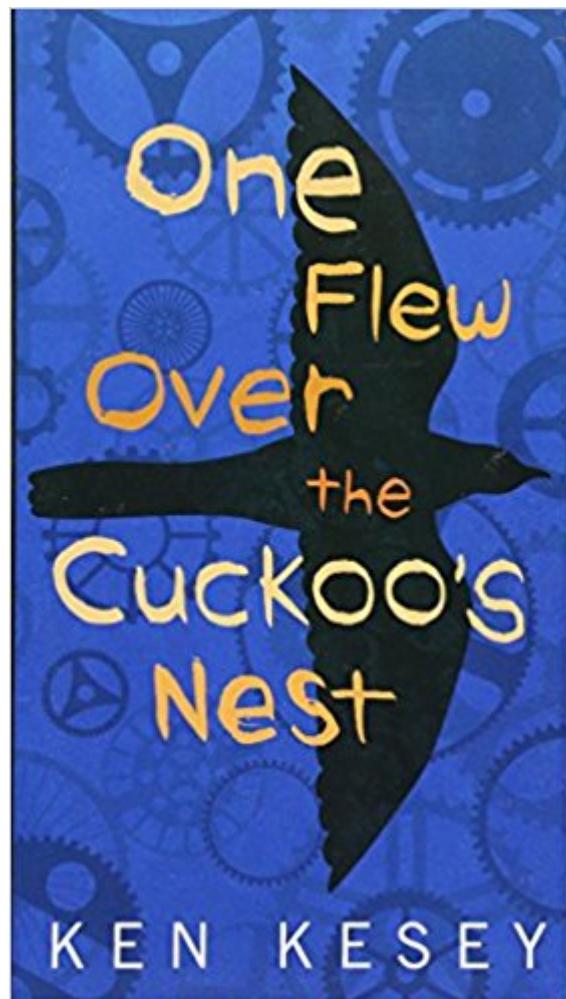


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# One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest



## Synopsis

An international bestseller and the basis for the hugely successful film, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is one of the defining works of the 1960s. In this classic novel, Ken Kesey's hero is Randle Patrick McMurphy, a boisterous, brawling, fun-loving rebel who swaggered into the world of a mental hospital and takes over. A lusty, life-affirming fighter, McMurphy rallies the other patients around him by challenging the dictatorship of Nurse Ratched. He promotes gambling in the ward, smuggles in wine and women, and openly defies the rules at every turn. But this defiance, which starts as a sport, soon develops into a grim struggle, an all-out war between two relentless opponents: Nurse Ratched, backed by the full power of authority, and McMurphy, who has only his own indomitable will. What happens when Nurse Ratched uses her ultimate weapon against McMurphy provides the story's shocking climax.

“**BRILLIANT!**” • *Time* “**A SMASHING ACHIEVEMENT...A TRULY ORIGINAL NOVEL!**” • *Mark Schorer* “**Mr. Kesey has created a world that is convincing, alive and glowing within its own boundaries...His is a large, robust talent, and he has written a large, robust book.**” • *Saturday Review*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This excellent version of Kesey's classic novel does not supplement the fine Recorded Books edition (Audio Reviews, LJ 2/1/93). However, this Blackstone version is a worthy companion, based on the reading skills of narrator Tom Parker. Parker does an exceptional job of bringing to life the characters of Randall Patrick McMurphy, Big Nurse Ratched, Chief Broom, and the others

occupying the Oregon mental hospital. He is especially good with Chief Broom, the story's narrator, presenting the chief's state of mind in seeing dark forces behind the nurse's actions plus the changes he undergoes through McMurphy's rebellious, fun-loving nature. Parker's skills and the continuing popularity of this work make this version a required purchase for all collections, even those libraries that have the earlier edition. ?Stephen L. Hupp, Univ. of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, PA  
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Ã¢ "A work of genuine literary merit...What Mr. Kesey has done in his unusual novel is to transform the plight of a ward of inmates in a mental hospital into a glittering parable of good and evil.Ã¢ "The New York Times Book ReviewÃ¢ "[A] brilliant first novel...a strong, warm story about the nature of human good and evil...Keysey has made his book a roar of protest against middlebrow society's Rules and the invisible Rulers who enforce them.Ã¢ "TimeÃ¢ "The final triumph of these men at the cost of a terrifying sacrifice should send chills down any reader's back....This novel's scenes have the liveliness of a motion picture.Ã¢ "The Washington PostÃ¢ "An outstanding book...[Kesey's] characters are original and real....This is a tirade against the increasing controls over man and his mind, yet the author never gets on a soap box. Nor does he forget that there is a thin line between tragedy and comedy.Ã¢ "Houston ChronicleÃ¢

If you are intrigued by stories about the human condition, then you'll do no better than *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. This is an incredible story of how indomitable and influential the human spirit can be, even in the face of a manipulative and controlling system that cares little for anyone or anything beyond winning. An absolute must read!

Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" was one of the most powerful books I have ever read. Although the story takes place mainly in a mental hospital, its ramifications can be felt in all of the broader society. The struggles depicted in the various characters, both internally and inter-personally, will give the reader pause and perhaps change your perception on life. The story at its core encompasses the struggle between the individual (portrayed by Randall McMurphy) and the establishment (Portrayed by nurse Ratched.) It is told through the eyes of the schizophrenic half-Indian known as Chief Bromden. Bromden has pretended to be deaf and dumb for so long that everyone takes this fact for granted. It also allows him to overhear comments from the staff that

others would not. The Chief is an interesting choice as narrator, and at times it seemed like he was rambling on about nothing. Unreliable narrators can be a touchy thing, but Kesey is able to navigate his way through the Chief's mind, and in time we find his ramblings have a purpose. He views the establishment as a machine, which he refers to as "the combine." He speaks of fog machines, wires in the walls, and robotic people, and views them as part of the combine. Even the name of the nurse, Ratched, sounds almost like "ratchet," which is a common tool. The Chief sees the struggle between the Big Nurse, as he calls Ratched, and McMurphy, and even though he has a sense right away that McMurphy is different, Bromden doesn't hold out much hope. After all, the combine is a massive machine and the Chief knows what it did to him. Bromden tells McMurphy he "used to be big," but not any more. The Chief's mother, a white woman from town, along with the government, broke down both he and his father and became bigger than both of them put together. The antagonist is Ratched, an ex-army nurse who rules the ward with an iron fist. She preys on the weaknesses of the patients and attacks them in those areas. She is all about control and power, and over her long career has devised many ways of projecting this with a cold, machine-like efficiency. Ratched has hand picked her staff based on their cruelty and submissiveness. The Chief calls her "The Big Nurse," which reminds me of Orwell's Big Brother, and mentions early on that "The Big Nurse tends to get real put out if something keeps her outfit from running like a smooth, accurate, precision-made machine" (pg 24). Indeed the Chief sees her as a machine, part of the combine who's purpose is to make others small. Ratched represents the oppressive nature and de-humanization present in modern society. And then there is Randle McMurphy. Sent to the ward from a work farm (because it's "easier" time), McMurphy comes in loud and confident. His singing and laughter are something new for the patients so used to suppressing their emotions. And he is definitely not the kind of patient the mechanical and repressive Nurse Ratched wants. It only takes McMurphy one group session to see Ratched's method of exposing the patient's weakest areas and pecking them into submission. Harding, the subject of the group meetings earlier frenzy, explains that it was all therapeutic. McMurphy, however, gives Harding his perception: "what she is is a ball-cutter. I've seen a thousand of 'em...people who try to make you weak so they can get you to...live like they want you to. And the best way to do this...is to weaken you by gettin' you where it hurts the worst" (pg 56). So McMurphy, ever the gambling man, makes a bet with his fellow patients that he would be able to make Ratched lose her composure, and he accomplished this by using her own tactics against her. As he pulls Bromden and the others out of the "fog" and makes them big again, McMurphy unwittingly becomes the savior of his fellow patients. It did not go un-noticed that the electroshock table was cross-shaped with the patient restrained by the wrists and feet and a

"crown" placed over his head. When McMurphy rips Nurse Ratched's tightly starched uniform and exposes her breasts, he is symbolically exposing her hypocrisy and breaking the power she had once wielded over the patients. Chief Bromden's final act of mercy cemented Nurse Ratched's fall as well as giving McMurphy the dignity that he had earned. Perhaps the largest piece of advice I pulled from this novel is to never let anyone or anything take your individuality. Society in general would like to have everyone fit into the same mold because then the people are easier to predict and control. However, we all need a McMurphy in our lives to show us that we can still be individuals and fit into society. And when The Combine tries to weaken you and make you conform, just throw your head back and laugh like McMurphy, "because he knows you have laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy" (pg 233).

Only half way thru the book and 'One Flew...' isn't what I expected although it's written fairly well. Written from the Chief's perspective most of the time, I guess I find it sometimes difficult to get what he's saying, maybe because it's the dialect or the choppy way he thinks. But then I refer back to the movie to see if I can put the book and movie together to picture what's going on. Frankly I'm amazed how Hollywood takes a book like this and makes a memorable classic movie that sticks with us and possibly changes the way we look at the world.

This is an amazing book. I didn't read this until I hit thirty; the reason for this being I thought less of it due to having seen the film. The film is not bad, but for me One Flew Over the Cuckoo's nest was its film version, full stop. I eventually decided to read the book after learning about the interesting life its author Ken Kesey lived, including that he wrote much of this book while working at a mental hospital. One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest deals with the relationship between freedom and power, and about how mental illness develops when the power of others dominates an individual to such a great extent that he/she can no longer act free. The individuals in the hospital are shown by Kesey to be lacking in courage and self-belief, and demonstrate an unwillingness to act without permission and approval. While the hospital should be making patients better it actually makes them worse by actively discouraging attempts to be assertive and by labelling any attempt to act free from the constraints of institutional power as symptomatic of a worsening of the underlying disorder. The book is told through the eyes of Chief Bowden: a part Indian man that has spent a long time in the hospital pretending to be deaf and mute. Through the subjective experiences of the Chief, Kesey presents the actual experiences of

mental illness. Kesey in doing this dismisses the notion that mental illness is unreal but reveals how its treatment is sometimes abused to keep people in line. Chief Bowden experiences things through metaphorical hallucinations. For example, when speaking of the power held by the Big Nurse, he literally sees wires running from her office into the bodies of those that she controls. This conception of mental illness is similar to that found in R.D Laing's book *The Divided Self*: the mentally ill person is someone that cannot face the pain of reality and retreats into their own realm, but reality still intrudes via metaphorical representations. Throughout the novel Chief Bowden focuses on the power struggle taking place between Randle McMurphy and the Big Nurse. McMurphy is not in hospital voluntarily but has committed an offence which landed him on a work farm. He is transferred to the mental hospital partly of his own design to escape drudgery. McMurphy immediately emerges as a threat to the Big Nurse due to his willingness to question process and act without fear. He is not scared of authority and does not censor himself when confronted with the subtle shaming techniques of the Big Nurse. The Big Nurse effectively runs the hospital. She is shown through the subjective eye of Chief Bowden to be solely concerned with maintaining her grip of power over the hospital. She is obsessed with process; she pretends to enforce process for the therapeutic value that the processes have on the patients, when in reality she loves the process because it is her process and provides her with a sense of security and power. The interactions between McMurphy and Big Nurse question the extent to which people can be free. Sartre once argued that individuals are totally free so that even if facing the death penalty we are free to defy the executioners by mentally not accepting their interpretation of events and the descriptions placed on them. McMurphy is a Sartrean hero as he does not allow the views of others and the subtle attempts to shun and devalue him dictate how he behaves. However, as the book plays out Kesey demonstrates that living in this manner may not lead to a life of pleasure or fame but may involve the free person being crushed by power structures and processes that do not appreciate the questioning of where power lies. I would argue that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* offers a modern presentation of the story found in the New Testament. Like Christ, McMurphy questions the powers of his time: in this case psychiatry and bureaucratic process rather than the Jewish religious leaders. Like Christ he questioned the intentions of the powers that be and acted as a free human rather than someone embarrassed by their true nature. Moreover, like Christ, McMurphy suffers at the hands of an authority that pretends to be in place for the concern of the many when in reality it gives power to the few, and in suffering on the Cross gives the weak a lasting sense of freedom. See my other reviews at [amateurreviewspace.blogspot.com](http://amateurreviewspace.blogspot.com)

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