



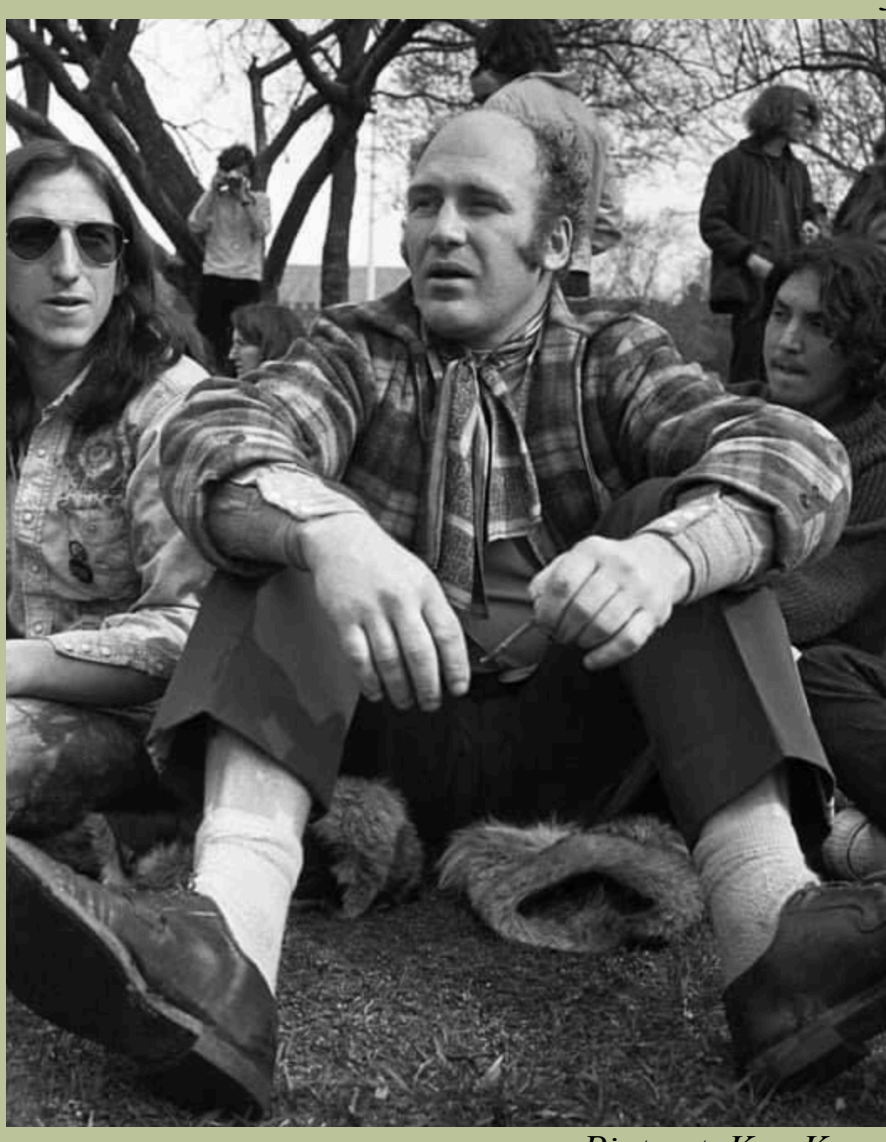
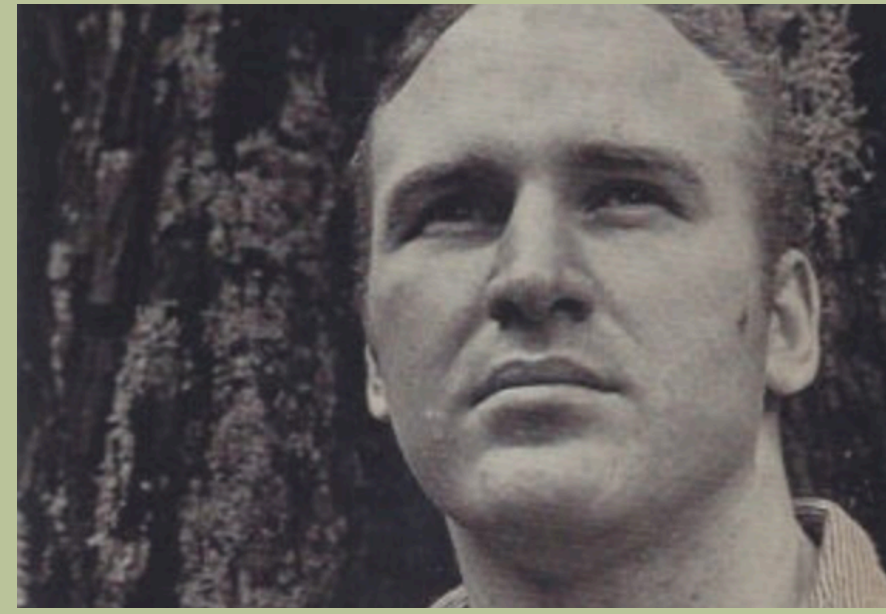
# The Influence of Being Under the Influence Psychedelic Drugs and Their Impact on Kesey's Personal Life and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*



Bayley Burke, Carmen Reddick, Xitlali Torres, Micah Woods, Dr. Rust  
University of Oregon, Robert D. Clark Honors College

## Introduction

Ken Kesey's iconic 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* exemplifies the pivotal shifts in American life, culture, and ideology that characterize the 1960's. *Cuckoo's Nest* paralleled the emergence of counterculture movements that challenged the oppressive status-quo. Ken Kesey and other supporters of psychedelics furthered this counterculture narrative by advocating for psychedelic drugs as a method of raising consciousness, empowering individuals to challenge the falsity of mainstream culture. Many consider Kesey the father of the 60's psychedelic revolution, citing his experimentation with drugs with the Merry Pranksters.



Pinterest, Ken Kesey

## Research Question

Drug use was a huge part of Kesey's life and identity before and during his writing of *Cuckoo's Nest*. Considering the central role of drugs in Kesey's life, it is evident drugs influenced his writing as well. Examination of his personal correspondences quickly show drugs' power in generating ideas and even full stories. How did Ken Kesey exemplify the counterculture of the 60's with his attitude towards drugs, and how did drugs influence his writing of *Cuckoo's Nest*?

## Methods

The beginnings of this project are rooted in the investigation of archival materials donated by Ken Kesey and his family. Using the Special Collections division of the University of Oregon's Knight Library, special focus was given to letters by Ken Kesey to Ken Babbs, where Kesey's extensive experience with drugs is apparent. To better understand Kesey and the era in which he was writing, peer-reviewed journal articles, interviews with Kesey, and recollections from those close to him were examined. Finally, the findings made using these primary and secondary sources were used to examine *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. This research was instrumental in determining how 1960's counterculture and Ken Kesey's drug usage impacted his novel.



Depicted at left: Kesey and the Merry Pranksters riding "Further," 1.

## Key Findings

The use of psychedelic drugs was a key part of 1960s counterculture identity. Although Kesey was a prominent figure in the introduction of drugs into widespread use among young people, the movement was already in the works before his band of Merry Pranksters set off in their bus, *Further*. For instance, the popularity of the book *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley (1954) had a positive portrayal of psychedelics, driving many 60's intellectuals to believe in the potential of psychedelics. Kesey referenced this in a letter to his friend Ken Babbs, boldly writing, "he [Huxley] hasn't even opened half the doors."<sup>7</sup> These drugs promised "mind expansion" for the young people of the 60's who were searching for something more than their reality.

A pivotal point of Kesey's life was when he volunteered to participate in government funded experiments with psychedelic drugs, most notably LSD, at the Menlo Park VA in 1959. His experience at "the nut house" gave him a sense of empathy towards the patients that he wouldn't have had otherwise<sup>13</sup>. He found LSD gave him more insight, love, and understanding of people. Although LSD was administered to him by the government, the idea these mind-altering drugs liberated their users to see their lives from a new perspective turned people against mainstream ideals. Kesey was a pioneer of this movement, saying, "People don't want other people to get high, because if you get high, you might see the falsity of the fabric of the society we live in."<sup>2</sup>

It is reasonable to attribute the creation of *Cuckoo's Nest* to Kesey's use of drugs, as he even dedicated the novel to his friend Vik Lovell, who took Kesey to the Menlo Park psychedelic tests, introducing him to the mind-liberating capacity of LSD<sup>4</sup>. The first few pages of *Cuckoo's Nest* were written when Kesey was high, setting the mood of the novel and remaining largely unedited since. He believed his understanding of Native American art and knowledge and of eastern religion helped him interpret the visions he had on psychedelics. *Cuckoo's Nest*'s Native American narrator, Chief Bromden, came to Kesey while high on Peyote<sup>9</sup>. Chief's perspective is crucial to the novel as it gave Kesey the opportunity to use his hallucination experience to portray Bromden's schizophrenia, such as the recurring images of fog and machinery throughout the book. Kesey believed he had a better knowledge and understanding than a doctor would have to tell the story of *Cuckoo's Nest*.

It's you, you're thought, your mind; remember that and and swing with yur self. It's you. The drug is a key. Take it. Learn. Dig. Swing.  
Doors can be windows, too.

6.

## Conclusion

Kesey maintained the position that drugs did not create, but that they opened up new possibilities; "I've found them [drugs] keys to worlds that have always existed, that *have* to be talked about<sup>11</sup>." He believed psychedelics were tools to explore what was already in his mind. Kesey wanted to have fun in his life, "I want to write a *good* novel instead of a *poor* one just because it's *fun* to write a good novel," which further evidences his rejection of mainstream culture. Kesey lived his life unconventionally even as a writer; Kesey's agent, Sterling Lord, remembered Kesey as deeply committed to living and experiencing as much as writing, with writing only being a part of living<sup>12</sup>. His use of drugs may have been the most obvious exemplification of 60's counterculture, but it was only one part of the whole that made him an iconic figure of rejecting conformity, and only one part of his literary process. Furthermore, it is notable that drugs are not put in a positive light in *Cuckoo's Nest*, since the patients were forced to take them and it clouded their judgement of the Big Nurse and her cruel authority over them. This may be because Kesey took drugs out of his own free will, with the knowledge and intention to use them to open doors, not to close them. It could have something to do with the nature of the drugs as well, as they were fabricated for controlling purposes instead of for creating feelings of freedom, like Kesey's favored Peyote. Psychedelic drugs helped Kesey begin the writing process by liberating the creativity that was inside him all along.

It will give you intence feelings for color, and you can hallucinate if you just sit back and look at a light. It gives you an ~~xxxx~~ entirely different perception of ordinary ideas and people.

8.

## References

1. "How Ken Kesey used LSD and a traveling bus of hippies to start the 60s psychedelic revolution." *The Plaid Zebra*. t242.photobucket.com/albums/ff149/hamlet279/KenKeseyTheMerryPrankstersBus.jpg. Accessed 6 May 2020.
2. Kesey, Ken. "Come Spake the Cuckoo." *Conversations with Ken Kesey*, by Todd Brendan Fahey, 1992.
3. Kesey, Ken. "The Art of Fiction." *The Paris Review*, by Robert Faggen, 1994. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1830/the-art-of-fiction-no-136-ken-kesey>.
4. Kesey, Ken. "Ken Kesey's First "Trip." *Conversations with Ken Kesey*, by Menlo Park Veterans Hospital, 1959.
5. Kesey, Ken. "Ken Kesey on the Misconceptions of Counterculture." *NPR*, by David Bianculli, 2011.
6. Kesey, Ken. "Letter to Ken Babbs." Ken Kesey Papers, circa 1953-2002. Series: General Correspondence, Box 1, Folder 2, Letter 11, Aug. 1960. University of Oregon Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, OR. Accessed 6 May 2020.
7. Kesey, Ken. "Letter to Ken Babbs." Ken Kesey Papers, circa 1953-2002. Series: General Correspondence, Box 1, Folder 2, Letter 13, Dec. 1960/Jan. 1961. University of Oregon Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, OR. Accessed 6 May 2020.
8. Kesey, Ken. "Letter to Ken Babbs." Ken Kesey Papers, circa 1953-2002. Series: General Correspondence, Box 1, Folder 1, Letter 9, circa summer 1960. University of Oregon Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene, OR. Accessed 6 May 2020.
9. (8) Kesey, Ken. "The Fresh Air Interview." *Conversations with Ken Kesey*, by Terry Gross, 1989.
10. (9) Kesey, Ken. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The Viking Press, 1962.
11. (10) Kesey, Ken. "What the Hell You Looking in Here for, Daisy Mae?." *Conversations with Ken Kesey*, by Gordon Lish, 1963.
12. (12) Lord, Sterling. "The Ken Kesey I Knew." *Lord of Publishing*, 2013, pp. 247-261.
13. (13) Sax, Richard. "It's all a Kind of Magic: The Young Ken Kesey." *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2015, pp. 171-172, <https://doi-org.libproxy.uoregon.edu/10.1111/jacc.12347>. Accessed 6 May 2020.

Depicted at right: Kesey and his bus "Further," 5.



## Acknowledgements

The University of Oregon is located on Kalapuya ilih, the traditional indigenous homeland of the Kalapuya people. We also extend our respect to the nine federally recognized tribes of Oregon, as well as to the many more tribes who have ancestral connections to this territory, as well as to all other displaced Indigenous peoples who call Oregon home.

Thank you to Linda Long, curator of manuscripts and senior librarian at the University of Oregon Knight Library who helped make our research effective and informed. Thank you to Dr. Rust, our mentor and professor, who was always there to answer our questions, and helped foster a supportive research community. Finally, thank you to the Undergraduate Research Symposium for encouraging and empowering our research.