1. Why did you decide to set the book in NYC’s Five Points, the historic neighborhood in Lower Manhattan?

For some time, I’d been curious about Five Points, the most poverty-stricken area of New York City in the nineteenth century, and about the relationships between the black and Irish communities there: the tensions but, more often, the cooperation. The first text I read on the district was Tyler Anbinder’s seminal, comprehensive, and engrossing 2001 volume *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World’s Most Notorious Slum*.

2. The dialogue in the book really brings the characters and the sights, smells, and sounds to life. How were you able to channel Theo’s voice on the page?

It was hard! No, that’s not quite right. It was scary. *Moon and the Mars* is my second novel, and I engaged in tons of research, but I also heavily delved into background material for my debut *The Castle Cross the Magnet Carter*. The difference was that for *Castle*, a mostly twentieth-century story, I felt on more solid ground: the time
setting didn’t stretch back further than my mother’s generation. I would write and, as historical or other questions arose, I clicked on a search engine or took out my library card. By contrast, the mid-nineteenth century placement of *Moon* felt exponentially more of a reach, and I read quite a bit before I ever put pencil to paper. (Literally: I write first drafts longhand.) I was absorbing so much about the era, and about the neighborhood, and about the communities, and I kept waiting to feel comfortable enough to start letting Theo tell her story. Finally I realized that day would never come without my prodding: I would only hear Theo’s voice by writing it. So I timorously dove in and, by trial and multitudinous errors, I came to hear it.

3. **Theo is an unforgettable protagonist. How did you decide on a child’s point of view, and what were the challenges (and/or advantages) of writing from that perspective?**

I am African American and, in exploring the intermingling of blacks and Irish, I could have opted to write from a black perspective only, but I felt that would be telling only half the story. Miscegenation (an old-fashioned but accurate term) was scorned by both communities elsewhere in the city and in the country, but in Five Points it was common and unremarkable. It seemed logical then to create a protagonist who was the product of such a union.

In *Castle Cross* there are four protagonists, all men. With *Moon* I wanted the main character to be female, and I wanted the story to focus primarily on women—Theo’s grandmothers, aunts, cousins. (Both novels take place in the very binary pre-twenty-first century.) I decided the story would begin with Theo as a small child, innocent of racial divisions, so that readers could witness that innocence gradually being chipped away.

I loved the paradox of Theo as a little girl finding joy in her family and in her neighborhood while the tensions of the world beyond are winding increasingly tauter—to convey to the reader, through what Theo overhears and observes, somber realities that Theo herself is too young to perceive. Easier said than done! I could have saved myself a lot of time and effort by alternating perspectives between Theo and the adults around her; in *Castle Cross*, I constantly switched between characters’ points of view, between first person and third. But *Castle Cross* had four protagonists; I had decided *Moon* would have one, and would be written completely in first person. To suddenly shift to an adult’s perspective felt inorganic, felt like cheating. I hope, in committing to the more challenging path I chose, that *Moon* is stronger for it.
4. There is a Broadway musical, *Paradise Square*, opening in February 2022 that also looks at the mix of Black and Irish communities in Five Points in the run-up to the Civil War. Why do you think there is renewed interest in this location, this subject?

The musical *Paradise Square* was conceived, as I’ve learned only recently, by Irish artist-of-all-trades Larry Kirwan, who also is the co-composer and one of the four book writers. The other three book writers—Christina Anderson, Marcus Gardley, and Craig Lucas—are playwrights and, as I am a playwright myself, I happen to personally know all of them.

I’d first heard of the project back in the summer of 2018 when Craig and I were seated at the same table for a playwriting awards ceremony. In our catchup chat, we were startled to discover that we had been writing on the same subject matter. I was still first-drafting *Moon and the Mars*, and *Paradise Square* was in development. I had no idea when, or if, the show would be produced—a musical can easily be workshopped for a decade (as this ultimately was), and many of those shows, probably most, never quite make it to the stage. But *Paradise Square* soon would: its world premiere happened at Berkeley Rep the year after I spoke with Craig.

In answer to the question, I don’t know of any other projects being developed that address this topic, so I don’t think there is any trend. In terms of timing, it just appears to be a fascinating coincidence.

5. Why did so many Blacks leave New York around the time of the Civil War and what was the impact to the city?

One reason were the race riots that seemed to erupt every few decades. The impact was that the city would become whiter and humbly contrite—for a while. By “race riot,” I am using the term in its historical sense with respect to African Americans: a white mob targeting black people and often their property. The modern connotation—property targeted rather than persons as a reaction by black people to a perceived, and almost always real, racial injustice—doesn’t seem to have materialized until the Great Depression.

6. You’re often asked what it’s like to write fiction versus for the theater. Can you explain some of the challenges and the benefits of one versus the other? Do you think that some stories require the space a novel offers and cannot be told in two hours onstage, and vice versa?
The last question—yes, when the idea came to me for *Castle Cross* that’s exactly why it was written as a novel rather than a play: I didn’t see the story fitting into a two-hour stage running time. With *Moon and the Mars*, however, having one novel under my belt, I never considered the story as a play; it was conceived as prose.

Having said that, if I were commissioned to adapt either book for the stage, I’d jump at the chance! The challenges I find exciting—though I can only imagine *Castle Cross*, and probably *Moon* too, as an ambitious event, the story told over the course of two or three parts à la *Angels in America*. On the other hand, I have never had the desire to adapt any of my plays to fiction. The only time such a process has ever occurred to me has been when I’ve seen a play written all in monologues, and those soliloquies already seemed to be short stories read aloud.

With a novel, I can describe a character’s appearance in detail: body type, skin color, hair texture. With a play, I am never more specific than race-gender-age because the imperative task is to find the strongest actor and, unless a physical trait is inherent to the story, limiting the search can undermine the production.

For an accomplished writer, there is a sense of control that fiction provides: the story is told directly from author to reader with no middle person influencing the narrative (except in the unfortunate instance of a problematic relationship between author and editor or publisher). Theatre, by contrast, is a collaborative art, so that same accomplished writer has less control on the stage. If every artist involved is topnotch and excited to be a part of the production, the results can be riveting; but if an actor or the director or even a designer is less gifted or less enamored of the script, the playwright’s intentions can get lost along the way. Conversely, a production by a less skilled playwright might be saved by the input of more proficient members of the artistic team.

7. There was so much happening in New York in the mid-nineteenth century. Why do you think the full history of Five Points and of the Draft Riots and other major historic events from that time have been, if not lost, then at least forgotten?

I didn’t grow up in New York City so I have no idea if such events are studied in New York City public school history classes. But if you ask the average New Yorker about any significant events that happened in the city during the Civil War, most probably would draw a blank.
Summer of Soul is a 2021 documentary with footage from a six-week series of concerts that took place in Harlem back in 1969, admission free to the public. Superstar performers included Nina Simone, Mahalia Jackson, Stevie Wonder, B.B. King, Sly and the Family Stone, Max Roach, Gladys Knight and the Pips, David Ruffin, the Fifth Dimension, Hugh Masekela, Moms Mabley, Mongo Santamaria, and the Edwin Hawkins Singers. While images from the one-off Woodstock concert of the same year—including the nearly four-hour self-named doc—have been extensively viewed for more than half a century, no distributor showed any interest in the star-studded Harlem extravaganza, and thus this release twenty-one years into the twenty-first century is the premiere screening of this priceless footage. As asserted by one of the female voiceovers near the end: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that black history is gonna be erased.” True.

It is also true that, in general, American memories are short and selective, as is American news reportage. Who recalls, for example, that the Obama Administration abused the Espionage Act to brutally persecute and prosecute reporters and leakers who courageously shed light on American military atrocities (a policy that continued under Trump and now, Biden)? A more distressing question: How many Americans would just prefer not to know anything about it?

Back to the previous query regarding renewed interest in those mostly forgotten events of 1863: if, in any small way, Moon and the Mars and Paradise Square might contribute to nudging that collective American memory—evidenced by more artistic exploration on the subject or, more importantly, by Americans’ common discourse—then I would feel gratified and humbled.

SEVEN STORIES PRESS is an independent book publisher of postcards from the deep in the form of American fiction, history, political philosophy, pathways to activism, poetry collections, literature in translation, writing guides, and graphic novels by established writers and new voices. Seven Stories Press is distributed by Penguin Random House. Learn more at sevenstories.com.