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## **Ken Kesey, Author of 'Cuckoo's Nest,' Who Defined the Psychedelic Era, Dies at 66**

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

Ken Kesey, the Pied Piper of the psychedelic era, who was best known as the author of the novel "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," died yesterday in a hospital in Eugene, Ore., said his wife, Faye. He was 66 and lived in Pleasant Hill, Ore.

The cause was complications after surgery for liver cancer late last month, said his friend and business associate, Ken Babbs.

Mr. Kesey was also well known as the hero of Tom Wolfe's nonfiction book about psychedelic drugs, "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test" (1968). An early flowering of Mr. Wolfe's innovative new-journalism style, the book somewhat mockingly compared Mr. Kesey to the leaders of the world's great religions, dispensing to his followers not spiritual balm but quantities of lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD, to enhance their search for the universe within themselves.

The book's narrative focused on a series of quests undertaken by Mr. Kesey in the 1960's. First, there was the transcontinental trip with a band of friends he named the Merry Pranksters, aboard a 1939 International Harvester bus called Further (it was painted as "Furthur" on the bus). It was wired for sound and painted riotously in Day-Glo colors. Neal Cassady, the Dean Moriarty of Jack Kerouac's "On the Road," was recruited to drive. The journey, which took the Pranksters from La Honda, Calif., to New York City and back, was timed to coincide with the 1964 New York World's Fair. Its purposes were to film and tape an extended movie, to experience roadway America while high on acid and to practice "tootling the multitudes," as Mr. Wolfe put it, referring to the way a Prankster would stand with a flute on the bus's roof and play sounds to imitate people's various reactions to the bus.

"The sense of communication in this country has damn near atrophied," Mr. Kesey told an interviewer from Publishers Weekly after the bus arrived in New York City. "But we found as we went along it got easier to make contact with people. If people could just understand it is possible to be different without being a threat."

Then, back in California, there were the so-called Acid Tests that Mr. Kesey organized -- parties with music and strobe lights where he and his friends served LSD-laced Kool-Aid to members of

the public and challenged them to avoid "freaking out," as Mr. Wolfe put it. They were interrupted by Mr. Kesey's flight to Mexico in January 1966 to avoid going on trial on charges of possession of marijuana. Finally, after he returned to the United States in October and was arrested again and waiting to stand trial, there was the final Acid Test, the graduation ceremony ostensibly designed to persuade people to go beyond drugs and achieve a mind-altered state without LSD.

This was the public Ken Kesey, the magnetic leader who built a bridge from beatniks on the road to hippies in Haight-Ashbury; who brewed the cultural mix that fermented everything from psychedelic art to acid-rock groups like the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane to the Trips Festival dance concerts in the Fillmore auditorium in San Francisco; and who, in the process of his pilgrimage, blew an entire generation's mind.

Yet Mr. Wolfe also narrated the adventures of a more private Ken Kesey, one who in addition to his quests took the inner trips that gave him his best fiction. It is true that by 1959, when he had his first experience with drugs, he had already produced a novel, "End of Autumn," about college athletics, although it would never be published. But after he volunteered at a hospital to be a paid subject of experiments with little-known psychomimetic drugs -- drugs that bring on temporary states resembling psychosis -- his imagination underwent a startling change.

To earn extra money and to work on a novel called "Zoo," about the beatniks of the North Beach community in San Francisco, Mr. Kesey also took a job as a night attendant on the psychiatric ward of the hospital. Watching the patients there convinced him that they were locked into a system that was the very opposite of therapeutic, and it provided the raw material for "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." One night on the ward, high on peyote, he suddenly envisioned what Mr. Wolfe described as "a full-blown Indian -- Chief Broom -- the solution, the whole mothering key, to the novel."

As Mr. Kesey explained, his discovery of Chief Broom, despite not knowing anything about American Indians, gave him a character from whose point of view he could depict a schizophrenic state of mind and at the same time describe objectively the battle of wills between two other key characters, the new inmate Randle Patrick McMurphy, who undertook to fight the system, and the tyrannical Big Nurse, Miss Ratched, who ended up lobotomizing McMurphy. Chief Broom's unstable mental state and Mr. Kesey's imagining of it, presumably with the help of hallucinogenic drugs, also allowed the author to elevate the hospital into what he saw as a metaphor of repressive America, which Chief Broom called the Combine.

Mr. Kesey would "write like mad under the drugs," as Mr. Wolfe put it, and then cut what he saw was "junk" after he came down.

"Cuckoo's Nest" was published by Viking Press in early 1962 to enthusiastic reviews. Time magazine call it "a roar of protest against middlebrow society's Rules and the invisible Rulers who enforce them." Stage and screen rights were acquired by the actor Kirk Douglas, who the following year returned to Broadway after a long absence to play McMurphy in an adaptation by Dale

Wasserman that ran for 82 performances at the Cort Theater during the 1963-64 season. The play was revived professionally in slightly different form in 1970, with William Devane playing the part of McMurphy, and again in 2001, with Gary Sinise in the part.

Even more successful was the film version, which was released in 1975 and the following year won five Oscars, for best picture; best director, Milos Forman; best actor, Jack Nicholson as McMurphy; best actress, Louise Fletcher as Nurse Ratched; and best screen adaptation, Lawrence Hauben and Bo Goldman.

But Mr. Kesey was not happy with the production. He disapproved of the script, thought Mr. Nicholson wrong for the part of McMurphy and believed that the producers, Michael Douglas and Saul Zaentz, had not lived up to the handshake deal he insisted he had made with them. He sued them for 5 percent of the movie's gross and \$800,000 in punitive damages and eventually agreed on a settlement. But he still refused to watch the film.

Although Mr. Kesey wrote several more books during his life, "Cuckoo's Nest" remained the high point of his career. Reviewing the film version in *The New Yorker*, Pauline Kael wrote that "the novel preceded the university turmoil, Vietnam, drugs, the counterculture." She continued, "Yet it contained the prophetic essence of that whole period of revolutionary politics going psychedelic."

"Much of what it said," she concluded, "has entered the consciousness of many -- possibly most -- Americans."

"Sometimes a Great Notion" followed in 1964. It was a longer and more ambitious novel about an Oregon logging family and, in the strife between two brothers, the conflict between West Coast individualism and East Coast intellectualism. Written under the influence of both drugs and Mr. Kesey's exposure to modern literature -- "an 'Absalom, Absalom!' set in Oregon," one critic called it -- the novel received mixed reviews, some impressed by its energy and others annoyed by its wordiness. In 1971, a film version appeared, directed by Paul Newman and starring Mr. Newman, Henry Fonda and Lee Remick. It left so little an impression that when it was released for television, its title was changed to "Never Give an Inch."

Initially Mr. Kesey acted undaunted by the negative reaction to the novel's appearance, which was timed for the arrival of the Pranksters in New York. He told his bus mates that writing was an old-fashioned and artificial form, and that they were transcending it with their experiments in metaconsciousness. A decade later, however, he told an interviewer, "The thing about writers is that they never seem to get any better than their first work," and, "This bothers me a lot." He added: "You look back and their last work is no improvement on their first. I feel I have an obligation to improve, and I worry about that."

Yet he never did surpass his first two books. During the remainder of his life, he published two more novels, "Sailor Song" (1992), about civilization contending with nature in Alaska, and "Last Go Round: A Dime Western" (1994), an account of a famous Oregon rodeo written in the form of

pulp fiction, with research done by his friend and fellow Prankster, Mr. Babbs. He also published three nonfiction works, "Kesey's Garage Sale" (1973), a miscellany of essays by himself and others; "Demon Box" (1986), a mix of essays and stories; and "The Further Inquiry" (1990), his own history of the Prankster bus trip, as well as two children's books, "Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear" (1990), which he often performed to music, and "The Sea Lion: A Story of the Sea Cliff People" (1991).

Ken Elton Kesey was born on Sept. 17, 1935, in La Junta, Colo., the older of two sons born to the dairy farmers Fred A. and Geneva Smith Kesey. Early in his life, the family migrated to Springfield, Ore., where he underwent a rugged upbringing. Although following the move his father founded a prosperous marketing cooperative for dairy farmers, the Eugene Farmers Cooperative, and established the family in a comfortable suburban setting, Mr. Kesey and his brother were taught early to hunt, fish and swim, as well as to box, wrestle and shoot the rapids of the local rivers on inner-tube rafts.

These all-American he-man lessons took, at least up to a point. Mr. Kesey developed great physical power; Mr. Wolfe writes that "he had an Oregon country drawl and too many muscles and calluses on his hands." He became a star football player and wrestler in high school and was voted "most likely to succeed" in the graduating class of 1953. At the University of Oregon, where he devoted himself to sports and fraternities, he acted in college plays and he won the Fred Lowe Scholarship, awarded to the outstanding wrestler in the Northwest. In May 1956, he married Norma Faye Haxby, his high school sweetheart. He even considered trying to become a movie star, moving to Los Angeles after graduation and playing bit parts in several films.

But his imagination exerted a counterattraction. After graduating from Oregon in 1957 and winning scholarships to Stanford University's graduate writing program, he moved to Perry Lane, the bohemian section of Palo Alto.

There he met Vic Lovell, a graduate student in psychology who told him about the drug experiments at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Menlo Park that were paying \$75 a session to volunteer subjects. His journey to the interior began.

After the bus trip, the Acid Tests, and a six-month sentence on a work farm in 1967 for drug possession, he moved back to his father's farm in Pleasant Hill.

Shunning a second Prankster bus trip in 1969, its destination this time the Woodstock rock festival in the New York countryside, he settled down with his wife to raise their children -- Shannon, Zane, Jed and Sunshine -- work the farm, involve himself in community activities and write. In later years he insisted that he had always been a family man with strong ties to the community.

Over the next three decades, he raised cattle and sheep, and grew blueberries. He joined school boards; helped out several local businesses; ran a Web site, Intrepid Trips; edited a magazine, Spit in the Ocean, which he founded in 1974; and worked on completing the films and tapes of the bus

trip. He coached wrestling at several local schools and taught a graduate writing seminar at the University of Oregon, in which he collaborated with 13 students on "Caverns," a mystery published in 1990 under the pen name O. U. Levon. He practiced his lifelong hobby of magic, developing a trick in which he made a rabbit disappear. He occasionally visited the original Prankster bus, which he kept hidden in the woods on his farm.

As for drugs, Mr. Kesey's relationship with them was revealed in an interview last April in The Times Union of Albany. Two weeks earlier, he told the interviewer, Doug Blackburn, he and a few close friends had gone on their annual Easter Sunday hike up Mount Pisgah, near his home. For the first time in more than three decades, he had decided to skip LSD for the event. Having recently taken medication for both diabetes and hepatitis C, he said that an additional substance was unnecessary.

"I felt like I was high enough just walking up the hill with nothing but adrenaline," he said. "Besides, I figured I ought to try making the hike at least once without psychedelics. The past few years that's been the about the only time I've taken acid, and even then not much. Just enough to make the leaves dapple."

He is survived by his wife; his mother; his brother, Joe, known as Chuck; his two daughters, Shannon and Sunshine; a son, Zane (his other son, Jed, died in a car accident in 1984); and three grandchildren.

Photos: Ken Kesey, center, presided at the Merry Pranksters' Acid Graduation ceremony in 1968, urging a mind-altered state without drugs. (Ted Streshinsky/Pix); Mr. Kesey, before he was sentenced in 1966 to six months in jail in Redwood City, Calif., for narcotics possession. (Associated Press)