

Books

History's up his 'Alley'

American Heritage columnist's childhood passion leads him to 'Paradise'

By MICHAEL GILTZ

A recent rainy afternoon spent tramping through the streets of lower Manhattan with author Kevin Baker sparked an endless stream of stories.

Passing by a statue of the antislavery activist Horace Greeley — one of the characters in his new novel "Paradise Alley" — Baker riffed on Greeley's unconventional wife.

"I nicknamed her the Irrepressible Conflict," said the 44-year-old New Jersey native. "She was a big vegetarian, and very anti-animal abuse. If you approached her with a kid glove on, she would pull her hand back and yell, 'Skin of a beast! Skin of a beast!'"

Juicy historical tidbits? One would expect no less from a columnist for American Heritage magazine, and the chief historical researcher for Harold Evans' 1998 blockbuster "The American Century," a project Baker spent almost a decade of his life working on.

Now, however, Baker is devoted to his own work. His latest book, due Oct.

Tuesday, is a captivating historical novel set in 1863, when New York City was engulfed in the Draft Riots, one of the worst disturbances in American history and a three-day nightmare that almost tipped the balance toward the South in the Civil War. He uses that tumultuous event — in which 119 people died — to explore the lives of a large cast of characters.

Baker juggles the intertwining lives with ease, creating a page-turning epic that's equal parts educational and entertaining. It's poised to bring him an even wider audience than his last book, "Dreamland," which sold 80,000 copies.

His next book — set in the Harlem of the 1940s — will complete what Baker laughingly calls his "City of Fire Trilogy."

Married to writer Ellen Abrams, the author said he's having a wonderful time pursuing a career based on his childhood passion.

"My parents taught me to read at 3," said Baker. "I grew up, because of the Cold War, in a very historically minded period."



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Baker carved his way out of a hardscrabble youth by stringing for a newspaper when he was only 13 years old, covering high school sports.

"I grew up in a very historically minded period," says Kevin Baker, author of "Paradise Alley"

"We were on public assistance," said Baker, who was born in Englewood, N.J., but grew up on the North Shore of Massachusetts.

"We used to hide from the creditors. There were a couple months in the summer where we didn't have heat or hot water, so we'd have to sneak into a

hotel where he was clerking and use the showers there.

"But I don't want to make my childhood sound like something out of Dickens," said the history buff. "It wasn't that bad at all. And in a way, it's nice to be able to overcome a little something... as long as it's not too hard."