



Dreamland

By Kevin Baker
ISBN: 9780060852726

Dreamland is a historical novel that recreates turn-of-the century New York, bringing to life an entire era and capturing the essence of the American immigrant experience. Each character in Kevin Baker's diverse cast represents a different walk of life from New York, circa 1910. *Dreamland's* heroine, Esther "Esse" Abramowitz, is a perfect example of the strength and resilience of the immigrant spirit. A hard-working laborer in a Lower East Side sweatshop, Esse never ceases in her various struggles for independence, equality, and fair treatment against exploitative employers and society's traditional views of the role of women. Esse's coming-of-age coincides with her love affair with Kid Twist, a stowaway from the Old World. The action of *Dreamland* begins with Kid Twist's violent falling-out with the feared gangster leader Gyp the Blood, setting in motion a long series of events that lead ultimately to a startling and unexpected finale on Coney Island. The stories of Esse and Kid Twist are intertwined with tales of a multitude of characters, most drawn straight from the pages of history, such as Tammany Hall political boss Big Tim Sullivan; Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis; Karl Jung, his protégé; Beansy Rosenthal, whose testimony in a police corruption case threatens to undermine Tammany Hall, and whose murder plays a catalytic role in the events of this novel; and numerous

others, real and imagined, from Coney Island at a time when it was one of the most miraculous spectacles of the modern world. *Dreamland* is a story about survival, about human beings living day-to-day, persevering against the odds. Turn-of-the-century New York was truly a remarkable place and time; while it held for most immigrants more promise than the lands from which they'd come, it introduced hardship and cataclysmic disappointment on a scale virtually unimaginable from today's perspective. From Esse, who was destined to work in a sweatshop and live in a filthy, crowded tenement, to Trick the Dwarf, eking out a living as a sideshow freak, basic survival consumed the bulk of people's time and spirit. For the poor, especially destitute immigrants, life was often a bitter struggle for the American Dream, an elusive and uncertain end in itself. Of course, honest work wasn't the only way -- or even the best way -- to make it in New York; indeed, there seemed greater opportunity through gangsterism, crime, and corruption. Esse and Gyp the Blood escape their common oppressive circumstance through opposite roots. Survival dictates that Kid Twist become a gangster, despite a moral aversion to the work expected of him. Whether these characters sewed or killed, sweat or cheated, earning enough to live another week was often all that mattered. And on the weekend? For Esse, as for thousands of immigrants, the Sunday off provided the opportunity to mix with all walks of life in Coney Island -- the magical city where bright lights cast a soft glow on hard lives and the surf of the Atlantic washed away fears and troubles. All kinds of people came together in Coney Island in a strange and dynamic synergy. Whores mixed with factory workers and gangsters with freaks; midgets lived out their dreams of normalcy and onlookers reveled in the spectacle. When it came time for dreaming, the playing field leveled, and the rich and the poor alike went to Coney's parks -- Steeplechase, Luna Park, and of course, Dreamland. There they could release their tensions and worries and fears, and find excitement in a stolen caress, comfort in the misfortune of others, beauty in a ride that left the surf below and soared in to the sky above... truly a land of dreams that provided a haven from the rough-and-tumble of life in a sometimes unforgiving New York City. **Historical Notes:** The era in which *Dreamland* takes place was one of immense social change and upheaval. In many ways, the social landscape changed dramatically to accommodate the rapidly shifting composition of New York's population. From the late 1800's until 1920, foreign immigrants grew to comprise close to half of New York City's already sizable population. It is an understatement, then, to say that immigration played a huge role in turn-of-the-century New York. Kevin Baker's *Dreamland* is the very portrait of this New York. Besides capturing the essence of this era of rampant change and diversification, Mr. Baker also adhered to a general framework of historical reality. In his own words, he explains, "My own feeling is that you can't beat reality; the best you can do is try to rearrange it." Thus, much of *Dreamland* is fact-based, particularly as Trick the Dwarf reminds us in his opening soliloquy how *Dreamland* is "a story about fire," and the infernos described within the novel were very real. The Triangle Fire was a tragedy that had enormous impact on city life in New York and elsewhere in the years that followed. On March 25, 1911, 146 people, most of whom were young garment workers, perished in the fire that consumed one of the city's biggest sweatshops. In the Asch Building, home to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company and east of today's Washington Square Park, firefighters fought helplessly against the raging conflagration. Ultimately, many women were forced to jump out of windows stories above the street, unsure of whether anything would catch them other than the concrete sidewalks below. The other fire central to the book is, of course, the burning of *Dreamland* itself, which occurred on May 26 of the same year. Workers were putting the finishing touches on fixing a leak that had sprung a few days before in the cavern walls of Hellgate, Coney's version of a boat ride on the River Styx. Suddenly, overhead light bulbs began to pop and explode, which, coupled with a spilled bucket of tar, set the park ablaze in moments. By 4 a.m. the next morning, the phantasmagorical *Dreamland* had burned to the ground, at a total uninsured loss of more than \$5.2 million and 2,500 jobs. **Questions for Discussion**

1. A key issue for immigrants has been the struggle to assimilate into their new homeland without sacrificing hallmarks of many different distinct cultures with them. What legacies have the various characters in *Dreamland* brought with them from their respective Old Worlds? Take Esse's family in particular and highlight how the old and the new clash, and how each member deals with the assimilation process differently.
2. Author Kevin Baker challenges the reader to sniff out various hidden historical figures in *Dreamland*. How many can you name?
3. Along those same lines, how difficult is it to distinguish between history and Mr. Baker's craft in the novel? Can you separate the fiction from the reality? How fine do you think that line is in your own perception of and involvement in the making of history right now?
4. Violence and beauty are often very closely associated in *Dreamland*. Why might they share close ties? Cite specific examples from the book.
5. Love is often tested in *Dreamland*. Whether faced with family disapproval, the threat of physical dangers, divisive politics, or simply the dynamics of a rapidly changing world, many of the book's characters meet the challenge put forth by love in its many different forms. For example, Kid Twist's loyalty to Esse never waned, not even in the face of death; Trick's love for Carlotta was uncompromised by her madness; even power-hungry Big Tim Sullivan's heart opened children everywhere. In light of this, how much do you think that characters' motivations were shaped by love in *Dreamland*?

About the Author: Kevin Baker was born in 1958 in Englewood, New Jersey, but grew up mainly in Rockport, Massachusetts. His career in writing began early; his first professional job was at age 13, as a stringer covering school sports for *The Gloucester Daily Times*. After graduating from Rockport High School and from Columbia University with a degree in political science, he worked at a number of freelance and writing jobs, including writing political position papers for the Public Securities Association and answering letters for the Office of the Mayor of the City of New York. Mr. Baker then signed on as the chief historical researcher for Harold Evans's celebrated history of the

20th century, *The American Century* (Knopf), which was a 1998 *New York Times* bestseller. In 1993 Mr. Baker published his first novel, loosely based on the legend of baseball great Ty Cobb entitled *Sometimes You See It Coming*. *Dreamland* represents what Mr. Baker envisions to be the first volume in a trilogy of historical novels set in New York.