

# **“One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest” by Ken Kesey [B2]**

Un romanzo toccante, che parla di quanto sia difficile adattarsi a una società che ci vuole “normali” e che cerca di reprimere ogni genere di diversità.

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Ken Kesey grew up in Oregon, the son of a **dairy farmer**. A star **wrestler** in high school, he went on to study drama at the University of Oregon and then won a **fellowship** which allowed him to study creative writing at the University of Stanford in California. While there, Kesey volunteered to take part in a government-sponsored research program that investigated the use of psychoactive drugs on patients. He began to sympathise with the mental patients at the hospital, and see their treatment as a way of forcing people to **fit in** with society’s idea of ‘normalcy’.

## **THE NIGHT-AIDE**

Kesey subsequently got a job as a night **aide** on the same **ward** at the hospital. He worked there for nine months, during which time he wrote almost all of the book One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Chief Bromden, a half-Native American man who suffers from paranoia as a result of trauma caused by the loss of his community. A giant of a man, ‘the Chief’ **escapes notice** by pretending to be **deaf** and unable to speak. He **sweeps** the corridors and rooms of the hospital and listens in to many private conversations. His vivid hallucinations and **insights** make him a fascinating narrator.

## **THE COMBINE**

On the **ward**, the all-male mental patients are divided into the curable ‘**acutes**’ and the incurable ‘chronics’. It is **run** with cold professionalism and **sanctimonious piety** by a **former army nurse** called Nurse Ratched. Terrified of the woman he calls “the Big Nurse”, the Chief sees her as part of “the Combine”, a huge machine-**run** conglomeration that controls society

and forces people into conformity. “[The Big Nurse] slides through the door with a gust of cold and locks the door behind her and I see her fingers trail across the polished steel — tip of each finger the same color as her lips. Funny orange. Like the tip of a soldering iron. Color so hot or so cold if she touches you with it you can’t tell which.” “[La Grande Infermiera] scivola insieme a una folata fredda fuori della porta, la chiude dietro di sé ed io vedo le sue dita strisciare sull’acciaio lucido... la punta di ogni dito ha lo stesso colore delle labbra. Uno strano arancione. Come l’estremità di un saldatore. Un colore così incandescente o così gelido che, se ti tocca, non sai distinguere.”

## GROUP MEETINGS

Other cogs in the machinery of the Combine include three menacing aides, personally selected by the domineering ‘Big Nurse’. “They laugh and then I hear them mumbling behind me, heads close together..., humming hate and death and other hospital secrets.” “Ridono, poi li sento farfugliare alle mie spalle, accostando la testa gli uni agli altri. Ronzio di nere macchine, ronzanti odio e morte e altri segreti dell’ospedale.” The patients have daily Group Meetings, in which they are forced to talk about each other’s most shameful secrets. If a patient rebels, Ratched sends him to receive electroshock treatments and sometimes a lobotomy.

## A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Into this dystopian environment arrives Randle McMurphy, a convicted criminal who has pretended to be mad as a means of avoiding doing hard labour on a prison farm. He swaggers onto the ward, introducing himself as a gambling man with a zest for women and cards. However, it is not easy to escape Nurse Ratched’s urge to ‘cure’. McMurphy comes as a disruptive breath of fresh air. What follows is a battle of wits between the Big Nurse and McMurphy. At first their battles provide entertainment for the other inmates. But, as time goes on, it becomes clear that, despite the curative effects of McMurphy, the grinding wheels of the Combine are a relentless force.

## LIBERATING AND TRAGIC

Another patient in the [ward](#) is young Billy Bibbit, who is timid and suffers from a debilitating [stammer](#). When McMurphy [sneaks a sex worker into](#) the hospital, so that Billy can lose his virginity, it appears to cure him. When woken by Nurse Ratched the next morning Billy manages to wish her good morning without [stammering](#). But the Big Nurse soon shames him into submission: "What worries me, Billy," she said — I could hear the change in her voice — "is how your poor mother is going to take this." She got the response she was after. Billy flinched and put his hand to his cheek like he'd been burned with acid." «A crucciarmi, Billy» disse, e percepii il mutamento nella sua voce, «è come la prenderà la sua povera madre.» Ottenne la reazione che cercava. Billy trasalì e si portò la mano alla gusta come se fosse stato ustionato con acido." The fight between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched is [bitter](#) and bloody; for some, the result is liberating, for others tragic. By the end of the book Kesey makes it clear what it means to be free in a world governed by an authoritarian machine.

## FILM ADAPTATION

In 1975 a film version of the book was released, directed by Miloš Forman. It starred Jack Nicholson as Randle McMurphy and Louise Fletcher as Nurse Ratched. Nicholson and Fletcher received [widespread critical acclaim](#) and won Academy [Awards](#) for Best Actor and Best Actress respectively. On its 2003 list of the 100 greatest villains in the annals of motion pictures, the American Film Institute placed Nurse Ratched (a character both vilified and acclaimed by feminist critics) at number five, behind only Hannibal Lecter, Norman Bates, Darth Vader and The [Wizard](#) of Oz's [Wicked Witch](#) of the West.

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# Glossary

- **dairy farmer** = allevatore di bestiame
- **sweeps** = spazzare
- **grinding wheels** = mole abrasiva
- **fit in** = adattarsi
- **piety** = religiosità
- **gambling man** = giocatore d'azzardo
- **bitter** = spietata
- **widespread critical acclaim** = numerosi consensi dalla critica
- **Witch** = strega
- **wrestler** = lottatore
- **fellowship** = borsa di studio
- **hard labour** = lavori forzati
- **urge** = voglia, impulso
- **sneaks a sex worker into** = intrufolarsi, entrare di nascosto
- **aide** = ausiliario
- **acutes** = acuti
- **sanctimonious** = moralista, bigotto
- **former army nurse** = ex infermiera militare
- **cogs** = ingranaggi
- **inmates** = pazienti
- **stammer** = balbuzie
- **ward** = reparto
- **deaf** = sordo
- **run** = dirigere, gestire
- **swaggers onto** = entrare in modo spavaldo
- **Wicked** = malvagia
- **escapes notice** = non farsi notare
- **zest** = gusto, passione
- **relentless** = implacabile
- **menacing** = minaccioso
- **avoiding** = evitare
- **insights** = riflessioni, idee
- **domineering** = autoritaria

- **shameful** = vergognosi
- **as a means of** = allo scopo di
- **battle of wits** = duello d'intelligenza
- **Wizard** = mago