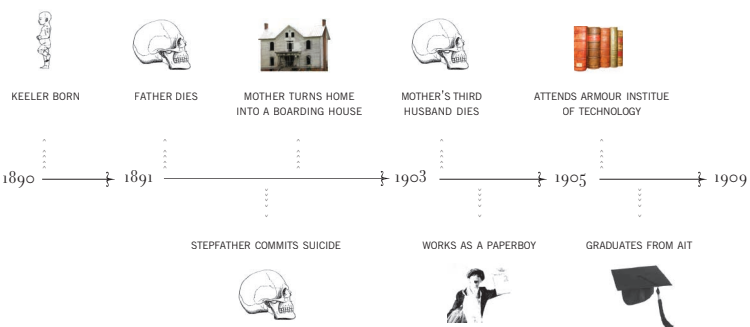


# ON HARRY STEPHEN KEELER

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The impression of Keeler I get from reading his fiction is one of exuberant naïveté. He seemed to write transgressive detective fiction without a sense of subversion, irony, or radical literary experimentation, and it is perpetually unclear whether he meant his writing to be as wonderfully funny as it is. He died prolific and unpublishable, but a few years later Francis Nevis published a series of articles suggesting Keeler to be a writer worthy of study. Since then he has developed a small but sincere following.

Harry Stephen Keeler was born in 1890, the same year as Agatha Christie. He stayed in Chicago his entire life. His father died when he was eighteen months old. His mother's second husband gambled away the family money, mortgaged the family home, then committed suicide. To make ends meet, his mother turned their home into a boarding house. Her third husband died three years after they married; Harry was thirteen. In high school, Harry worked as a paperboy. He received a degree in electrical engineering from the Armour Institute of Technology, and worked both as an electrician and in a steel mill.

His writing life apparently began at age twenty. He sold his first story in 1913. The following year his literary output increased, and he sold a story for \$10, which, according to Nevins, allowed him to pay four weeks of back rent and take Hazel Goodwin, his future wife, out to dinner (with wine) and a show (great seats). From 1919-1940, he served as an editor of the magazine *10 Story Book*. In 1919 he married Hazel.

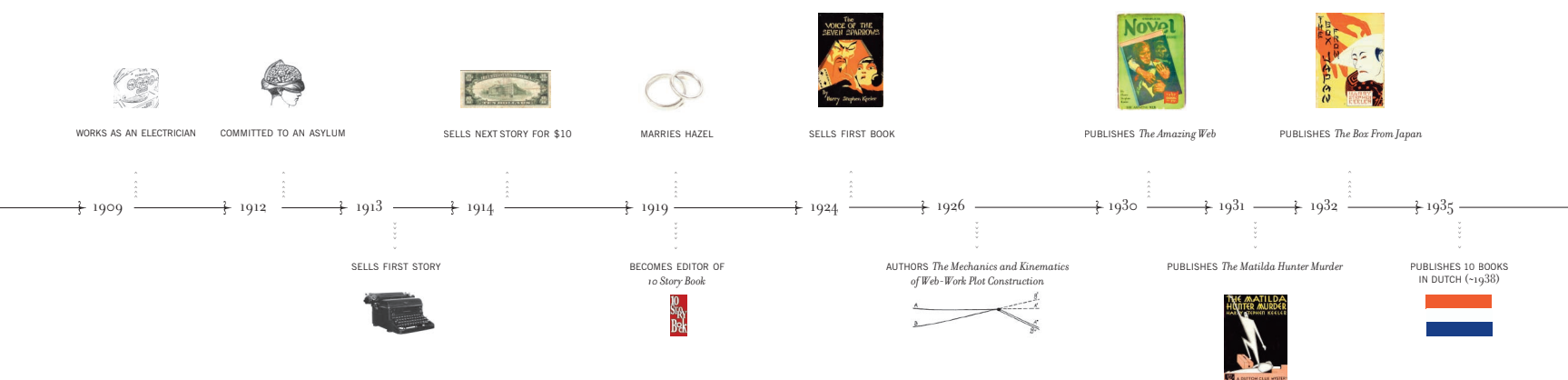
After accumulating success as a short story writer, he sold his first book in 1924: *The Voice of the Seven Sparrows*. While this novel is already almost unreasonably complicated, it is mild compared to what would come. Harry

continued to publish books of increasing size, implausibility, and density. *The Box From Japan* (1932) is 762 pages, set in smaller type than *Gravity's Rainbow*. By 1935 his web-work constructions could no longer fit in books, and a 350,000 word trilogy was published as *The Marceau Case* (1936), *X. Jones of Scotland Yard* (1936), and *The Wonderful Scheme of Mr. Christopher Thorne* (1937). Perhaps Keeler's experiences crafting serial fiction for magazines was useful in composing serial novels. I suspect though that his plots were too bizarre and fast-paced to generate much actual suspense.

The volume of Keeler's output, especially during this period, was staggering, though offset somewhat by his tendency to recycle his earlier short fiction by including it in his novels, usually by having a character who is a writer present a story to another character, then including the entire text of the story as a chapter. In *Thieves' Nights* (1929) he pulls a daring metafictional maneuver by having stories within a story within a story, in which a character from the innermost stories unexpectedly appears in the outer story.

From 1939-1942, Keeler wrote and published two simultaneous meganovels, one released as a trilogy and the other as a tetralogy. At the same time, he began to publish a third collection of six novels joined only by an element that appears in each: a (fictional) book of Chinese aphorisms entitled *The Way Out*.

In 1926 he authored a series of magazine articles explaining his elaborate methods: *The Mechanics and Kinematics of Web-Work Plot Construction*. Keeler's stylistic indulgences make his complicated treatise unnecessarily impenetrable and strangely organized, but his ideas are, I maintain, unique, internally consistent, and genuinely useful. The passage that might best be



considered the introduction occurs in section XXIII, when Keeler offers what appears to be the philosophy behind web-work:

Aside from normal interest in dramatic happenings, is it not true that in every human being is a longing—and instinctive hunger—to believe that life, in its great complexity and utter meaningless involvements, does move in a regulated manner; that it is not all incoherent, all mixed up and utterly without pattern, but that the whole thing is mathematically accurate in its causes and effects?

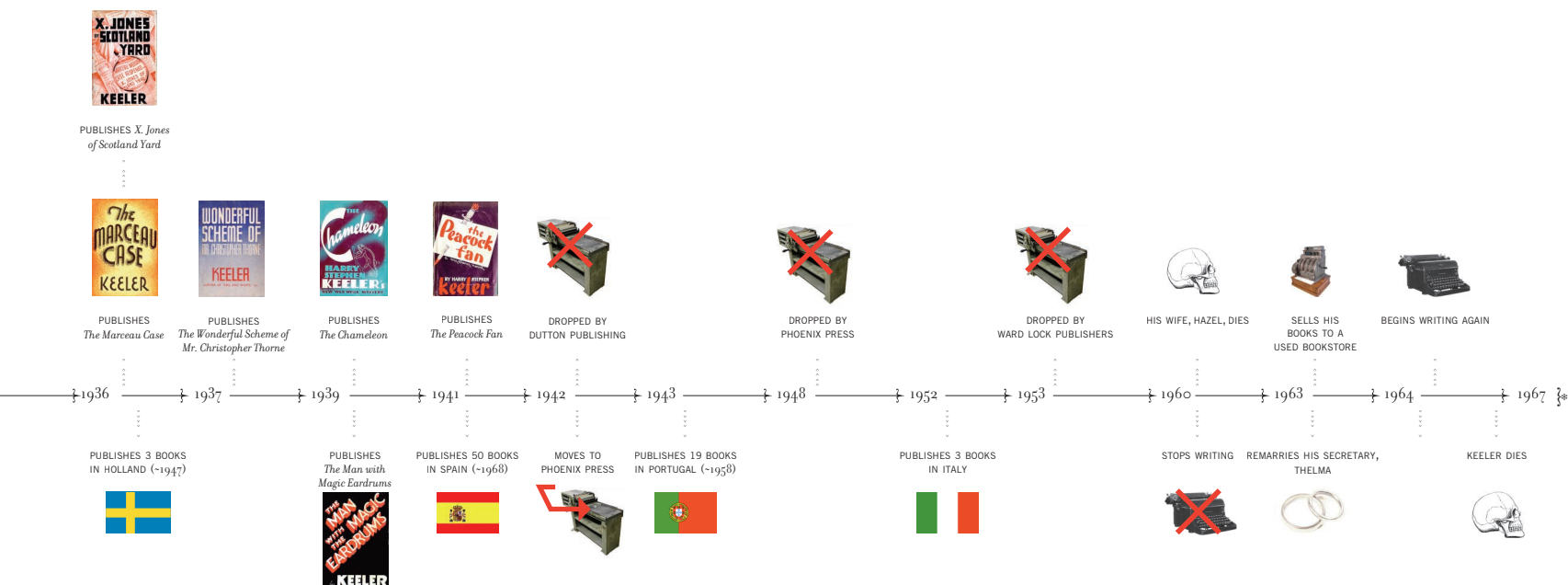
Keeler's idea of a beautiful novel resided in the complexity of its plot, and he followed highly specific rules to make his plots elaborate and yet, to his mind, structurally sound. He believed in an infinity of possible stories and scoffed at those who would say there are only a few basic plots. Keeler found coincidence an acceptable, even indispensable, element of the novel. His plots are complex machines that render their characters cogs. Keeler's diagrams are not flat maps, they are dynamic, in motion, a schematic of a row of dominos falling or playing pool and knocking in all the balls, eight ball last, on the break. Skull in the corner pocket. He made the puzzle plot unsolvable.

One year after the publication of *The Peacock Fan* (1941), with its bizarre and paranoid portrayal of publishers, he was dropped by his publishing house Dutton. This was the beginning of the end, professionally speaking. He moved to the much smaller Phoenix press, who published nine shorter novels until they dropped him in 1948. His English publisher Ward Lock continued for a few years to publish books now unavailable in North America. Then they dropped him. He continued to publish novels in Spain (unavailable

in English, the language in which Keeler wrote them), as translated by the heroic Fernando Noriega Olea. When Instituto Editorial Reus of Madrid, his Spanish publisher, dropped him, Keeler's next two books were available only in Portugal. During this time his novels became less dense with events, less webby, less fraught with implausibly dense strings of coincidences, but the characters and situations continued to become stranger and arguably more tasteless. *O Caso do Cadaver Endiabrado* (*The Case of the Crazy Corpse*), for example, begins when the police extract from Lake Michigan a coffin containing the top half of a Chinese woman stuck with green gum to the bottom half of a black man. Many of these novels concern a recurring character: Angus MacWhorter, leader of the Greatest Little Circus on Earth, a character originally created by his wife Hazel Godwin Keeler (herself a writer) in a story published in 1930.

Not being published in any language didn't seem to slow down Keeler's output. It was the death of Hazel, his wife and collaborator, in 1960, that stopped him. The following three years must have been dark ones. He stopped writing and (regrettably) sold to a used book dealer his collection of his own books, which are now rarities commanding large sums, and for which he almost certainly received negligible cash. But in 1963 Keeler remarried. With the support (and collaboration) of Thelma Rinaldo Keeler, Harry began to continue to finish new manuscripts. In 1965 he completed the triumphant, inscrutably weird masterpieces *Strange Journey* and *The Scarlet Mummy*.

Keeler was devoted to both his wives and collaborated with them, including (and crediting to them) their writing in his own novels. To Keeler scholars, Hazel's and Thelma's writing lack the strangeness, charm, and relentless



inappropriateness of Keeler's prose, but this scholar finds Harry's tendency toward collaboration with his better halves fun, radical, subversive, feminist, and touching.

Keeler died—unpublishable, prolific, and happily married—in 1967, leaving over seventy complete books, and twelve unfinished manuscripts. The original editions are very difficult to find, but all of Keeler's novels, including those never before published in English, are now being brought back into print by the plucky Ramble House ([ramblehouse.com](http://ramblehouse.com)). Where to start? For beginners: *The Voice of the Seven Sparrows* (1922). For the more intrepid, *The Skull of the Waltzing Clown* (1934). For the totally cocky, perhaps the *Marceau Case* trilogy (1936-1937) (now available from Ramble House as a six-book set) or *Strange Journey* (1965). Or, if you want to know more about Harry, Francis Nevins claims that *The Mysterious Mr. I* (1938)/*The Chameleon* (1940) (one novel in two volumes) is the most personal, *The Man Who Changed His Skin* (1959) is the best novel to understand Keeler's problematic obsession with race, and *The Face of the Man From Saturn* (1933) is the most political. As to which novel is the strangest, to my knowledge nobody has yet ventured a guess.

As for me, I have only seen three of Keeler's novels, and find that his prose style vacillates between addictive and intolerable, and can take me to both the heights of hilarity and the depths of bitter frustration in the course of a single paragraph. I have been, however, for a few years a devoted scholar of his bizarre writing manual *The Mechanics and Kinematics of Web-Work Plot Construction*. As a work of structuralist narratology, what it lacks in style it more than makes up for in substance. It is not the only writing advice you will ever need, but it is a highly specific formulation of how plot works, and,

when applied to an unfinished (or unbegun) fiction, can immediately suggest solutions. This year I posted the entire text of the *Mechanics and Kinematics*, including Keeler's diagrams, to the web ([spinelessbooks.com/keeler](http://spinelessbooks.com/keeler)). For me, Keeler brings to fiction an Oulipian rigor, a new model of closure, and the courage to keep writing.