

Eli Pickering

Athenaeum, Feb 2021

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Ken Kesey, in his own words, was a man “Too young to be a beatnik, but too old to be a hippie”. A straight-laced student athlete, Kesey went to college in Oregon where he played football then wrestled competitively. He graduated in 1957 with a BA in Speech and Communications, then went to Stanford where he studied at the Creative Writing Center. Living in the bohemian community of Perry Lane, it was here for the first time that Kesey experienced psychedelics by volunteering as a paid participant in the CIA’s MKULTRA program at Menlo Park Veteran’s Hospital. The audiotapes of this experience are still available and leave little doubt what inspired Chief Bromden’s schizophrenic visions of the ward. During this same period of time, Kesey worked evenings at a psychiatric ward, where he began to sympathize with the lost dignity of the patients. These were the formative influences that lead to publishing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* in 1963.

The novel is a story about the transformation of men on the psych ward of a hospital in Oregon. It is narrated by Chief Bromden, a huge Native American who does not speak and pretends not to hear what goes on around him. Through his (not always reliable) eyes unfold the main conflict between antagonists Randal Patrick McMurphy and the Big Nurse, Miss Ratched. Their names belie the nature of their contest – McMurphy’s initials, RPM, imply his role to get the patients back on their feet, literally revved up and moving again, while Ratched is there to keep them strapped down, passive, and emasculated. The real enemy is the Combine which seeks to root out social dissidents and anyone who labors against “the system.” Miss Ratched is merely a functionary for carrying out those ends, and the ward is her field of battle.

Emasculation is a persistent theme in the book. A healthy virility is concomitant with male confidence and wellbeing, so denying it to the inmates is a particularly useful weapon for control. Miss Ratched’s first therapy session

opens with a painful discussion of Harding's sexual inadequacies, and when we later meet his slutty wife it becomes apparent, she is also using her sex appeal to denigrate him and destroy his confidence. Nurse Ratched cultivates Billy Bibbit's suffocating oedipal fixation as leverage against him. It is worth noting the one time in the entire novel that Billy does not stutter is right after being de-flowered, "Good morning, Miss Ratched...this is Candy." But in response the Big Nurse invokes his mother, and Billy's lapse back into emasculation is so profound he takes his life moments later. The nurse's starched white uniform hides her huge breasts, but they remain a point of fixation throughout the book. It is not accidental that McMurphy's final act of defiance on behalf of the loonies, the attack on Nurse Ratched, is to bare her breasts and choke her. This pseudo-rape is symbolic of bedding down the oppressor, "putting her back in her place."

Choking the Big Nurse is also poignant, as voice and voicelessness are another theme in the novel. Those with voices are in control, and those without are under the thumb of the Combine. McMurphy's attack leaves Nurse Ratched voiceless, even weeks later, weakening her influence over the ward. Billy Bibbit's stutter is another example of voicelessness, recovered for an evening before being lost forever. The most obvious example is Chief Bromden. He recalls his childhood in which agents come to his home and openly talk about using underhanded means to get his father to sell the tribe's land so it can be turned into a suburb for the Combine's automatons. Kesey's choice of Bromden as the narrator is spot on since there are few people groups in the United States that have a greater claim to being rendered voiceless than Native Americans. Bromden learned early that no one was bothering to hear him, much less actually listen to him, so fading into the background pretending not to see and hear is a mirror of the treatment he received. Ironically, despite being large, his reckoning of size is pinned more to influence, and influence is your ability to stand against the Combine. The more you stand against the machine the more the machine works to diminish you. Voicelessness is a powerful tool for reduction. Later in the novel, after the fishing trip and electroshock therapy, Bromden's growing confidence and size are symbolized by regaining his voice, "and nobody seemed to think a thing about me all of a sudden talking with people."

McMurphy's advent to the ward carries a sense of destiny. The reader is meant to believe he is running from the hard service of the work camp, and upon

arrival sees an opportunity to fleece the inmates a bit and relax. He's happy with his daily orange juice and a group of loonies over which to exercise influence. But his mild predations soon turn into a mission to redeem them. He takes on the Big Nurse (and thus the Combine) and seems to be winning battles without realizing the war is futile. Some of these episodes are funny, for example his duty to clean the toilets. "When she came to the toilet with her mirror, she gave a short gasp at what she read reflected and dropped it... [she] gave him a look that would peel paint and told him it was his job to make the latrine cleaner, not dirtier." When he realizes his confinement is mandatory rather than voluntary, and that Miss Ratched has control over his future, his initiative temporarily wilts. But Miss Ratched overplays her hand, spurring McMurphy back into action. His childish antics turn missional, and Kesey portrays him as a Christ figure. It is no accident he leads a fishing party of 12 in an effort to give them back confidence and vivacity. His punishment for beating up the orderly in defense of George is to stretch out his arms in a cross on the EST table, and declare, "Anointest my head with conductant. Do I get my crown of thorns?" Even Nurse Ratched chastises him for, "Playing with human lives – as if you thought yourself a *God!*" There are many such references, which will be interesting to unfold in the course of this evening's conversation.

McMurphy is a tragic figure. He fights against the Combine and its agent, Miss Ratched, and tries to restore men to dignity, but ultimately is rendered a vegetable through lobotomy, and mercifully put out of his misery by the Chief. What greater love is there that a man lay down his life for another? The sacrifice yields mixed results – some of the men leave under their own volition, some are simply transferred to another ward, and Billy and Scanlon lose their lives. Miss Ratched is wounded, but not gone, and the Combine carries forth. After mercifully putting McMurphy out of his misery, Chief Bromden escapes along the same path as the dog he saw through the grated window -- a symbol for McMurphy – make its run to the highway where it met its fate. The reader is left hopeful that Bromden's fate is different.