

A Defense of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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IN the judgment of one recent patron of the Bellevue Public Schools, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is not a decent book for students to read or teachers to teach. While literary critics might be able to dismiss such pronouncements as simply untutored, public school people have to deal with them frequently and take them seriously, in the interest of preserving their right of access to literature and the student's right to read. It is in this context that I offer a defense of Kesey's novel against the charge that it is an improper and even evil book, fit only "to be burned."

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is not obscene, racist, or immoral, although it does contain language and scenes which by common taste would be so considered. Like all great literature, the book attempts to give an accurate picture of some part of the human condition, which is less than perfect. Kesey's book is set in a mental hospital; the language, attitudes, and habits of the inmates are typical of disturbed men whose already distorted world is being further systematically dehuman-

ized by the ward nurse. The story is told in the first person through the eyes of an Indian whose health is gradually restored to him and to others through interaction with the robust new inmate McMurphy, a picaresque figure who is transformed into a tragic hero as he struggles to help the inmates regain control of their lives. To charge that the book is obscene, racist, or immoral because it gives a realistic picture of the world of the insane is to demonstrate a lack of the minimum competency in understanding literature we expect of high school students. The charge also ignores the extent to which this novel does conform to the standards outlined in the guidelines for selection of instructional materials in the Bellevue schools.

Our students are taught that to understand the general meaning of a book, the reader has to take all the details into consideration. The theme emerges from a complex combination of scenes, characters, and action, often in conflict and often contradictory. To judge a book simply on a few passages which contain unconventional language or fantasies is

missing the point. In the case of the Indian narrator, we are seeing and hearing at times the hallucinations typical of schizophrenia. Chief Bromden has been systematically ignored and abused all his life to the point of madness. It is no wonder that his consciousness is filled with horrors, obscene and otherwise. What Kesey is telling us, beyond giving us a realistic idea of the actual language of the asylum, is that what is being done to these people is an obscenity. When McMurphy comes upon the scene, it is as if his outrageous speech and action are the only possible answer to the vicious way in which the men's privacy and smallest efforts of will are being pried into and exploited and diminished. His profanity is a verbal manifestation of the indecencies they suffer, the only appropriate response to it, a foil which helps us to see its actual nature, and a means by which the scene is transformed into a world in which some tenderness and love are possible. Big Nurse speaks properly but does unspeakable things. McMurphy's speech is outrageous; he fights the profane with the super profane and moves beyond profanity to help the men create a new respect for themselves. He restores Harding's ability to face reality, gives Billy a sense of his manhood, and convinces Chief Bromden that he is indeed his actual six foot six, not a withered deaf mute.

If the reader is really sensitive to the specific language of the book, he will see how Kesey uses its subtle changes to signal changes in the Chief's state of mind. The fogged-in scenes are characterized by confusion and some description of the grossness of the asylum's inmates and black help. As Chief Bromden recovers his powers of perception, including his sad past and the scenes of white racism and war which has produced his state of alienation, the sentence structure and word choice change markedly. So also the emphasis on McMurphy's outward

grossness shifts in the Chief's eyes to an apprehension of what he is suffering inwardly, to his deeds of kindness to the men, his complicated and puzzling deals, and his final decision to protect another man though he knows it means his doom. The Chief sees beyond McMurphy's outward geniality to the marks of anguish on his secret face.

TO understand the book, then, is to experience through this unique point of view the emergence of at least three themes which the book has in common with other major works of literature. First, there is the idea that we must look beyond appearances to judge reality. Just as the reader has to look beyond the typically racist language of the inmates to find in the book as a whole a document of witness against the dehumanizing, sick effects of racism in our society, so Bromden has to look beyond the perception of the world which limits his concept of self. When the perception changes, he begins to see the reality of his growth. Chief Bromden is sick from racism and is made whole again when he learns to laugh in spite of it and to realize his identity as an American Indian. Second, there is the idea that fools and madmen have wisdom. Writers from Shakespeare to Kesey have suggested that the world is sometimes so out of joint that it can only be seen from some perspective so different that it cuts through illusion to truth. Lear and Hamlet both experience a kind of madness for this reason, madness in which it might be added, they too abandon propriety of speech. (Polite language has hardly ever been associated with madness in literature.) And through this madness, in Kesey's book, the third theme emerges: the idea that the bumbling fool may be transformed into a worker of good deeds. McMurphy assumes almost the stature of the typical quest hero at his death. The circumstances of his life have required him to

rise above the "lowness" of his original station to become a deliverer, to give up his life for his friend. The idea is that each human soul is worthy, and it is the genius of heroism to work transforming deeds which discover the worthiness both in themselves and in other humble men.

The book, then, works through the eyes and action of madmen to go from a vision of the world where all things are profane to a vision of the world where all human things are potentially sacred. Certainly teaching the book compels a discussion of obscenity, for it is impossible to understand it fully without realizing that what people do to each other in cruelty is the true obscenity, not shadow words. The book does not teach profanity; it teaches that the world of the insane is full of profanity. It does not teach racism; it clearly connects racism with cruelty and insanity. It does not teach immorality; it suggests that the fantasies of an unbalanced person are sensitive to a disruption of ordinary morality.

Frankly, the charge that the book teaches immorality puzzles me a little. Certainly Big Nurse's cruel manipulation of the men is immoral, but the young are hardly likely to identify with her and want to emulate her. Are Chief Bromden's fantasies immoral? Or are we to assume that because McMurphy is by common standards immoral that students are going out to copy him wholesale? Probably not any more than they would be inclined to copy Hamlet the murderer, Macbeth the assassin, or Oedipus the mother-lover, attractive though these tragic figures are. McMurphy, after, winds up with a prefrontal lobotomy, experiencing a psychic death as final as the physical death his friend Bromden later provides.

THE policies of the Bellevue Public Schools provide a set of guidelines

for text selection. I have tried to show how the use of this book would "enrich and support the curriculum" in English and "help the pupil improve his power of discrimination and his quality of choices" by showing that it is a piece of literature rich in design and details, and that its thematic material stands well within the tradition of great literature. As such, it clearly relates to our expectation that the student achieve minimum competency in dealing with the structure and texture of a book.

Second, within the context of that program for increasing competency in understanding literature, I have also shown how the book can be considered appropriate. More essentially, because here is where the charges against the book seem to lie, I have established a distinction through my reading of the book between the common taste which might object to the use of a four-letter word in the book, and what I consider "good taste," which will place that word in context and see its relationship to the book as a whole. I think I have established a clear sense of the difference between this book and a dirty joke. It does not comment on human experience to leave the reader with a guilty snicker of complicity in the disregard of human frailty for the sake of a cheap sensation. It deals with human weakness, eccentricity, and suffering to increase the reader's respect for the transforming power of love, which teaches us to overcome weakness, to tolerate eccentricity, and to endure suffering.

I think the book admirably fulfills the requirements of the fourth principle of the guidelines, that it "contribute to the pupil's growing understandings and appreciations of his culture and other cultures so that he can live compassionately and reasonably with his fellow men." Most students know very little about either the world of the mentally ill or the alienated condition of the American In-

dian. The detail of the book richly provides this information. The weaving of these details into this particular story moves the reader to deep sympathy with the Indian and much compassion for the inmates of his asylum. I think it is a profoundly humanizing book.

Fourth, and last, but not least, I would like to consider the student's freedom to read, "an inherent right and a necessity in a democratic society." I think our schools and our curriculum have to be defined vigorously against the naive reader who reacts out of a Victorian sense of propriety and out of vague fears of the magic power of the written word to want to condemn everything in literature which seems to him unconventional or strange. Attitudes such as these toward literature are a real danger to the student, in that if we yield to them we simultaneously seek to reduce the student's right to entertain ideas and teach the validity of these attitudes in the degree to which we acknowledge they have any power. We teach the student to fear ideas, or we teach the student that we fear ideas, any time we kill a book, which is, after all, as Milton told us, "The lifeblood of a master spirit."

KESEY is a valid part of the world of American literature. His books, if not available in the library at our high school, would easily be found in any bookstore or book rack. The attempt to "protect" the students from his view of the world is in the first place futile: they like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and will read it anyway. Second, such an attempt would be stupid. Why neglect the opportunity to provide a framework of reason in which such an admittedly difficult book can be read, discussed, and understood—unless we want to garner the doubtful honors attributable to playing the role of Big Nurse of education, and further alienate

the young people we are attempting to communicate with?

I conclude with the description of one remarkable scene in Kesey's book: Patients are allowed to vote in weekly group meetings about policies which concern their welfare and entertainment. McMurphy has requested that though the regular TV watching time is in the evening, patients be allowed access to the TV during the daytime while the World Series is being played. Big Nurse does not like this assertion of individual will which will upset the daily routine, so she opposes McMurphy and then overrules the patients' affirmative vote on a technicality. In spite of her ruling McMurphy puts down his tasks and pulls his chair in front of the TV as the game broadcast begins. It is a battle of wills, and the patients watch to see who will win. Big Nurse pulls the great lever and cuts off the power. But McMurphy remains solidly there, in front of the TV, watching the empty screen. One by one the others join him, and soon they're all sitting there, "watching the gray screen just like we could see the baseball game clear as day," and Big Nurse is "ranting and screaming" behind them.

"If somebody'd of come in and took a look, men watching a blank TV, a fifty-year-old-woman hollering and squealing at the back of their heads about discipline and order and recriminations, they'd of thought the whole bunch was crazy as loons."

It is unfortunate that the patron who has lodged the objection to this book was so distracted by its alleged obscenity, racism, and immorality that he couldn't appreciate this scene. It has something to say about the need for authority to establish itself through reasonable, not arbitrary action. It also illustrates the utter futility of ever trying to get between a human being and anything he holds as dear as baseball.