



Paradise Alley

By Kevin Baker
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Introduction With *Paradise Alley*, the second novel in his City of Fire trilogy, Kevin Baker returns to the immigrant experience in historical New York. For three days in the summer of 1863, the Irish immigrant working class controls the streets of Manhattan, protesting President Lincoln's newly implemented draft act. As the angry mob burns its way through the city, Ruth Dove, Deirdre O'Kane and Maddy Doyle, neighbors on a street called Paradise Alley, come together in an unlikely alliance, struggling to protect themselves and their families during what would later be considered the worst riot in American history. Just as he did in his previous novel, *Dreamland*, Kevin Baker uses the complexities of his characters to explore the essence of the immigrant experience in America. Capturing the hopes and dreams, failures and disappointments of the crowds of Irish Catholics as they step off the boat and into the teeming melting pot of New York, he looks for a historical understanding of what it means to become an American. Deirdre O'Kane's determination to make something of herself in New York has gained her the love of a husband, a small tidy house on Paradise Alley and an unbreakable aura of respectability. Fiercely proud and unfailingly pious, she seems to represent the best of both of her worlds, but comes to recognize the limitations of her success when she sends her husband off to a

war from which he may never return. Maddy Boyle, a hot corn vendor-turned prostitute, is shunned by the neighborhood women for her reckless independence and the insult her profession presents to their propriety. Though her self-reliance seems impressive at first, behind closed doors she betrays her longing for kinship and family. Ruth Dove has survived the potato famine and the passage across the ocean to become a rag picker in Northern Manhattan. In the shadow of an abusive relationship, she has fallen in love with an ex-slave and managed to trick her tormentor - Dangerous Johnny Dolan - into leaving for the West Coast. Now Johnny is back, and, marching in the front lines of the mob, he is searching for her. Ruth's survival in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds pays testament to the resilience and perseverance of those who made it, and her interracial relationship explores the complexities of the African-American experience in a time of racial hostility and suspicion. In the kaleidoscope of his characters' stories, Baker captures the many dimensions of leaving everything behind and starting over. What they discover, ultimately, is a world without certainties, a constantly changing reality, where much of their lives will be spent struggling to retain a sense of who they are and where they have come from. **Historical Note** Of the roughly 37 million immigrants that arrived in America between 1840 and 1920, about 4.5 million came from Ireland, most of them arriving between 1840 and 1870. Escaping the potato famine, relentless poverty and the iron-fisted rule of the English, America was seen as a land of opportunity, where, with a bit of luck, street smarts and application, anything was possible. Most of the Irish Catholics seeking their fortunes in the New World came through Manhattan and many of them simply stayed: on the streets, in the overcrowded tenements, maybe even in a house of their own. As the urban centers began to expand in the middle of the 19th century, living and working conditions of the poorer immigrant working classes suffered. The economy was shaky, jobs were scarce and in the tenement district of lower Manhattan (where each square mile at that time packed more than 290,000 people), poverty and crime ruled the dark alleys and overcrowded apartments. It was here that Lincoln's draft act was most keenly felt. The new Irish-American working class had been willing to fight to preserve the Union, but their attitude toward the Civil War changed once Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation made it a war to free the slaves, and once the government began conscripting their fathers, brothers and husbands. Worse yet, only those able to pay the sum of \$300—a full year's wages for an average workingman—would be able to buy a substitute. Within a few hours after the first names were called out at his draft box on July 13, 1863, the heated discussions on street corners, in pubs and at market stalls turned into the frenzy of a mob, as their fury at the injustice spilled onto the streets of Manhattan. **Questions for Discussion**

1. One of *Paradise Alley's* central themes is the Irish immigrants' struggle to adapt to a new and foreign environment while trying to preserve their cultural heritage in the process. Looking at the characters in *Paradise Alley*, what are some of the key problems they encounter and how does the assimilation process manifest itself in their daily lives?
2. In his narrative, Baker has carefully interwoven fact and fiction, an effort that is echoed in the journalistic exploits of his character Herbert Willis Robinson, a reporter for Horace Greeley's New York Tribune. What does Baker's fine line between fact and fiction, and Robinson's depiction of his own reality, tell you about the complexities of recording and reconstructing historical reality? To what extent (if at all) should the novelist be bound by the actual historical record?
3. The concept of family plays a significant role in the book and each character's actions are fueled, in part, by the presence, absence, safety or cruelty of their loved ones. Discuss the concept of family for each of the main characters and place it into the context of the Irish immigrant experience as a whole.
4. Ruth Dove's personality is quiet and reticent, timid even, yet she has survived the most extreme adversity. What is the source of her strength? How did she make her way from the potato fields of Ireland to Paradise Alley?
5. With Ruth's struggle in mind and the abuse she suffers at the hand of Johnny Dolan, we feel the emotional quality of her relationship and family to be especially redemptive. How would you interpret her death in that context?
6. Tom and Deirdre's relationship seems to be one of mutual respect and affection. Why does she encourage him to join the army voluntarily and what, for her, are the consequences of her actions?
7. The cabinet of wonders that Johnny Dolan steals from the wandering peddler accompanies Ruth and Johnny throughout the novel:

"Along the road, Johnny kept the box wrapped up tight... At night ... he would open it up, and stare at it until the light faded. There was everything inside, behind the glass. There were tiny mirrors and gemstones, glued to the back, so the whole size and shape of the thing seemed to shift, every time they looked inside. And they could always find something new. There were embryos of small animals, and insects floating in jars and feathers of strange birds, and the bones of the Saints. There were miniature charts of the seas and the constellations, and the compass of the navigator, and the tools of the apothecary, and of the barber and of the surgeon -- ... he would look until the sun went down, and even longer, ...wondering over it afterward. 'An' what d'ya think that is, back there? What d'ya think that does?' he would ask as they peered in together by the glow of the fire." (Pages 223-224)

What is the significance of this box to Johnny and what about it makes it so valuable to him?

8. As a Protestant and the only character from the educated higher classes, Herbert Willis Robinson seems to be the odd man out in a cast that is drawn mainly from the Irish immigrant working class. What is his role in the narrative?

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' 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, based loosely on the legend of baseball great Ty Cobb entitled *Sometimes You See it Coming*. In 1999, *Dreamland* was published as the first volume in a series of historical novels set in New York, followed in 2002 by *Paradise Alley*.