Ken Kesey: Writing is an act of performance

By Dan McCue

Even counter-culture superstars have to sometimes go to the supermarket.

And so it was that Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion* – not to mention the central character in Tom Wolfe's The *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* – was in the position to literally everything drop everything for someone he didn't know.

Kesey had spent the better part of the past three decades engaged in "living" his books rather than actually committing them to paper, but when he did release a bit of writing here and there from his farm in the wet hills of Oregon's Willamette Valley, the work often surprised his fans.

For instance during a five year stretch beginning in 1986, there was *Caverns*, a mystery written in collaboration with the graduate class he taught at the University of Oregon; *Demon Box*, basically a grab-bag of miscellany; and *A Further Inquiry*, a rejected screenplay turned into a book in which he put his erstwhile band of fellow travelers, the Merry Pranksters, on trial.

And right before I set the telephone ringing inside his Pleasant Hill, Ore. Home, there were *Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear* and *The Sean Lion*, two children's books that began their existence as performance pieces.

As Kesey said picked up the receiver to say hello, one could still hear the rustle of paper grocery bags as he and Faye settled into the kitchen to unpack them.

Having someone call completely out of the blue seemed the most nature thing in the world to Kesey, who listened, offering an agreeable "Mm-hmm," as the caller spun a hurried tale that amounted to an introduction by a mutual acquaintance.

"Well," he said cheerily when the caller paused. "How can I help you?"

Talk to Ken Kesey for awhile about writing, and you almost forget that he's been a literary outside for more than a quarter century. His life seems perfectly centered, and his sentences all seem to end in a smile, rather than a period, as he says them.

But it's also clear, that he's paid a price in certain circles for the life that he's lead and the career that he's fashioned. When he recently once again tackled the novel [with *Sailor So*ng, a skewering of religious cults, organized lodges and land developers], critics reviewed his persona as much as they did his work. Many of them, still smarting from his rejection of the New York-based publishing world, were less than kind.

"You know, I wouldn't have let Tom Wolfe do [*Acid Test*] if I had known what I know now," he says of the long shadow the book and, more to the point, the image it created, cast over his subsequent projects.

“In that book it’s like he’s looking at me from an East Coast crow’s nest,” Kesey continued. “But what he’s really looking at is this huge [figurative] wart beside my nose, and he writes about this wart so eloquently that other people are looking at it all the time, and staring at it, and then you find one eye begins to cross down and then you’re looking at. You become cross-eyed at you own wart.”

With that, Kesey hesitated, as if to take the measure of what he would say next. After a moment’s deliberation, he said, “You have to take that into account when you’re writing with this kind of light on you.

“It’s different than if you’re writing as a stranger. When I was doing *Sometimes A Great Notion*, my personality was in it, but my personality was not something that anybody knew,” he said.

Still, Kesey said he saw no alternative to pressing on with his writing in his own way, likening the process, as William Faulkner did, to the “dog having to go against the bear, just to keep calling itself a dog.”

It is Indian Summer in Oregon as Kesey and I have this conversation, and *Sailor Song*, the author’s first full-blown novel in 28 years has just been released by Viking. In writing it, Kesey chose to include his *Sea Lion* tale for children, making it an important part of the book’s story line.

This afforded us the chance to discuss his feeling about “children’s stories, beginning with why he got involved with the form in the first place.

“I’m real certain of my kids’ books,” Kesey said. “I’ve read them and performed them enough to know that this is a working piece of stuff. You’re not telling stories that are meant to explore the psychological depths of a character – you’re just trying to tell a story, like Poe or Zane Gray. And that’s just so much more interesting to me.”

By comparison, Kesey said, “it’s hard to be certain of a novel.”

“They’re just so vast,” he said. “But with a kids’ story, the kids you’re reading to, they don’t know you from Ralph Waldo Emerson [laughs]. They’ve never heard of Tom Wolfe. They’re barely heard of the Grateful Dead, so if the story can’t stand up on its own, no amount of posturing or critical praise is going to change it in a kid’s mind. It’s got to make it according to that kid’s set of rules, and I think those rules keep you pretty honest.”

Surprisingly, given that it would naturally be assumed Kesey would be talking up his latest novel, he said he actually prefers Ticker The Squirrel, the story of a wily rodent who outwits the bears of a mythical forest called Topple’s Bottom.

“It’s a better story,” he explained. “It’s basically a story that my grandmother told me and that I haven’t changed very much except – as my grandma told be when she heard me read it one time – ‘I gussied it up quite a bit.’

“But the story itself has all the classical storytelling tricks in it: Repeating things three times, using a lot of alliterative, using a lot of changes in tempo, casting large things against small things. Every time I read it, I’ll be discovered by another nuance I’ll discover.

“Did you ever see [Disney’s] *Beauty in the Beast*?” Kesey asked abruptly. “A super movie. People will be watching that movie in a hundred years; they won’t be watching Silence of the Lambs, and the reason why is the story. It’s so good, in terms of pure storytelling, that you can just barely do anything to hurt it.”

If there’s element of Kesey’s personality that’s obscure d his perceptiveness over the years, it’s the fact that his persona is a pure distillation of the child within the man – and again, this is never more evident that when he’s performing his stories for children.

Last October, for instance, he ventured to West Harlem, N.Y. to read *The Sea Lion* to an audience bused in by local church groups and homeless shelter.

Decked out like a kind of hippie shaman, Kesey used magic tricks, slides and audience participation to flesh out the story. This theatricality, he said afterwards, is the shape of all literature to come.

“Writing really doesn’t happen until it connects with the mind of the reader, or… I think we’re getting to a time in which we can call the reader the viewer. If we don’t confront the reader as viewer, we’ve going to lose a lot of them.”

A week prior to this conversation, the director Gus Van Zandt had brought a film crew up to Kesey’s place to film him performing the *Sea Lion*.

“To me, that is the real publication of it, more than the book,” Kesey said. “The book will be there and one thing doesn’t preclude the other, but a performance is much better and so much more fun for the artist as well as the viewer.

“You begin a novel, and you can just cross yourself off for about two years of being worth living with,” he added with another hearty laugh. “It’s corrosive work – and not just for you, but on everyone around you. You find yourself in the morning kicking the dog, throwing things at the cat, and screaming at the parrot.”

Sailor Song, in fact, was written over the course of several years, and its writing was accompanied by a nagging fear that the thread of the story would run dry during the long process of committing it to paper.

“I think every writer is fearful of that,” Kesey said. “See, you don’t ever really know for sure where the inspiration for a piece of writing comes from. If you did, you’d just reach in there and grab the handle and turn it on.

“But with [Sailor Song] I had a strong enough sense that this, what I was doing, was really close to the bone of my sermon, and if I just kept myself interested, that the story would just come… “ he said. “I

guess a more simplified way of saying it is, you have to trick your muse over the course of writing a novel.

“She’ll sit around and watch daytime television if you let her, and you have to do something to poke her out of her stupor,” he laughed. “And I have learned a number of ways over the years to trick my muse.”

While Kesey’s larger-than-life persona is difficult to keep entirely out of his work, he said he tried harder to keep it at bay in Sailor Song than in some of his other recent work, like *Demon Box*.

“I really felt like Demon Box was my gonzo,” he said. “I felt like my personality was pretty much contained in that, in a way. I wanted sailor Song to be different.

“But you know, the thing about being a writer that’s getting older is that you find yourself being more and more like a grumpy old man, by which I mean it’s harder to repress your personality,” Kesey continued. “Now, I don’t that’s good for you, but you find yourself doing it.

‘Also, the gonzo that I’m using in Sailor Song is somewhat different from the one I used in Demon Box,” he said. “The central character is… not quite me. This is kind of me in the future. I’ve put a pin on this personality that’s not quite like the ones that I used to do.”

“If I were Dostoyevsky, I could pretty much keep myself out, but once you start tricking your muse, you find you trick yourself as well. You’ve got to get her up from watching daytime television, but you’re also a little jacked up too… so it’s hard to keep personality entirely under wrapped. But most of the time, when I do let it in, I’m aware of what I’m doing and I’m doing it for effect.”

Still recriminations peak through. Circling back to his comments about the impact [Acid test] had on his subsequent life and work, Kesey allowed that the notoriety Wolfe’s book gave him, may have been an advantage in some respects and not in others.

“In a way, I guess, I really wish I didn’t have to take that public perception of me into account as I work,” he said.

When Kesey is in the throes of a novel, manuscript pages pile up quickly.

“For this one [Sailor Song], I’ve got big boxes of manuscript pages, that are maybe 10 to 12 inches deep and two that big across, and if you were to go through them, what you see is the process behind the finished work,” he said.

“When I’m writing, I experience with the prose to get the right tone and to get the right character,” Kesey explained. “To get the tone in this book, I experimented a lot because I wanted to arrive at something between cyberpunk and traditional, turn-of-the-20th Century, Emily Bronte prose. I wanted to bring the old and traditional and set it against the new and uncertain.”

As he writes, Kesey said, he’s constantly revising his pages.

“When I read over what I’ve written, if something isn’t right, it really stands out and jars me, and when that happens, I often have to work a long time to get it ring true, ” he said.

“Another thing that sometimes happens is that my characters get away from the plot. They’ll head on out and do what they want to do, and sometimes they just don’t follow what I’m trying to do in the novel,” he said. “When that happens, and when something obviously becomes superfluous, I have to go back and take lot of that out.”

Kesey said when it comes to central characters, he tries to leave them “open” inside, allowing room for readers to project their own thoughts and perceptions into them. To explain what he meant, he pointed to Hollywood.

“Part of the genius of a Robert Redford as an actor is his ability to be a character and yet leave enough room for the audience to inhabit the character as well. You really don’t know that much about the character, but over the course of the performance, you’re kind of taken inside the roll and by the end,, you’re almost playing it inside your one mind as well.

“The western Shane is another good example of that and the title character is a great American character,” Kesey said. “He’s a little bit mysterious, a little tragic, alone, and you can sit there and watch the movie and… all of a sudden, you become Shane. It’s a little harder for you to do that with, say, Ishmael, which is a more fully developed character on the page.”

Real writing, according to Kesey, is writing that understands who it is being written to.

“It goes right around and stands in front of that consciousness and confronts it, speaks eye to eye with it,” he said.

“This business of standing off to the literary side and shuffling work into somebody’s ear and hoping it goes ‘Boom!’ in their brain… well, I think we can just about count that over. We may have really big literary heroes for a little longer, but I don’t think that’s going to last.”

Instead, Kesey saw musical artists usurping that position – but only if they have to wherewithal to re-imagine their own relationship to their audience and to their work.

“Let’s imagine this,” he said. “Take Michael Jackson, because he’s got the talent to carry this off; if he were to look at what he is doing and decide, instead of just titling the kids, I’m going to create a work comparable to Pink Floyd’s The Wall, something with some depth to it, he’d be considered one of the great artist of our time.

“when I talk to the Grateful Dead, I keep telling them, ‘You guys have got to get off that stage and get down in the orchestra where you belong, and allow stiff on the stage to happen that conveys drama and plot and character,” he said. “That’s what the Greeks did, what the Indians did, what the Africans did. They used drums and flutes and dance and fire to convey thing a story. That’s exciting to me.”

Given how keenly Kesey seemed to feel the need for the artist to change, it seemed naturally to talk about how the audience for literature has changed in the decades that have passed since Kesey first began writing in the late 1950s.

“Um, well, television has changed everything so enormously that it will never be the same, and for us in the writing world to bemoan that fact… that’s like complaining about hurricanes hitting Florida. There’s nothing you can do about it but try and live after it,” Kesey said.

“[As a writer] you have to compete with Big Bird, and the latest big situation comedy, and you have to compete with all of the car chases and shootings and low cleavages that are there constantly in front of the viewer’s minds – and if you try to respond by doing all the old stuff that used to catch attention, you’ll just find yourself left out in the cold,” he said.

If Shakespeare were working writing today, the bard of Stratford-Upon-Avon would be trying to work, “in what is the most popular and exciting and juicy form,” Kesey said.

“Today that might be MTV, and tomorrow, some other forum, but it all comes down to this: Being where the audience is, because that’s where the action is. Now, implied along with that, whether you’re a writer or a dancer or a filmmaker, is the realization that the greatest sin that you can commit is boredom,” he said. “My Dad told me a thing once that I’ve always remembers: good writing ain’t necessarily good reading. He always emphasized to be sure that what you’ve writing is something that people will enjoy reading.

“Now, it’s difficult to do this, especially when you’re distracted by potential reviewers,” Kesey said, subtly shifting gears as he continued.

“Right now, everybody’s talking about this [unfavorable] review [of Sailor Song] in The New York Times – they’ve talked about it enough that I’ve been able to forestall myself and not read it,” he said, laughing. “In fact, I’ve quit reading all that stuff.

“I decided that good reviews, they don’t really help you, they just pump you up; And bad reviews, well, all they do is hurt you. After that review came out, my editor called and said, ‘Well, you know it’s a good book. You don’t have to be affected by a bad review.’ And I said, ‘That’s like saying Rodney King knew he was innocent.’ It doesn’t make a different when they’re hitting you with a stick, it still hurts.”

Kesey said rather than get caught up in all that, he’d just assume stay busy in Pleasant Hill. Soon, he said, he was going to begin work on the further adventures of Tricker the Squirrel, to be followed by a children’s book in which a female character named Shula descends into the spirit world.

“I’d like to see what happens when Shula meets Buddha,” he said.

Comparing the demands of writing with the demands inherent in writing for adults, Kesey said that with Sailor Song, “the audience I’m dealing with is not only older, they’re also kind of specific.”

“At one point I was trying to figure out, ‘Who am I writing this for?’ And I knew I wasn’t writing it for the East Coast critics because if I did, I was going to get my ‘heart broken and my nuts crushed,’ as Hunter S. Thompson says,” Kesey said.

“In a sense, I feel like the audience I’m writing for today is kind of the MTV, skateboarding circuit, that segment of the population that perhaps doesn’t know it likes to read yet, but that is nonetheless interested in the future of our country and the environment, and in what’s happening in TV and drama and in other mediums.

“You know that magazine, Mondo 2000?” Kesey said, referring to the glossy cyberculture magazine published in the 1980s and 1990s that covered everything from virtual reality to the emergence of computer culture to speculations on the benefits of “Smart” drugs.

“I want to speak to that consciousness,” Kesey said. “A consciousness that’s just a little bit above science fiction, but a little below Saul Bellow.”

As Kesey’s laughter subsides, he had just one more question to tackle, although by now, the answer seemed fairly obvious. Did he ever nurse regrets about being a maverick within his own profession?

“No. Not at all,” he said. “I’ve watched a lot of writer friends do this and that, and one of the things you learn is that sometimes you have to make a choice. I mean, it’s very difficult to write and maintain a marriage and a family because [being a writer and] playing the game seems to demand that you go back and live on the East coast, do lunch, and have certain acquaintances – and I never cared about those things.

“I don’t feel like I’ve missed anything by living out here, and what I’ve gained is immeasurable,” Kesey said.

This interview took place in 1993. Kesey died eight years later, on Nov. 21, 2001, from complications following surgery to remove a tumor from his liver. He was 66 years old.