



Kevin Baker

Paradise Alley
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A Conversation with Kevin Baker

Q: You've written *Dreamland*, a novel set in 1910s New York, and you've done research for Harold Evan's *The American Century*. How did you come across the historical events described in *Paradise Alley* and why did you decide to write about them?**KB:** I first came across the events depicted in *Paradise Alley*, when my father gave me a copy of Herbert Asbury's *The Gangs of New York* to read, over 30 years ago. Having grown up in America in the 1960s, I was not terribly surprised by the idea of urban riots, or by protests over a draft — it seemed, in those days, that every time you turned on the TV you saw a halftrack rolling down a city street — but I was stunned by how violent and furious these protests from the 1860s were. Asbury's book, which is now emerging as a classic of our hidden history, is not terribly long on accuracy; an estimated 119 people died, instead of the 2,000 he claims. But it was, still, the worst riot in American history, and something that was very alien to the received history I had about the Civil War, and what kind of a fight it was, and who the good guys and the bad guys were. I wanted to know more — and what I learned, I thought, made for a great story.

Q: You've placed three women at the center of your narrative and each is portrayed with a striking degree of intimacy. How did you, as a man, get to know these characters? Was it difficult finding their voices?**KB:** I always find it difficult to get any character's voice down. I know that the conventional wisdom of today is that one should not be able to truly depict anyone not exactly one's own self, but that would mean the death of literature. There is always a lot of groping in the dark, and it's even harder, of course, when you're dealing with a different time period. I have been fortunate enough to know many wonderful women in my life, my wife, sisters, mother, many friends. I have learned a great deal from them all, and I feel that I know many of them better than the male friends and relatives I have. The gap between the sexes is great, but it is not so wide as to preclude the basics of human love, fear, desire, greed, etc.

Q: In *Paradise Alley*, you're delving deep into the heart of Irish Roman-Catholicism. Was it easy to become familiar with the cultural norms and behavioral patterns of a different religion?**KB:** As it happens, much of my father's family is Catholic, and I have attended a number of masses in my life. It's not exactly another world to me. But yes, I was brought up in different Protestant faiths — and on top of this difference, I had to find out what the Catholic church in America was like in the 19th century. In this endeavor, I was fortunate enough to have the help of several priests in the New York area, all of whom had a good historical perspective, and several books that I cite in the bibliography. The differences between then and now are not vast, but in general the Catholic church in America was, at the time of *Paradise Alley*, poorer, more defensive, more besieged, more persecuted, somewhat more proper and conservative, and perhaps a little more directly involved with life in the streets, where most of its communicants were living.

Q: Your use of geographical landmarks brings to life vividly the anatomy of historical New York. Which places are real and which are fictional? Where could we find *Paradise Alley* today?**KB:** *Paradise Alley* was a very real place, an alley that emerged from a terrible double tenement known as "Sweeney's Shambles." Both are long gone, thank goodness. Their approximate location was just off Cherry Street, behind where the New York Post printing plant is today, and about where the La Guardia Houses currently stand. The anatomy of the whole Fourth Ward over there is very much changed now, and scarcely recognizable. Gone, too, are the old homes of The New York Times and the Tribune, the grand old hotels such as the Astor House and the St. Nicholas, and most of the tenements of the old Five Points. But many other buildings are still standing, such as the churchyard of the Old St. Patrick's (the church itself burned and was rebuilt shortly after the Civil War), where Tom meets Deirdre; New York's graceful, Georgian City Hall; Federal Hall, the old Sub-Treasury building, where they kept the gold, and quite a few older residential buildings. The oldest known tenement, for instance — dating back to at least 1824 — still stands, at 65 Mott Street, in the heart of Chinatown. The Lower East Side of New York is truly a unique place in America, a neighborhood that has been a poor, immigrant community continuously for at least 175 years. The ethnic groups have changed — from Irish and German, to Jewish, Eastern European, and Italian, to Hispanic and Asian — but the flavor of struggle, of aspiration, of sheer density and poverty, still remains. To get a very vivid idea of how new Americans lived from the 1850s to the 1930s, I would highly recommend that one visit The Lower East Side Tenement Museum, at 97 Orchard Street, which has preserved an old tenement and created inside replicas of how various apartments looked during different ages. I certainly did — which is why no location in *Paradise Alley* is made up out of wholecloth.

Q: Which scene in the book did you most enjoy writing (and researching)? Which was the most painful?**KB:** Researching the entire book was extremely enjoyable, as it usually is. This is the fun part for me, where I get to actually learn things. As far as the writing goes, I guess the most fun lay in writing in Herbert Willis Robinson's voice. It is a rather modern voice, cynical and dryly humorous, and being a journalist he has the freedom to follow the riot up and down the island, and to remark on almost anything he chooses. It's hard to say what was the most painful. The famine scenes in Ireland were hard, as were those of racial animosity and the lynchings during the riot. Perhaps the hardest of all was Col. O'Brien's murder, or maybe Ruth's confrontation with the mob.

Q: *Paradise Alley* is part of a series of novels you're writing, all set in historical New York. What exactly is it about New York that holds your fascination? Can you offer us any hints about your next subject?**KB:** New York is fascinating for any number of reasons. The most obvious thing, I think, is that it is the most cosmopolitan city in the history of the world. No other place has ever been home to so many disparate groups of people, in such numbers. Amazingly, they usually get along — with some notable exceptions. It is, as well, about the most continuously worked over piece of real estate in all of America: From the Revolution, when a quarter of the city burned down and more Americans died in the British prison ships out in the harbor than in all the rest of the war combined, right through to the World Trade Center atrocities, this has been the site of constant conflict, turmoil, even disaster. I think the reason for this is that here is where America has defined itself, over and over. In *Paradise Alley*, the draft riots were both largely instigated by and put-down by Irish-Americans. This was the crucible of becoming a full American, it meant fighting your friends and neighbors in the streets. What did your freedom mean? Who did you owe your loyalty to? *Dreamland* dealt more with the Jewish American experience, around the last turn of the century. This was the bringing of the law. These were people who took America at its word — that this was a free

country, guaranteeing certain, inalienable rights to all citizens. When they came here, and found that yes, it was a democracy, but one largely controlled by political machines and corporations, they fought to make America over into the country they had been promised — through the labor movement, through battles for civil liberties, and even by shaping the message of America through the entertainment industries. The third book in this trilogy, which I'm working on now, will be called *Strivers' Row*, and it will be set in Harlem, during the Second World War. Here, in dealing with African Americans, we are talking about really the oldest people — people who have wanted to be full-fledged Americans for centuries, but who have been systematically excluded, despised, exploited. As Harlem, their last haven, declines around them, the fervor that will create the modern civil rights movement grows — the demand to be treated as full human beings, and thus full Americans.