**Ken Kesey Biography **

**In 1962 American writer Ken Kesey (1935–2001) rose to prominence when Viking Press published his first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* . Kesey served as a primary link between the Beatniks of the 1950s and the counter-culture movement of the mid-to-late 1960s, and his 1964 cross-country journey with a band of followers known as the Merry Pranksters was immortalized by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* in 1968. In 1975 a film version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* received five Academy Awards, spreading Kesey's vision to a new generation.**

**Lived All-American Youth**

Over time, Kesey would be seen as one of the primary trendsetters of the counter-culture movement during the 1960s; as a child and young man, however, his dreams and accomplishments were "all-American." He was born Ken Elton Kesey on September 17, 1935, in La Junta, Colorado, the son of Fred A. and Geneve (Smith) Kesey. Beginning in 1941, the family moved several times, eventually settling in Eugene, Oregon, in 1946. Fred Kesey founded Eugene Farmers Cooperative, which marketed Darigold products. Kesey later described his family as "hard shell" Baptists, and he retained great respect for the Bible into adulthood. He and his younger brother Joe (known as Chuck) loved the outdoors, and spent their leisure time fishing for salmon and trout, and hunting for duck and deer. Kesey also enjoyed physical sports like boxing and racing, and was active in both wrestling and football at Springfield (Eugene's adjacent city) high school. His classmates voted him most likely to succeed.

Kesey's accomplishments and interests expanded far beyond the outdoors and physical sports. Kesey decorated sets for assemblies and plays, wrote skits, and won an award for best thespian. He also had a fascination with magic that extended to ventriloquism and hypnotism. Before Kesey enrolled in the University of Oregon's speech and communications program, he spent the summer in Hollywood attempting to find bit parts. He would return the following summer, and though he found little success, he relished the new experience and the people he met.

As with high school, Kesey was an active student at the University of Oregon, participating in the theater, sports, and fraternities. Academically, his major directed his energies toward acting and writing for television and radio. He won a second thespian award at college, and wrote several drama and documentary scripts for a course offered by Dean Starlin. Kesey simultaneously pursued his love of sports, eventually earning a Fred Lowe Scholarship in wrestling. "His friends in Drama could not understand why he was on the wrestling team and associated with athletes," noted Stephen L. Tanner in his book *Ken Kesey* , "and of course his friends among the athletes could not understand why he would involve himself with the theater group." On May 20, 1956, while at the university, Kesey married his childhood sweetheart, Faye Haxby.

**Experienced Dramatic Life Change**

Kesey earned a bachelor of arts degree in 1957 and returned home to Eugene, where he worked in the dairy business for a year. He had decided to become a writer, though his future remained uncertain: with his teachers' urging he had applied for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, which would allow him to continue his education, but there was also the possibility that he would be drafted. Both the answer to the fellowship and draft question arrived in the mail on the same day. Because of a shoulder injury from wrestling, Kesey was classified as 4F, disqualifying him for military service. The Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, on the other hand, was granted, allowing him to sign up for the writing program at Stanford in 1958.

At Stanford, Kesey studied under Wallace Stegner and Malcolm Cowley, and completed his first unpublished novel about college athletics. While Kesey's teachers at Stanford had a significant impact on his writing, he was also greatly influenced by his fellow students and the cultural movements surrounding the community. Kesey befriended Larry McMurty, Robert Stone, and Wendell Berry, and participated in contentious but constructive roundtable discussions with his fellow writers. He formed his closest friendship with Ken Babbs, and the two would become tight-knit co-conspirators in the coming years. Kesey was also attracted to the beat culture. He visited the nearby beat scene of North Beach, and read works by Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Clellan Holmes. In a short time, the teetotaling Kesey with a Baptist background was wearing a beard, smoking marijuana, and working on a second novel titled *Zoo* , about the North Beach beat scene. Although he was unable to find a publisher for the novel, Stanford granted him the $2,000 Saxton Prize for a section of the book.

Kesey lived at Perry Lane while at Stanford, a block-long row of cottages on the outskirts of a golf course within Menlo Park. Perry Lane had a long, bohemian tradition, and Kesey and his friends quickly became a part of that tradition. "In the Lane he was introduced to wine drinking, marijuana smoking, wife swapping, and a variety of new attitudes and practices," wrote Tanner. His most radical transformation, however, came after he enlisted in a number of experiments at the Veterans' Hospital in Menlo Park at the suggestion of a friend, Vic Lovell. There, Kesey was paid to ingest a number of psychedelic substances including LSD, an experience that led to his own experimentation with hallucinogenics in order to heighten consciousness. Later, he was hired as an aide at the hospital where he worked third shift.

***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest***

Kesey's next novel was based on his work at the Veterans' Hospital and influenced by his ongoing use of psychedelics, and served to make him a notable literary figure. Narrated by the character Chief Bromden, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* tells the story of Randle Patrick McMurphy, an exuberant, vivacious outsider who avoids a correction facility sentence by pleading insanity. He is sent to a mental hospital where his vitality and willingness to stand up to the oppressive Big Nurse Ratched re-energizes a number of inmates whom he befriends. Kesey, reportedly, even received a clandestine treatment of shock therapy to aide his descriptions of the hospital experience. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest's* metaphor, which centered on the relationships between authority figures and the oppressed, posed a larger social question for the so-called silent generation, born and reared in America's middle class suburbs: Are the people in charge (the government, the corporations) less sane than the people following orders (citizens, workers)? Kesey finished the book in the summer of 1961, and with the help of Cowley, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was published by Viking in February of 1962. The book became an immediate critical and popular success.

Kesey returned to Eugene briefly in the summer of 1961 and worked at the creamery with his brother Chuck. He started gathering material for his next book, *Sometimes a Great Notion* , and continued working on the manuscript when he returned to Perry Lane in the fall. Unlike *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* , which took ten months to write, the new book would take two years. As he worked on the project, *One Few Over the Cuckoo's Nest* continued to gain attention. In 1963–64, a Broadway version, adapted by Dale Wasserman, starred Kirk Douglas and ran for 82 performances. The book also sold well, allowing Kesey the money necessary to buy land in La Honda, California, an isolated locality in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Kesey finished *Sometimes a Great Notion* in La Honda, and Viking published it in 1964. While the book never achieved the critical and popular success of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* , many critics prefer it. "In terms of struc- ture, point of view, and theme," wrote Barry H. Leeds in his book *Ken Kesey* , "it is more ambitious, more experimental, and ultimately more successful."

**Initiated Mythic Bus Trip**

After Kesey finished *Sometimes a Great Notion* , he bought a 1939 International Harvester School Bus (called Furthur) and planned a cross-country trip to New York City that coincided with the book's publication in July of 1964. The trip, however, would be unlike any that Americans had ever witnessed, with Kesey serving as the unofficial leader of a small group of friends who had gathered at La Honda. Together, they prepared the International Harvester for the trip, installing tape players and loud speakers, painting it psychedelic colors, and stocking various psychedelics (LSD was legal at the time), and the crew left La Honda on June 14, 1964. Kesey and the "Merry Pranksters" embarked upon an expedition that served as a signpost to a rising generation, introducing the hippy prototype to American towns and cities from coast-to-coast. "It became a metaphor for the carefree (and, at times, careless), hedonistic, authority-challenging, back-to-nature, alternative-seeking qualities of the 1960s," wrote Paul Berry in the book *On the Bus* .

By the end of August of 1964, Kesey and the Pranksters had returned to La Honda. Kesey busied himself editing 45 hours of home movies taken during the trip, though he was unable to shape the footage into a theatrical release. As the unorthodox community around Kesey grew, it attracted more attention from both neighbors and law enforcement. On April 23, 1965, the police arrested Kesey and he was charged with possession of marijuana. During this time, Kesey and the Pranksters also conducted a series of "Acid-Tests," festival-like events held at various venues where LSD was introduced to a wider audience. Following a second drug arrest at the beginning of 1966, Kesey left the United States for Mexico to avoid prosecution. He remained in Mexico for the next nine months, where he, his family, and followers continued living a lifestyle similar to the one they had established in La Honda. When Kesey returned to the United States, he eventually received two light sentences totaling nine months and a $1500 fine.

**Settled on Oregon Farm**

Following his release, Kesey moved his family and members of the Merry Pranksters to a farm in Pleasant Hill, Oregon, which remained his residence for the rest of his life. In 1969 he decided to forego a trip with the Pranksters to the Woodstock Festival, and made it clear that they were unwelcome at his farm upon their return. Kesey remained relatively isolated until 1973 when he published *Kesey's Garage Sale* , a collection of commentaries and plays. In 1986 he published a second collection, *Demon Box* , followed by the children's book, *Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear* , in 1990.

Kesey released *Sailor Song* in 1992, his first novel since *Sometimes a Great Notion* 28 years earlier. Set in an Alaskan fishing village of Kunjak, *Sailor Song* takes place in the near future, following a number of ecological disasters. Critical reaction to the book was mixed. "If Kesey himself weren't a cult figure of sorts," suggested Gene Lyons in *Entertainment Weekly, "Sailor Song* would probably not have been published." *Publisher's Weekly* , however, noted that the book found Kesey's "baroque humor in top form."

The influence of Kesey's life and work, especially during the 1960s, has had a broad impact on American culture. Kesey and the Merry Pranksters' mythic bus trip and counter-culture lifestyle was immortalized in Tom Wolfe's highly popular nonfiction book, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* , in 1968. Wolfe was one of the first commentators to identify Kesey as the essential link between the beatnik culture of the 1950s and the hippy culture of the mid-to-late 1960s. In the 1990s, even the Smithsonian Institute recognized Kesey's cultural impact, and attempted (unsuccessfully) to purchase the "Furthur" bus. By the mid-1970s, when *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* had been turned into an Academy Award film, the book itself had sold over four million copies and been adapted to countless college courses. In 2006 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was transformed once again, this time into a musical.

Kesey suffered a mild stroke in 1997. Four years later, on November 10, 2001, Kesey died of liver cancer in Eugene, Oregon, at the age of 66. "All his life," wrote novelist Robert Stone in the *New Yorker* , "he was searching for the philosopher's stone that could return the world to the pure story from which it was made."



# Bibliography

*Ken Kesey Biography*. (n.d.). Retrieved March 6, 2013, from Encyclopedia of World Biography: http://www.notablebiographies.com/supp/Supplement-Ka-M/Kesey-Ken.html