

*Vintery, mintery, cutery, corn, Apple seed and apple thorn,*

*Wire, briar, limber lock?*

*Three geese in a flock*

*One flew East?*

*One flew West*

*And one flew over the cuckoo's nest.*

A simple nursery rhyme gives us the title of one of our greatest novels. With full disclosure here, I proudly go on record to declare that Ken Kesey's 1962 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* stands uncontested as my favorite book of fiction.

I will also disclose that if I could be gifted by the muse of writers to create stories like any other writer's, living or dead, I would choose to write like Kesey. His psychedelic, shape-shifty prose seems to blow my mind at least once on every page.

Let me illustrate with a description from the first pages of *Cuckoo's Nest*. Remember that Kesey writes about the 1950s, the age of the gray flannel suit and Eisenhower, of the ultimate bureaucracy—the military-industrial complex—and of the spread of cookie-cutter suburbs, those little boxes on the hillside and they all look just the same.

In other words, when Kesey wrote this book...conformity ruled.

The excerpt introduces the villain of the novel, Nurse Ratched, also known as Big Nurse, as she enters a mental health facility in Oregon where Kesey sets the novel. Big Nurse symbolizes all big organizations and institutions that dehumanize—whether they do so to mental patients, students, employees, prisoners, soldiers, whatever. Kesey presents Big Nurse as a social dominatrix, a steely, remorseless controller of her environment and all trapped hopelessly in its web.

We meet Nurse Ratched through the narration of a giant American Indian, Chief Broom. Broom has been a resident of the mental health ward, pretending to be deaf and mute, since the end of World War II:

*I'm mopping near the ward door when a key hits it from the other side and I know it's the Big Nurse by the way the lockworks cleave to the key, soft and swift and familiar. She has been around locks so long. She slides through the door with a gust of cold and locks the door behind her and I see her fingers trail across the polished steel – tip of each finger the same color as her lips. Funny orange. Like the tip of a soldering iron. Color so hot or so cold if she touches you with it you can't tell which.*

Dear reader, remember that Chief Broom is institutionalized. Kesey gives us a classic unreliable narrator...the writer keeps you guessing whether what Broom sees is real or hallucinated.

A page later in the book, Big Nurse notices an African-American threesome who serve as her accomplices in ruling the ward. Big Nurse catches them slacking off. Chief Broom describes what he sees...what we see.

*Then ... she sights those boys. They're still down there together; mumbling to one another. They didn't hear her come on the ward. They sense she's glaring down at them now, but it's too late. They should of knew better 'n to group up and mumble together when she was due on the ward. Their faces bob apart, confused. She goes into a crouch and advances on where they're trapped in a huddle at the end of the corridor. She knows what they been saying, and I can see she's furious clean out of control. She's going to tear the black bastards limb from limb, she's so furious. She's swelling up, swells till her back's splitting out the white uniform, and she's let her arms section out long enough to wrap around the three of them five, six times. She looks around her with a swivel of her huge head. Nobody up to see, just old Broom Bromden the half-breed Indian back there hiding behind his mop and can't talk to call for help. So she really lets herself go and her painted smile twists, stretches to an open snarl, and she blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor, so big I can smell the machinery inside the way you smell a motor pulling too big a load.*

Every page and paragraph and sentence of this novel feels equally vivid, just as charged with creative energy and power. The book splits the back of its spine with anger. It telescopes out its arms to capture more and more of Kesey's outrage at the powers that be.

*Cuckoo's Nest* ranks by any standard among the great novels written in the 20th century. Most people know the story, thanks largely to a 1975 movie by Milos Forman, starring Jack Nicholson as the red-haired Irish free-spirit Randle Patrick McMurphy, our hero. Louise Fletcher, playing Big Nurse, and a brilliant ensemble cast brought the book to life for general audiences too busy to read. Too bad. The movie won the top five Oscars for films made in 1975—best picture, actor, actress, director and screenplay—but in my humble opinion it does not hold a candle...or a glowing soldering iron...to Kesey's written work.

Here's why. I'll give one literary reason. I'll give one personal.

We humans love our martyrs. We build whole religions around them, faiths based on the willingness of one human to suffer and even give up sweet life itself for the sake of fellow man. Think of the beloved martyrs. Jesus. MLK. Gandhi. Socrates. The Maccabees.

You can add, in literature, Randle McMurphy to that list.

Wild as the wind, a big scar-nosed Irish brawler and gambler, a redblooded, womanizing, card-playing, hard-drinking man's man, McMurphy shambles into Big Nurse's ward to

serve out the remainder of a conviction for battery. He's looking to avoid hard labor with his sentence, and he thinks easy days lounging inside the mental health clinic will keep blisters off his hands and give him a chance to win poker money from the other ward inmates.

But McMurphy finds himself like Shane, or like Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, or Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*, as the only man with the cojones and will to stand up for townsmen who have been subdued by fear, turned into cowering rabbits by the drugs and coercions and subtle emasculations of Big Nurse and the mental health system. Once McMurphy lands on the ward, Big Nurse begins a gambit to break and control him like she has the others. That's our plot—the uncontrollable force meets the immovable object.

Like every Western, the story will lead to a showdown, and the gradual escalation of the war of wills between McMurphy and Big Nurse brings rising, page-turning tension. McMurphy wins all the cigarettes on the ward in poker games. Big Nurse confiscates the cigarettes and doles them out like army rations. McMurphy coaxes the trembling inmates into voting with him to watch the World Series on TV. Big Nurse counters, working to split the emboldened ward mates away from McMurphy in various nefarious ways.

Poker plays through the book as a metaphor, and every card played by Big Nurse and McMurphy raises the stakes for everyone. As the war of wills escalates, McMurphy takes on the mission of restoring the self esteem of the men in the ward. He chooses his cross to bear, so to speak, and his brash, headlong, fearless impulses stir the pulses of other inmates, especially Chief Broom, who has played at being deaf-mute so well during his time at the facility that the staff talks and tells secrets openly around him.

One particular incident—a failure—makes all the difference. McMurphy throws out an absurd bet to the insecure brotherhood around him—he'll bet on anything, after all. He wagers that he can lift and throw through a window a huge hydrotherapy machine, a big chunk of equipment weighing hundreds of pounds. As McMurphy grips the unit and strains with all his might, a thrill of possibility passes through his cohort. Could it be possible that McMurphy will really lift that monstrous block and hurl it like a giant, like a god, through the glass and wire that holds them captive?

Well, no. But McMurphy *moves* the machine, shifts it ever so slightly. And as he gasps for breath after failing, he turns to the inmates and wheezes the words that every single man in the ward takes to heart from that moment:

*But, at least I tried, didn't I?*

Ken Kesey as a young man worked the night shift in a mental health facility much like the one he describes in *Cuckoo's Nest*. This was in the mid-1950s, after he'd been a star athlete, a wrestler a la John Irving, in school. In Menlo Park, Calif., Kesey saw firsthand the

enervating, soul-killing effects of institutional care on many men he honestly believed weren't crazy when they came in, but were certainly FUBAR when they left.

That experience convinced Kesey that big, institutional power corrupted absolutely, and he spent much of his life afterward battling The Man...or The Combine, as he termed the sinister controlling powers in *Cuckoo's Nest*. Kesey emerged as a symbol of the rebel writer, a man who boarded a retrofitted bus and traveled the U.S. during the hippie years with a band called The Merry Pranksters. Tom Wolfe wrote about them in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and Kesey came to epitomize the wily, spirited David who battled Goliath, sensationally fueled by psychedelic drugs and attitude, a real-life Randle McMurphy with a pen in his hand and The Grateful Dead in his ears.

So...now my personal reason this book matters.

When Kesey started graduate school at Stanford, studying creative writing under Wallace Stegner, he heard of a government program that paid people to take part in experiments with psychedelic drugs.

Remember that these days fell smack between the Beatniks and the hippies, a transition time in so many cultural areas—civil rights, social rights, science, music, theater, painting. History would show this hinge point of the 1950s actually served as staging area for the great collective nervous breakdown of society called The 60s. And here, at the edge of the great convulsion, our own U.S. government paid smart young men to take LSD and psilocybin and other hallucinogens to study their effects.

Those effects translated directly into the fiction of Ken Kesey. His writing phosphoresces, morphs, woozes in and out of reality, but always under such immaculate control that the impossible seems normal and beautiful and acceptable. Kesey gives us the impossible with rainbows around it, music strumming along, flowers falling from its clouds.

Think of Nurse Ratched telescoping out those arms. Think of her swelling to the size of a tractor, smelling like a burning engine—images straight from the world of psychedelic experience. When Ken Kesey unlocked the doors of perception with LSD, the gifts that tripped the light fantastic in his mind poured out onto the page, into our literature.

Don't get this review wrong. It's not saying hallucinogens are good. It's not saying hallucinogens are bad. It's not saying hallucinogens are right or wrong.

It does say thank goodness this writer, Ken Kesey, discovered psychedelic drugs. I believe that because this great writer turned on and tuned in, he created some of the most astonishing sentences and images written in the last century.