

AN AFTERNOON WITH KESEY

BY JOHN PAUL BARRETT

I did not go fishing with the idea of writing *Sea Stories*. I did not drink too much so I could write about it. I didn't obtain a series of wild crows with the idea of writing of the experience. I did not make more than 10,000 books by hand so I could write about it. Neither did I intend to write about my visit with Ken Kesey the afternoon of Sunday, September 9 — a day and a half before reality shifted and barely two moons before Kesey's own reality shift.

I met him some years back at the Columbia River Maritime Museum, where he was signing copies of his just published *Sailor's Song*, and I was peddling my *Sea Stories*. Knowing we would meet, I sent copies of my books to him, by way of introduction and as a friendly gesture, a few weeks before the event.

I remember standing alone next to a table full of my books, watching the line grow longer in front of Kesey's table. A few friends dropped by to say hi briefly, then went over and got in Kesey's line. I don't think I sold any books at all that day. I felt like a candle in the sun...but I didn't mind. I got to chat with Kesey and his wife, Faye, after the signing. There was a meaningful exchange, at least to me. I played my didgeridoo for them, told them about the crow book. Kesey said he was working on a book about the Pendleton Roundup with his long-time friend, Ken Babbs. He told me he had read and enjoyed my books. I was flattered. He invited me to his home, but I thought he was just being cordial.

Though he was easy to find, I didn't communicate with him again until last summer. I figured he enjoyed his privacy as much as his celebrity, and I didn't really have anything of substance to say, ask or offer.

A certain constellation of events (a premonition, or just acknowledgement of my own mortality?), however, prompted me to send an e-mail and just say hello, see if he remembered me. He said he did, and to my amazement, that my books were on the shelf next to his desk. He repeated his offer of a visit. After a little thought, I decided I would be foolish to pass up such an opportunity.

I told Kesey I did not intend to write anything about our visit (unless he wanted me to); that I only wished a pleasant afternoon meeting, conversation, exchange of ideas, perspectives...stories, maybe even a little insight.

Ken Kesey was not a guru to me. I thought I understood to some extent what had happened to him — perhaps, in a small way, even a few of his thoughts.

I will freely admit that I saw the opportunity to pick the brain of an "icon" of a significant era of the 20th century. But I also maintain my motive was *pure*; that I would not have written for publication anything about the meeting — but it seems appropriate at this time to relate at least a part of the visit. After all, I was there. Beyond that, I'm confident he wouldn't mind. Things have changed...and I have something interesting to say. I think he understood and liked what I was up to — making and selling books. "Stay small," he smiled.

Yet moreover, Kesey's death reminds me that if one has something to say it's best to say it — especially if one is well into the second half of one's allotted time on the planet.

I don't think Kesey went to work in a veteran's mental hospital so he could write about it. I believe — particularly after meeting him — that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was born of his compassion for the inmates: what comes from the heart, goes to the heart, says an old Hebrew adage. I believe this is one of the primary reasons for his literary, artistic and theatrical successes. There was a certain purity and integrity in just about everything he did.

On November 10, the day of Kesey's passing, his long-time friend and co-author Ken Babbs posted this on the 'Kesey web site', and I don't see how it could possibly have been stated more eloquently:

"A great good friend and great husband and father and granddad, he will be sorely missed, but if there is one thing he would want us to do it would be to carry on his life's work. Namely to treat others with kindness, and if anyone does you dirt, forgive that person right away. This goes beyond the art, the writing, the performances, even the bus. Right down to the bone."

In tribute I shall try to follow those words.

All I really want to say is that Kesey was/is — all of us are — so much more than the pigeonholes into which we are placed by others, the stereotypes that make our lives comfortable, that make things so easy in this complicated world. "Oh, that hippie, gay alcoholic, Black (insert adjective here)." We are all so much more than can be related in a few words — Kesey certainly was/is.

Ken Kesey's ultimate message — for me at least — is the same as that of his "generation" (which he was not really *in*: being born in 1935 stamps him as a "beat"). It is something like "Fear is the lock and love is the key." Still makes sense to me.

Kesey's last novel ended with a shifting of the earth's poles, an admittedly implausible effect — at that time — but at that time who would have imagined the 9/11 horror? Now, or so it seems, *nothing* seems implausible. Those of us who have known "other realities" may be at a slight advantage in such extraordinary times.

I had the great good fortune to sit with Kesey on a beautiful fall Sunday afternoon, at a big table near the latest incarnation of 'Further' the magic bus, to focus deeply into his eyes and communicate with him, to hear his answers and comments, to laugh, to pet the family dog, Happy. I have never felt more welcome or comfortable.

Kesey was a showman and a shaman. He loved to amplify, as his words have been amplified to me by his death.

We spoke of crows. He knew I had been trying to finish a book on raising them for many years. He had also raised several crows and was interested in them. There are many crows painted on The Bus.

Sweet smoke wafted on that idyllic late summer afternoon; yes, of course...

Everything he said to me made perfect sense. He nodded when I asked questions, then answered them myself. We just talked. It was nice. Faye, Kesey's lovely high school sweetheart, Sunday school-teaching wife of many years, graced us with blackberry wine and soda.



The Thunder Machine was in the barn/studio affair not far from the house. Kesey climbed inside it (which is the only way to play the thing) and suddenly — just for an instant — I saw the Wizard of Oz. He smiled when I told him of the brief vision. He knew.

Kesey got royally screwed by the publishing and film industry. We spoke of it briefly, but I could detect no bitterness, only a statement of facts. One would imagine royalty checks in every mail delivery to one whose books exist in scores of languages and number in the hundreds of millions — but it was not like that. "Our main source of income these days," he told me, "is from the sale of videos of the bus trip." (These are video-cassettes made from the 8-mm footage taken during the original bus trip to New York in the 1960s with Neal Cassady at the wheel, vibrating and expounding.) Kesey handpainted the jacket of each cassette. These are still available at Kesey's website: (www.intrepidtrips.com), although they may not be painted by Kesey himself — but who knows? November 12, two days after his transition, this appeared on the website:

Hey, all you people over there, get the news spread around that they're going to do a memorial service for me at the McDonald theater in Eugene at noon tomorrow and if you can't get inside we are going to put speakers out on the sidewalks so everyone can hear all that hoopla bound to be spreading out of the theater like moths on the wing. It says here they are going to bury me in private. Babbs says there's been thousands of e-mails and he wants me to thank you all for writing. Meanwhile, I've still got lots of forms to fill out and they're looking for a bigger

halo but durned if I'm going to play that harp. I'm holding out for the thunder machine. See you around.

~Kesey

P.S. If you want to donate something send it to the Spotlight Theater, P.O. Box 802, Pleasant Hill, OR 97455. It's a nonprofit local community theater group where my granddaughter Kate performs. Thanks.

Kesey played the Thunder Machine, I tried the didge, then shifted to a completely unfamiliar bass guitar. My friend Jim (who came with me) lost himself in the theramin (a manually operated sound synthesizer). It was a little like being stoned on acid for about 30 minutes, but it was really only a "sound high," perhaps osmosically enhanced by the presence of the Captain Himself, one who had produced two classic, best-selling novels after having been given LSD by the CIA! It was fun. I thought of Tim Leary: "The name of the game is too feel real good." I did and do.

Kesey once said, "I'm just your average, good citizen neighbor... who happens to be an acid head."

The rest of the visit is private. We left in time to get half-way home before dark. Three-odd hours had been plenty. Kesey invited us back again. I don't know if he knew he was ill. He seemed healthy to me. Two days later the World Trade Center was gone; two months later Kesey was corporeally gone. I hope he got at least a little something from our visit. I certainly did.

For the past six months my wife Tricia and I have been caring for a 23 year old crow we inherited. We were told he had been in a cage for 20 years with a paranoid/schizophrenic and reclusive old man in a trailer until the old man died three years before. They said they didn't think the crow could fly. I built a big cage for him outside and we fed him well, but the whole setup never has felt quite right. There was no contact with this crow. Jim dubbed him "Pscrow."

Wild crows had been visiting the caged crow almost daily. Last week I was standing outside the cage, watching the crow jump from perch to perch, looking at me and poking his head through the wire mesh. He flew from one side of the cage to the other as if to show me he could fly. I could *hear* him clearly. I had been thinking about Kesey, about *Cuckoo's Nest*. About freedom. We hated seeing him in a cage.

The crow wanted out, *needed* to fly, to be what he was made to be: a free spirit — even if it only lasted a few hours. A captive crow is not a crow at all.

I went inside and shared my thoughts with Tricia. She agreed. Then we walked back out and I unlocked the cage door and propped it open. The crow assessed the unfamiliar situation for a few minutes, then flew straight up, over the roof to perch, albeit somewhat unsteadily, on a power line, where he flapped his wings in the manner of a fledgling for an hour or so. Then he flew to a tall tree. That afternoon there were several wild crows with him. The next day there were crows around, but they were impossible to tell apart. I put fresh food out every day for several days, but, although they were around, none came near it.

There has been a large envelope addressed to Ken Kesey on my desk for the past month. He had asked if I had a video of the crows and I had planned to send him a copy.

And thus I have obtained the ending of the book, and I can't help thinking Kesey had a hand in it. I am sure he would have enjoyed hearing about the release of Pscrow.

Thank you Ken, from all of us.

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KESEY ENCOUNTER

So you want to read a little story about Ken Kesey?

Okay, dig this. Roll the calendar back to the evening of September 17, 1977. The place, Highway 395, just about three or four miles south of Pendleton, Oregon right around McKay Dam. I was coming to town for a little Saturday night fun. It was the last night of the Round-Up and I had been up on my family's ranch all summer looking after the stock. I was thirsty. I had just turned 27 years old. I was lonesome. I wanted to be in a busy town, go drinking and check out all the people.

As I moseyed along in my pickup I came up on a rig that had pulled over. It was an old Chevy van. A couple of guys were standing around and one was waving a glowstick at the passing traffic. I was in a string of cars and no one was pulling over or even slowing down. When I came up on them I thought I recognized the dude waving the light. I figured it was someone from Pilot Rock, so I pulled over. "What's the problem?" I asked. The dude said, "I think we're out of gas. Can you give me a lift to Pendleton?" No problem, I said. He grabbed a gas can out of his van, hopped in and we were out of there.

I just couldn't figure who this guy was. I knew I had seen him somewhere. In a few seconds, though, I figured it out.

"You're Ken Kesey, aren't you?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's me," he answered.

It was quiet for a few seconds. My brain dug into its Kesey file and spun up a little background check: Favorite author. Heavyweight Hipster. Deluxe Prankster. Denny Holmes' college roommate. Captain Trips. Celebrity. Big Shot. Icon. Blacksheep Native Son. Pride of Oregon. Natural Resource. National Treasure.

Okay, I thought, what do I say now? I wondered, if he's here, then Tim Leary, The Grateful Dead and a couple hundred of their closest friends must be up in the hills, gacked out of their minds and having a good time in a school bus. So I took a risk and asked, "What are you doing out here?"

He took the bait quick. "My brother Chuck, our sons and I've been hunting up in the John Day country. We're kind of burned out so we're going into Pendleton for a little town life."

At this point I gave up the idea that I would be sitting in a lotus position on a stage with Kesey and Leary, smoking a joint with Jerry Garcia and watching 200 half naked Hippie chicks whirl themselves into an erotic frenzy while the Dead played. We just drove into town, got some gas, scored a tow chain and drove back out to where their van was broken down. We couldn't make the van start, so we chained my pickup on to it and away we went.

When we got into Pendleton it was just getting dark. Kesey wanted the van parked along the railroad tracks, just a couple of blocks from Main Street. Brother Chuck and the kids wanted to eat and check out the Main Street carnival. Ken said to me, "You were nice enough to tow us in, come on I'll buy you

a drink." Since drinking beer was pretty much the reason I came to Pendleton in the first place, I took him up on his invitation.

We spent the next several hours threading our way through the gin mills and beer joints of Pendleton. I drank beer, he was having something a little stronger, gin I think. He also said it was his birthday, so a little celebration was only normal.

And we talked. I first read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* when I was 13, read *Sometimes A Great Notion* soon after it came out. I was raised at the coast around logging families. I knew these guys. We talked about MacMurphy, the Stampers. Fishing and hunting, beaches and history. When I asked what his favorite book was, he answered immediately, *Moby Dick*.

He told me about a shrink at the State Hospital who had a drawer full of weed. I asked him how he got his story ideas for his novels. He said an old house on the road from Eugene to the coast was the seed for *Great Notion*.

On through the night we drank and talked. Changing locations frequently, among crowds of cowboys, Indians and tourists. As the night went on I got a pretty good buzz going but the booze didn't seem to have much affect on him. He just kept on talking, sharing his thoughts and observations on life in general. Neither of us ran into a soul we knew in any of those joints. I was hoping I would see somebody I knew because no one would believe I had gone bar hopping with Ken Kesey, on his birthday no less.

We parted company as friends sometime late in the evening. He went back to the van to crash with his family. I drove carefully the 30 something miles back up into the hills. The next afternoon I backtracked down to Pendleton. I guess I was just making sure they were getting fixed up. They had moved on, though, as they probably always have and always will.

I will never forget that evening. I feel very fortunate to have encountered these folk. I think I got to experience the Kesey cultural phenomenon from a different perspective. Not as an artistic social statement making event but as a small wandering hunting and gathering clan of brothers and cousins, fathers and sons who follow ancient paths through the warm Umatilla Indian summer hunting grounds and watering holes.

That's my story. If you've read this far, please consider this. As you travel back and forth on your familiar routes and you see someone on the side of the road who might need a hand, stop and ask if there is something you can help with. You might be able to help someone, and for sure you will certainly be helping yourself by offering.

~JIM FURNISH

Jim Furnish lives in Astoria. He wrote this for The Merry Prankster History Project (<http://pranksterweb.org/index.htm>).