



# Dreamland

*Kevin Baker*

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Kevin Baker's *Dreamland* is the kind of novel that begins with a two-page list of characters and ends with a nine-page glossary. In between, this vast, sprawling carnival of a book takes in Coney Island and the Lower East Side, midgets and gangsters, Bowery bars and opium dens, even Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. It is, in short, a novel as big, lively, and ambitious as Gotham itself, and if you can stomach some of the more garish local color, it's every bit as much fun. Set at the turn of the century, in a New York as polyglot as any city on earth, *Dreamland* opens with an act of misplaced--and very stupid--compassion. Eastern European immigrant Kid Twist intervenes when villainous gangster Gyp the Blood is on the verge of murdering a young newsboy for sport. But surprise: that's no street urchin--that's Trick the Dwarf, self-proclaimed Mayor of Little City and a Coney Island tout, who dresses up as a boy, he says, as "a way I had of leaving myself behind." Trick hides Kid Twist in the hind parts of the Tin Elephant Hotel; Kid Twist meets Esther Abramowitz, impoverished seamstress and labor agitator, then falls in love; Trick woos Mad Carlotta, a three-foot beauty who thinks she's the Empress of Mexico; and Freud and Jung sail for America, where they squabble about psychoanalysis. There are also a few subplots involving police corruption, Tammany Hall, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire--but who's counting? Suffice to say that it all really does come together in the end, and you won't be bored for one step of the way. Baker served as chief historical researcher for Harold Evans's *The American Century*, and it's clear that he put his time there to good use; *Dreamland* is full of vivid historical detail, from Lower East Side slang to the lyrics of popular songs. If this is middlebrow entertainment, it's middlebrow in the same way as Dickens: extravagantly plotted, elegantly written, and compassionate to the core. --*Mary Park*

## Dreamland Details

Date : Published October 6th 2009 by HarperCollins e-books; 1st edition (first published 1999)

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Author : Kevin Baker

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## **From Reader Review Dreamland for online ebook**

### **Kate Lynn says**

I could overlook the confusing story telling. I could even look past trying to find out what the long drawn out plot was for. What I couldn't get over was the inaccurate telling of historical events. The 1909 shirtwaist strike is told so blatantly wrong and over embellished that I wanted to scream. Read a book before writing about something, please.

The timeline presented in the book wasn't even clear. Were Freud and Jung necessary? All of the talk about sex sure wasn't. Nor was using rape as a plot device. I'm honestly surprised I even read the whole book. How can you write something like this and not mention dates. Was there a point to the story at all?

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### **Jay says**

turn of the century new york city (it's "wild west period") as told from the perspective of two jewish gangsters, a female sweatshop worker in the triangle shirtwaist factory, a jewish prostitute and a midget who works in various coney island freak shows. my favorite non-harry potter novel that i have read in the past few years. fucking fantastic, and so much yiddish.

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### **Elizabeth La Lettrice says**

I picked up this book because I love stories of early 1900s especially in New York. Being a native New Yorker, I am somewhat nostalgic towards Coney Island in the face of all the constant attempts at revival and renovation. This book opened my eyes to a Coney Island unlike any I've ever imagined - a world where the concept of being "P.C" didn't exist, where an "amusement" park included a "Midget" Town and where people born with deformities and other unfortunate situations were looked at like "circus" attractions. It also gave very personal insight into the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire which is just an incredibly sad moment in New York City's history.

There really is so much to say about this book (and I have so little time!). It's not a book for the light reader as it interweaves multiple character narratives (including Freud!) and it probably is a good idea to have a good general sense of what was going on in New York and the world at the time. However, I assure you that if you give it time and patience, it will be unlike any other historical novel you've ever read.

(Ya know, I feel so passionate about this book that I might add more to my review later when I have more time.) :)

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### **Ron Charles says**

In dreamland, even America was possible.

Kevin Baker's spectacular new novel is often more a nightmare than a dream, but I didn't want to wake up.

Trick the Dwarf, a Coney Island circus performer, opens the novel by claiming, "I know a story," and does he ever. "It is a story about a great city, and a little city, and a land of dreams. And always, above all, it is a story about fire." Over the next 500 pages, we descend into the controlled and uncontrolled flames of New York in 1911. This isn't the city Edith Wharton described in her novels. Baker has turned that luxurious portrayal of the Big Apple on its stem. His New York is an explosive furnace in which gangsters, prostitutes, politicians-all recent immigrants-vie for survival.

In a seedy bar where the patrons bet on rat fights, Gyp the Blood is showing off: He can break a man's back over his knees. When Gyp reaches for a young boy, Kid Twist bravely-foolishly!-intervenes. After beaming Gyp with a shovel, Kid and the boy are marked for death and flee to Dreamland, an amusement park on Coney Island.

Here, Kid Twist discovers that the boy he saved is actually Trick the Dwarf, who disguises himself as a boy to snatch a few moments of normalcy from his life of ridicule.

The phantasmagoric amusement park provides a perfect metaphor for the city itself. Staffed by the mentally or physically handicapped, Dreamland is an ever-expanding complex of bone-crushing rides, shocking freak shows, and reenactments of disasters.

As Gyp the Blood seeks revenge on the man who beamed him with a shovel and the "boy" who got away, we meet his indomitable sister Esther and their cruel father, a rabbi so strict that his congregation has abandoned him.

Trapped in the crippling labor of the garment district, Esther is saved from despair by her friendship with a young socialist. Together they begin the almost hopeless task of organizing a women's union and striking for better hours. But their modest requests are met with horrifying brutality from the city's police and gangsters, two groups distinguished only by uniform.

Above the fray, but thoroughly in control of it, strides Big Tim, a state senator and city crime boss who owns more bars, gambling rings, and flop houses than he can count. Big Tim enjoys such prosperity and power that he's beginning to dabble in a new luxury: compassion for the people in his city. Why should so many children be killed by thoughtless carriage drivers, he wonders. How many women will be lost in factory fires because the bosses lock them in?

These questions are just starting to break through a lifetime of corruption, but they're in harmony with the liberal reform movements driven by shrill newspapers and the persistent lobbying of the city's high society ladies. That the New York we know today could have evolved from such social chaos should give us hope about modern-day Russia.

Woven throughout these stories of escape, revenge, survival, and reform is a remarkable, often comic narrative of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung coming to America. It's the culmination of Freud's attempt to legitimize his cause, but the founder of psychoanalysis finds himself haunted by anxieties. New York's explosive energy and sensuality overwhelm him. Abused and humiliated in a ghastly Coney Island funhouse, Freud finally concludes, "America is a mistake."

Dreamland is a richer symphony of life than E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), to which it's being compared. Baker, the chief historical researcher for Harry Evans's recent *American Century*, has perfectly captured the

messy, complex, inefficient nature of social development. Thick with the gritty details of unforgettable characters, this is literature-and history-at its best.

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### **Jessica says**

This was a nice trip back in time on the coney island strip and the streets of fast paced manhattan

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### **Kij says**

Coney Island in the early party of the Twentieth century, A city of Midgets, the seamy underworld of New York City, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire , a love story. What more do you need from a book?

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### **Timothy Juhl says**

So it took better than a month for me to finish this rambling, historical tale about New York and Coney Island at the advent of the 20th century.

When Baker wrote about Dreamland and Luna Park and Steeplechase, those wondrous marvels of Coney Island, I was entertained. I was less entertained by the passages focused on the political mechinations of Tammany Hall and the corrupt maneuverings of the city councilmen and the police.

I hated every chapter about Freud. Freud? Freud and Jung, to be precise and a fictionalized trip they take to America. Tedious.

Most of the characters were one-dimensional, distinguished only by their clothing or the food they could afford.

The ghost of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory looms throughout the book, a tease of something dramatic to come, only to be leveled in a few pages at the end as speculation into a character's afterward.

That this was a corrupt, violent, dangerous time, Baker leaves no doubt. The image of addicted babies on display at Coney Island where the public waited breathless for one of them to die, a highlight of the exhibit, or the image of an elephant tortuously caged and ultimately electrocuted for public consumption, both stand as reminders that these were not simpler times, but rather times ruled with simpler minds.

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### **Beth says**

A very interesting historical novel set in New York City in the early twentieth century. We see the amusement parks of Coney Island, the gangs, the Jewish tenements, the garment sweatshops, and the Tammany Hall political machine through the eyes of both real and fictional characters involved, such as a dwarf who works on Coney Island, a young Jewish woman who tries to mobilize workers in the garment sweatshops to demand better conditions, and even Sigmund Freud during a visit to the city. It's meticulously

researched and realistic and gives a fascinating look at conditions in the raw, corrupt, young city.

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### **Tina says**

It's a complicated relationship that I've developed with this book. There were segments I loved and characters that I adored, but there were parts that I hated and characters that I found irrelevant. The overall story--historical fiction of Coney Island, gangsters, and the working woman's strife in early 20th century NYC--was completely compelling, and the detail he goes into was great. You felt like you were truly in the setting. The scenes with Kid and Gyp were fraught with tension, you relationships that developed between Kid, Esther, Gyp, and Sadie were engrossing and you found yourself coming down on distinct sides, and that was great. What I ultimately think I needed was for it to be about 200 pages shorter, completely eliminating the Freud story line and pretty much all of the Big Tim stuff, with the story completely focused around the big 4--Esther, Kid, Gyp, and Sadie, and including enough of Trick's story to see where he fit in to all of the plot.

There was just a bit too much of the story that felt unnecessary. Yet, I don't regret reading it--if only for the story that developed between the four of them.

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### **Gregory Williams says**

Fascinating account of New York and Coney Island circa 1909-1911, a period when many influences were growing, such as the labor movement, along with the exuberance and immaturity of a new country, which shoved so many cultures together so ambitiously in such a short period of time. It could only have happened how it did - with gangsters, Trammany Hall society, graft, prostitution, ridiculously bad working conditions, and unrestrained demonstrations of wealth and self-satisfied projects such as Dreamland with a million incandescent lightbulbs beckoning newly transplanted immigrants to the new country. An amusement park that also hosted "Little City", full of dwarfs and midgets, and incubators for the public to see tiny babies struggling for life.

I was a little put off by the knowledge that some of the events were off by a few years, but the author acknowledges this in the end, saying that he used some license, but his true aim was to get human nature right at that time in history, and he's done that very well. A worthwhile read!

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### **Simi says**

I really wanted to like this book because it came so highly recommended but in the end, I found that I really disliked it even though I finished it.

This is a story of early 20th century New York City and the characters who populated this riveting, tumultuous, and extreme city. There are many characters, actually, and some are real and some are fictional. This is a kind of magic realism historical fiction that combines real events and fantasy in ways that are at once fascinating and bizarre.

That said, the story is rambling and gets less and less interesting. I only liked one character in the whole

book and her story - the woman Essie and her work at the sweatshops and the struggle within to earn decent wages and be treated fairly. I think this story was amazing and would have liked to see Baker focus more on this than on other parts.

The story of the dwarf was uninteresting and I was definitely perplexed about why Freud was brought in as well. What did he have to do with the story? I still don't understand. I didn't have much interest in the politician, though when his story intersected with Essie's, I understood why.

The last chapter was a real comedown. Instead of taking responsibility for the ending, the author provides a series of possible scenarios about what might have happened. This is a cop-out and is terribly disappointing after reading such a long and complex story to not have a satisfying sense of conclusion.

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## **Bandit says**

This book's edition opens with pages of praise from very respectable nationwide sources. Pretty tough to live up to, but Dreamland meets and surpasses every word of them. It's an absolutely awesome (in the purest meaning of the word) novel, an epic, a powerhouse. It is exactly what a work of historical fiction (any book, really) should be like, a perfect, perfectly immersive, magnificent reading experience. As a rule I stay away from large books, something to do with instant gratification or fear of being stuck with a dud, so it took me a while to approach this book, but once I started it, it didn't seem long at all, it read easily, which is a marvel in itself for such an epic work with enough characters to require a dramatis personae and shifting narratives. Kevin Baker creates a world so stunning, so vivid, so magical, that, like the actual visitors to Coney Island in the early 1900s, one is reluctant to leave it at all. Fortunately, with this edition, one doesn't have to, not right away, not when there is a glossary and a historical note from author (highly recommended since it's where Baker lists his subtle manipulations of factual events) and even a lovely and very informative author's tour of Coney Island as it stands currently (at the time of publication). So yes, as far as actual history goes, some facts were rearranged to fit the dramatical narrative better, but Baker captures so much of the flavors and colors and textures of small part of the world and thoughts, hopes and dreams of its inhabitants during a specific time period that this is not only an important book, it's an exceptionally good one. Very well written, smart and moving, with a phenomenal cast of characters including, but not limited to, gangsters, midgets, prostitutes, women's suffrage workers and psychiatrists. This is a story of tenement dwellers, immigrants, fighters, lovers and dreamers, a genuine chronicle of the American experience, the pursuit of an ideal at all costs and from all angles. New York has never held any appeal to me personally, but boy does it make for a great tale, amazing tale of bygone glory. For a while Coney Island shone so brightly against the night sky, that its Ferris Wheel would be the first thing the newcomers to the country would see, before the Statue of Liberty even. This is a story of Coney Island at its shiniest. Highly recommended.

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## **Craig says**

This book was hard to read. It was huge which is usually ok with me but it just seemed to go on and on and on. I didn't really like any of the characters and then worst of all the last chapter felt like an add-on by the editor. The entire style of the book vanished and it became some kind of musing about what might or might not have happened to some of the characters. Ridiculous. Either tie up all the loose ends or don't. I don't recommend this book to anyone.

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## El says

Not normally a fan of historical fiction (if the history is interesting, why the need to fictionalize it?) I picked this book up merely for the novelty of the cover and the promise of Coney Island-goodness that screams from the top cover. And it was a buck in clearance at Half Price Books.

What I found was actually quite a surprise. I found myself not interested at all for well over 100 pages, but then all at once realized I was invested in some of the characters. The layout of the chapters confused me at first when I read in short spurts; eventually, however, I figured out that not only were the characters heading each chapter intertwined with one another, occasionally a chapter would backtrack so that particular character could tell his or her perspective about a situation the reader had already encountered. Once I accepted that I found myself enjoying the book entirely.

The historical part of the story comes in the form of the characters themselves (Freud and Jung come to America and the reader witnesses the break in their beliefs, Kid Twist and Gyp the Blood are very central characters, etc.) as well as the landscape (turn of the century immigrant New York, specifically Coney Island; Bowery bars; opium dens; whore houses; sweatshops, etc.). Dramatized historical events showed their heads as well such as the union strike (and subsequent arrest of the women strikers, their imprisonment, their torture), the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, politics, corruption... a lot of the same things I spent 4.5 years learning about at a historically women's college.

Kevin Baker clearly did his research and fleshed out many real characters from the very late 19th-very early 20th century without sugar-coating any of it. He openly admits in his Acknowledgements that certain creative licenses were taken, rearranging a small period of years in order to tell the story he wanted to tell. Normally that sort of thing would drive me batty. Somehow Baker was able to do it in a completely non-offensive way. In fact, the man made me downright approve of it.

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## Carl R. says

By virtue of a tour of The Tenement Museum (highly recommended, by the way) on NYC's lower east side, I came in contact with Kevin Baker's historical novel (1910) of Coney Island. There were (I found out) three big amusement parks there--Luna Beach, Steeplechase, and Dreamland.)

Baker's narrative starts off like a bullet and seldom lets up. He prefaces Book One with a list of "Dramatis Personae, like a Playbill, and it helps set the historical tone. We hear first from Trick the Dwarf, whose first words are I know a story. And does he ever. We're transported from uptown to downtown in an instant, from Coney Island's sand and water to rat-baiting in a Bowery cellar, and to an incident that will haunt every character in the story from then on.

And there are a lot of characters. As huge a cast, fictional and historical, as you'd ever want to meet. And every single one as fascinating as the city in which Baker sets us down. This world is not a melting pot, but a stew--lots of different ingredients, each with its own distinct texture and flavor--but all in the same pot, swimming in the same gravy. As you might expect in this time of Ellis Island, this is a world of immigrants--first or second generation. Jews, Italians, Germans, Irish, all striving for survival and/or dominance. Often



violently.

It's a mixed bag of pushcarts and automobiles, manure and petrochemicals, oppressive bosses and exploited workers, crooked politicians and ward bosses. It's a crowded world that smells bad, one where even the virtuous need to watch their backs. But it's also a world where affection and solidarity rule even in the worst circumstances.

We see a lot of our friend Trick the Dwarf. We see a lot of Tammany Hall boss Big Tim Sullivan. We see a lot of--really--Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung on their first journey to America. And there are many others, each drawn sharply and feelingly. But the central story is that of Esther (Esse) Abramowitz and her lover Josef Kolyika, a.k.a. Kid Twist, coming of age and following a circuitous path to they're not sure where.

We move uptown, downtown, midtown through many different plot lines, but always, that incident in the beginning drives everything else, turns the book into a revenge drama of the first order, a hunter-hunted tale that keeps you going, going, going till there are no more pages left and you wish there were more.

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