

# Ken Kesey explores art of novel writing with students

By Cami Swanson  
Emerald Reporter

Author Ken Kesey, best known for his book "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," has close ties to the University. A 1957 graduate of the University, his sons also attended school here and wrestled for the Duck team. It seems only natural that Kesey now is teaching a graduate novel writing class at the University.

"I was turned on to writing at the University of Oregon... there's no place else that I really could have taught," Kesey said. "I have been wanting to teach a class for a long time. I lecture a lot but in a lecture you can spread on a lot of thin manure... I feel like I have something to teach."

The class, made up of about 15 graduate students, meets informally at Kesey's house in town twice a week to go over ideas for a novel they are working on collectively. However, the subject of the novel is something they are reluctant to discuss.

"(Kesey) asked us not to talk too much about the subject matter," graduate student Jim Finley explained. "Let's say an author was working on a novel — You don't want a lot of publicity about the material beforehand, to cut down on the strange speculation (about the book)."

Kesey plans to take his students through the entire process of writing, editing and publishing a single novel during the class, which will last three terms.

Kesey said the major drawback of other writing schools is that they take their students to the point of writing a novel, but don't extend any further into the procedures on having a work published.

"I'm going to do this till it's finished. Otherwise, you've got something stinking in the kitchen," Kesey said.

Kesey majored in radio and television when he attended the University, but still was interested in writing. His satirical column, "Gulliver's Trifles," was carried by the Oregon Daily

Emerald in 1955 and 1956. His first literary work was published by the Northwest Review.

He said that his eyes first were opened to serious literature one day in class while he was reading Ernest Hemingway's short story, "Soldier's Home."

"(My professor) said all of this stuff really means more than it seems, and suddenly the whole idea of literature, serious literature, opened up for me," he said.

"Being an old magician, I wanted to get into that and know how to produce those effects... Writing is an alchemical business. All kinds of tricks go into it that the public never knows about," he added.

Findley describes Kesey as being thoughtful, insightful and friendly. When asked how to describe himself as a student, Kesey replied with a smile, "I was a Beta," as if that explained it all.

"At that time, Betas could not only drink more, but they got better grades. Animal House was filmed here, and it did everybody a real misservice because it made it seem like getting drunk was what it was about. But we got drunk and always finished in the top three living organizations of campus," he said.

Compared to the University during the time he went to school, Kesey said that today's students are more socially conscious and worldly.

"In the 50's, we wouldn't have understood what divest would mean," he said.

However, Kesey, an outdoorsman who owns a farm in Pleasant Hill, regrets that progress and increased enrollment has made it necessary for the University to construct buildings like PLC, which he compares to a tombstone in front of a beautiful statue.

Kesey's future plans include working on a rodeo novel and on video novels, which he described as being "like soap operas only it would be serious fiction." He has been contacted by HBO to work on such a video essay.



Photo by Andre Ranieri

Ken Kesey's goal is to have his University class complete a novel within the next three terms.

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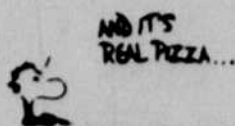
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