

Ken Kesey's important status in recent American literature rests primarily on two novels: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964). The first was immediately popular, widely read, and immensely influential. The second, which Kesey and many critics considered his masterpiece, remains in print, deserves more attention, but is much less known. After finishing his second novel, Kesey became perhaps even more famous as a transformative cultural figure than as a serious, dedicated writer. His drug use, his advocacy of drug use, and his arrest for drug use brought him a different kind of public attention than the kind won by his novels. But it was his 1964 cross-country tour in an old school bus (painted in bright psychedelic colors and crammed with "high," high-spirited "Merry Prankster" friends) that epitomized the spirit of the 1960s. It was the bus trip that made Kesey a cultural icon. Immortalized in Tom Wolfe's 1968 best-seller *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, the bus tour remained the focus of public attention for the rest of Kesey's life. He himself considered it his finest hour.

Lovers of Kesey's writing often wish that he had produced further literary triumphs. Throughout his life, he continued to write, but even Kesey felt that he never did (and never could) produce a better book than *Notion*. Meanwhile, *Cuckoo's Nest* remained the novel for which he was best known and most widely appreciated. It was soon adapted (by Dale Wasserman) into a play that is still widely performed. And, of course, the novel also became the basis for one of the most critically and commercially successful films of all time. Kesey, however, despised the film and claimed to have never seen it. He felt (rightly) that it was far less complex than his book, but there is no denying that the movie brought new attention to the novel. Practically anyone who sees the film will want to read the book that inspired it.

Cuckoo's Nest, the novel, deserves—and repays—close attention. In the first three decades after it was initially published, it was the subject of much scholarship and appreciative commentary. More recently, however, much less has been written about it. Partly this apparent decline in interest may be due to the book's depictions of women and African Americans. Some critics consider the novel misogynist; others are troubled by the ways it sometimes presents black characters. These are issues that the present collection of essays squarely addresses. But the essays included here also explore many other topics as well, and the book has additionally been designed to provide an unusually comprehensive overview of scholarship on *Cuckoo's Nest*. Anyone who wants a good grasp of the history of commentary on the book and its film adaptation will, we hope, find this volume very helpful.

The book opens with a brief overview of Kesey's life, prepared by Jeff Moody. It then shifts to a series of four contextual essays. Each of these is designed to place *Cuckoo's Nest* within some important, larger framework. The essay by Darren Harris-Fain, for instance, situates the novel in the contexts of various literary and cultural traditions as well as in the contexts of its immediate times, especially in the late 1950s. Harris-Fain especially focuses on such issues as the book's relation to earlier examples of narrators and narration in American fiction; its connections with earlier works stressing individualism; and its links with numerous cultural developments in the decade or so following World War II. He relates Kesey's novel to the "youth" culture of its day, the "Beat" literary movement of that period, and the rise of new kinds of American novels. He explores its treatment of racial issues, its depictions of women, and its presentation of psychiatric treatment. In each case, Harris-Fain shows how the book both reflects and affected its specific moment in literary and cultural history.

In the next contextual chapter, Robert C. Evans offers the first of several essays in this volume designed to indicate, in great detail, precisely how *Cuckoo's Nest* has been discussed by previous critics. This chapter focuses, especially, on discussions of the novel's two main characters ("Big Nurse" Ratched and her wily antagonist,

Randle P. McMurphy). The chapter is organized chronologically, so that readers can trace the development of commentary on these two figures. Evans then, in the next chapter, suggests how “critical pluralism” can help readers better appreciate the complexities of practically any piece of literature, including Kesey’s novel. Focusing on a single passage in the book that depicts McMurphy interacting with an African American, Evans argues that this passage, like any section of any text, can be more richly analyzed when viewed from numerous perspectives, rather than just one. In the final contextual essay, Christopher Baker compares and contrasts Kesey’s novel with *The Grapes of Wrath*, by John Steinbeck, a book Kesey greatly admired. Baker discusses the importance of strong males in both works, the emphasis in both texts on small communities, and the ways both novels explore friendships between men. He shows the importance of “Christ” imagery in both works, the roles strong women play in both texts, and the roles of oppressive forces in the two novels. These, in fact, are just a few of the many intriguing parallels Baker detects between *Cuckoo’s Nest* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The next major section of the present volume offers a series of diverse critical perspectives on Kesey’s novel. This section opens with a chapter by Robert C. Evans that offers a chronological overview of commentary on the various “minority” characters presented in *Cuckoo’s Nest*, including the Native American “Chief” Bromden, the various African American employees of the hospital, and the female characters (other than Nurse Ratched). Bromden, the novel’s narrator, has frequently been discussed by critics, as have the other women. Surprisingly, however, the African American characters have received far less critical attention. This survey is then followed by an essay by Brian Yothers, the distinguished Melville scholar, who sets Kesey’s novel within the contexts of various nineteenth-century American literary traditions. These include gothic, transcendental, and Romantic writings and such writers as Douglass, Emerson, Melville, Poe, Thoreau, and others.

In the following chapter, Ronald G. Billingsley, one of the very first serious commentators on *Cuckoo’s Nest*, discusses

the novel's relationship to nineteenth-century American humor, especially frontier humor, and then an essay by Joakim Nilsson relates Kesey's book to twentieth-century theories about gender in general and masculinity in particular. Nilsson finds the novel more misogynistic than some commentators have wanted to admit. Also adopting recent theoretical perspectives, Catherine Calloway uses ideas about "gatekeeping" to explore the various ways gatekeepers and gatekeeping are presented in the novel, focusing especially (of course) on Nurse Ratched. Ronald G. Billingsley then returns to offer a vigorous defense of the novel against charges that it is insensitive to minority characters, arguing, instead, that "Kesey has given us a quintessential American novel in which he uses minority characters, often in stereotypical ways, to provide a literary expression of our underlying common human capacity for unfettered self-expression." Billingsley's essay is then followed by a spirited reminiscence of Kesey by Ed McClanahan, one of Kesey's best, earliest, and longest-lasting friends. McClanahan vividly describes Kesey's reactions to a high school performance of the stage version of *Cuckoo's Nest*—a performance which, forty years later, Kesey still regarded as the best he had ever seen, surpassing even a 2001 Broadway revival.

Finally, the book closes with three more overviews of critical comments on the novel and/or its adaptations. The first of these chapters, by Christina M. Garner, offers a representative sampling of responses to the film. The second of these closing chapters (prepared by Robert C. Evans and Kelley Jeans) collects, for the first time, as many of Kesey's own comments about *Cuckoo's Nest* as could be traced. And then the volume closes with a lengthy overview (by Evans) of critical commentary on aspects of the novel not already surveyed in this volume. All in all, the present book attempts to provide an unusually comprehensive review of the best that has been written about *Cuckoo's Nest*, while also adding new insights of its own.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: A Survey of Commentary on the Film Adaptation_____

Christina M. Garner

Ken Kesey's 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was immediately successful as a book, and then it was quickly turned into a 1963 Broadway play starring Kirk Douglas. The play at first fell flat. Eventually, however, in a new production, it became immensely popular and continues to be performed quite frequently throughout the United States. Then, of course, in 1975 Milos Forman directed a film adaptation starring Jack Nicholson and Louise Fletcher. This film became one of the most popular and critically acclaimed movies of all time. It won all five major Academy awards (Best Picture, Best Actor in Lead Role, Best Actress in Lead Role, Best Director, and Best Screenplay)—the first time that had happened since 1934. The film remains popular to this day and is routinely cited as one of the best movies ever made.

Surprisingly, Ken Kesey himself claimed to hate the film. He vowed that he never would (and that he never did) see it. He objected to the way the movie (unlike the play) diminished the importance of Chief Bromden as narrator, concentrating instead on Randle McMurphy. He also considered Jack Nicholson totally unsuitable to play McMurphy, and eventually, he filed suit against the filmmakers, contending that he had not been adequately compensated for his various contributions to the project.

Commentary concerning the film abounds and is too extensive to review in any detail here. The purpose of this article, then, is simply to provide a taste of the kinds of reactions the film has provoked among academics. Interestingly enough, the movie has elicited reactions not only from students of film and from persons interested in relations between film and literature; it has also sometimes been discussed by doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, and psychologists.

One of the first medical professionals to examine the film, Jillian Van Nostrand (RN), discussed it in 1976. She wrote that although *Cuckoo's Nest*

goes a long way in describing the painful alienation and despair of contemporary life, it has severed the subjective nightmare of mental illness from the social antecedents that give it meaning. The question remains as to whether the film's one dimensional view of mental illness serves to mystify rather than to explain its nature and origins. (Van Nostrand 23)

Much of Van Nostrand's article consists of a point-by-point summary of the film, emphasizing—and often celebrating—McMurphy's shenanigans. As she details the movie's events, Van Nostrand describes McMurphy as a “lively” man with “adolescent charm and defiant independence” who is “the very essence of sanity and passion” (24). In contrast, she defines Nurse Ratched as McMurphy's “arch enemy,” a “despicable nurse” with an “iron hand” and a “patronizing, authoritarian manner” who occasionally “unleashes her fury” on her patients (24).

The fact that Van Nostrand reacted with such strong emotions about the characters is precisely her point:

The film version of Kesey's novel is a powerful emotional experience. In fact, one is so easily drawn into the center of the struggle that it is difficult to gain enough emotional distance from it to critically reflect upon it. In one important sense, this is a flaw in the film. We are not required, or even allowed, to make a judgement [sic] about any turn of events. From the beginning, we have no doubt as to who is right and who is wrong. Caught up in the moment, we find ourselves simply “rooting for the good guys.” Yet this response seems inappropriate, and inadequate to deal with the seriousness of the subject. (25)

Van Nostrand continues her criticism, arguing that one problem with the film is that the characters are “a set of people who are suspended in time” with “no past, no expectations, no future” (25). Furthermore, she says, the characters are isolated from the outside

world, and though they are both interesting and endearing, “they are underdeveloped” and “asocial” (25). Van Nostrand argues that because of the one-dimensional portrayal of these characters, “the story unfolds as simple, unbridled antagonism between McMurphy and Miss Ratched. The conflict is defined as a personal one, as one of sane man against insane institution. This is one man’s rebellion against the monolith” (25). The larger problem, as Van Nostrand sees it, is that McMurphy’s defiance and rebellion do not seek to change the status quo of the institution, but rather to escape it. She describes the conflict as “a dehumanizing situation in which a fundamental change in the moral and social order of things is mandatory. But it is impossible” (25). This futility is evidenced by the fact that the only people who manage to escape from the tyranny of the institution are Billy Bibbit (through committing suicide), McMurphy (through being lobotomized), and Chief Bromden (through breaking out of the facility and fleeing). Van Nostrand contends that this “escape...is no liberation, but merely a gravitation away from the center of tension” (26). Therefore, she believes that McMurphy’s attempts at rebellion, although they may be entertaining and emotionally engaging, are all in vain because the film fails to show how significant change can be made.

In an article published in 1976, Basil Gilbert explores a shifting trend in the film industry from “[t]he good, old-fashioned physical roughhouse of the gun-toting cowboy and his unshaven mates,” which was popular in the 1960s, to “a new, more subtle world of violence: the legal, sanitary, technological world of the modern mental institution and its inmates” (292). Gilbert explains that, while it is not necessarily an original idea to set a novel in a sanatorium, *Cuckoo’s Nest* presents a facility that is:

more than a simple refuge for the sick. One of the morals of the novel is that it can also become a most Kafkaesque institution, where rehabilitation and conformity to society’s norms are...enforced by the subtle persuasion of group therapy, tranquilizing drugs, electroshock treatment, and clinical neurosurgery. (292)

Chronology of Ken Kesey's Life_____

- 1935** Ken Elton Kesey is born September 17 in La Junta, CO, to Frederick A. Kesey and Geneva Kesey.
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- 1946** Kesey's family moves to Springfield, OR.
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- 1953-57** Kesey attends and graduates from the University of Oregon, where he is actively involved in sports, writing, and theater.
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- 1956** Kesey marries his high school sweetheart, Norma "Faye" Haxby.
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- 1958** Kesey writes *End of Autumn* (unpublished novel).
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- 1959** Kesey wins fellowship to prestigious creative writing program at Stanford University.
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- 1960** Kesey writes *Zoo* (unpublished novel).
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- 1960-61** To earn money, Kesey volunteers for government-sponsored drug experiments at nearby veterans hospital, where he first takes LSD; works as a psychiatric aide; writes *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.
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- 1962** *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is published, winning wide critical acclaim and immediate popularity. Meanwhile, Kesey begins working on his next novel, which deals with loggers in Oregon.
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- 1963** Stage version of *Cuckoo's Nest*, written by Dale Wasserman and starring Kirk Douglas, opens on Broadway, but soon closes.
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Works by Ken Kesey

Novels

End of Autumn [unpublished], 1958.

Zoo [unpublished], 1960.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, 1962.

Sometimes a Great Notion, 1964.

Seven Prayers by Grandma Whittier [serialized novel], 1974–1981.

Caverns [by “O. U. Levon,” pseudonym for Kesey and thirteen student authors], 1989.

Sailor Song, 1992.

Last Go Round: A Real Western [with Ken Babbs], 1994.

Drama

Over the Border, 1973

The Further Inquiry, 1990.

Twister: A Ritual Reality in Three Quarters Plus Overtime if Necessary, 1999 [performed].

Children's Literature

Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear, 1990.

The Sea Lion, 1991.

Adaptations of Kesey's Works

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, a play in three acts, Dale Wasserman, 1970.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, a play in two acts, Dale Wasserman, 1974.

Miscellanies

Kesey's Garage Sale, 1973.

Kesey, 1977.

Demon Box, 1986.

*Kesey's Jail Journal: Cut the M***** Loose*, 2003.

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In 1982, he was awarded the G. E. Bentley Prize and, in 1989, was selected Professor of the Year for Alabama by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. At AUM, he has received the Faculty Excellence Award and has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor, and University Alumni Professor. Most recently he was named Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English.

He is one of three editors of the *Ben Jonson Journal* and is a contributing editor to *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*. He is also the author or editor of over 30 books on such topics as Ben Jonson, Martha Moulsworth, Kate Chopin, John Donne, Frank O'Connor, Brian Friel, Ambrose Bierce, Amy Tan, early modern women writers, pluralist literary theory, literary criticism, twentieth-century American writers, American novelists, Shakespeare, and seventeenth-century English literature.