

ANALYSIS

Sometimes a Great Notion (1964)

Ken Kesey

(1935-2001)

“The hero is an anachronism, out of scale and out of kilter with contemporary standards of truth. That is why it is so surprising to meet a pair of Western heroes in contemporary American literature, the protagonists of two novels by Ken Kesey: Randle McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) and Hank Stamper in *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964). Even more surprisingly, both of these heroes have received contemporary praise and survived contemporary criticism... They dwell, as their ancestors did, in the Virgin Land, victims like all their kind of the pastoral dream in which civilization is a dirty word and Jeffersonian democracy is both the shape of the golden past and the definition of the utopian ideal....

Hank Stamper...survives. In shape, Hank is almost identical to McMurphy, big, lusty, physically and personally so vibrant as to dominate his surroundings—and just as much a loner. As hero, his triumph is demonstrated by his survival, and his quarrel is even more clearly with civilization than was McMurphy’s, for Hank Stamper is fighting the whole community, represented by the loggers’ union and the town of Wakonda, Oregon. Living across the river from them, he is as isolated from this community philosophically as he is physically, for he is wildcatting logs for the big lumber company against whom the town is striking.

Indeed, the only community Hank Stamper seems to have any feeling for is his nuclear family: cousin Joe Ben (with wife and children), father Henry, wife Viv, and half-brother Lee, who is his major antagonist outside the town. Hank’s task is obvious—he must complete the order for logs in spite of total community opposition and the Freudian conflict with his eastern, college-bred half-brother, who is determined to sleep with his wife in revenge for the seduction of his mother by her stepson Hank. The novel has an extraordinarily complicated structure, stylistically and psychologically, and this, as in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, is the means by which Kesey camouflages his romance as a contemporary black comedy.

But in spite of such deviations from earlier, simpler, and more Victorian patterns, the hero, as Kesey draws him, is even more obvious in *Sometimes a Great Notion* than in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Just as the classic tradition demands that the hero have a supreme goal to which all other heroic values except honor may be sacrificed, so too does the American version demand that the hero’s will and character be the primary means by which he attains his goal.

So it is with Hank. The family business—hence the family living—is being kept alive by his decision to log for the larger company and, in effect, to act as strike-breaker for them. From the beginning it is obvious that it is not the business but the independence which it represents that is of supreme importance to Hank, particularly as it gives him the necessary state of freedom without which no hero can survive. More significantly, it is Hank alone who wills this action; in order to protect this independence and the natural existence from which it stems, he will even defy all the orthodox assumptions of contemporary society. In this his character is clearly that of the nineteenth-century hero, responsible to no one but himself, viewing social cooperation as a sign of weakness, opposition to his will as immoral. Possessed of such a single-minded will, it is no trick at all to justify the part he plays as enemy of the livelihood of the families of Wakonda. Conventional liberal ideals simply don’t work for this hero.

The furthest he can go toward such loyalties is to that nuclear family—or, as a sop to traditional Christian ethics, to justifying individual success as the key to general human success. Not humanity but the goal becomes holy: delivering the completed booms of logs into the hands of the company becomes Hank’s righteous passion. The resulting action is arranged like the classic plot—a series of sharp little conflicts arranged along a rising curve of intensity through Hank’s apparent defeat by death, weather, and the union to the final resounding climax of his decision to defy all the forces arrayed against him and get his logs to

market. Along the way a host of traditional obstacles litter his path: the growing hostility of the community, the magical hexes of the whore Indian Jenny, the fight with Big Newton, and the inevitably successful seduction of his wife by his half-brother which finishes the destruction of even his family in the pursuit of victory. Along the way he has stamped his way back and forth over the town, demonstrating the superiority of his commonsensical nature over the fairy intellectualism of his brother (in spite of that seduction), and shown in word and deed his intuitive symbiosis with Nature.

But even when he is taking a physical beating, he is the hero. It is not really surprising, in the end, that he should set out implacably to accomplish his end, his only allies a boy and his half-brother Lee, whose Hellenic revenge, as well as his civilized intellectual mask, are finally submerged in the primitive floodtide of their mutual Stamper blood. The victory of the hero in this novel is complete. Hank Stamper not only triumphs over all the forces of evil (the town, the corrupted institutionalized society, black civilization itself), but also over his own temptation to give in to overwhelming despair.

At the end, he has reclaimed his individuality, defying tide, temptation, and the town to deliver his logs to the company and prove his heroic righteousness again. Like the ancient Greek warriors, he rises above his obvious humanness to superhuman heights; like Natty Bumppo, he demonstrates the natural sources of his virtue and like Randle McMurphy, he holds unswervingly to his predestined goal.... Thus it remains apparent that both of Kesey's heroes are more peculiarly American than European, drawing their strength from the American myth rather than the classic one. They both are virtuous, hardworking yeomen and Jacksonian images of the central American figure, from whose agrarian roots all the democratic values are drawn....What amazes one about these two novels is the deceptiveness with which such heroism is displayed. There is no real trace here of the grandiloquence with which a Walter Scott portrays an Ivanhoe, or even...the simple-mindedness of Natty Bumppo....

One comes inevitably up against the thematic questions: is the side of good always that of the American Hero? Does an engaging personality, physical superiority, love of nature in her many moods, unswerving loyalty to the ideal of individuality, automatically range one on the side of righteousness? Are ordinary folk in their tired confusion and their puerile actions to be so contemptuously brushed aside? Is civilization always the corruptive betrayer? That, of course, is the way the myth defines it, heroic America cutting herself off from corrupt and civilized Europe, sending her faithful yeomen into the wilderness to hack paradise out of the limitless forests.... That Kesey's heroes seem to carry out that old-fashioned dream in an atmosphere of contemporary confusion does not lessen the traditional and romantic structure underlying it.... It is a little like John Steinbeck's sardonic separation of a cast of characters into white hats, black hats, and gray hats. The white hats are the heroes; the black hats are the villains; and the gray hats are all the subordinate characters who will turn good if they are bad and bad if they are good."

John A. Barsness

"Ken Kesey: The Hero in Modern Dress"

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"His second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964), concerns a logging family in Oregon. The novel centres on the mainstay of the family, Hank Stamper, a tough and stubborn individualist cast in the same mould as McMurphy, and nourished in his childhood on the same Captain Marvel comics. He is the strongest man in the book when it comes to any physical deed of bravery, effort or endurance. He is a Paul Bunyan type, and, in holding out against the coercive group pressure of a union in a local logging dispute, Hank is asserting a kind of American individualism which Kesey clearly admires. But there are aspects of his relationship with his wife, Viv, and his brother, Lee, which suggest that he suffers from being sealed off in his heroic role. He is more at home confronting the elements, as, for instance, on the dangerous logging run down river on which he has just embarked when the book concludes.

Not that nature in this book is benevolent. There are few pastoral moments in Kesey's sombre Pacific north-west. Through a series of very powerful and evocative descriptions one is made aware of a continual background process of dissolution and erosion: the endless rains, the turbulent rivers, the changing sea, the heavy clouds, the penetrating fog, all make this particular part of America seem like a dream world of endless decay, on which man can never hope to leave any 'permanent mark.' It is a lush and fecund land,

but it is also a land 'permeated with dying.' The slow death by drowning of a man trapped in a rising river, described in very poignant detail, serves to focus the more general dread of obliteration, and the absolute certainty of it, which permeates the lives of all who live there. The ubiquitous sense of all things flowing steadily away is responsible for the underlying fear which pervades the community in Kesey's account.

Since logging is the livelihood of the community, some contact with this awesomely flowing nature is inevitable. But there are degrees of removal. Lee Stamper has gone east to study at a university, and has become a neurotic intellectual (much of the plot is concerned with what happens when he returns to Oregon). The union official, Draeger, is a man who believes he has reality nearly contained in his own system of definitions and maxims. He lives in the 'dream of a labeled world,' and operates in a verbal world of disputes between workers and management. Hank has little time for this world and prefers to be out in the forests doing the actual cutting. He does not sentimentalize nature. It is something which has to be fought, and fought with machines too. But the direct encounter with nature provides an experience of reality which cannot be had in the protective structures of society. Hank is another American who prefers to move out to the edge. 'It's part of the show I like best, this edge, where the cutting stops and the forest starts.' He likes to get to that point at which the contact with untouched nature has to be resumed. It is shown that life in this area can be very dangerous; but at least it is pure.

One is beyond categories and, somehow, into the thing itself. In this connection the location of the Stamper house is very suggestive. It stands nearest to the threatening and ever-widening river from which all the other inhabitants have moved back for fear of being washed away. For all its exposed position, it has nevertheless preserved its identity longer than the other houses—'a two-story monument of wood and obstinacy that has neither retreated from the creep of erosion nor surrendered to the terrible pull of the river.' This suggests that perilous point, somewhere between the social edifice (to which the population has 'retreated') and the...flow of elemental natural forces, which so many recent American authors and their heroes seem to be seeking. Right at the edge, but not over it....

As a study of a certain mode of heroic individualism the book has surprising power and authority... The book is framed by an encounter between Draeger and Viv in a bus depot. Draeger has come to ask her to explain to her husband Hank to him. She in turn refers him to a photograph album she has with her, covering the family history of the Stampers. At the end Viv gets on a bus, leaving behind the photographs as she is leaving Hank and Lee and the whole area. Throughout this meeting it is raining very heavily. This juxtaposition of the photographs and the rain seems to me to point to a more profound tension in the book between fixed images and flowing forces. At bottom Kesey's novel is a meditation on themes implicit in this conjunction.

Photography can be seen as an activity which treats people as objects, a substitute for conducting a living relationship.... Photographs and films catch and 'fix' the individual, disregarding the full dimensions of his living uniqueness.... Viv...like her temperament, suggests just the mysterious quality of 'life' itself. Both Hank and Lee in their differing ways 'love' Viv; at the same time Kesey makes it clear that each tries to impose his own version of her. From the start of their marriage Hank has told her how to cut her hair, what to wear, how to behave, turning her into his idea of a mate without wondering what was going on inside her. Lee's love seems to be more sympathetic and sensitive, but he gives himself away when he asks to be allowed to take away a photograph of her which is, we learn later, an early photograph of his own mother. The implication is that he has never seen the real Viv, but only the image he has projected on to her. Thus in differing ways, Viv has been made to fit into the brothers' reality pictures, while her own reality has remained unperceived and thus unloved. This is not depicted as cruelty; if anything it is one of the sad results of that loss of ability to recognize and communicate with other people's reality which more than one American novelist has portrayed.

Before she marries Hank, Viv takes one last look in her mirror and kisses her reflection goodbye. The meaning of this gesture is brought out by one of her later thoughts. 'It means this is the only way we ever seen ourselves; looking out...' Viv is the one character who has had the ability to move beyond narcissism and look *out* at other people and really see them, and their needs, and this is the only way that true vision—of self and others—can be reached. In some ways, Hank and Lee are still operating within the images they project. It is appropriate that at the end Viv leaves both brothers, for despite the generosity of her love she

cannot devote her whole self simply to being what other people need her to be. She gets on the bus simply to move on, with no destination in mind. It is a bid to escape from the images that have been imposed on her, and leave the photographs behind. Almost her last words are—‘I’m just going.’ Just so, life itself flows away despite all attempts to hold it.

Photographs are like art and human identity in the one respect that they offer a temporary extrapolation from the flow, a holding of some fragment of the flux of nature in fixed outlines. A novelist has to work with outlines, and Kesey’s own novel is the verbal equivalent of a family album. At the same time, the timeless ongoing truth of Nature’s flow must not be forgotten, and Kesey does what he can to remind us of it: ‘the Scenes Gone By and the Scenes to Come flow blending together in the sea-green deep while Now spreads in circles on the surface.’ This is what lies behind the narrative strategy of the book which involves a dissolving of chronological time so that past and future events swim into each other, and during the fictional present we move without transitions from place to place, person to person. The intention seems to be to achieve the illusion of temporal and spatial simultaneity in which ‘everything is at once.’ (As in his first novel, it is possible that Kesey drew on LSD-induced sensations for his narrative strategy.)

The novel suggests that although human perception necessarily deals with particular configurations of reality, we must beware of identifying these temporary arrangements and fixities with the ‘whole Truth’—whether we are thinking of reality arrested in photographs or arranged in verbal conceptual systems. We must always be willing to look round the edge of the fixed image to the flow behind it. We must also be aware, as Viv is, that, ‘*There are bigger forces... I don’t know what they are but they got ours whipped sometimes.*’ One chapter has as a heading a little story about a squirrel who lived in a davenport. He knew the inside so well that he could always avoid being sat on. However, the outside got worn out and it was covered with a red blanket. This confused him and undermined all his certainties about the inside. Instead of trying to incorporate this blanket ‘into the scheme of his world,’ he moved to a drainpipe and was drowned in the next fall of rain—‘probably still blaming that blanket: damn this world that just won’t hold still for us!’ It is a neat reminder that we must keep our schemes of reality flexible so that they can be expanded to incorporate any new phenomenon which the outside world may present. Our notions are only our notions, while the flow is more than we can ever know.

Having depicted two fictional heroes who created themselves on the lines of the available archetypes to be found in cartoons and other such repositories of the more vital popular mythologies, Kesey took a step further. His third hero was Ken Kesey.” [as portrayed in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, by Tom Wolfe]

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