



Ken Kesey's Last Interview

By Carla Perry

Ken Kesey, cultural and literary icon, was the author of the novels *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*, as well as children's books, screenplays, articles, and several other novels. He was born September 17, 1935, and grew up in Springfield, Oregon. He graduated from the University of Oregon with a degree in speech and communications and received a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship to enroll in the creative writing program at Stanford. During his college years, he volunteered at a Veterans Administration hospital in an experimental program involving mind-altering drugs.

Kesey's homegrown parties evolved into 1960s San Francisco Day-Glo "happenings" and "acid tests" with light shows, body painting, exotic costumes, strobe lights, eastern mysticism, sexual mayhem, and eventually a hookup with Jerry Garcia's band the Grateful Dead. In the summer of 1964, Kesey purchased a 1939 school bus, painted it psychedelic colors, and took the Merry Prankster crew on a road trip to New York. Neal Cassady (made famous as Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*) was the driver.

In recent decades, Kesey wrote, directed and performed plays, including *Where's Merlin?* (which toured England for the 1999 solar eclipse) and *Twister: A Musical Catastrophe* for the Millennium's End. Kesey was awarded the CES Wood Retrospective Award honoring his lifetime achievements at the Oregon Book Awards ceremony in November 1999.

In January 2000, I was in Pleasant Hill, Oregon, at Kesey's office. Kesey had agreed to do a "thing" at the Nye Beach Writers' Series in Newport, on the Oregon coast. As coordinator of the series, I was given the enviable task of obtaining updated personal information.

I asked Kesey questions about his philosophy of benevolence, attention, and love. I asked him about writing as drama, novels as performance, books as money, and videos of the future.

Carla Perry: I noticed the concept of "benevolence" when others have written about you, such as Tom Wolfe in *The Electric*

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Kool-Aid Acid Test. You could have been the top of the power structure, the head of it all, the guru. Instead, when you initiated all the hoopla, created the psychedelic "happenings," the acid test musical extravaganzas, the on-the-road escapades, you would step back to let others flow with the scene. You seemed to love the crowds, but you would inconspicuously cruise, keeping your eyes open, keeping things on track. When there was trouble, you were the peacemaker. You would step in and round up everyone else to pay attention to the trouble, which would solve the problem. When a person was having a bad moment on a drug trip, attention would be focused on that person. The attention would translate to love as it was received, and the person would eventually be all right.

Ken Kesey: There's a line in the I Ching that says, "The best way to fight evil is to make energetic progress in the good." I've pretty much lived by that. The idea was to go against something wrong by getting involved with it. We used to say we were Christ-driven, Jesus-driven, and would deliberately give someone all our attention and then just lay back and imagine what would Christ do in these kinds of circumstances. It's harder now to do than when we first started doing this thirty years ago because there are more things that it is easy to get angry at.

CP: Would you mind talking about the death penalty, since you brought that up in an earlier talk?

KK: Most of the people in favor of the death penalty consider themselves Christians. People in general. A lot of them go to church, and that's where they get their religious energy. And the death penalty goes counter to their deepest beliefs. Anybody who has followed the death penalty, they know it doesn't help. It doesn't help in fighting crime. There are many things that could be done that would be a whole lot more beneficial. And everybody pretty much knows that. But when it comes down to a battle, the right wing is so ready to battle and the left wing is so ready to give in that you're stalemated there. There's always more solutions than people think.

When we were bombing Bosnia, it was as though there were only two choices. We either bombed them or we didn't. If you were creative, my idea is, you could have gone to one of those military camps with a fire-fighting airplane that carries liquids, fill it full of urine, and drop it on Belgrade. It would have just had a hell of an effect. It wouldn't hurt anybody, but it would put them down a set. Because we had pissed on them. That kind of creativity is hard to come up with in the heat of a battle. For us to be warriors now it takes a whole lot more creativity than it used to.

CP: Let's talk about the flip side. Let's talk about your idea of benevolence for a minute. How did you get this idea? Does it tie in with being ignored early in life, like the character of Chief Broom in Cuckoo's Nest? Were you born believing in the goodness of people?

KK: I got the idea of believing in the goodness of people because I come from a really good family. The whole group of us did.

Strong, middle-class families. We had some very good teachers in high school and college. And after school, we had teachers like Neal Cassady and Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs. So we were well schooled. As time goes by, I feel more and more gratitude to those people. I'm reading the Kerouac letters now, the second bunch, from 1957 through 1969. They get pretty depressing because he's a drunk and beginning to get a little bitter and feels put-upon by all these people and you kind of wish you could go back in time and put your arm around him and give him a big hug and say, "Hey, you were more beneficial than you'll ever know." That whole group of people was there to hand the fire on to us and we're handing it on to our kids and our grandkids as best we can.

Ginsberg was the best at doing this, at being benevolent. Always sweet. "Happy little Allen," Cassady used to call him.

Then there's another thing. We've had spiritual help. You look back at stuff and you think, "Boy, that's a far-out coincidence." But it must have been right, because there it is. The first time I was over there at the Newport Aquarium, this woman came up and said, "Hi, do you remember me?" She was sixty-something. I said, "Kind of." She says, "Lois Learned. You know, Nurse Ratched." I said, "Oh my God!"

CP: The real woman?

KK: The real woman was there, and she is a volunteer. She helps at the aquarium. I was absolutely dumbfounded. I was completely tongue-tied. She said, "Oh no, don't worry about it. You did the nursing profession a great service. Nobody wants to be like that." You talk about synchronicity. Going there to the Newport Aquarium and running into Big Nurse. You can't help but think, Oh boy, there's some little leprechauns in heaven working this out right now!

Coincidence is an element of mystery because it happens so many times. It's best if you just quit arguing with it. It's more than serendipity. It's more than coincidence. There's a sense of intelligence to it. This isn't just random magic, this is magic for our benefit. Things are arranged with a red line drawn under it saying "Pay Attention To This."

CP: I believe in magic, in elves, in spirits. I believe in the synchronicity of life. If we're doing things with a true heart and if we're on our right path, then the cogs fit. I believe in your concept of the "creative warrior." And I'm interested in your concept of paying attention because it seems to me that if we don't pay attention we have a direct route to discord. It seems as though it's the children who fall apart when their parents don't pay attention. Children don't do well in school if teachers don't pay attention. We've stopped paying attention to children.

KK: Everybody is still paying attention. The kids are paying attention. But they're paying attention to the wrong thing. They're paying attention to the loudest noise. If you're a kid of three or four and your parents are paying attention to television all the time, and you get in front of the television just when there's a gun

battle going on, the parents will say, "Get out of the way!" The kid is going to say, "Look, what do I have to do to get attention?" And what he does is he goes out and gets a gun, and that's the quickest way in the world to get people's attention. I think it's going to be a good long while before we get over television and the gun shows. The Wild West attitude. Let's kill all the buffalo because we're white. But we have to get over that attitude or we won't survive as a nation. We'll tear each other to pieces.

CP: You've been doing it on a very personal level though, always.

KK: That's where your heart is.

CP: You've said you were more interested in helping warriors know more about their task than you were interested in trying to titillate with stories. And you said that you've got to write a novel every so often to make people pay attention to the other stuff you're doing. How do you see your role as a writer?

KK: I think a writer owes the reader a new way of telling a story, using a technique that doesn't normally show up in a novel. What I'm interested in is mystery itself. Mystery in life, in literature. Not the solution. As soon as you get the solution, it's like, well, we've done that, what are we going to do next? If each mystery leads you to another mystery, that becomes exciting and promotes magic in your mind.

CP: How does this concept of "mystery" relate to literary craft?

KK: I've never liked the mystery as a form. Mystery novels or mystery movies. Because the whole action goes toward trying to solve the mystery. I've always objected to them teaching Cuckoo's Nest, because it's an easy book. It doesn't need any teaching. Sometimes a Great Notion needs a whole lot more teaching. There's more stuff going on. The best part of that book was, as I was writing it, I knew I was dealing with a new form, like plowing new ground. When you break new ground with your plow, up from the ground wells this moist spontaneous feeling of Oh! This is new ground! That moment itself offers you energy, even if the writing is not any good. I'm a terrible plower, but I do like the smell of breaking new ground.

CP: The literature scene has changed from what it was back in the sixties because of computers, because of Web pages, because people are supposedly not reading as many books. What is your impression?

KK: I think people are reading a lot of books. These big places, like Borders, they say there's more people reading than ever before. What they're reading is another matter. Teachers may be teaching kids how to read, but they're not teaching them what to read. Not many kids get the guidance to read Paradise Lost, for instance. That book is out there and there's nothing else like it. And no kid is ever going to read it unless they're forced to. That's the job of the English teachers: to say, "Read this!"

CP: You've said it's important for writers to get out there on the

road and read their stuff to an audience. How does performance fit into this?

KK: Performance is what I'm paying attention to right now. My work in the last five years or so has been centered around performance. I can do the kids' books now by heart; I don't have to hold the book and read. When we went to England we had this little play called *Where's Merlin?* It's a simple little thing. The main message says, you can take a bunch of people with no talent and put them all on the stage and kind of survive. Because the audience is then brought into it. The performances end up with the audience onstage. Dancing and singing. That's the gear we want to promote.

Here's an example of performance and synchronicity. When we were in England, I learned what a "Thing" was. I'd been reading about it before we got over there, like in *Prince Valiant*, you talk about the All Thing. And the word Thing, apparently, is a Finnish word to start with. And it means the center of something. And while we were there in Cornwall, we went to visit one of these Things, which is a big circle of rocks with a big rock right in the middle.

While we were there, after going to this ceremony in which King Arthur presided and the archbishop of the Druids knighted us, we got back to the motel and a guy came out to look at the bus. A young guy, maybe twenty-five or twenty-eight. He asked about the bus and we talked to him a little bit and he said, "Oh, I love my circle!" We said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I'll show you," and he began to flick through the pictures in his little digital camera. And the pictures were of him and two of his friends getting a truck with a great big rock in it, a big stone, and dragging it out into a pasture and sitting it upright in the middle of this pasture during the total eclipse of the sun. The stone weighed ten tons.

As I looked at those pictures all I could think of was, Here's a very ancient thing going on. Cornishmen dragging a rock and sitting it somewhere. And we're seeing it through a digital camera. So, we're seeing the Thing now with one of the most recent of inventions, and we're seeing probably the most ancient of rituals through it. And that's wonderful.

I see performance as a Thing. Performance is a form of publication. Performance is when you go public. And publication of literature is the point. When we go over on the coast to Newport in April to do a Thing in front of the public, that's publication. When we're doing e-mail on our Web site, that's publication.

CP: How does the Internet fit into this?

KK: A lot of writers think they have to be published by New York, just like a lot of people who make movies think they have to go to L.A. But all of that is changing. Very fast, with e-mail. With our ability to contact people outside the old New York literary establishment. Or the L.A. movie establishment. And they are a

little afraid of it.

CP: They're afraid of what?

KK: They're afraid of us. The Internet is the new campfire we have to gather an audience around. To really get an audience, to keep the reader's attention on the Web site, you've got to have a different kind of prose. You can't meander around. In fact, when we go to the Web site, if it's more than one page, I usually delete it. This form is so new, and so exciting, that to not take literature onto the Internet is deliberately avoiding something. It's possible right now for me to write a novel and put little pieces up on the Internet day by day. So, it would be a page, maybe four pages. I would key it in. You'd get up in the morning, and there it would be.

It means I just send the message electronically, and the consumer does his own printing, on the equipment he has. We have that capability right now. Everywhere. What that means is I'm not having to move that paper back and forth across the United States. Paper is heavy. Anybody who works with books knows that books are heavy as hell.

We have the capability right here to contact anybody in the world. The Internet will make the business of books so much more competitive. What I'm speaking is blasphemy in New York. We've got the talent, we've got the energy, we just haven't quite figured out how to hook that together with money. Blasphemers, unfortunately, don't get any money.

CP: Haven't you made a fortune from your books?

KK: Quite the opposite. I've never had a best-seller. That's one of those things that's a mystery to me. We're as nonprofit as you can get. I would love to be a profit-making organization. It's not out of benevolence that we are poor. Gurdjieff said that enlightened people aren't meant to be poor. Our poorness is out of ineptitude. People ask us, "Why did you do it that way?" We always say, "We're cyber-hicks! We're inept!"

An old lawyer friend called up and said that he'd seen they were having a new opening for the play Cuckoo's Nest in Paris and that I should be prepared to have a lot of money coming in. But we don't get any money from that. I don't get a penny from that.

CP: How can that be? Who gets that money?

KK: When I was twenty-five or so, I signed this thing for twenty grand and it went to Kirk Douglas and this guy, Wasserman, who gets money from that. It's one of those things that if you dwelt on it, you'd have to bite your tongue.

CP: Ok. Then let's not go there.

KK: Right. Let's not go there.

CP: Why don't you just ask for Money From Unexpected Sources?

I found that worked for me.

KK: How did you do that?

CP: I wrote those words down on a piece of paper. I was already working as hard as I could; I didn't need more work, I needed more money. The usual sources weren't doing the trick. So I wrote down, "I need money from unexpected sources. Substantial money. Enough money to make a difference."

KK: And money started coming in?

CP: Yes. After a lifetime of scraping by. It came right away. Within a month.

KK: Maybe we should put that up on the Web site.

CP: So, Ken, what are you writing now?

KK: I've been working for some time on what I call the Jail Journal. The full title is Cut the Motherfuckers Loose but Motherfuckers is spelled "M" with asterisks all the way to "s" so people understand it. Cut the M* * * * * s Loose. The book is about my stay in jail for six months. I've got stuff from 1954 and on—extensive journals—but I don't know what to do with them now. I think eventually I'll get them over to the University of Oregon. Next door to this office is where all the archives are. All the tapes, all the film. Piles and piles and piles of stuff, this detritus of rotting minds.

CP: Do you have a thought to leave us with?

KK: My dad told me a great thing: You never outgrow your need for compliments. And every writer needs to be stroked a little bit. It keeps us writing.

Ken Kesey died after cancer surgery on November 10, 2001, but his Web site lives on at www.intrepidtrips.com.

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