow myself to state that if I have written a ‘9/11 book,’ that book would, in my mind, be Blood-Dark Track” (2). I’d like to talk about both those points. First, the tag “9/11 novel,” with which many novelists have quarreled.

O’NEILL: Well, all tags are objectionable to the extent that they are reductive. But to the extent that any tag is valid, why not a 9/11 tag? Is there really a reader out there who sees the 9/11 tag and shuts down their brain to everything else? Readers are more sophisticated and able to transcend tags and see them for what they are. They’re Post-it notes, not tattoos. Also, every reading of a book is a tag of sorts and to be valued accordingly, not least as an emblem of attention. Books thrive on attention.

FROST: I guess the more intriguing twist in that quote is that for you, Blood-Dark Track rather than Netherland is your “9/11 book.”

O’NEILL: The first significance I attach to the 9/11 novel is a political one. It has to do with the construction of political narratives and the predicament of the individual conscience in the face of history. And I think that the situation and the dilemma of the individual conscience was never more dramatic, in my personal experience, than on 9/11 and the years following 9/11. It’s almost as if 9/11 was like a lightning flash that abruptly illuminated something that already existed, namely the increasingly frail capacity of the single mind to apprehend what’s going on in the world in a politically and ethically coherent way. After the financial crash, this kind of thinking is more difficult than ever: I mean, do we have to be economists now, on top of everything else? Blood-Dark Track is the story of two men, my grandfathers, who before and during the Second World War find themselves inserted into history. Their capacity for ethical, political thinking – for identifying the narrative of reality that is most valid – is tested. And to some extent they’re overwhelmed by it.

FROST: So is there a parallel between your grandfathers dropped down into history and Hans dropped down into New York?