Marc Peter Keane

Garden designer, writer and artist based in Kyoto

Marc Peter Keane is an American garden designer, artist, and writer based in Kyoto. Born in 1958 and trained in landscape architecture at Cornell University, he first moved to Japan in the mid-1980s, spent roughly eighteen years there, then lived for many years in Ithaca, New York, before returning to Kyoto. His gardens range from intimate spaces for private homes to the Morgan Japanese Garden at Cornell's art museum and the gardens of the Genji Kyoto hotel. English-language readers also know him through books that explain Japanese garden design, translate an early garden-making treatise, and describe the work of looking, arranging stones, and caring for living things. More recently, he has illustrated and published his own books and written speculative fiction. [1], [2], [3], [4].

Keane's career has taken him through a downtown design office, university classrooms, building sites, art museums, private properties, and temples. He writes about working with gardeners and architects, walking around his city, and noticing natural life in ordinary places. He now publishes some books through specialist presses and others through his own imprint. Gardens remain a central occupation, alongside temporary installations and the work of writing. [5].

From New York to Kyoto

Keane was born in New York City and grew up nearby. He graduated from Cornell in 1979 with a bachelor's degree; his field was landscape architecture. He has supplied one vivid childhood memory: camping in a Canadian forest through a violent storm, then watching the clearing sky expose a field of stars. He remembers the feeling of wonder in the darkness between them. Beyond such recollections, his early family life and the choice of his college subject remain sparsely documented in public. [6], [7].

Keane recalled working in the United States for six years, then choosing Japan to experience another culture; he expected a year there. His first Kyoto period instead occupied much of his adult life. He later told a hotel client that the simplicity and relatively unadorned character of Japanese culture had initially attracted him. The aesthetic interest preceded the sustained historical and professional knowledge his books would require. [8], [9].

His entry into Kyoto included an institutional foothold. He first held a research fellowship at Kyoto University, then worked as a landscape architect and writer and established his own office downtown. He also taught environmental design at the separate Kyoto University of Art and Design. The distinction matters: the research university and the art-and-design institution were different parts of his formation and professional life. His

biography says that he was the first person in Japan to receive a working visa as a landscape architect. That is his published account of the unusual position he occupied; the available profile does not supply the administrative record or a comparison with every earlier foreign practitioner. [10].

For him, learning a garden was not limited to analyzing it from outside. His essay “The Art of Setting Stones” describes work alongside an older gardener and younger workers, carrying a heavy stone with ropes and a pole, shifting it, checking its angle, and returning to the job after tea. The stone had come through the trade in materials from older gardens. The decisive view was from the room that would look onto the new composition: the workers had to reconcile the stone’s physical weight with how it appeared to someone seated indoors. The essay joins the labor of their bodies to Keane’s recollections of people carrying festival floats. It also includes a walk with his young son, who finds a boulder and invents a use for it. Keane’s writing preserves these encounters with other workers and a child; it does not reduce the stone to a diagram or a philosophical emblem. [11].

Early clients came through architects and family friends whose introductions established trust. [12].

Becoming a working designer in a living city

The Kyoto in which Keane established himself was a city where historical environments were lived in, altered, and demolished. In a June 1998 interview in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, he spoke as a designer, teacher, and preservation organizer. He was visiting American cities through Japanese cultural organizations to discuss Kyoto’s future. The newspaper identified him as a founder and chairman of the International Society to Save Kyoto; the biographical reference also records his chairmanship of Kyoto Mitate, a historic-preservation society, from 1996. [13], [14].

Keane’s preservation position was practical. He argued that older neighborhoods could support economic activity and comfortable everyday life, citing lessons from Edinburgh and Pittsburgh. He did not say that every old building should survive. He objected to short-term construction that discarded historical quality and described the weakness of citizen influence: his group, he said, collected roughly 60,000 signatures against a proposed replica of a Parisian bridge in a historic district, without stopping it. The interview records his disappointment, rather than proving the details of the petition independently. He was concerned with the conditions under which a distinctive city could continue to be inhabited, not simply with protecting a picturesque background for his own gardens. [15].

His commissions likewise put him into different kinds of Kyoto life. At Momochitaru-kan, the headquarters and shop of the traditional-craft business Kurochiku, he designed a passage and courts that recalled the narrow spaces of a machiya, a town house. A timber street front concealed the larger steel building behind it. The first court contained a wall of rammed, or compacted, earth and a pine tree; the second had bamboo. These plantings

echoed the paintings on a Noh stage upstairs. Noh is a classical form of Japanese theater. Keane was working with the business's building, visitors, and cultural presentation. The portfolio does not give a construction date, so this commission cannot safely be slotted into a precise early-career year. [16].

At Hiden-in, a subtemple of Kyoto's Sennyū-ji complex, he worked within the tradition of the roji, the approach garden associated with tea. A path, a gate, a pause, and the view into the next space organize the visitor's movement. His middle gate consists of compacted-earth walls shaped like folding screens; the rear fence uses narrow wooden slats. A large flat central stone can serve as a pedestal for flower arrangements, allowing the garden to function like a tea room's display alcove. Keane was designing both an approach and a place to look into, with movement and display accommodated within a small space. [17].

His reach also extended beyond Kyoto. Awanosato Park in Tokushima was made on a confectionery factory's grounds for visitors. Reconstructed farmhouses, individual gardens, and a moat became parts of a business's public environment. Its hand-worked pink granite came from Qingdao in China. The commission involved commercial patronage and imported materials as well as the presentation of regional history. Keane's general biography also lists historic-district design in Nagano, although the public material reviewed here does not reconstruct that job in comparable detail. [18], [19].

The designer becomes an author

In 1996, Tuttle published Japanese Garden Design, with photographs by Haruzo Ohashi. Keane had spent years in Kyoto by then and was writing for readers who might recognize a garden's beauty without knowing how to read its forms. The book connects design with history, poetry, and the religious and philosophical traditions that gave specific elements their meanings. Its apparatus includes plans, a glossary, maps, a bibliography in English and Japanese, and a chronology. These are aids for readers who need to learn a vocabulary and a history, not merely borrow an attractive arrangement of rocks and plants. [20], [21].

The choice of an explanatory book made his experience available well beyond his own commissions. A garden belongs to a site and an owner; a book can be consulted by a designer in another country, a librarian building a collection, or an amateur maintaining a small plot. One concrete reader, the American Japanese-garden practitioner Bill Cook, later described Japanese Garden Design as the title he regularly recommended to people seeking an introduction. Cook also remembered Keane guiding stone-setting work at the Japanese garden in San Diego's Balboa Park in 2000 and encountering him at professional gatherings. Cook's recollections give a view of Keane among practitioners and users of his books, beyond the endorsements printed by a publisher. [22].

In 2000, Keane also received the grand prize at the Kyoto Arts Festival for Omega Point. Eight proposals had been selected from a field of 260. The installation stood at Daigo-ji, a major Kyoto temple. Its title referred to the French Jesuit thinker Pierre Teilhard de

Chardin’s idea of an ultimate convergence. This was a different professional setting from a private garden: a selected temporary artwork in an arts festival, judged among other proposals, placed in a conspicuous religious environment. It established that his work with landscape and natural materials could enter exhibition and installation contexts as well as the ordinary commission. [23], [24].

Keane’s next important collaboration was with Jirō Takei on Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden, first published in 2001. The Sakuteiki, or “Records of Garden Making,” is an early Japanese gardening text associated with the Heian period, the age of the aristocratic court and its elaborate literary culture. Their edition pairs translation with cultural and historical explanation. Takei brought extensive experience teaching the text and researching Japanese gardens; he was a professor at the Kyoto College of Art and active in garden scholarship. The collaboration placed Keane’s practical and English-language work beside a Japanese scholar’s long engagement with the subject. Takei was a significant intellectual working partner. [25], [26], [27].

Translation mattered because the instructions emerged from a world with meanings that an English reader would not automatically share. Stones, arrangements of land and water, technical directions, and religious concerns appear together in the book. Explaining that world allows a reader to understand a prescription before deciding what remains useful in another place or time. Keane’s later designs would sometimes move far from traditional iconography, but his work on the old text was a sustained effort to understand the inherited practices closely. In 2026, Tuttle issued a new edition with added color photographs and a foreword by Hugo Torii, the curator of Portland Japanese Garden. The book thus continued within a network of scholars and working gardeners rather than remaining an isolated translation from his first Kyoto years. [28].

The Art of Setting Stones, published by the small Berkeley publisher Stone Bridge Press in 2002, gave his writing a different scale and voice. Instead of an introductory manual, it offered eight essays from Japanese gardens, moving between observations of place, the labor of making, and questions about human existence. The title draws on the old association between making a garden and setting stones. The book made room for Keane as a participant and observer, including experiences that a technical manual need not contain. This essay form became a durable part of his writing. [29].

Ithaca: family, a university, and new kinds of work

A one-year Cornell teaching invitation became a long residence in Ithaca. Public project records place Keane there in the early 2000s, and he was still identified as Ithaca-based in 2017. His Japanese knowledge now had to function within American material supplies, climates, buildings, and institutions. He and his family were living in a city whose professional and cultural life was closely connected with Cornell. [30], [31], [32].

Keane’s wife, Momoko Takeshita Keane, is a sculptor and ceramic artist from Kyoto. She

studied pottery in Shigaraki, a Japanese kiln town, and at the Kyoto Laboratory of Traditional Crafts. A 2013 Cornell exhibition included her work alongside his. Both artists were therefore exhibiting within the local community, though their everyday division of work remains largely private. [33].

In 2003–04, Keane installed Miwa-an at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell's university museum. It was an experimental tea house and garden that lasted a year. Hand-woven dogwood and willow formed three interlocking circles, associated with giver, receiver, and what is shared. The structure translated the social encounter of tea into a spatial experiment; it did not attempt to duplicate an old tea house. Its temporary character also made a different kind of project possible from a garden expected to serve an owner for decades. [34].

The project brought him into a working relationship with Cornell Plantations, the university's botanical gardens and arboretum. In the introduction to a later lecture, director Don Rakow remembered first hearing from Keane when he asked for shrub stems to build the tea house. Their contact began with a material need. Years later, they were working together on a much larger garden design. The university's plant collections and staff knowledge supplied resources for making, while Keane found opportunities to work and exhibit near home. [35].

He also made ceramics from plants. Leaves and meadow grasses were coated in clay and formed into structures resembling nests or cocoons. The works were fired, unglazed, in wood-burning kilns over five days, allowing flame and ash to alter the surfaces. This required a different rhythm from drawing or setting stones: preparation could establish a form, but the firing introduced effects he deliberately sought without fully controlling. The portfolio describes this as a search for the encounter of fire and clay. Some examples incorporate gravel or plant stems; the work remained materially connected to a garden. [36].

His "Ceramics from the Garden" exhibition at Cornell Plantations in March–April 2013 made the relation literal. Some of the plant substrates had been harvested there. The opening programme included talks by Keane and Momoko and a presentation of his proposed East Asian garden. By 2023, he said he was no longer making ceramics. [37], [38].

He found other forms for small-scale landscape work. His bontei, or tray gardens, belong to a family of East Asian arts that also includes miniature tree cultivation and the presentation of selected stones. A small, bounded field can hold stones and suggest the rhythms of a much larger natural landscape. Keane's versions use materials such as a black-walnut tray or a slate base with a wooden frame; they can enter a private collection as objects. He describes beginning from the older traditions while extending their materials and ideas. The works allow the decisions of a landscape designer to operate at a size that can be carried, displayed, and collected. [39].

The university connection also supported forms of public teaching less specialized than a garden-history lecture. In 2007, Keane, then a visiting fellow, was announced as an opening speaker for the Ithaca Sciencenter's interactive family exhibition Japan and Nature:

Spirits of the Seasons. His talk was called “Shiki: The Art of Nature in Japan.” In 2011 he helped organize a concert for relief after the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Its announced programme paired his readings in English with Japanese poetry sung by Cornell teacher and translator Kyoko Selden, alongside faculty musicians and a player of the shakuhachi, a Japanese bamboo flute. These activities place him within the local educational and cultural community and within continuing ties to Japan, beyond his clients and book readers. [40], [41].

A museum garden and the people who keep it

In 2011, Keane completed the garden beside the Johnson Museum’s new wing. The project was made possible by Cornell alumni Rebecca and James Morgan; the museum’s expansion was designed by John L. Sullivan III of Pei Cobb Freed & Partners. Keane’s landscape was therefore part of a building project supported by donors and managed by an institution. Its formal name is the Rebecca Q. and James C. Morgan Garden; its poetic name is Tiger Glen Garden. The university’s museum, architecture, alumni patronage, and Keane’s own Cornell history met in the commission. [42], [43].

Keane based the garden on the Chinese story of the Three Laughers of the Tiger Glen. A Buddhist recluse, a Daoist, and a Confucian are so absorbed in conversation that the recluse crosses a boundary he had vowed never to pass; the three laugh at the breach. Keane turned the story into an arrangement of upright stones, moss, a small-stone ravine, and the sound of water. It was a way to make the museum’s surroundings carry a narrative about friendship across differences. [44].

His role reached into the collection as well as the site. As the garden approached completion, the museum acquired a seventeenth-century hanging scroll by Kanō Dōun Masanobu representing the Three Laughers. Curator Ellen Avril records that the acquisition came through Keane’s connections in Japan. The painting and garden were thus linked through his professional relationships, not just through a curator noticing a similarity afterward. His years abroad had produced contacts usable by an American museum. [45].

The Morgan Garden’s public life requires recurring labor. Keane explained in 2012 that about twenty-five volunteers, mostly students but also local residents and faculty, helped clean, water, and tend it. Professional care and specialist pruning supplemented that work. The proposal for his next Cornell garden included an endowed maintenance position; even the choice between charred wood and stain depended on funding. Cornell Plantations also ruled out running bamboo, so he planned with clumping bamboo instead. These are concrete negotiations through which a design becomes feasible for an institution. [46].

That proposed project, the Six Friends East Asian Garden, would bring Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cultural references into a contemporary composition. Keane presented the design publicly at Cornell in 2012; a further presentation with Rakow was announced for San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum in 2013. Keane said that university approvals and fundraising were still required. The available record establishes a developed design and

fundraising proposal, without establishing subsequent construction. [47], [48], [49].

[External image / 外部圖片] An overhead view of Tiger Glen Garden, with a curving dry-stone stream between moss-covered areas and upright rocks.
Tiger Glen Garden at Cornell’s Johnson Museum of Art. Moss and upright stones flank a winding stone stream: water is suggested through the arrangement of dry materials. Photograph: Kai Keane; garden: Marc Peter Keane · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

Commissions in America: material, collaboration, and maintenance

Discussing twentieth-century garden innovation, Keane pointed to the garden maker Shigemori Mirei and the sculptor Isamu Noguchi. [50].

While living in Ithaca, Keane designed for American clients in several regions. An older Gardenista firm listing identifies work in the Northeast, the New York region, and the San Francisco Bay Area, alongside Japan. It also described the appeal of his work in settings as different as a centuries-old Japanese house and an American museum. The listing belongs to his Ithaca period; the address and present-tense biography on that page should not override later records of his return to Kyoto. [51].

The American commissions involved different starting points. At a residence in Darien, Connecticut, he designed a series of pocket gardens over many years. The client had acquired Japanese stone artifacts, including lanterns, a carved basin, and older stepping stones, which helped determine what the designer could work with. Keane had to accommodate an owner’s collection and several small spaces rather than begin from an empty, interchangeable site. The continuing relationship also matters: a portfolio photograph can present a finished composition, while the project account describes a commission developing over time. [52].

At Dream Islands, a house in Stone Ridge, New York, designed by the architecture firm LevenBetts, he drew on the wooded property’s own stones and on the region’s bluestone. Paths and retaining elements extended the stone palette into the garden. The central arrangement used moss and boulders to suggest islands, mountains, and water. His work there depended on the property’s materials and on a contemporary building, even as he used a vocabulary learned from Japanese landscapes. It was not necessary to transport an entire Japanese garden abroad for those decisions to make sense. [53].

When GQ interviewed him in 2017, Keane described composing with the particular rock and tree available, responding to their shapes as the garden developed. The magazine placed his work among contemporary landscape designers, presenting the moss-and-stone gardens as attractive to owners of modern houses. Its “New Zen Garden” label reveals one public market for his practice, although it compresses the more varied history he explains in his

books. [54].

One particularly well-documented commission was for the Irvington, New York, home of gallery owners Peter and Rita Blum. They reserved a portion of the property for Keane after other landscape work had been undertaken. The garden served both a passage between house and studio and a place for contemplation. An irregular stone path through planting demanded attention to one’s steps; the adjoining white-granite field was a place to look into. He had to replace unsuitable soil and provide drainage beneath the granular surface. Behind the calm image were construction problems, routes of use, and an owner’s particular request. [55].

Its upkeep was entrusted in part to Asher Browne, a gardener trained in Japan, who visited several times a year for pruning and other care. Raking could be more or less frequent depending on the degree of visual tidiness the owners wanted. Bamboo needed thinning. The person who installs a garden does not subsequently perform all the acts that make its appearance possible. Browne’s presence in the account is therefore more than a credit line: it identifies a second practitioner whose judgment and repeated work helped sustain Keane’s design. [56].

Keane’s Manhattan projects brought garden work into still smaller and more architecturally constrained settings. Still Point is a rooftop composition, with a contemporary tea structure and stone arrangements that direct attention toward converging forces. Thrust! occupies a courtyard viewed from the lobby of a commercial building, with architecture by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill and interiors by Rottet Studio. For the latter, Keane used stone to suggest tectonic force. In both cases, his subject could be natural processes rather than an old religious image, and the work had to be legible through a particular building’s view. The public portfolio does not provide secure construction dates for all these projects. [57], [58].

The collaborations become especially visible in Stone Wave Garden, a San Francisco commission. Keane designed the garden and arbor; Bill Castellon undertook garden construction, Makoto Imai built the arbor, and Avram Dalton supplied specialty fences. Kyoto pavers and an antique stone element joined the setting. The division of work involved people with distinct skills in building, wood, and enclosure. [59].

Keane keeps design authorship personal, while construction is collaborative. In 2023 he said he had never had permanent studio assistants. He assembled installation crews and supervised on site; drawings left some choices open until the actual stones and plants were available. [60].

Writing alongside the American practice

During these years, Keane continued publishing both practical studies and literature. The Japanese Tea Garden appeared with Stone Bridge Press in 2009. It follows the history of tea gardens from their antecedents in China into Japanese practice, using photographs, floor

plans, and illustrations to explain their design. For a reader of his Hiden-in commission or the experimental Miwa-an, the subject is concrete: tea requires a setting for approach, preparation, waiting, and meeting. Keane was studying the historical arrangements behind spaces he also made. [61].

He also began issuing books through his own MPK Books imprint. Dear Cloud (2011) is a novel in letters whose traveler can inhabit other lives, including nonhuman and inanimate forms. Its shifts of perspective include a tree and a tide pool. The device gave Keane a way to write from beyond the observing human's usual position. In Songs in the Garden (2012), he returned to historical study, explaining how Heian court poetry linked natural images to human emotions. A pine on a rocky shore could communicate waiting for a lover; scattered reeds could express an unsettled state of mind. For the literate court, these associations belonged to communication and therefore to how a garden could be understood. [62], [63].

Moss (2015), also under MPK Books, collected nine stories. The title story concerns an overworked Tokyo employee longing for a return of the wild while trying to distinguish the natural and artificial around him. This was a subject Keane could approach from his professional experience of arranging nature inside cities. But writing fiction also meant making characters and imagined circumstances, rather than explaining the history of an existing garden. His publishing record had already acquired two distinct kinds of work: books that help readers understand gardens and books that use invented lives to explore human experience. [64].

His 2017 Japanese Garden Notes brought him back to the designer's act of looking. It grew from repeated visits, with a camera, to a hundred Japanese gardens. Keane selected more than 130 elements, moving between whole compositions and details such as the alignment of nodes in a bamboo fence. He was showing what someone with working experience notices. The resulting book let an English-speaking reader follow a practiced eye through gardens that ranged from familiar public sites to obscure or private ones. [65].

The book also supplied a subject for public teaching. Portland Japanese Garden's August 2017 lecture was presented with the Portland Art Museum's Asian Art Council and the University of Oregon's Oregon East Asia Network. Its biography located Keane's studio in Ithaca and listed affiliations with garden research in Kyoto, Cornell's East Asia Program, and Columbia's Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies. These connections gave his work settings beyond either a design client or a bookstore. The event joined an institution concerned with maintaining an actual Japanese garden to museums, university research, and a paying lecture audience. [66].

Returning to Kyoto

After their son left home, Keane and his wife returned to Kyoto before the pandemic. By 2023 he preferred commissions reachable by bicycle, while continuing work elsewhere. [67].

One substantial commission in the new Kyoto period was Genji Kyoto, a boutique hotel

beside the Kamo River that opened in April 2022. Keane worked with Geoffrey P. Moussas, an American architect also based in Kyoto. The Japanese garden writer Itō Masatoshi visited that autumn and described the relation between the architecture and the gardens, including the open passage beside the courtyard and the incorporation of old materials. For Keane, the hotel meant working with a building’s circulation, guest rooms, and public areas, rather than adding a single garden after the architecture was complete. [68].

The rooms have small tsubo gardens: compact planted or stone spaces that give an interior a close view of the outdoors. In the public courtyard and on the roof, Keane worked at different scales. Explaining the commission, he distinguished choices a designer can make—form, texture, alignment—from what develops through seasons and the work of maintainers. The hotel interview thus carries forward a concern already visible in his American commissions: the finished construction is an early stage in the garden’s life. [69].

The courtyard, called Ukifune Garden, refers to a woman in The Tale of Genji, the classical Japanese court novel associated with Murasaki Shikibu. A boat-like stone in a bending dry stream evokes the character’s drifting life. The Japanese report notes that a licensed reproduction of a related scene from a painting in New York’s Metropolitan Museum accompanied the setting. On the roof, Sky Forest offers guests somewhere to sit, drink, and talk with views of the river and mountains. Keane connects it with the older idea of a mountain retreat located inside a city. [70], [71].

Momoko’s work entered the same setting. The hotel acquired her sculpture Curl, resembling a curled leaf or a boat, for an alcove beside the courtyard and announced an exhibition of her ceramics in November 2022. She had learned wood-kiln firing in the United States and maintained her own studio and kiln. Asked by the hotel whether her nature-related forms reflected her husband’s influence, she said they more often drew on images of life experience. Their professional paths crossed at the hotel, as they had at Cornell’s exhibition, while each artist described a personal source for the work. [72].

At Hōnen-in, another Kyoto temple, he made Empty River in 2023. He kept the courtyard’s established camellias and changed the ground beneath them. A dark curving line of charcoal passes through pale sand. His account relates the charcoal to the carbon cycle, making a normally invisible movement of matter visible as a river. The Japanese reporter’s repeated visits confirm the new garden’s date and distinguish it from a separate recycled-glass installation made by another artist in 2019. Hōnen-in has historical connections with Pure Land Buddhism; treating every temple garden as simply “Zen” would obscure the particular institution with which he was working. [73], [74].

His writing in Kyoto also resumed the essay form. Of Arcs and Circles appeared through Stone Bridge Press in 2022, gathering observations about gardens, names, art, and the relations among living things. An excerpt, “Everything Is Connected,” shows his route from everyday looking to a larger question. He describes walking through a temple and considering why its pines have a distinctive columnar form: their historical pruning depended on the labor available there. Later, feeding his cat leads him to consider the many

processes behind a bowl of food. He explains Buddhist emptiness through dependence and change. This is Keane’s own explanation of a concept that interests him; it is also an account of a person using ordinary encounters in his city and home as occasions to write. [75], [76].

The publisher was part of the continuity. Peter Goodman founded Stone Bridge Press in 1989 to publish books related to Japan. Having worked on Japanese-garden books at publishers in Japan, he retained a particular interest in the subject. In an interview anticipating the 2022 list, Goodman singled out Keane’s new essays and their close observation. The record documents shared editorial interests and several books over two decades; it does not disclose the financial terms of their relationship. [77].

Becoming a maker and seller of books

For The Name of the Willow, Keane took responsibility for more of the object itself. Published under MPK Books in 2023, it developed an essay from Of Arcs and Circles into an illustrated tale about a willow and the forces that constitute it. He spent a year and a half on writing, illustrations, and layout. The original pictures used dyed Japanese linen paper, pastels, ink, and graphite; a particular green recalled the malachite color of Japanese painting. The printing combined a modern Fujifilm digital press with paper designed to evoke fibrous traditional paper. Kyoto artisans hand-bound the sewn spine. Separate English and Japanese editions were offered directly through his website. As observed in October 2026, the English book was listed at ¥14,000 before shipping. That price describes a product, not Keane’s return after the paper, printing, binding, and time involved. [78].

The book brought him into a local bookselling setting as well. Keibunsha, an independent Kyoto bookstore, announced a gallery exhibition for April 2024 and daily readings by the author. Here the illustrator, publisher, and reader-facing author were the same person. A book whose argument concerns the relations forming a tree was also an object made through printers, binders, and a shop’s exhibition program. Those working relationships are part of how the book reached people, alongside the online purchase links. [79].

Another recent book involved a quite different division of labor. For the fine-press volume comprising A Bonsai-Shaped Mind and Postures of the Heart, Keane wrote five essays and a nine-part story following a bonsai over five centuries. Richard Wagener made end-grain wood engravings of specimens at the Pacific Bonsai Museum in Washington State. The publishers were Wagener’s Mixolydian Editions and David Pascoe’s Nawakum Press. Handmade papers and several bindings made the volume a physical collaboration among writer, engraver, printer, and binder. The Fine Press Book Association awarded it first place in the 2024 Manhattan fair’s Collector’s Prize. [80], [81].

The publisher’s description makes the production conditions unusually visible. Wagener printed the engravings by hand on his Pratt Albion press. The three editions were listed at prices ranging from $1,950 to $4,400; the page now describes them as out of print. This was

a collector’s market, distinct from the readership of a paperback garden guide or an electronic novel. Keane could participate in it because other specialists supplied the engraving, presswork, binding, and sales infrastructure. The evidence does not establish his payment or the proportion of his livelihood that such collaborations provide. [82].

The novelist’s working life

Keane’s most recent fiction extends a line already present in Dear Cloud and Moss. Proxima’s Gift (2025), issued under MPK Books, imagines Japan centuries after a solar catastrophe. One group has developed an enhanced capacity for empathy with other life. The novel follows the possibilities and burdens of that ability. Miyako Redux (2026) moves into another society within the same future, including a city of artisans and religious and political conflict. Keane’s website offers the novels in print and electronic editions through Amazon, a broader distribution route than the directly sold illustrated book or the fine-press collaboration. [83], [84].

In a 2025 author interview, he described a writing routine without fixed hours or a fixed place: an urge to write can arrive irregularly. His first draft discovers the story; on the next pass, knowing its ending, he can adjust what precedes it. Experience accumulates and enters the work, while its author may understand its implications later. Keane’s account leaves room for discovering what he is doing, alongside the deliberate decisions required to finish a book. [85].

The same interview identifies some of his reading. Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek observes natural life closely; Wendell Berry’s The Unsettling of America considers farming, culture, and the consequences of how people inhabit land. Among fiction writers, Keane named Russell Hoban’s Riddley Walker, a novel whose invented future language matters to its world. These are declared interests, not evidence of when he first read them. He preferred the label “speculative fiction” to a narrower genre designation. [86].

In April 2026, the Kyoto writer Rebecca Otowa asked him directly about the relation between the novels and his garden career. He said the influence was indirect: decades working in Japanese gardens had also meant absorbing mythology and ways of living with cultivated countryside. He did not describe the novels as garden manuals with fictional decoration. He explained some specific decisions, including a future language mixing French, Japanese, and English, with Riddley Walker as a model for linguistic change. His time divisions follow natural cycles: the first novel spans a year, the second a month, and the planned third a day. Some section names draw on Japanese poetic seasonal words; others are his inventions. Otowa, writing for the English-language group Writers in Kyoto, said that she preferred absorbing the books’ feeling to following their plots. The conversation places him among fellow writers and actual readers, and records both his intentions and one reader’s response. [87].

Keane’s public descriptions still begin with garden design, but his working life now

includes preparing words and pictures, coordinating physical production, and making books available through several channels. His view of nature is correspondingly expansive. In a nature questionnaire, he found it in weeds at a sidewalk’s edge, birds inside a hardware store, and moss on a wall. The places matter: a professionally shaped garden has never been the only place in which he looks. His work depends on both the concentrated demands of a commission and the observations he can make while moving through ordinary surroundings. [88].

Chronological reference points

The dates below anchor the narrative; several moves and undated commissions remain less precisely documented.

Period / Verified reference point

Period: 1958; 1979
Verified reference point: Birth year; Cornell graduation. [89].

Period: Mid-1980s
Verified reference point: First Kyoto residence begins. [90].

Period: 1996–98
Verified reference point: First major garden book; preservation organizing documented. [91], [92].

Period: 2000–02
Verified reference point: Omega Point, Sakuteiki, and the first essay collection. [93], [94], [95].

Period: 2003–04
Verified reference point: Miwa-an at Cornell anchors the Ithaca period. [96].

Period: 2011–13
Verified reference point: Morgan/Tiger Glen Garden; Six Friends proposal; Cornell ceramics exhibition. [97], [98], [99].

Period: 2017
Verified reference point: Japanese Garden Notes; still based in Ithaca. [100].

Period: Before the pandemic
Verified reference point: Return to Kyoto, according to his later recollection. [101].

Period: 2022–24
Verified reference point: Genji Kyoto opens; new essays, Empty River, illustrated publishing, and fine-press collaboration. [102], [103], [104], [105], [106].

Period: 2025–26
Verified reference point: Proxima’s Gift and Miyako Redux; new edition of Sakuteiki. [107], [108], [109].

Source note. This profile uses Keane’s project and book records alongside interviews, contemporary newspaper coverage, Cornell documentation, Japanese garden reporting, and accounts by practitioners and readers. Project pages establish his published descriptions and credits; they do not necessarily supply construction dates or financial arrangements. Publisher descriptions establish editions and production, and selected excerpts support discussion of the prose; they are not substitutes for claiming to have read every book in full. The remaining gaps include his first American employers, the precise dates of both transnational moves, and the terms of his teaching, commissions, and publishing income. Research reflects public material accessed on October 3, 2026.

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38. 2023 conversation, 45:50–46:01↩
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45. Avril’s collection account↩
46. Cornell lecture, 33:06–33:38, 40:46–43:25↩
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49. lecture, 44:09–44:25↩
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