

## BIOGRAPHY

# Dropping in on Ken Kesey, the LSD era

Hit the road again through literary contortions

By **TOM DODGE**  
Special Contributor

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was a popular novel when it came out in 1962 but not entirely famous until the movie version in 1975 won five Oscars. It's a simple Christian allegory, and professors keep it in print, teaching its deeper meanings. What they may not teach is that the government unknowingly financed the novel and provided the drugs, mainly LSD, that its 27-year-old author, Kenneth Elton Kesey, said were necessary to its success.

Kesey's indirect association with the CIA began in 1959, when he was a student in a Stanford University writing program (with fellow student Larry McMurtry). For extra money, he volunteered for experimental drug trials, later known to be the nefarious MKUltra project, conducted at the nearby Veterans Affairs hospital at Menlo Park. He was a Baptist with

little drug experience, but through the program made a love connection with LSD and mescaline.

The LSD, he said, gave him his literary vision, but this could have been the drugs talking, as his writing instructor, none other than literary kingmaker Malcolm Cowley, is said to have contributed most to the book's success.

Mark Christensen's combination biography-memoir provides a portrait of the artist and the era Kesey is said to have influenced. It is a soft-focused picture of him and also of Christensen and his cadre of West Coast surfboard dudes, retro-weirdo beatnik poets, doomed rock 'n' roll stars and Haight-Ashbury hippies.

*Acid Christ* itself is a kind of wild bus ride through an often-bedeveling maze of mangled slang, strange figures of speech and upside-down clichés. The author should get points though for

attempting such a hybrid literary form. A lot of readers will no doubt enjoy the Christensen life story as it parallels Kesey's more famous doings and may even surpass the Kesey contingent in drug intake.

Again, his literary contortions might send English teachers reeling to their own drug cabinet. Typical example: "*On the Road* — written in 1951 but published finally the year before in 1957 was flying out bookstore doors and twenty-three year-old Ken Kesey had settled into a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship at Stanford."

Bedeveling prose can happen to anybody. Kesey's second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, apparently made some reviewers want to jump in the river and drown. After that experience, he gave up novel writing, saying that it was too much trouble and was dead anyway. He would live his art and redeem mankind into the

bargain, and that's when he fired up the psychedelic bus, old "Further," solicited as its driver the notorious Neal Cassidy, he of *On the Road* fame, and lit out with the Merry Pranksters on a mission to inflict peace and love on the land. Judging by the current national fit of anger, his aspirations toward messianic peace and good will fell flat as well.

Kesey's death in 2001 after surgery to remove a tumor from his liver was a terrible blow to Faye, his wife of 45 years, their two surviving sons and grandchildren, who saw him as the family magician and hypnotist. One was heard to say, sadly, "Now who's going to teach us to hypnotize the chickens?"

*Author and radio commentator Tom Dodge (www.tomdodgebooks.com) spent part of a day with Ken Kesey in September 1979 and found him to be a congenial and truly thoughtful guest.*

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### Acid Christ

*Ken Kesey, LSD, and the Politics of Ecstasy*  
Mark Christensen

(Shaffner Press, \$26.95)

