

Kesey, Ken (1935-) Encyclopedia Article

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Described as a psychedelic outlaw and the "Dr. Strange" of American letters, Ken Kesey's fame as a counterculture luminary was assured with the impact of his novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). Kesey was a champion wrestler who graduated from the University of Oregon and studied creative writing at Stanford, where he discovered the bohemian life he continued to pursue. Over the years, he turned that life into the stuff of fiction, traveling across the country in a psychedelic-colored bus (now in the Smithsonian Institution) with his band of Merry Pranksters, whose adventures were chronicled by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) and by Kesey himself in *The Further Inquiry* (1990). Kesey fraternized with Timothy Leary, fled to Mexico to avoid prosecution for marijuana possession, and lived in a commune with his wife Faye (who bore him three children) and others, including Mountain Girl, who bore his fourth child, Sunshine. While embracing this unconventional lifestyle, Kesey wrote several major novels and other fiction, including two charming children's books. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), was his first novel. The story of an unlikely redeemer who triumphs over the authoritarian "Combine" run by Big Nurse Ratched, the work was partly based on Kesey's own experiences as the paid subject of drug experiments at the Veteran's Hospital in Menlo Park. It remains a comedic masterpiece and a cult classic, lent further weight by the 1975 multi-Oscar-winning film version, starring Jack Nicholson.

Further Reading:

Leeds, Barry H. *Ken Kesey*. New York, Ungar, 1981.

Porter, M. Gilbert. *The Art of Grit: Ken Kesey's Fiction*. Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1982.

Tanner, Stephen L. *Ken Kesey*. Boston, Twayne, 1983.

Wolfe, Tom. *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968.