IN TONGUES presents...
NON-FICTIONAL FROLICS!

"Like the spattering of brown ink from an angry fountain pen on a sheet of white paper."

THE BARELY LITERATE CASE OF...

HARRY STEPHEN KEELER
1870 - 1967

above quote from The Man with the Wooden Spectacles, published 1944 by Dutton
Mike Saler alerts me to yet another presum-ably unwitting Keelerian writer: Tim Powers.

Mike says, “Powers is a devout Catholic, and believes that there may well be an underly-ing order to existence, whereas of course Harry thought it was fun to play with the notion in fic-tion. (True, he could be metaphysical as well.)”

Powers in an interview: “What I do first is find some real-world situation or activity or per-son that looks as if a story could be hung on it. This is always the result of random recreational reading …. Then I’ll read everything I can get my hands on about that person or place or whatever it is, freely allowing myself to be sidetracked by anything this reading touches on. (‘He was interested in goldfish? Let’s read everything about goldfish!’) I underline like a lunatic, and make customized indexes on the flyleaves of all these books, and soon I’m working in a little nest of stacked and tumbled books. I make a lot of cross-indexed computer files, to try to keep track of ev-erything. … All the while, I’m looking for ‘things that are too cool not to use’—events, customs, people, places, unique motivations or conflicts, means of transportation, anything. And when I’ve got a couple of dozen of such things, I can start to ask myself what sort of story these things might be pieces of. In other words, I don’t come up with a story and then do research for it; I do the research to find out what the eventual story might consist of. … The way I handle it is to outline it down to the most miniscule detail possible before I even start. I make giant calendars, with every event, even bits of dialogue, fitted into each big day-square. When I’ve finally got the whole thing diagrammed on my calendar, with a hundred-or-so-page outline printed out and strategically underlined, I figure, ‘Whew! The hard part’s over! Now all I’ve got to do is write the thing. Start right here and follow the arrows.’

During the notes-&-outlining stage I’m willing to write unplanned dialogue, and try out my characters in various provisional situations, but once I’ve got the outline finalized I won’t per-mit any spontaneity from the characters. They’re supposed to know their lines and cues and make it look spontaneous, but if I catch them impro-vising I put a stop to it right away. That’s not exactly true. Sometimes they do improvise and I pretend not to notice. But they know the rules.”
This evocative introduction to Keeler was created by Jesse T. Dockery, of Lexington, Kentucky, as part of his recent volume *In Tongues Illustrated* (available at jtdockery.com). Many thanks to Mr. Dockery for permission to print it here. You may recognize his style from a preliminary sketch that we printed in the letters column back in KN #52.
For specific reasons that are still unclear, his mother had him declared insane and committed to an institution in 1912.

Although eventually released, this year he spent in the asylum inspired Keeler, in his fiction to depict the psychiatric profession as quackery. This includes multiple examples of trepanning, an obsolete practice of drilling holes in the skull for therapeutic results. Unanswered Questions linger.

By 1919, Keeler was doing well. That year, he married Hazel Goodwin, not only an attractive woman, but a talented and ambitious writer herself. He became the editor of "10 Story Book," a position he would hold until 1940, and generally was engaging on a career as a man of letters, a novelist who would, perhaps, unconsciously confound the conventions of Western literary tradition.

Yet his work would be successfully, at least for a time, marketed and published within the parameters of the mystery genre. Even printing presses bend with the pressures; molecules realign to speak words, sentences, echoes.

Keeler got a job as an electrician in a steel mill, but he began rising early to write before work. His stories started to get published, and Keeler's mother, contrary to the act of previous, having him committed, offered to support him, allowing Keeler to set up a studio in their home. A sign was placed in the window that read, "Harry Stephen Keeler, writer of Detective Stories, Serials, Action Stories."
The adjective "eccentric" does not begin to describe Keeler as a writer. So what did he do that made him so peculiar?
Central to understanding his singular oddity is to gander upon his philosophy of the "web work" story. Keeler developed a method predicated upon little more than a zest embrace of coincidence at the exclusion of all other constructs, replete with elaborate diagrams to illustrate the process (remnants of his engineering background?). From absurd character names to novels written in dialogue, not only in dialogue, but in near impenetrable ethnic dialect, there is a thriving multitude of obsessions...the repeating motif of disembodied floating heads/skulls, the plethora of physical freaks...to merely mention these elements is but a starting point to pick at the surface. His surreal titles speak to an audience that seemingly does not exist, or exists strictly in the commercial Marketplace of an alternate dimension. To quote Keeler, "It was like trying to think about the square root of minus zero."

Is the undated, telegraphic, literal essay in the Keeler collection at Columbia University, "Impressions of Hashees Drunk Written Day After in Retrospect, With Effects Still Somewhat On," a clue to Keeler's technique? Yes, but only one of them, which fails to explain it all. The skull dedicated to the study of Keeler's prolific output is one that often hurts, as mine does now, when pausing to apply rational motives to his intentions. His successful, at least for a time, stint in the publishing racket perplexes. The "mystery" contrivance, its resultant linear solution, so essential to readers and publishers of the genre, a trivial affair to Keeler, was never present in his work. However, two motion pictures appeared in 1934 adapted from his fiction, both produced by the budget studio Monogram. "Sing, Sing Nights" & "Mysterious Mr. Wong." Lugosi as a Chink. Pass the opium pipe. Brains fumble. One of them is mine.
"No one ever thinks of a novel as something written to enrich some single lone reader somewhere who needs that novel badly at a critical time in his life. And who, reading it, and changing the current of his thoughts, thereafter makes altered decisions in people connecting to him in space-time, and their decisions alter those of others, and so the pattern of the whole world is altered, i.e. it becomes World X-143 a instead of World Y-243-b. All from a single book?"

-- from a Keeler letter

Greetings, Mistel Palladine. I make big mistake las' nite, wen I sell you sheet starring like you wan.

As he say, kinda jokin' lak, 'Soun' to me lak dey's a Shylock Home around dis place - only he is a punk Shylock Home, koze he don't observe nothin'."

But wance w~atch tho' ransome monee, Loo-ee-you no mellee gommatey order us for to mak' bees scatter - westif keen knowin' 'bo we are.

(all dialogue above from "The Case of the 16 Beans" 1944)
Even when going beyond pulpwork novels into what he termed "mage-novels," Keeler never quite lost his sense of humor. He said of The Box from Japan, weighing in at 765 pages, that it was... perfectly adapted to jack up a truck with.

But what did contemporary critics make of this literary oddity?

The New York Times suggested that all his novels "are written in Cthulhu."

Important genre critic Anthony Boucher had this to say:

His fabulous fertility could make Keeler the greatest writer in the business — if only he could write.

No matter what the response to his literary cosmology, Keeler's books were published and sold. However, the niche market in which he thrived throughout the 20s and 30s did not quite survive the decline of the wide-eyed market for pulp excess. In the atmosphere following World War II, Dutton, his publisher in the U.S., dropped him in 1942. Ward Lock continued issuing his novels in England until 1953. He lapsed into writing original novels that were translated into Spanish and/or Portuguese, leaving one bewildered as to what was lost and/or gained in the translation process. By the time of Hazel's death in 1960, he was arguably best known for being her husband. And by the end of his own life in 1967, despite the large body of his published work, this "writer of Detective Stories, Serials, Action Stories" left behind approximately 1.3 million words unpublished.
The Case of the Cracked Craniums

by Daniel Schroedl

Don’t ask me how or why, but I’ve noticed some similarities between Harry Stephen Keeler and Louis Ferdinand Céline.

In his loosely autobiographical novels, Céline’s fictional doppelganger Ferdinand claims to have suffered a head wound and been trepanned in World War I. Céline was severely wounded, but not in the head and was never trepanned. It’s possible he made this claim to defuse criticism of his more outrageous writings: “he’s just a crackbrained war veteran.”

Keeler, as we know, often wrote about skulls, trepanation, brain surgery. It’s possible, in his more oblique way, Harry was responding to critics who questioned his sanity: “give a dog a bad name.”

Céline’s anti-Semitic statements led to postwar charges of collaboration by the French authorities. I think his anti-Semitic pose was probably more a calculated provocation of polite society than actual bigotry. Keeler’s ethnic characterizations are also controversial if taken out of the context of American humor and pop culture of his day, not to mention Harry’s zany world where everyone is a freak. Both were, and continue to be, controversial innovators, too inimitable to be influential.

Other parallels to consider at your own peril:

1912: graduates Armour Institute of Technology

1914: formally discharged from Kankakee State Hospital

1932: The Box from Japan—longest mystery novel in the English language.


1912: enlists in French 12th cavalry division

1914: wounded in combat, discharged, ruled 75% disabled.

1932: Journey to the End of the Night—also pretty long, European critical sensation.

1936: Death on the Installment Plan. Céline’s fragmented, elliptical structure, use of slang, idiosyncratic spelling and obscure references are highly controversial. The former critics’ darling begins deliberate process of alienation.

Harry Stephen Keeler
1890-1967

Louis Ferdinand Céline
1894-1961
Strands of the Web: The Short Stories of Harry Stephen Keeler is the latest Keeler volume from Ramble House, and it’s a landmark. Edited by Fred Cleaver, a true expert on the early work of HSK, the book paints a portrait of the webworker as a young man by collecting the stories in which he developed some of the characteristic weird plot devices and surprise endings that would later form the backbone of his novels. Also included is the one short story from HSK’s old age: “Goodbye, Coppers!” The cover design is by longtime Ramble House artist Gavin L. O’Keefe.

Many of these early stories are very difficult to track down, and they hold unique pleasures for the Keeler fan who’s familiar with the novels: not only can we appreciate their own O. Henry-on-hashish style, but we can recognize their future influence on the more baroque tales that were to follow.

Ramble House is offering a special discount to Keeler Society members: $12 plus shipping ($3 U.S., $10 elsewhere). The preferred method of payment is a check payable to:

Fender Tucker
10329 Sheephead Drive
Vancleave, MS 39565

You may also pay fender@ramblehouse.com using PayPal. Fender’s phone is 228-826-1783.

—Richard Polt

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Sources include the Chicago Ledger, 10 Story Book, The Black Cat, Argosy, Boy’s Life, Top Notch, and The Philadelphia Inquirer.
Fabio Lombardi alerted us to the existence of *Il caso Marceau* (Milan: ShaKe Edizioni, series “Nnoir Sélavy,” 2009). Translator Giancarlo Carlotti is to be commended for his dedication to deciphering Keelerese and rendering it into the language of Dante, although it must be pointed out that he spared himself some labor by translating the British edition, which is considerably shorter than the Dutton version and also poorer in visual aids. The graphics that are included are translated, when necessary, into Italian.

The preface (by Igor Longo) introduces readers to the life of Keeler, who is credited with “the colorful and poetic energy of a deviant Dickens, a Balzac on acid.” He also gets compared to Alfred Jarry, Francis Picabia and Rube Goldberg; going beyond all available evidence, Longo even finds Keelerian influence on Thomas Pynchon, William Gibson, Don DeLillo, and David Lynch! Fender Tucker gets described deliciously as *il vulcanico editore della casa editrice underground Ramble House*. You can find an entertaining computer translation of the preface at tinyurl.com/casomarceau.

Fabio reports that in Italy, “nobody knows Keeler, and the recent publication of *The Marceau Case* has fallen down in the most absolute indifference. May be there is no feeling between my country and the Genius of Chicago.” Trust me, HSK still remains very obscure in his own country as well, despite the republication of *The Riddle of the Traveling Skull!* At least the translation did receive a favorable little review in *La Repubblica*:

“A little gem of ‘criminal pataphysics’ à la Jarry for refined and ironic palates. … A crazy beginning and a coherent development, in a delirium of abstruse and exhilarating digressions that will lead to the solution of the crime. Actually, to one solution; the sequel, *X. Jones*, soon to appear, will offer a contrary solution based on the ‘four-dimensional theory of criminal investigation.’ … Whether lauded or denigrated, Keeler remains unique and inimitable. To be read without the vices of plausibility, abandoning oneself to an excited and vital narrative flux. [The preface] warns that Keelermania ‘is an incurable virus with collateral effects on mental health.’” —Rosella Simone

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**PATAFISICA IN NOIR**


**Harry Stephen Keeler, Il caso Marceau**, Shake edizioni, 14.90 euro
These intriguing items from The Editor were kindly contributed by Fred Cleaver.

August 26, 1916:

10 Story Book, 1001 Transportation Building, Chicago, III., have suspended publication. Financial conditions grown bad because of the high price of paper have made necessary the calling in of a committee of creditors to take over the assets including the magazines, and to sell these to the highest bidders. Authors who are creditors of the Daily Story Publishing Company, should file their claims, in duplicate, and with affirmation made before a notary public or a commissioner of deeds, at once. The total of the Company’s liabilities is not known; authors are said to be creditors to the extent of $500.00. A well-informed person is of the opinion that the creditors will realize about one-tenth of their claims. Undoubtedly the 10 Story Book will be purchased from the creditors’ committee, and its publication resumed.

October 7, 1916:

10 Story Book, 1112 Garland Building, Chicago, III., R. R. Hamilton, president and general manager, writes: “10 Story Book, now in its eighteenth consecutive year of appearance on the American and Canadian newsstands, has not suspended publication as was announced in The Editor. This evidently is misinformation supplied by some contributor whose manuscript was returned from the previous address. 10 Story Book has been purchased from the former owners, The Daily Story Publishing Company, and is now owned by a publishing combination to be known as 10 Story Book Corporation. Harry Stephen Keeler, the former editor, having failed on account of passport complications to go Londoneering, will be with the new publishers in the capacity of editor; but will have no connection whatever with the previous ownership and must refer authors to Daily Story Publishing Company, 1206 Pontiac Building, in regard to any material published prior to the November issue. 10 Story Book will be in the market at all times for sparkling, gripping, interesting short stories of from 1,000 to 5,000 words, but Mr. Keeler has been instructed to give the preference to stories with well-defined sex interest. Manuscripts must be marked plainly ‘Editorial Department’ and stamped envelopes should be enclosed. We took over a number of selected sex Misses from the files of the former company, but the addresses of all the authors have been torn off the corner, evidently for pasting in a record book. This book is missing. If the following authors, whose stories will appear in the first two or three issues, will send their addresses, we will forward checks with no delay, although in the future payment will be made on publication: Paul Adams, William Orville Brice, John Ackers, Ethell Parr Deeley, Mark H. Orelup, Marion Short, J. B. Hawley, Dugdale Renn Douglas, John Irving Pearce Jr., Hazel Clary French, Everett T. Clune, F. H. Sweet, Muriel Kemp, Von Harding, Penrose T. Dean, Harry Morley, and R. D. V. L.—evidently a nom-de-plume.” The news of the suspension of 10 Story Book and The Arkansaw Traveler came direct from the former editor, Harry Stephen Keeler. The Editor urges writers with claims against the Daily Story Publishing Company to put these in the hand of Charles Daniels, an attorney in the Marquette Building, Chicago, Ill., and to instruct Mr. Daniels to scrutinize carefully the contract for the sale of the 10 Story Book to the new 10 Story Book Corporation.

And finally, from Aug. 12, 1916, news about our friend John Stapleton Cowley-Brown (KN #68):

*The National Fireman, Westminster Building, Chicago, Ill., is a new monthly, established by the Christine Publishing Company, which was responsible for the beginning of The National Police Magazine, of New York. Fiction and illustrated feature articles will be used. John Cowley-Brown once book-reviewer for The 10 Story Book is editor.*
I enjoyed your “Reader’s Diary” so much I’ve started in on The Portrait of Jirjohn Cobb.

William Poundstone
Los Angeles

How foolhar—er, admirable. While I have long described the book as “unreadable,” many Keelerites enjoy it, and in its day it sold comparatively well. It even got a relatively good review from Isaac Anderson in the New York Times (Feb. 4, 1940). Anderson remarks on the extreme verbosity of the characters, but ends on a high note: “The story has all the ingenious complications that Mr. Keeler knows so well how to employ.”

The diary succinctly captures the wonderment leavened with irritation provided by the Big River trilogy! I find that the novels are enhanced even further by contemplating Weber and Fields. You can even find their recordings online!

Has it been noted that, in chapter 21 of Dracula, Van Helsing performs a trepanning upon poor Renfield? A fact! “We shall operate just above the ears.” (Amusingly, the professor just happens to be carrying his trephining kit; apparently, he has it on his person constantly, anticipating regular encounters with entomophagous patients suffering from suffusions of the brain. Or is he hoping to defeat the count by trepanning—a Keeler-esque variation on the stake through the heart?)

Here’s a second Irishman who regaled the Victorians with vampires and cranial operations! Harry certainly refers to Dracula and probably read it.

Edward Bolman
Albany, N.Y.

Weber and Fields, for those who’ve forgotten, provided inspiration for Harry’s description of a character in the Big River Trilogy (KN #70, p. 4).

See this issue for trepanning and Céline; and in the recent fantasy series His Dark Materials (The Golden Compass, etc.) trepanning is used by certain northern tribes to allow some sort of angelic dust to enter their brain. Oddly, I still haven’t been convinced to have a hole drilled in my own head.

Thanks much for yet another Harrian extravaganza! I can’t think of anything else I might add to my obese dossier of Keeler Kommentary but I do hope there will be at least another 70 issues for me to enjoy.

Mike Nevins
St. Louis
About to teach Keeler for the...4th time? This time to grad students (at least one of whom has already read Traveling Skull—it was taught at Columbia a few years back by a friend of mine!) — I get something new out of it every time — this time, I fixated on the whole streetcar reversal thing that takes up so much of the first chapter.... it just goes on and on......But as with "Match, please" (signaling Keeler’s art of connection), I think HSK wants to tip us off to all the many reversals of story/alibi/plot .... I plan to read part of your amazing Big River summary, to boot!

I'm reading Nabokov’s Real Life of Sebastian Knight (pub. 1941). Its description of the construction of a fictional book, Success, sounds very webworky — here’s a bit:

The two lines which have finally tapered to the point of meeting are really not the straight lines of a triangle which diverge steadily towards an unknown base, but wavy lines, now running wide apart, now almost touching. In other words there have been at least two occasions in these two peoples’ lives when unknowingly to one another they all but met...

Ed Park
New York City

Has anyone discussed Woodlawn Cemetery in Forest Park as the basis for Restvale Cemetery in The Riddle of the Traveling Skull? From roadsideamerica.com/story/0:

On the fateful early morning of June 22, 1918, a 26-car circus train was heading from Illinois into Hammond, Indiana, with 400 performers and roustabouts asleep in the rear cars. The train was halted on the Michigan Central tracks near Ivanhoe due to an overheated axle box. A troop train suddenly appeared on the same track, cruising up from behind at 35mph and failing to heed track warning signals and flares. Engineer Alonzo Sargent snoozed his way through three cars, finally halting on top of the fourth in a deafening grinding of metal and splintering of wood. Most of the 86 perished in the first 35 seconds of the wreck. Then, as is typical of any horrific historical mishap, the whole thing caught on fire.

Four days after the crash, survivors gathered at Woodlawn Cemetery, where the Showmen’s League of America had selected a burial plot for members. The identity of many victims of the wreck was unknown — some were roustabouts and temporary workers hired just hours or days before. Most of the markers note “unidentified male” or female. One is marked “Smiley,” another “Baldy,” and “4 Horse Driver.” Showmen’s Rest continues to fill up today, with deceased showmen performing at that biggest of Big Tops.

If Keeler visited the cemetery it would have been the occasion for a memorably long and expensive cab ride.

Fred Cleaver
Greeley, Colo.

I was perusing KN #38 and noticed the short letter concerning Frederick C. Davis, and that you added that “The Living Dead” appears in 10 Story Book. I'd like to add that it first appears in the Chicago Ledger issue of Dec. 23, 1922.

Morgan Wallace
via electronic mail

Good to know that back issues of Keeler News and the Chicago Ledger are finding readers. It seems that a large proportion of material in 10 Story Book had previously appeared in other publications edited by HSK.

I thought that fellow Keelerites might get a kick out of an anecdote about “Yellow Kid” Weil, the King of Kons, who figured prominently in KN #69. As suggested therein, he was living an upstanding, kind of benign life by 1948; and whether that was real or just another front, he did frequent the law office of one of the most promi-
ent Chicago attorneys of that time, Luis Kutner. My mom worked for Kutner (who played a key role in the formation of Amnesty International), and observed Weil almost literally charming the pants off the secretaries in the office (in contrast to another client, author Nelson Algren, whom she was advised to treat with kid gloves because of his skittishness with women). The punchline is that my mom did Weil’s taxes, and that raises the same question one would ask about Al Capone’s tax reporting as a “civilian”: How much and from what source?

Eric Levin
Milwaukee, WI

Eric, you are only three degrees removed from Harry Stephen Keeler: your mother knew Kutner and Weil, and they both knew Keeler. Kutner is mentioned four times in HSK’s Keyhole newsletter, which I have in digital form thanks to Mike Nevins’ efforts and which I’ll quote below.

Luis Kutner, who won $1,000,000 alimony for Bragno from the Netcher heiress, “springs” countless inmates of Stateville who are wrongly imprisoned, and does it “for free.” Says Luis: “A man’s got to have a hobby!”

(12-27-60)

Luis Kutner writes us very reproachfully that his friend and client of many years, Maggie Daly, is exceedingly irked with us because of the item we ran complaining that her column was made up of somebodies and had no nobodies in it. How Maggie knew that Luis was also our friend and attorney, we can’t imagine. Well Maggie, we apologize. On second thought, we do realize that a column containing nobodies would be like an equation containing “x”s, “y”s, and “z”s, each of whose value was the square root of minus zero—the whole equation would be reduced to zero with the rim peeled off—the column wouldn’t be a true “column” any more. We read your column faithfully, Maggie, and firmly believe that someday historians will be consulting it in the Newberry Library for the facts not findable in the auto-biogs and WHO’S WHO. Luis, plead us guilty, will you, on the basis of “non compos menti since May 17, 1960”?

(2-8-61)

Chivalry and knighthood have never died. Just try ribbing Maggie Daly in your cartulary, be it called Totem Pole, Keyhole, Barrows’ News Letter, or what, and see Luis Kutner come charging up on his white horse, his plumes trailing 7 feet in back of him, his golden sword flashing in the sunlight, and his dulcet jury-addressing voice crying, “Unhand that lady, you base varlet!”

(2-11-63)

Luis Kutner has all his pretty secretaries busy these days polishing up his golden sword, Excalibur. For Luis is going to roar down atop his white charger to rescue “Big-Mouth” Duggan from the penalties of shooting off his mouth on the air waves. Many cities can boast of having a Public Defender, but only Chicago can brag of having a Public Knight.

(4-3-63)

My new blog is getting good!
parkerbrothersfamilyhistory.blogspot.com

Edward Parker Bolman again
Albany, N.Y. again

The Parker brothers: George Swinnerton Parker, Charles Parker, and Edward Hегeman Parker (Edward Bolman’s great-great-grandfather). Who will be the first to find a connection between Parker Brothers games and Harry Stephen Keeler?
Era l’unica spiegazione plausibile per il bizzarro omicidio di André Marceau: la folle vendetta attuata dal membro di una confraternita di bizzarre persone, l’eterogeneo mondo di Lilliput che tornava protagonista nella sua vita dopo venticinque lunghi anni, un gruppo che annovera membri di tutte le razze e ha centinaia di nuove reclute nate dopo che è stata scritta questa lettera, la vendetta contro un uomo che, baciato con generosità dalla Natura nel fisico, aveva inviato a sterminare loro dal grande ordine delle cose, e con la morte più dolorosa, lo strangolamento!

Il caso Marceau