

The Tracer of Lost Persons is Keen

I was looking at the books in the vault of Lyrical Ballad in Saratoga Springs when I chanced upon the interesting volume at left. I was keen to find out exactly who this “Tracer of Lost Persons” was. Actually, that’s not quite correct. I wanted to find out if this “Tracer of Lost Persons,” printed in June, 1906, was Keen.

A little over 31 years after this book was published, a detective/mystery radio show debuted on the Blue Network: *Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons*. The show was wildly popular, running from 1937 through 1955. But the show is always credited to Frank and Anne Hummert, whose forte was soap operas – *Ma Perkins*, *Stella Dallas*, and *Mary Noble, Backstage Wife*. Was this book the beginning of *Mr. Keen*? After all, the show opening said something about “the famous fictional character,” but the closing said the show was “based on the novel *Mr. Keene*.” Even so, this has to be him, right? Not the cover picture, obviously, but in the pages inside.

He was thirty-three, agreeable to look at, equipped with as much culture and intelligence as is tolerated east of Fifth Avenue and west of Madison. He had a couple of elaborate rooms at the Lenox Club, a larger income than seemed to be good for him, and no profession.

Page one, but the name “Mr. Keen” does not appear. The Hummerts paid writers little, churned out thousands of episodes of dozens of series, and were hardly ever mistaken for creators of art... or even nice people. Did they rip off the idea for *Mr. Keen* from a 31 year-old book? Did somebody else? I’d never seen or heard of this tome before.

Gatewood, before the mirror, gave a vicious twist to his tie, inserted a pearl scarf pin, and regarded the effect with gloomy approval. “Say to Mr. Kerns that I am – flattered,” he replied morosely; “and tell Henry I want him.”

It’s page two. Still no Mr. Keen, although we have a “Mr. Kerns.” Were the Hummerts so lazy that they named their rip-off radio character by changing two lousy letters from the second name mentioned in “Tracer of Lost Persons?”

Page three. Gatewood meets Kearns. Nothing.

Page four.

“Besides, there’s too much gilt all over this club. There’s too much everywhere. Half the world is stucco, the rest rococo. Where’s that martini I bid for?”

No Mr. Keen on page four. No Mr. Keen on page 5.

“I never have seen my ideal,” retorted Gatewood sulkily, “but I know she exists – somewhere between heaven and Hoboken.”

I'm surprised that the Hummerts never created a soap opera called "Between Heaven and Hoboken." Great title.

I plunge onward to page 6. The dandy Gatewood is now sprinkling French words and phrases into his utterances. OK, but...

Wait! Page 7:

"I don't want you to; I don't know anybody. All I desire to say is this: I do know a way. The other day, I noticed a sign on Fifth Avenue: Keen & Co., Tracers of Lost Persons."

Sorry to have ever doubted you, Hummerts.

Mr. Keen himself does not show up until page 17:

Gatewood sat down and looked at his host. Then he said: "I'm searching for somebody, Mr. Keen, whom you are not likely to find."

"I doubt it," said Keen pleasantly.

I'm about 60 pages in by now, and so far, there is no physical description of Mr. Keen. I don't think a description is forthcoming – the book is a series of vignettes more focused on Mr. Keen's clients than Mr. Keen himself. We do not know how Mr. Westrel Keen (radio historians who say "we don't know his first name" are **wrong**!) acquired his amazing ability to find lost persons. We do not know what he looks like, unless we credit the book's illustrations. If there was a radio series based on this guy, it should have been *The Shadow*.

The radio series lasted forever, but very few people think it was much good. The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio describes it as "a prime-time mystery with serious soap opera trappings," pointing out that "...the dialog was simplistic, identifying each speaker and subject fully in each utterance: 'Before I open this door, Mr. Keen, let me tell you something. No one in this house right now had anything to do with the murder of young Donald Travers, my niece's husband.'" Not until Judson Fountain came along were the Hummerts topped in dramatic character-based explication of the obvious ("See this? If you don't know what it is, I'll tell you. It's a gun.")

Listen to all or part of [an episode of Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons](#) (30m), because it will help you more fully appreciate the brilliant satire of [Bob and Ray's Mr. Treat, Chaser of Lost People](#) (7m).