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Photo by Andre Ranieri

Ken Kesey is pleased with the outcome of last year's Writing 532 class, which produced the novel *Caverns*, but is not quite ready for another round.

Unique class produces 'Caverns'

Graduates collaborate on work

By Stephanie Holland
Emerald Reporter

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree.

Where Alph, the sacred river,
ran

Through caverns measureless
to man

Down to a sunless sea.

—Kubla Khan

—Samuel Coleridge Taylor

This poem gave Ken Kesey the title to what is possibly the first book of its kind — a novel written and published by a college class.

Kesey, teacher of Writing 532 last year and one of the authors of *Caverns*, said he had tried for five years to start a book-writing class, and the University was the first to let him experiment.

"As far as anybody knows, this is the first time this has been done in the history of literature," he said.

From fall to spring of 1988, Kesey was mentor to 13 hand-picked graduate students. Kesey taught them how to be writers, which is something students cannot find in traditional writing classes, said co-author Chuck Varani.

Varani, who graduated last June with a master of fine arts, said the graduate writing programs at most schools are extremely competitive.

"The purpose is to advance yourself while stomping on as many other people as possible," he said.

"Kesey said writing is not this thing that you have to beat out other people," Varani said. "And I think that was really a valuable thing."

Kesey taught the students to learn from other writing. He taught them other writing could be inspirational, Varani said.

Graduate students should demand this type of teaching, Kesey said. "Students should work on something real."

Selling the book makes it real, he said.

"I wanted to teach people how to be professional writers," he said. "(Writing) workshops for personal satisfaction are like doing crossword puzzles."

However, publishing a book is difficult. There are tricks to finding agents and publishers, Kesey said.

All of the *Caverns* authors are talented writers, Kesey said. "They could all write good books if they could get the breaks."

"Over and over again the class came up with ideas that I never would have imagined," he said.

Did the 14 different minds working on the novel create a masterpiece?

"I think parts of it are really good — it's hilarious," Varani said. "But I don't know whether it's great literature or not."

"I don't know how many times it can be repeated and be successful," said co-author Jane Sather, who graduated last June with a master of fine arts.

"I'd hate to think of it becoming a genre," she said.

"It doesn't pretend to be a great book," Kesey said. He said the class knew it would not write another *Gone With the Wind*.

"It's as good as anything Stephen King has ever done and better than anything Danielle Steel will ever do," he said.

Although by many people's standards Kesey's experiment was successful, no plans have been made for another class of this type in the near future.

Kesey said unless he is paid better he will not teach the class again.

"It was the hardest work I ever did for the least amount of money," he said.

Kesey said if he tackles the project again he will have the class write a play. This way, the students would work toward the actual presentation of the finished script during the school year.

Caverns, set during the 1930s in the American West, is an adventure novel about a group of people who search for a cave and, in the process, learn about themselves.

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