

Keeler News

Bulletin of the Harry Stephen Keeler Society
No. 81 April, 2013



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It is this artificial relationship, this purely fictional web-work plot, this bit of life twisted into a pattern mathematically and geometrically true, that fills the gaps in one's spirit which rebels at the looseness of life as it apparently is.

No. 81, April 2013

On our cover:

Poster for the 1934 Monogram film
Sing Sing Nights, "suggested by the
novel by Henry [sic] Stephen Keeler."
Thanks to Tom Stewart.

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To join the HSK Society and be added to our mailing list, ask the editor and state your town of residence. To be removed from the list, just ask.

Editor's Notes

J. Randolph Cox is stepping down after editing over 100 issues of *Dime Novel Round-Up*. He has been a Keeler Society member since our inaugural year, 1997. The preservation-minded Mr. Cox has also placed all the issues of KN that he's received in a library archive. Thank you, Randy, and congratulations!



Here's a worthy project for our Society: getting Harry into the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame (chicagoliteraryhof.org). Even if we fail, we'll draw some people's attention to HSK and get them thinking. All we have to do is pester the serious and sober crew of official nominators until they nominate Keeler. Right?



"How could I overlook Ramble House? Yes, its books are print-on-demands, but where else can you acquire the complete works of Harry Stephen Keeler, author of *The Man with the Magic Eardrums*, *The Skull of the Waltzing Clown*, and many, many others? Keeler is either the worst or the most original detective-story writer of all time. Ramble House is, in fact, pulp heaven, with reprints of *Weird Tales* authors and numerous oddities, such as Adams Farr's unique World War II novel, *The Fangs of Suet Pudding*. They certainly don't write 'em like that anymore."

—Michael Dirda, "In Praise of Small Presses," in *The American Scholar*



My online collection of 10 *Story Book* covers is now significantly more complete thanks to the collaboration of Phil Stephensen-Payne (see his massive site, Galactic Central, at philsp.com). My page also loads faster now and is accessible through our main website, keelersociety.mondoplex.com. Peruse, ogle, gape, scratch your head.



Mapping Keyhole Factory

by William Gillespie

When I wrote my novel *Keyhole Factory* (keyholefactory.com) upon a webwork map taken straight from the teachings of Harry S., one reviewer accused this of being “literary exoticism,” implying that my real influences were more respectable post-modernists.

It seems that although Keeler, his novels, and his diagrams, are going to be remembered—thanks in no small part to the work of Richard Polt, rogue publisher Fender Tucker, and the members of the Keeler Society—it would seem that Keeler is not in line for a posthumous honorary MFA from the University of Iowa, may never be mentioned in the same sentence as Thomas Pynchon without a “but” between them, and, while going down in history, will probably be considered a novelty.

I guess he’s all ours, folks.

Regardless, my experience in creating my webwork map for *Keyhole Factory* (a novel as interconnected short stories) taught me a lot about what Keeler might have experienced, gave me insights into his superb (if obsessive) intellect, and raised lots of questions about how he did what he did.

First, know that my map was not composed before the text of *Keyhole Factory*, but rather during a back-and-forth between mapping the novel and reverse-engineering the map based on what the muses delivered. What proved most exciting about the process was when the map talked back, and showed me how to revive characters who had appeared briefly and been forgotten, possibilities to combine minor characters into major characters, or even the existence of new stories.

To create my map, I had something Keeler certainly did not—Adobe Illustrator. It’s not easy software, but training for it is widely available, and its specialty is drawing elegantly curving lines. So my map was always perfectly editable, and remains so, whereas Keeler must have used (I imagine, given his electrical engineering background) mechanical pencils (editable, but not perfectly). I could use color to differentiate the characters; Keeler, as far as I know, did not.

The problem of making the map visually coherent proved a significant information architecture problem—like making a usable subway map. You get spaghetti, a mess of it. Given that

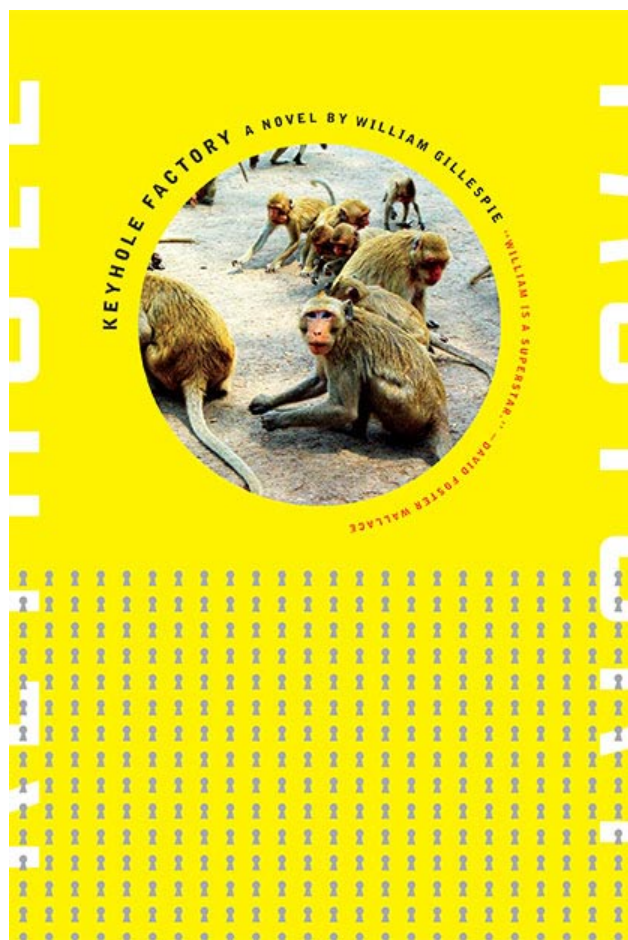
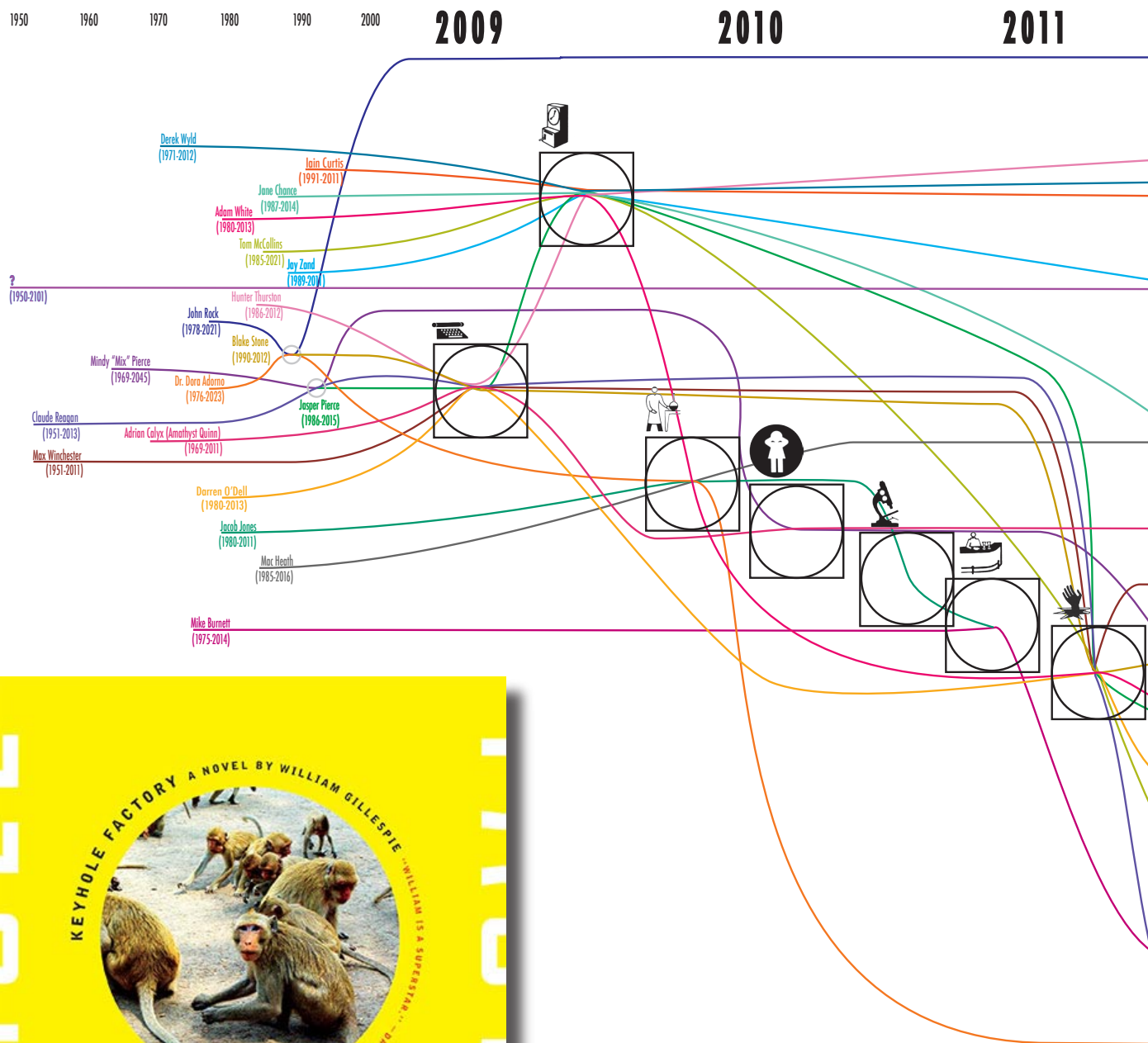
the Keeler map has no rules (I know of) for what the Y-axis represents, I conclude the purpose of the vertical dimension is this: to be used thoughtfully to differentiate the threads, for the purpose of making each visually distinct, and trying to reserve their intersections for those moments when the characters actually meet. In other words, how do you keep the lines from crossing until they are supposed to?

In order to comb this spaghetti, I tried to impose order various ways. First, I tried making the Y axis represent geography (notating the U.S. in a one-dimensional line, a dubious mapping). I also tried making the Y axis represent story time (meaning the order in which the reader moves through the book, rather than the order in which the events happen in the story—I recall that sometimes enormous portions of Keeler’s webworks are revealed when, late in the book, one character can confess to another enormous tracts of the map that have so far been concealed from the reader). In the *Keyhole Factory* map you can see that the stories (which have pictographic icons instead of titles) descend from the top of the map toward the bottom in the order they occur in the book, which does not always correspond to the order in which events occur in the novel. Some stories are flashbacks, others flash-forwards; some stories represent years of story time, others are instantaneous.

Keeler either did a lot of drafting, or had an intuition behind his webwork maps that eludes me.

I have chosen to continue to use this process, and develop my map to allow the loose ends to trail into prequels, sequels, and even stories written by the characters (though representing diegetic levels poses another huge notation problem!). I wish I could find an out-of-work subway map designer to offer pro-bono assistance on this project, but I’ll make do. I have learned what I could from Keeler’s tortuous treatise *Mechanics and Kinematics of Web-Work Plot Construction* (<http://spinelessbooks.com/keeler>), and am redesigning my map in a new style to address some of the problems outlined above. Wish me luck. ☹

See the map on our next two pages.



2010

2011

