
That fateful week

A fictional exploration of the 1863 New York Draft Riots

Reading Kevin Baker's massive novel set during the New York draft riots is rather like returning to a favorite city after a considerable absence--the surroundings are familiar, and so are many of the people present: Mayor Opdyke, Police Superintendent Kennedy, publisher Horace Greeley, soldiers of the Fighting 69th. I first met some of them decades ago, in the pages of a paperback edition of Irving Werstein's *July 1863*. Once exposed to the scenes of that fateful week, the images do not easily fade.

There are plenty of newcomers, largely fictional, milling in the familiar streets. Chief among them are a man and woman whose journeys begin, via extensive flashbacks, in Ireland during the 1846 famine. The story follows these two characters across the sea to their dismal destinies in a city that treated poor Irish immigrants almost as harshly as it treated blacks.

Kevin Baker is a writer of talent and power. He knows how to hook the reader from the first chapter, and the first sentence: the scabrous villain, Dangerous Johnny Dolan, is at once a looming presence, back in New York to take revenge on his much-abused companion, Ruth. She is now partnered with a fugitive-slave shipwright, Billy Dove, living with their mixed-blood children in the dingy alley of the title. Ruth and Johnny Dolan are the two refugees whose relationship begins in Ireland. Unable to find work because of his race, Billy helps tend the little children at the ill-fated Colored Orphans' Asylum.

The days and nights of the draft riots are carefully and authentically witnessed through the various characters. The principal observer is a jaded reporter who works for Greeley's *Tribune*. Although connected to one of the
three women of the story, Herbert Willis Robinson struck me as Baker's least compelling creation. He is a device more than a character; at one point he traipses off to Wall Street just to show us that part of town.

Passages short on historic detail are the best proofs of Baker's ability to write in a compelling way. Baker creates a harrowing scene in Ireland in which Dolan fights off wild dogs, for example, and another in which Billy sails through a hurricane to freedom on the Jersey shore - these are where Baker sets aside his notes and just writes. Trouble is, a second Kevin Baker lurks in this novel: the researcher, who can't resist packing in every last nugget of information and description. I mention this with a degree of embarrassment, because I've been accused of doing the same thing, more than once. I can picture the author in the midst of a room full of 3x5 cards, old books, new books, newspapers, magazines, photographs; I can almost hear him say, Got to get this in. Got to get that in. Got to get everything in. As I began reading the novel - and make no mistake, it's a good read - I found myself wishing the author had an old-fashioned editor who did line editing (newer ones may have heard of this discipline but it isn't in vogue in today's publishing world; there are far too many marketing meetings, followed by luncheons to acquire new books).

I wish someone had sent the author a plaque reading LESS IS MORE. Or that he'd been fortunate enough, long before he wrote, to encounter Roger Ebert's telling comment in a review of the three-and-a-half hour Civil War mega-movie, *Gods and Generals*. In it, Ebert refers to people who think historical accuracy is a virtue instead of an attribute.

In *Paradise Alley*, likewise, there is just too much of everything. Dark images abound, and they are almost unrelentingly ugly. We're swept by tidal waves of dirt, blood, pus, phlegm, offal, excrement (shite if you want to be Irish about it), plus a whole lot of bad smells, all vividly described. Perhaps it's unavoidable, given the nature of the draft riots, and the characters, mostly poor, involved in Baker's re-telling of it. Still, Shakespeare knew how to lighten things up: how and when to send in the clowns, to make a bloody climax all that much stronger.

Stylistic mannerisms abound. Incomplete sentences. Exclaims(!). In Robinson's chapters, we whip into present tense for no apparent reason (other than to appear literary, I suppose). I don't care for any of this, but every author has the right to make choices, and then hope others will endorse them.
Baker does include a helpful glossary of street talk, and a short essay on sources. The pound-foolish publisher packaged the book handsomely but should have sprung for maps.

Will you enjoy the novel? That depends on whether or not you savor slow-moving narratives dense with detail. I closed Micheal Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* about half way through, beautifully written though it is, because of its slow pace. One can hope that Kevin Baker rings up his editor a few more times during writing, rewriting, and production of his next novel, and finds that editor hard at work with a blue pencil.

*John Jakes is an internationally acclaimed historical novelist and author of sixteen consecutive New York Times bestsellers. He has written extensively about the Civil War in Charleston, On Secret Service, The North and South Trilogy, and several volumes of The Kent Family Chronicles.* 2003 by John Jakes. All rights reserved.