

# H-Net Reviews

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Rick Dodgson. *It's All a Kind of Magic: The Young Ken Kesey*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013. 226 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-29510-3.

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## A Magical, Merry Prankster

Ken Kesey gained fame in the early and mid-1960s as the noted author of the classics *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964), the leader of the Merry Pranksters, and general counter-cultural icon. Memorably portrayed in Tom Wolfe's *Electric Acid Kool-Aid Test* (1968), Kesey became a noted advocate for LSD and psychedelic drugs. That advocacy led to legal troubles, including fleeing to Mexico for a period of months, before fading from public view. For most of the rest of his life, until his death in 2001, Kesey continued to embody the contradictory nature that personified his early life. He shied away from fame and spent quiet time with his family. He decried the author's life, but wrote on occasion. As Rick Dodgson demonstrates in *It's All a Kind of Magic: The Young Ken Kesey*, Kesey's early life before the Wolfe depiction was equally engaging, if not equally contradictory.

In the preface, Dodgson, a history professor at Lake-land College in Wisconsin, explains how he first came to write about Kesey for his PhD dissertation at Ohio University. After a few back-and-forth e-mails with Kesey, Dodgson eventually met him at his home in Oregon and then met other Pranksters. Thus were the first seeds sown of a fascinating biography.

Dodgson relates Kesey's birth in Colorado, his family's move to Oregon at age seven—including his obvious precociousness at even that early age—and his detailed role as a paradoxical figure in high school and college. Kesey was a "Big Man On Campus" and voted "Most Tal-

ented" at high school, a star athlete, actor, journalist, and magician. He was also a teetotaler and frat boy, a writer who lamented the limitations of the written word, and a hard worker with a penchant for partying. This incongruous nature is best portrayed in the longest section of the book, an examination of Kesey's life on the San Francisco peninsula. As a postgraduate enrolled in Wallace Stegner's writing program at Stanford University, he first lived at Perry Lane, Stanford's bohemian, intellectual party area. After leaving Stanford, Kesey moved briefly to La Honda, where he finished writing *Sometimes a Great Notion*.

The little details chronicling Kesey's life are the heart of the book. Dodgson's painstaking research unearths hidden gems of Kesey's life that marked him as a fascinating figure. Kesey turned to his magician stage show to pay for his first few years of college. He was only drunk twice in his early life—once for his bachelor party. He smoked marijuana for the first time long after he had dropped acid and popped peyote, and once after blacking out, woke up on a Stanford golf course. During a party celebrating the release of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey took a friend to read a draft of *Sometimes a Great Notion*. These minor incidents provide depth and a rich narrative of Kesey's life.

But these details offer an uncritical portrait of Kesey. Dodgson admits his enthusiasm and delight at meeting Kesey and the Pranksters. His unabashed joy, perhaps even reverence, in Kesey's presence affects Dodgson's

writing. He glosses over Kesey's seemingly racist traits—wearing blackface during a school production and providing stereotypical caricatures of African Americans in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*—claiming that “Kesey was never a racist at heart” (p. 53). Nor is there an indictment of Kesey for writing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* while supposedly “working” at the local VA hospital, merely saying that “Kesey was certainly more focused on his writing than his duties” (p. 138). Similarly, Kesey stole from the hospital to obtain many of the drugs that fueled his psychedelic parties on Perry Lane. Yet these incidents, while mentioned, are presented as relatively minor blips in Kesey's otherwise greatness.

Coming as it does from Dodgson's dissertation, the book suffers from sounding like a doctoral thesis at times. Sections of the book give fairly well-known background context, such as the nature of Hollywood in the 1950s or the role of American “advisors” in Vietnam in the early

1960s, which detract from the overall biography of Kesey. Also, though Kesey gave Dodgson permission to examine his personal papers and journals, along with those of fellow Prankster and lifelong friend Ken Babbs, for the dissertation, after his death neither Kesey's widow Faye nor Babbs granted such permission to quote from these unpublished sources. Unfortunately this absence of Kesey's unrestricted voice shows throughout the work.

Despite these flaws, Dodgson provides a captivating look into the life of a sixties icon. For Kesey devotees it most likely will not provide much new material, but for casual observers who only knew of Kesey through Wolfe's influential work, this offers a rare glimpse into how his prominence began. In writing the first sizeable work detailing his early life, Dodgson helps to fill a “gap in the literature” in Kesey's history. Its meticulous attention to detail and free-flowing style, while not of Wolfe's quality, make for a fun read.

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