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Ken Kesey One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

MODERN CLASSICS



KEN KESEY

ONE FLEW OVER
THE CUCKOO'S NEST

with illustrations and a preface by the author
Introduction by ROBERT FAGGEN

-1697-

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PENGUIN BOOKS

Introduction

By the end of the 1950s psychiatry had reached the height of its prestige in the American imagination. Washington, D.C.'s St. Elizabeth's Hospital, with more than seven thousand patients, became a utopian monument to the virtues of separating the mentally ill from the community for successful treatment. The 1948 film of Mary Jane Ward's novel *The Snake Pit* depicted the psychiatrist as the savior of a woman suffering in a mental institution. If the psyche could be so unruly as to produce multiple personalities, then the caring psychiatrist could uncover the demon and unify them, as Lee J. Cobb did in *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957). Psychiatrists were knights of reason and order saving damsels from the proliferating dragons of the mind.

But by 1960, the dragons had become the psychiatrists and the institutions of psychiatric care themselves. Budapest-trained psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz, in *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1960), turned on his own training and called the idea of psychiatric illness "scientifically worthless and socially harmful." In *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness* (1960), R. D. Laing argued that the schizophrenic patient was often playing at being mad, making a fool of himself and the doctor as a way of keeping dangerous people at bay. Michel Foucault's *Folie et déraison: histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (1961), later published as *Madness and*

Civilization, provided an account of the birth of the asylum and suggested that the modern concept of madness was a cultural invention of control; the mad who had once been an accepted part of society and life's folly became seen as threats, separated into asylums, and silenced. Sociologist Erving Goffman's *Asylums* described mental hospitals, particularly Washington's St. Elizabeth's, as built on a power dynamic in which patients were abused as a way not of curing mental illness but of asserting the power and authority of the psychiatric and mental health professionals. Goffman concluded that "mental patients find themselves in a special bind. To get out of the hospital, or to ease their life within it, they must show acceptance of the place accorded them, and the place accorded them is to support the occupational role of those who appear to force this bargain. . . . Mental patients can find themselves crushed by the weight of a service ideal that eases life for the rest of us."

These books looked at psychiatry and mental illness as instruments of social purification masquerading as science with little diagnostic or therapeutic value. Therapy meant learning to internalize the moral codes of a particular society, not treatment of an illness. Despite the prestige and influence of these books in intellectual circles, none of them had the widespread impact of a novel that was begun in 1960 by a twenty-four-year-old writing student who was working the graveyard shift at a mental hospital and participating in government-sponsored drug experiments. Ken Kesey was not out to write a treatise on psychiatric practice (the merits of electroshock therapy are still debated) or to right any particular political wrongs. His temperament was too anarchic and mischievous to recommend a sociological or political agenda. As he worked on the mental ward in the Menlo Park Veterans Hospital near Stanford University, he became sympathetic to the patients and began to question the boundaries that had been created between the sane and insane. He began to consider whether madness really meant the common practice conforming to a mindless system or the attempt to escape from such a system altogether. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Scanzoni, a psychiatric patient, utters what could be a gloss either on Goffman's thesis or modern definition of tragedy: "Hell of a life. Damned if you do and damned if you don't. Puts a man in one confounded *bind*, I'd say." Either conform and be released or maintain your integrity and be kept in the ward.

Kesey envisioned the-then widespread practice of “Therapeutic Community” as a way of forcing the internal soul to fit someone else’s idea of the ideal external environment. According to the practice, patients confessed their secrets to each other in an effort to make the ward “as much like . . . democratic, free neighborhoods as possible—a little world Inside that is a made-to-scale prototype of the big world Outside that you will one day be taking your place in again.” Therapeutic Community became a trick of coercion that pretended to help people by and for the democratic common good but served only the tyranny of the mediocre majority and the management of the institutions that supported the practice for its own purposes. In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, Kesey turned the mental ward into a symbol of the tricks of control afoot in postwar American society.

The son of a successful dairy farmer who had moved the family west from Colorado, Ken Kesey had been a star wrestler and a drama student at the University of Oregon. After graduation in 1956, he wrote a novel about college sports, entitled *End of Autumn*, and spent a year in Hollywood flirting with the film industry. With a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to study writing at Stanford, he and his wife, Faye, moved to Palo Alto’s bohemian community of Perry Lane. Kesey began working on a novel, entitled *Zoo*, about a country boy football player who had become part of San Francisco’s North Beach beat community. *Zoo* did not have the edge Kesey sought but it won him a prestigious Stegner Fellowship, and he was able to test himself against the advice of Wallace Stegner, Frank O’Connor, and especially Malcolm Cowley, the legendary editor who had championed both Faulkner and the work of Jack Kerouac, whose *On the Road* had been published in 1957. Already a rebel, Kesey often did not attend ordinary seminars but held court at other venues or at his home to share work and ideas with his talented peers—Gurney Norman, Robert Stone, Larry McMurtry, Ken Babbs, and Wendell Berry. One of his neighbors at Perry Lane was a graduate student in psychology named Vik Lovell, already a friend of Allen Ginsberg and Richard Alpert (later Ram Dass), who told Kesey about government experiments with psychopharmacology at the local veterans hospital. Kesey started in the experiments in the spring of 1960. At about the same time, a man showed up on Kesey’s front lawn in a Jeep with a blown transmission, talking a mile a minute, and stripping his transmission into pieces. It was Neal Cassady, the muse of the beats

and the model for Kerouac's Dean Moriarty, fresh from a two-year stint in San Quentin and not quite on the road again. He never explained to Kesey then or later what brought him there, but four years later he would be driving Kesey's bus and Merry Pranksters around the country. Wildness had been in confinement and the west awaited further exploration.

Confinement, control, and loneliness had been the words defining the dark moods of the cold war, still at its chilliest when Kesey entered Stanford. Though McCarthy himself had failed, HUAC, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, was interrogating college professors and others about their political loyalties. The specter of communism, so elusive and, therefore, so difficult to control, produced a culture of suspicion and of silences; those with something to hide and those who feared being misunderstood. Institutional conformity became the subject of the most widely acclaimed fiction as well as the popular sociology of the post-World War II era. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) depicted a tortured and invisible loneliness for a man caught between white conformity and black nonconformity. Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951) dramatized the debilitating effects of military conformity and monotony on the individual while Stanley Kubrik's film *Paths of Glory* (1957) showed the cruelty of military justice in the service's hierarchical order. The sociological literature of the 1950s had an equally great impact on defining the problems of loneliness and conformity. David Riesman's 1950 *The Lonely Crowd* proposed two major social characters in middle-class America—innerdirected and outerdirected, using metaphors of internal "gyroscopes" and "radar," respectively, metaphors that described and reinforced the reduction of human beings to types and machines. Riesman also emphasized cultural control of its members through various strategies of negative self-assessment. William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956) described the proliferation after World War II of robber barons who effectively homogenized America through planned communities. The reduction of individuals to figures in corporate taxonomy came to haunt Kesey's imagination, as it fueled the postapocalyptic and carnival visions of America in Ginsberg's *Howl!* (1956) and William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959).

The potential of altered and intoxicated states of mind to release

the individual from effects of cultural deformity had captured the imaginations of Ginsberg and Burroughs. Ken Kesey's participation in the government-sponsored experiments with psychedelics became a parable of the government's attempt and failure to use science and technology to control the world. The cold war era extolled science and even fed on the fear of loss of control engendered by its growth. The brilliant planning that had brought the atom bomb to fruition fueled the immense fear of proliferation that became the cold war. Oppenheimer, who masterminded the bomb and presided over its macabre postwar politics, soon became the target of fear and suspicion for wanting to put the brakes on the hydrogen bomb and lost his security clearance. Irony also found its way into Alfred Kinsey's attempts to quantify human sexual behavior. His findings, known as the Kinsey Report, appeared subversive to the ideals of the American family and were banned from major newspapers; religious leaders denounced the report as tainted by Communist influence. *Life* called the Kinsey Report "an assault on the family as a basic unit of society, a negation of moral law, and a celebration of licentiousness." Despite or perhaps because of its reporting that over a quarter of all white middle-class women had committed adultery by age forty and that half had had premarital sex, Kinsey's work became a bestseller. Sexuality and especially homosexuality became associated with subversion and fear of the hidden and the clandestine. But its unruliness in human life, however measurable, was beyond control.

The mid-1950s also saw elaborate experimental programs by the CIA with lysergic acid, mescaline, and other hallucinogenic drugs. The CIA had hoped to develop means for mass mind control as a weapon in the cold war. LSD was not readily available to people who wanted it but it became the talk of artists, writers, and actors in that phantom entity, the counterculture. Allen Ginsberg found his way to a government-sponsored LSD experiment at Stanford and eventually wrote a Whitmanesque tribute to its power to intensify paranoid feelings of disembodied alienation and grandiosity: "I Allen Ginsberg a separate consciousness/I who want to be God." The question for Ginsberg and for others was whether LSD produced psychosis or insight into the world around them. Kesey volunteered for the government-sponsored drug experiments at the Menlo Park hospital, where he was paid seventy-five dollars to take LSD, Ditrane, mescaline,

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