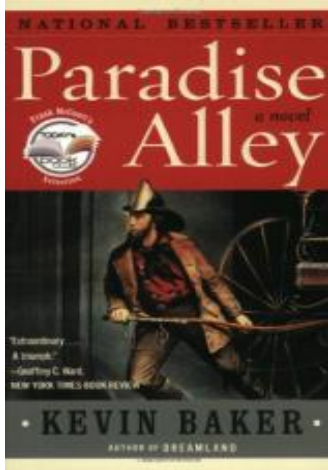


# Paradise Alley

by Kevin Baker

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## About the Book

At the height of the Civil War, what begins with strong words and a few broken bottles will, over the course of five days, escalate into the worst urban conflagration in American history. Hundreds of thousands of poor Irish immigrants smolder with resentment against a war and a president that have cost them so many of their young men. When word spreads throughout New York's immigrant wards that a military draft is about to be implemented -- a draft from which any rich man's son with \$300 can buy an exemption -- trouble begins to spill into the streets.

Down in the waterfront slum of Paradise Alley, three women -- Deirdre Dolan O'Kane, Ruth Dove, and Maddy Boyle -- struggle with their private fears as they wait for the storm to descend on them. Deirdre, whose lace-curtain sensibilities have always kept her at arm's length from her neighbors, is devastated by the discovery that her husband, Tom, has been wounded at Gettysburg. In her desperation, Deirdre must turn for aid and comfort to Ruth, a woman she has always judged as morally depraved.

Ruth, too, has been cut off from her husband, Billy Dove, an ex-slave. At dawn he set out for the Colored Orphans' Asylum uptown, to collect his last wages. But he has not returned by day's end, or by the next morning. In the meantime, Ruth has learned that dozens of black men and women have been lynched or beaten by rioters.

She begins to fear the worst, not just for Billy, but for herself and their children, too -- because she now knows that *he* is coming. *He* is Dangerous Johnny Dolan, Deirdre's estranged brother, who after fourteen years' exile has returned to New York. Years before, it was Johnny who saved Ruth from the famine in Ireland, who arranged for her steerage passage from Dublin to New York -- and who beat her mercilessly until she arranged to have him sent away for murder.

Even as the riot builds toward its violent climax, Dolan searches relentlessly for Ruth and Deirdre, carried along by the unruly mob. In the end, these remarkable women have nothing but one another to rely on as they seek to protect their homes and families from the brutality of a city -- and a nation -- gone mad. **Paradise Alley** a story of race and hatred, of

love and war, of risk and dauntless courage.

## Discussion Guide

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 Deidre'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?

## Author Bio

Kevin Baker is a novelist, historian and journalist. He has been a professional writer since the age of 13, working originally for the *Gloucester Daily Times* as a stringer covering school-boy sports. He is the coauthor of Reggie Jackson's BECOMING MR. OCTOBER. His work has appeared in *Harper's*, where he is also a contributing editor, *New York Observer*, *The New York Times* and *The New Republic*. He lives in New York City.

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