



# One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Ken Kesey

Teacher's Guide

Written By Matthew Jewell

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## Synopsis

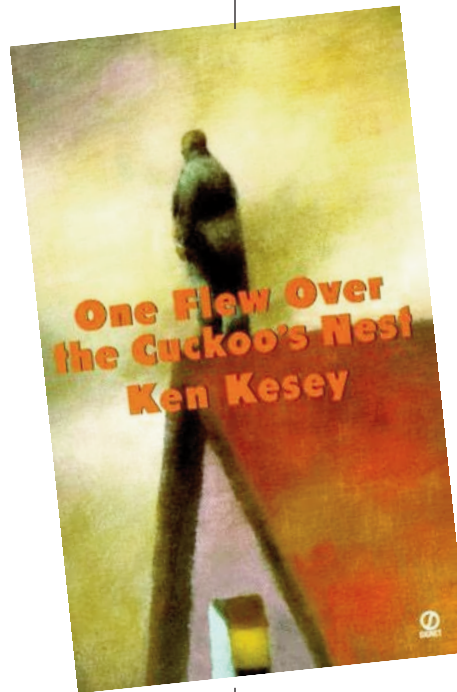
### Part One

Set in a psychiatric ward tyrannically ruled by the evil Nurse Ratched (a.k.a. "Big Nurse"), the novel is narrated by Chief Bromden, a paranoid and delusional half-Native American who is often overlooked because he pretends to be deaf and dumb. The narrative occasionally is disrupted when Bromden descends into paranoid hallucinations of the "Combine," the machinations of the military-industrial complex bent towards total control of human life.

Randle Patrick McMurphy is admitted to the ward. Boisterous and brash, he contrasts sharply with the aura of cowed fear exhibited by other patients. He is an Irish-American brawler found guilty of battery and gambling, for which he has received a fairly short prison term; he claims to have gotten into too many fights at the work farm in order to be labeled a potential psychotic, a diagnosis he cultivated because it got him excused from the manual labor at the work farm. He is dismissive of the patients' fears, the psychiatric hospital, authority, and theories of mental illness in general.

Nurse Ratched is suspicious of and hostile towards McMurphy and the threat he presents to the stability of her regime. In the daily group meetings, McMurphy challenges her authority, mostly by refusing to be intimidated, making off-color sexual jokes, and telling bawdy stories. The other patients slowly overcome their shock and begin to warm to him.

After complaining that the music in the main ward room is too loud, McMurphy petitions to have an empty room set aside for card playing and gaming. Nurse Ratched opposes the idea, but it gains the support of Dr. Spivey, with whom McMurphy has established a rapport. The approval of the idea is a small victory for McMurphy over the nurse, and McMurphy, a self-described "gambling fool," sets about fleecing the other patients.



The tension between Nurse Ratched and McMurphy comes to open confrontation over the World Series, which is shown during an unapproved television viewing time. McMurphy's request for an exception is denied, then put up for vote. Afraid to openly confront the nurse, the other patients vote against McMurphy. Later, at another group meeting, McMurphy lobbies for a new vote. The voting favors his position, but the nurse skews the vote by including the nonvotes of those too incompetent to understand the issue. In protest, McMurphy and the other patients station themselves in front of the television, watching the blank screen.

### Part Two

McMurphy continues his antics, and the patients begin to respond to him, becoming bolder and more assertive. They complain in the group meetings and challenge the nurse's authority. However, a watershed moment occurs when they are taken to the pool. The lifeguard, a former football player, explains to McMurphy that he is completely at the mercy of the nurse, that, in contrast to prison, he will not be released after a certain term. McMurphy becomes a model patient, refusing to antagonize the nurse, which baffles the other patients.

Dale Harding, one of the patients, explains electroshock therapy and lobotomies to McMurphy, noting that they can be ordered by the nurse. McMurphy is distraught that no one had warned him of the possible consequences of his outbursts, and utterly bewildered when told that most of the patients are there voluntarily. At the next group meeting, McMurphy reopens hostilities by shattering the window to the nurse's station, signaling a return to form.

**Part Three**

McMurphy organizes a fishing expedition for himself and a group of patients. Although the trip gains official authorization, the nurse does her best to discourage anyone from accompanying him. Though she successfully intimidates a number of men, a group leaves the ward accompanied by Candy Star, a prostitute, and Dr. Spivey. At the coast, the boat captain refuses to take them out, saying that they don't have the proper documents. McMurphy gives him a bogus phone number to call for verification, then steals the boat while he's gone. He and Candy disappear below deck while the other men fish, steadily gaining confidence. Their empowerment has a physical effect, being readily apparent to the fishermen when they return to the docks. On the way back to the hospital, they detour to visit McMurphy's childhood home.

**Part Four**

Nurse Ratched begins an extended campaign against McMurphy, instilling doubts in other patients, who begin to suspect that he's been cheating them at various wagers. McMurphy dismisses their concerns and begins arranging for Candy and another prostitute to come visit them.

During a delousing shower, McMurphy intervenes when the orderlies torment Rub-a-Dub George, which leads to a brawl. He and the narrator are taken to the Disturbed Ward and given electroshock therapy. McMurphy refuses to be cowed and pretends to relish the experience. When they return to the ward, the other patients have devised an escape plan for him, but he refuses to follow it, saying he wants to be present when Billy Bibbit loses his virginity.

McMurphy bribes the night warden to let in Candy and her friend Sandy. The women bring large amounts of alcohol, and a debauched party ensues.

Too intoxicated to rise early and clean up, the patients and women are discovered in various compromising situations in the morning. Nurse Ratched discovers that Billy has slept with Sandy and, in a cruel manipulation designed to reassert her authority, threatens to tell his mother, whom he fears more even than he fears Nurse Ratched. Terrified, Billy commits suicide in Dr. Spivey's office by cutting his own throat with a scalpel.

Nurse Ratched shrilly accuses McMurphy of causing Billy's death, then retreats into the Nurse's Station. Despite the accusation, McMurphy, the other patients, and the narrator all regard Nurse Ratched as responsible, having deliberately sent Billy over the edge. In an act that is portrayed as a form of self-sacrifice—a necessity to liberate the other prisoners, even though he knows it will lead to terrible consequences for himself—McMurphy deliberately attacks Nurse Ratched, ripping her uniform down the front and exposing her breasts, thus symbolically divesting her of her authority, and nearly choking her to death as her three orderlies look on, forcing visiting doctors and nurses to rescue her. Nurse Ratched is hospitalized for a week, during which McMurphy is sent to the Disturbed Ward to be lobotomized. When Nurse Ratched returns, she has lost her terrible authority and can barely speak because of the damage to her throat. The majority of patients on the ward begin to check themselves out of the hospital, having been psychologically liberated by McMurphy. When McMurphy is wheeled back into the ward after surgery, he is unrecognizable, an empty husk. The narrator suffocates him in an act of mercy killing, then escapes out a window and begins hitchhiking toward his tribal home.

**Ken Kesey Timeline**

- 1935** Ken Elton Kesey is born on September 17 in La Junta, Colorado to dairy farmers Fred A. and Geneve Kesey.
- 1946-1953** After being discharged from the Navy, Fred Kesey moves with his family to Springfield, Oregon. In high school, Ken boxes, wrestles, plays football, and is voted "most likely to succeed."
- 1953-1957** Ken attends the University of

Oregon in Eugene, earning a degree in speech and communications. He marries his high school sweetheart, Faye Haxby, in 1956.

**1958** Ken completes *End of Autumn*, an unpublished novel.

**1959-1961** Ken enrolls in the graduate writing program at Stanford University, where he studies with Malcom Cowley, Wallace Stegner, Richard Scowcraft, and Frank O'Connor. He completes another unpublished novel, *Zoo*, in 1960. The same year, he volunteers for government drug experiments, then begins working as a psychiatric aide in 1961. These experiences form the foundation for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

**1962** *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is published. Ken moves to Florence, Oregon, to research a novel on logging.

**1963** Kesey moves to La Honda and finished his second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*.

**1964** *Sometimes a Great Notion* is published. Ken and the Merry Pranksters ride their psychedelic bus driven by Neal Cassady across the country.

**1965** Ken is arrested for possession of marijuana.

**1966** Ken is arrested again for possession. He flees to Mexico, where he continues experimentation with LSD and other drugs. He is arrested when he returns to the United States. Congress criminalizes LSD.

**1968** Ken moves to Pleasant Hill, Oregon and completes his jail journal. Neal Cassidy dies in Mexico, and Tom Wolfe publishes *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* about the Merry Pranksters.

**1969** Ken refuses to go to Woodstock with the Merry Pranksters, marking the beginning of the group's demise.

**1970** Ken makes *Atlantis Rising*, an unreleased movie for children.

**1971** Ken edits *The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalogue* with

Paul Krassner.

**1973** *Kesey's Garage Sale* is published.

**1974** Kesey begins *Spit in the Ocean*, a serial publication.

**1975** A cinematic version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is released. It wins five Academy Awards. Kesey refuses to see the movie and sues for breach of contract, settling out of court the following year.

**1976** *Spit in the Ocean No.2* is published.

**1977** *Spit in the Ocean No.3* is published.

**1978** *Spit in the Ocean No.4* is published.

**1979** *Spit in the Ocean No.5* is published.

**1981** *Spit in the Ocean No.6* is published.

**1984** Ken's younger son, Jed, is killed in an accident.

**1986** *The Demon Box* is published. At readings he performs on the "Thunder Machine," a 1962 Thunderbird converted into a musical instrument.

**1988** *Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear* is published.

**1990** *The Further Inquiry* is published.

**1991** *The Sea Lion* is published.

**1992** *Sailor Song* is published.

**1994** *Last Go Around* is published.

**2001** Kesey dies on November 10 after surgery for liver cancer.

### Author Sketch

A literary bridge between the Beat writers and 1960s counterculture, Ken Kesey was born on September 17, 1935 in La Junta, Colorado. In 1946, the family moved to Oregon. After high school, Kesey married Faye Haxby, his high school sweetheart, and the two raised three children and remained married throughout his life. Kesey earned a B.A. in Speech and Communications at the University of Oregon in 1957, then enrolled in the creative writing program at Stanford. During these years, he volunteered at a local Veteran's Administration Hospital as a test subject for psychedelic drugs, including LSD 25. He also worked in a mental hospital, which experience became material for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

After *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, his most successful novel, was published, Kesey formed The Merry Pranksters, a counterculture group best known for

psychedelic parties. The group's trip across the U.S. in an old school bus driven by Neal Cassady is the subject of Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-aid Acid Test*. After being arrested for marijuana possession, Kesey fled to Mexico, then returned and served five months. Once released, he returned to Oregon, where he lived until his death on November 10, 2001.



## Critic's Corner

An international bestseller, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a classic and one of the best-known English-language fiction works of the twentieth century. The critique of conformist society remains relevant to contemporary readers, and, more importantly, accessible. This accessibility is largely a product of Kesey's deft use of extended symbolism and recognizable literary archetypes and imagery. The appropriation of Christian imagery and literary precedents like *Moby Dick* frame the narrative in highly specific contexts, allowing for the piercing commentary to be couched in a way that is not pedantic.

The various objections to the novel almost exclusively deal with content, not the writing. Feminist critics note its virulent misogyny; women (including a nine-year-old girl with whom McMurphy claims to have lost his virginity at age ten) are almost entirely "ball-cutters" or "whores." Clinical psychologists object to the notion that the patient-caretaker relationship is inherently adversarial and the idea that mental illness is mostly a social construct. A 2007 book by Edward Shorter and David Healy, *Shock Therapy: The History of Electroconvulsive Therapy in Mental Illness*, even identified the depictions in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* as a contributor to the bad reputation and decline in use of electroconvulsive therapy, which had been a largely successful treatment for several mental illnesses. While these and other critiques of the novel are not without merit, they neither detract from the novel's literary significance, nor obscure its basic themes.

## Bibliography

Shorter, Edward, and David Healy. *Shock Therapy: The History of Electroconvulsive Therapy in Mental Illness*.

New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007.  
McClanahan, Ed, Ed. *Spit in the Ocean: All About Ken Kesey*. New York: Penguin, 2003.  
Perry, Paul. *On the Bus: The Complete Guide to the Legendary Trip of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and the Birth of the Counterculture*. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1990.  
Porter, M. Gilbert. *The Art of Grit: Ken Kesey's Fiction*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982.  
Porter, M. Gilbert. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Rising to Heroism*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.  
Safer, Elaine B. *The Contemporary American Comic Epic: The Novels of Pynchon, Gaddis, and Kesey*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989.  
Tanner, Stephen L. *Ken Kesey*. Boston: Twayne, 1983.  
Whitmer, Perer O. and Bruce VanWyngarden. *Aquarius Revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture that Changed America*. New York: Macmillan, 1987.

## Other Works by Ken Kesey

*Sometimes a Great Notion*, 1964  
*Kesey's Garage Sale*, 1973  
*The Day After Superman Died*, 1980  
*Demon Box*, 1986  
*The Further Inquiry*, 1990  
*Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear*, 1990  
*The Sea Lion*, 1991  
*Sailor Song*, 1992  
*Last Round Up*, 1994

### MEDIA VERSIONS

#### Audiobook

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Durkin Hayes, 1987, abridged  
*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, HighBridge, 1993, abridged, read by Ken Kesey  
*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Blackstone Audio, 2005, unabridged  
*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, HighBridge, 2006, abridged

#### DVD/VHS

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Warner Home Video, 1975

#### Large Print

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Macmillan Library Reference, 1994

**Play Adaptation**

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Dale Wasserman, 1970.

**Objectives**

**General Objectives**

- 1.To read and discuss counterculture fiction
- 2.To develop critical reading, thinking, and writing skills
- 3.To expand reading and speaking vocabulary
- 4.To gain a deeper appreciation of literature through close reading and analysis
- 5.To track and decipher extended metaphors
- 6.To identify significant themes and motifs
- 7.To read literature with an understanding of historical and social context
- 8.To understand and deploy literary terminology
- 9.To evaluate the veracity of an unreliable narrator's claims

**Specific Objectives**

- 1.To analyze Chief Bromden's perspective in relation to his narrative
- 2.To contrast nature and machinery in the novel
- 3.To explore the novel's theme of sexuality
- 4.To discuss representations of women in the novel
- 5.To investigate the narrator's use of figurative language
- 6.To track Christian imagery
- 7.To discuss the novel's socio-political implications
- 8.To characterize Randle McMurphy
- 9.To analyze the novel's theme of castration
- 10.To chart and discuss the power dynamics at play in the narrative

**Literary Terms and Applications**

**Metaphor:** a comparison between two unlike things. Fog is one of the central metaphors of the novel.

**Symbol:** an object or action in a literary work that stands in for another object, action, or idea.

McMurphy's lobotomy is a symbolic castration, the assault on Nurse Ratched a symbolic rape..

**Unreliable Narrator:** a narrator in a piece of fiction whose perspective, situation, bias, or altered perception makes his/her viewpoint suspect. Chief Bromden is an unreliable narrator, his occasional hallucinations and paranoia shading his understanding of the events around him.

**CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES**

**Film**

- A Beautiful Mind*, 2001, Universal
- Cool Hand Luke*, Warner, 1967
- Girl, Interrupted*, Sony, 1999

**Internet**

- Lesson Plans for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*  
<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/kesey.html>
- National Institute of Mental Health's Teacher Guide to Mental Illness  
[http://science.education.nih.gov/supplements/nih5/mental/guide/guide\\_toc.htm](http://science.education.nih.gov/supplements/nih5/mental/guide/guide_toc.htm)

**Novels**

- Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*
- William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*
- Albert Camus, *The Stranger*
- Hannah Green, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*
- Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*
- Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
- Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*
- George Orwell, *1984*
- Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*
- Thomas De Quincy, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*
- Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

**Nonfiction**

- Neal Cassady, *The First Third*
- Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*
- Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*

**Plays**

- Peter Schaffer, *Equus*
- William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

**Poetry**

- Gregory Corso, "Vision of Rotterdam"
- Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "I Am Waiting"
- Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"
- Ted Hughes, "The Tender Place"

**Short Fiction**

- Anton Chekhov, "Ward 6"
- Edgar Allan Poe, "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether"

## Themes and Motifs

### Themes

- mental illness
- bravery
- self-sacrifice
- sexuality
- conformity
- individuality
- social conventions
- gender
- castration
- power dynamics
- vitality

### Motifs

- Actual size distorted to reflect personal power
- Conflict between The Natural and The Artificial
- Alternative understandings of mental illness
- Castration as the ultimate expression of control
- Randle McMurphy liberating/empowering the patients

## Meaning Study

1. It's the truth even if it didn't happen. (p. 13)

*(At the end of the first chapter, the narrator discusses his own narration and concludes with the above line. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this paragraph is that it reveals that the present narration involves past events (presumably written after the Chief's escape), despite the use of the first person present tense. There are two ways to interpret the idea that the events described are true even if they didn't happen. First, the novel tends to prefer figurative truth over literal truth, distorting reality to make deeper points about characters, the ward, and society. A good example is the figurative use of literal size. Second, the line can be making a point about the nature of perception. Even if a perception is false (like a hallucination), it was nevertheless experienced and thus true in some limited way. If a person reacts to a hallucinatory experience, then the experience affected them and caused the behavior, even if the hallucination was completely divorced from objective reality.)*

2. People who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to. (p. 57)

*(The above line comes from McMurphy's depiction of Nurse Ratched as a "ball-cutter." He claims that her true intention is to disarm the patients and make them conform to her rules and ideals and that literal or figurative castration is the most effective means to this end. The conversation firmly establishes the conceptual stakes in the antagonism between Nurse Ratched and McMurphy. The nurse seeks mass conformity and is willing to "hit below the belt" to win, while McMurphy is the free spirit that must be tamed.)*

3. The shorts under his work pants are coal black satin covered with big white whales with red eyes. ... "She gave them to me because she said I was a symbol." (p. 76)

*(The "she" in the lines above is the college student who gave the boxer shorts to McMurphy. The white whales on his underwear paired with the notion that he is a literary symbol clearly is meant to reference Moby Dick. In this analogy, McMurphy represents the whale, Nurse Ratched the tyrannical and obsessed Captain Ahab, and Chief Bromden the outcast Ishmael. The character and plot similarities are numerous. Like Ahab, Nurse Ratched destroys her "ship" (the ward) in a quest to capture/tame the elemental McMurphy.)*

4. You're making sense, old man, a sense of your own. You're not crazy the way they think. (p. 120)

*(The narrator is internally addressing Colonel Matterson, the old man who gives incomprehensible lectures. Bromden thinks the above lines once he realizes that the Colonel's lectures are entirely composed of metaphors, though many are tangential, tangled, or simply absurd. It is natural that the narrator would be the one to recognize the sense beneath Matterson's nonsense, since Bromden himself sometimes distorts reality to get at deeper truths.)*

5. There are forty patients on the ward, Mr. McMurphy. Forty patients and only twenty voted. (p. 124)
- (In the lines above, Nurse Ratched is telling McMurphy that his vote to temporarily change the television viewing rules in order to watch the World Series has been defeated because of a technicality. The majority of votes counted as*

*"Nays" were actually people too incompetent to understand the question or to be bothered raising their hands. This perversion of the democratic process is an extension of the novel's concern with the machinations of the "Combine," the military-industrial complex intent on enforcing unthinking conformity.)*

6. There is a marked disregard for discipline and authority. (p. 134)  
*(Privately discussing McMurphy's behavior amongst themselves, the doctors conclude that he is a prototypical psychotic, noting that he has a "disregard for discipline and authority." The irony is that McMurphy's disregard for misused authority is exactly what allows those in power to diagnose and hold him against his will. In other words, he's crazy to act as if he were sane. This is one of the scenes that suggests that insanity is a social, not mental, disease, that mental illness is primarily defined by social convention. This particular implication has been criticized by psychologists as unfairly representing debilitating mental illnesses.)*
7. She walked right on past, ignoring him just like she chose to ignore the way nature had tagged her with those outsized badges of femininity, just like she was above him, and sex, and everything else that's weak and of the flesh. (p. 138)  
*(This is one of the many passages in which the narrator refers to Nurse Ratched's breasts and her apparent discomfort with them. Her breasts place her in two different symbolic tensions: feminine vs. masculine and machine vs. nature. In the first tension, masculinity is aligned with a drive to dominate, femininity with a drive to nurture. In the second tension, her breasts are symbols of vestigial humanity.)*
8. Five thousand kids lived in five thousand houses, owned by those guys that got off the train. The houses looked so much alike that, time and time again, the kids went home by mistake to different houses and different families. Nobody ever noticed. (p. 204)  
*(As they drive to the coast to go fishing, Chief Bromden sees a new commuter train line and suburbs, leading to the above fantasy of radical conformity. The contemporary reader may view the scene as hallucinatory, but the post-war*

*suburbanization of America actually looked very much like the narrator's description (example: Levittown). This scene is important because it allows the reader to glimpse the social context in which the novel was written, particularly the conformity of the 1950s against which it is reacting.)*

9. He knows you have to laugh at the things that hurt you just to keep yourself in balance, just to keep the world from running you plumb crazy. (p. 212)  
*(Amid the chaos of the fishing expedition, McMurphy laughs. This is one of the many scenes in which his laughter is an essential component. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, he is heard laughing before ever being seen. McMurphy's laughter is an expression of his basic vitality, and it infects those around him. The tail end of the line is one of several ironic references to being "crazy" by a narrator who regularly has paranoid hallucinations.)*
10. I got sick. It wasn't the practices, I don't think, it was the feeling that the great, deadly, pointing forefinger of society was pointing at me—and the great voice of millions chanting, "Shame. Shame. Shame." It's society's way of dealing with someone different. (p. 257)  
*(Harding explains that the root of his mental illness was the pressure of being different and the feeling that society in general disapproved of him. The "practices" are presumably homosexual (supported by veiled references in his wife's visit), technically classified as a mental illness at the time. Harding's case contrasts sharply with other patients'. While the novel depicts mental illness generally as either socially imposed or socially defined, Harding's case accurately fits this definition, in contrast to schizophrenia, which is a demonstrable illness.)*

### Comprehension Study

1. How are women portrayed in the novel?  
*(The women of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest generally fall into two categories: "ball-cutters" and "whores." The women that McMurphy calls "ball-cutters" are strong women portrayed as intent on usurping male power by figurative or literal castration. Nurse Ratched is the most obvious example of this group, which also includes Chief Bromden's*

mother and Billy Bibbit's mother. The opposite type of woman is the stereotypical "happy hooker," a woman content to submit to male power and be a means for male sexual gratification.)

2. Discuss the novel's theme of castration.

*(Most obvious in the character of McMurphy, male power is directly connected to sexual potency. Castration is the process by which the male patients are disempowered and made complacent. McMurphy's lobotomy is a metaphorical castration, ordered by the "ball-cutter" Nurse Ratched. Rawler's literal castration is interesting because it is self-inflicted. The narrator is curious at Rawler's impatience, noting "all the guy had to do was wait," implying that the institution would have eventually performed a figurative castration. That he performs the procedure himself also refers to the patients' complicity in their subjugation; the majority of patients are in the hospital voluntarily.)*

3. How is sexuality related to mental health in the novel?

*(As evidenced in the characters, the novel links an open sexuality to sanity and repressed or hidden sexuality to insanity. McMurphy's conversation centers around open expressions of his sexuality, often in an attempt to challenge Nurse Ratched's totalitarian regime. Candy and Sandy, the prostitutes, are presented as equally sane and sexual. In contrast, the repression of sexual desire results in mental illness. Harding's inability to reconcile his homosexuality with social norms is presented as the root of his psychological problems, and Billy Bibbit commits suicide rather than face the consequences of his sexual activity.)*

4. Discuss the relationship between real and figurative size.

*(The narrator frequently uses size to represent a character's personal power. At the beginning of the novel, he imagines Nurse Ratched swelling to her "real" size, "as big as a tractor." Similarly he describes McMurphy as "a giant." Changes in size reflect changes in relative power. He describes how McMurphy makes him "big again" and how his mother grew as his father shrank.)*

5. Analyze the metaphor of fog.

*(The hallucinatory fog that Chief Bromden imagines issuing from machinery hidden in the walls refers to the patients' complacent lack of clarity. This psychic "fog" is principally produced by their medication and electroshock therapy. While the fog obscures reality, it also hides the patients, providing safety (which explains the voluntary commitments). McMurphy forces the men out of the fog, dragging them into reality.)*

6. How is the ward a microcosm of society?

*(A reflection of 1960s radical politics, the novel presents the authoritarian regime of Nurse Ratched as a microcosm of life in the industrialized world. McMurphy, a free spirit, represents individuality, which the "Combine" seeks to crush in order to maintain its ruthlessly efficient machinery. This regime is maintained through physical punishments and mental/emotional manipulation. Electroshock therapy is analogous to execution by electrocution, while the manipulation of thoughts and emotions is produced by everything from religion to advertising. That most patients can "check out" of the ward at any time refers to the level of voluntary collusion necessary for such systems to work.)*

7. Discuss Christian imagery in the novel.

*(McMurphy is clearly a Christ-like figure. He sacrifices himself willingly to liberate the patients on the ward. The electroshock therapy table is explicitly described as cross-like, its cap a "crown of thorns." If the electroshock therapy is analogous to crucifixion, the lobotomization stands in for a spear in his side. Billy Bibbit is somewhat of a Judas figure, betraying McMurphy to Nurse Ratched and then taking his own life. In this model, Chief Bromden's killing of McMurphy is analogous to the ascension. Though McMurphy's personal history might seem to contradict his status as a Christ-like figure, his penchant for consorting with prostitutes makes sense if one considers Candy Starr to refer to Mary Magdalene.)*

8. How does the novel represent race?

*(At first read, Kesey's use of race seems problematic at best. The African-American orderlies are depicted as petty and vicious, their temperaments the product of their race. Nurse Ratched is shown as being a doll-like white and her*



*authority (and whiteness) is transmitted to the orderlies through their white uniforms. However, this use of race resolves easily if the novel is read as a social critique. Having disempowered non-whites, the Combine then drafts them into minor positions in its hierarchy, perpetuating its power structure. Considering that the "Combine" is the military-industrial complex, in context the African-American orderlies are reminiscent of the military's disproportionate drafting of minorities during the Vietnam conflict.)*

9. Discuss the theme of nature versus machine. *(The tension between nature and machine aligns along the primary conflict between characters. McMurphy represents the natural, which the novel depicts as involving open sexuality, a semi-nomadic existence, and a grounding in the physical. While his violent and sexual tendencies lead to his diagnosis of "psychotic" by representatives of the Combine, they are the same qualities that are romanticized by the narrator and place him in direct opposition to Nurse Ratched. Imagined by the narrator as more machine than human, her only connection to nature is her large breasts, which she tries to conceal behind the uniform that is a symbol of her authority and connection to the Combine.)*
10. How is the tub room's control panel symbolic? *(Most obviously, the control panel represents Chief Bromden's empowerment over the course of the novel. As McMurphy restores his confidence and ability to resist the narcotic complacency of the ward, Chief Bromden is able to lift the panel. Once his restoration is complete, he wrenches it from the floor and smashes a window to escape entirely. That it is a control panel is not incidental. Though it is nonfunctional on the literal level, it represents the various controls over patients in the ward and more generally over people in the industrialized world.)*

### How Language Works

1. There are several highly ironic references to insanity: "If somebody'd of come in and took a look, men watching a black TV, a fifty-year old woman hollering and squealing at the back of their heads about discipline and order and recriminations, they'd have

thought the whole bunch of us was crazy as loons" (p. 128). This particular passage is doubly ironic because 1) Nurse Ratched, the mental health expert, appears the least sane and 2) it is one of the most lucid moments for the patients.

2. While McMurphy is portrayed as a savior, his presence is also dangerous: "I'm just getting the full force of the dangers we let ourselves in for when we let McMurphy lure us out of the fog" (p. 130). Because fog obscures both ways, there is a relative safety in it, a safety from predators and enemies, both real and imagined.
3. The narrator consistently intuits events to come. When tension rises between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched, Chief Bromden hears, "Friday-night ringing" (p. 169). Once the tension is broken into open confrontation, the noise disappears: "The ringing that was in my head had stopped" (p. 173). Structurally, the hallucinatory ringing brackets the chapter, introducing the tension, then disappearing once it's resolved. In the plot, the ringing serves as a form of foreshadowing.
4. Chief Bromden's mother is portrayed as a parasite: "He [Bromden's father] was real big when I was a kid. My mother got twice his size" (p. 186). The reversal in size is a metaphor for her usurping the father's power and masculinity.
5. The Chronicles exist on the verge of humanity: "Old Chronicles wake up sudden some nights, before anybody else knows a guy's died in the dorm, and throw back their heads and howl" (p. 192). The howling is itself bestial, but the intuition of death is akin to stories of pets intuiting the impending death of a human.
6. When they return from the fishing trip, an Acute wants to know "how come McMurphy looked so beat and worn out where the rest of us looked red-cheeked and still full of excitement" (p. 216). This line is similar to the one in No. 4, a physical transformation reflecting a transfer of personal energy/power. The main difference is that McMurphy's is the result of self-sacrifice, while Bromden's mother's is the

result of psychic vampirism.

## Across the Curriculum

### Drama

1. Choose one character and read a selection of his or her lines aloud. Make a list of defining characteristics and discuss the character in relation to the themes of the novel and the other characters. Make a list of speaking patterns peculiar to that character.
2. Read Dale Wasserman's 1970 play adaptation of the novel. Discuss significant changes, their probable justifications, and how they alter the plot, themes, and characters. Discuss the adaptation's successes and failures.
3. Choose a confrontation between Randle McMurphy and Nurse Ratched and script it in the form of a scene in a play. Use standard script format, including stage directions.
4. Using what you know of the characters, act out one of the group meetings.

### Gender Studies

1. Make lists defining gender roles in the novel. Are the gender roles of the novel indicative of its contemporary society or idiosyncratic to the author?
2. Research and present a short speech on gender-based differences in speech patterns. Relate your findings to the speech patterns of the characters in the novel.

### Art

1. Research and make a pamphlet on art therapy. Include its history, theory, dominant practices, goals, and notable figures in the field.
2. Make a mural of what you consider to be the most significant moment in the novel. Include details from the text. Explain your selection and artistic decisions to a partner.
3. With a group, research and design a tourist's brochure for an historical psychiatric hospital.
4. Gathering images from the internet, make a digi-

tal collage of life in the early 1960s. Include significant people, events, places, ideas, symbols, and recurring images.

### Film

1. Watch *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Warner Home Video, 1975). Discuss how the film enhances or alters your understanding of the book. Which scenes were highlighted in the film? Which were deleted? Why?
2. Watch *Cool Hand Luke* (Warner, 1967). Compare the protagonist to Randle McMurphy. Which themes link the film to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*?
3. Watch *Girl, Interrupted* (Sony, 1999). Compare the film's representation of mental health care to the novel's.

### Journalism

1. Compose a review of the novel. Examine online and print literary reviews and mimic the general format. Include a plot summary, comparisons to other literary works, and a judgment of its literary merit.
2. Choose and research an event from the last year relating to mental health care and write an informative article about it.
3. Prepare a list of interview questions for Chief Bromden. Trade lists with a partner and write responses from Bromden's perspective using what you know from the novel. Discuss your responses.
4. Using a crossword puzzle generator (like the one at <http://www.crosswordpuzzlegames.com/create.html>), create a crossword puzzle based on characters, places, events, and vocabulary from the novel. Print your puzzles, exchange with partner, and complete them.

### Psychology

1. Choose five characters from the novel and make a list of their psychological symptoms. Research mental illnesses and write a one-paragraph diagnosis for each character.
2. Research and give an oral report on electroshock therapy. Include its development, history of

use, evaluations of its successes and failures, and significant people associated with it.

3. Choose a major figure in the development of psychology and give a chalk talk about his/her contributions, history, and main ideas.

**Social Studies**

1. Make an informative website about The Merry Pranksters. Include their history, significant personalities, literary representations, and social importance.
2. Research and write a short paper on conformity in the 1950s in America. As a class, discuss prevailing trends against which *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* might have been responding.

**Language**

1. Keep a reading journal as you read. List every phrase that seems important or particularly aesthetically appealing. Discuss your selections with your classmates.
2. Assigning twenty words to each student, create a glossary of psychological terms. Each entry should include pronunciation, etymology, meaning, and a sample sentence.

**Composition**

1. Select what you consider to be the most significant scene in the novel and write an essay explaining it. Incorporate direct quotes, paraphrases, and MLA style citations.
2. Choose a minor character from the novel and write a series of journal entries in reaction to McMurphy's arrival, antics in the war, lobotomization, and death.
3. Choose one of the patients from the novel and write a short story about his life before he was hospitalized.
4. Compose a series of haiku poems about scenes, characters, ideas, events, or places from the novel.

**Literature**

1. Read a scholarly article on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and argue for or against the author's interpretation of the novel. Support

your arguments with quotes from both the book and the article.

2. Make a list of what you consider to be the novel's most important themes. Supply page numbers of important scenes illustrating each theme.
3. Create a character list for the novel. Include each character's name, nickname (if applicable), physical description, personality, and significance in the plot.
4. Choose a mode of literary interpretation like formalism, new criticism, new historicism, structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, Freudian, Lacanian, Jungian, phenomenological, read-response, Marxist, or feminist criticism. Write an essay in which you outline the basic ideas of the mode of interpretation and apply them to the novel.

**Alternative Assessment**

1. Read *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. Discuss the novel in relation to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, particularly with attention to similarities between characters, themes, and significant plot events.
2. Read another work by Ken Kesey and compare it to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* based on themes, literary technique, structure, characters, setting, action, and your personal reactions.
3. Read selections from *Madness and Civilization* by Michel Foucault. Discuss the ideas concerning madness, sanity, and social norms in relation to the novel.
4. Read one of the novels, plays, or poems listed in the *Cross-Curricular Sources* section of this guide. Compose an essay comparing or contrasting it to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* based on characters, themes, socio-political agenda, representation of mental illness, structure, or another basis of comparison.

**Standardized Test Preparation**

**Vocabulary**

1. As you read, note twenty words that you do not know. Look up each word's definition and

rewrite the sentences in which they appear using synonyms.

2. Make a glossary, choosing twenty of these words:

- acute
- apathy
- aplomb
- benevolence
- chronic
- coiffure
- commence
- concise
- deduce
- deliberation
- delude
- dispense
- drudgery
- ego
- fester
- fracas
- furor
- geriatric
- grievance
- gripe
- id
- impound
- impregnable
- inclination
- insinuate
- intolerable
- irate
- laceration
- liable
- lien
- lope
- matriarchy
- maudlin
- mortify
- notorious
- ogle
- overzealous
- pediatric
- permissive
- perverse
- placate
- psychopath
- quaint
- relinquish

- requisition
- sadistic
- spiel
- stoicism
- superego
- veritable

**Grammar and Mechanics**

1. Find examples of ten different punctuation marks in the novel.(ex: apostrophes, colons, commas, dashes, ellipses, exclamation marks, parentheses, question marks, quotation marks, and semicolons). Supply the original sentence for each and explain the mark's function.
2. Find five grammatically incorrect sentences in the novel. Explain the error and correct it.

**Writing**

1. Compose an essay about gender in the novel. You should have an introductory paragraph with a thesis statement, a body with at least three main ideas and a topic sentence in each paragraph, and a conclusion. Use MLA citations for quotes from the novel and include a Works Cited page and an outline.
2. Choose what you consider to be a significant passage from the novel. Compose a list of fifteen reading comprehension questions. Exchange lists with a partner, answer the questions, and discuss your responses.

## Vocabulary Test

Circle the definition that *best* fits the word.

1. drudgery

- a) boredom
- b) dull manual labor
- c) repetitive tests
- d) occurring in a vacant area

2. matriarchy

- a) group of organization governed by a council
- b) group or organization governed by a man
- c) group or organization governed by a woman
- d) group of organization governed by a family

3. astute

- a) barbed
- b) shrewd
- c) clairvoyant
- d) abrupt

4. irate

- a) unintelligible, garbled
- b) truthful
- c) obscured
- d) angry

5. forlorn

- a) miserable, alone
- b) resilient
- c) in need of assistance
- d) quiet

6. geriatric

- a) pertaining to physically challenged people
- b) pertaining to mentally incompetent people
- c) pertaining to aged people
- d) pertaining to abnormally aggressive people

7. maudlin

- a) sticky, sugary
- b) overly and unconvincingly sentimental
- c) sounding similar to a violin
- d) pertaining to memory

8. brash

- a) physically aggressive
- b) manipulative
- c) bold, audacious
- d) confident

9. lope

- a) to sever
- b) to howl
- c) silly, nonsensical
- d) easy gait

10. trite

- a) hackneyed
- b) concise
- c) meaningless
- d) rude

11. aplomb

- a) casual confidence
- b) sense of humor
- c) obesity
- d) the sound made when someone flops into a chair

12. lucid

- a) translucent
- b) sane, intelligible
- c) wolf-like in character
- d) corrosive

13. fraternize

- a) to domineer
- b) to form an organization
- c) to trick
- d) to socialize with

14. squalor

- a) collection of loud noises
- b) rowdy and lewd behavior
- c) condition of being dirty, neglected
- d) poverty

15. chicanery

- a) laughter
- b) trickery
- c) personal sacrifice
- d) understanding

## Comprehension Test A

### Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

Name the character(s) who fits these descriptions.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. educated and eloquent
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. consistently complains of fatigue
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. is tied to the bed at night
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. terrified of germs
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. scorned by his wife
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. transferred from Pendleton Work Farm
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. stutters
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. the Combine's chief agent on the ward, according to the narrator
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. the "aunt" who accompanies the fishing expedition
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. pretends to be deaf and dumb
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. gambler
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. terrified of his mother
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. former cavalry soldier
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. ward's official representative on the fishing expedition
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. McMurphy's main opponent

### Part II: Fact or Opinion (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true, F for false or O for opinion.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Randle McMurphy is psychotic.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Randle McMurphy is lobotomized.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Billy Bibbit commits suicide.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Candy Starr is arrested for aiding and abetting a fugitive from justice.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Dale Harding is homosexual.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The Acutes are permanent residents of the ward.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. The Chronics are permanent residents of the ward.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Nurse Ratched's intentions are inherently evil.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. McMurphy's first victory is winning the right to watch the World Series.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. The narrator is unreliable.

### Part III: Chronology (20 points)

Using the spaces provided, number the events in chronological order.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Chief Bromden lifts the control panel in the tub room for the first time.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Harding checks himself into the psychiatric ward.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Sefelt has an epileptic seizure in the lunch room.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. McMurphy struts around the ward wearing only a towel.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Chief relates his personal history to McMurphy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Harding is visited by his wife.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. A decadent party is thrown on the ward.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. A group of patients steal a boat.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. McMurphy receives electroshock therapy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. The tub room becomes a gaming room.

### Part IV: Essay Questions (30 points)

- 1. Discuss the portrayal of women in the novel.
- 2. Analyze the idea of the "Combine."
- 3. Contrast McMurphy and Harding.
- 4. Analyze fog as one of the novel's central metaphors.
- 5. Characterize the narrator.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Identification (30 points)

Identify the character(s) described in each quotation.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. rambling on and on with those goofy definitions of his
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. likes a double dose because he's scared to death of having a fit
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. all three of them sulky and hating everything
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. carried the fight to them by ... telling the cops they didn't have any jurisdiction over us, as we were a legal, government-sponsored expedition
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The big, hard body had a tough grip on life
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. [had] been captain of a PT boat in the Pacific and got the Navy Cross
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. the grate still clutched by his chubby pink and blue fingers
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. looked like a cowgirl trying to pass herself off as a society lady
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. a giant come out of the sky to save us from the Combine
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. like an expensive baby doll
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. crying and stuttering too hard to say anything else
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. When he lets his hands and face move like they want to ... they flow and gesture in a way that's real pretty to watch
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. redheaded with long red side burns
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. She couldn't rule with her old power any more, not by writing things on pieces of paper
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. in the hospital ... just to keep them from walking around the street

Part II: Short Answer (20 points)

Provide an answer to each of these questions:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Where did the narrator first encounter the fog to which he frequently refers?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. What does Nurse Ratched suspect is McMurphy's underlying motive for arranging to be transferred to the psychiatric ward?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. What are the sub-types of Chronics?

- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. According to Harding, how did the idea for electroshock therapy originate?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. What does the lifeguard reveal to McMurphy?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Why does Nurse Ratched refuse to lower the music volume?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. How does the patient on the Disturbed Ward commit suicide?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. How tall is Chief Bromden?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. What sport did the narrator play when he was young?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Why does Sefelt refuse to take his medication?

Part III: Fill-in (20 points)

Fill in the words that complete each statement.

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ is terrified when Nurse Ratched threatens to tell \_\_\_\_\_ that he has slept with Sandy.
- 2. McMurphy's stories often center around \_\_\_\_\_, usually in an attempt to make \_\_\_\_\_ uncomfortable.
- 3. McMurphy breaks the nurse station's \_\_\_\_\_ while reaching for \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4. After escaping from the ward, Chief Bromden claims to be a \_\_\_\_\_ on the way to \_\_\_\_\_.
- 5. Nurse Ratched knows the \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_ when they were both \_\_\_\_\_ nurses.

Part IV: Essay Questions (30 points)

- 1. How is physical size used metaphorically by the narrator?
- 2. Discuss the novel's theme of castration.
- 3. Why does Chief Bromden kill McMurphy?
- 4. Discuss the novel's perspective on race.
- 5. List McMurphy's tattoos and analyze their significance.

## Answer Key

### VOCABULARY TEST

1. B
2. C
3. B
4. D
5. A
6. C
7. B
8. C
9. D
10. A
11. A
12. B
13. D
14. C
15. B

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

1. Dale Harding
2. Pete Bancini
3. Chief Bromden
4. George Sorenson
5. Dale Harding
6. Randle McMurphy
7. Billy Bibbit
8. Nurse Ratched
9. Candy Starr
10. Chief Bromden
11. Randle McMurphy
12. Billy Bibbit
13. Colonel Matterson
14. Doctor Spivey
15. Nurse Ratched

#### Part II: Fact or Opinion (20 points)

1. O
2. T
3. T
4. F
5. O
6. T
7. F
8. O
9. F
10. T

#### Part III: Chronology (20 points)

1. 8
2. 1

3. 4
4. 2
5. 6
6. 5
7. 10
8. 7
9. 9
10. 3

#### Part IV: Essay Questions (30 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Identification (30 points)

1. Colonel Matterson
2. Fredrickson
3. the African-American orderlies
4. Dr. Spivey
5. Randle McMurphy
6. George Sorenson
7. Cheswick
8. Sandy
9. Randle McMurphy
10. Nurse Ratched
11. Billy Bibbit
12. Dale Harding
13. Randle McMurphy
14. Nurse Ratched
15. the Chronicles

#### Part II: Short Answer (20 points)

1. a military landing strip
2. to escape manual labor
3. Walkers, Wheelers, Vegetables
4. Two psychologists observed placidity in cows after a blow to the head induced seizures.
5. that he is at the complete mercy of Nurse Ratched
6. contends that older patients have poor hearing
7. self-castration
8. 6'7"
9. football
10. tooth damage/decay

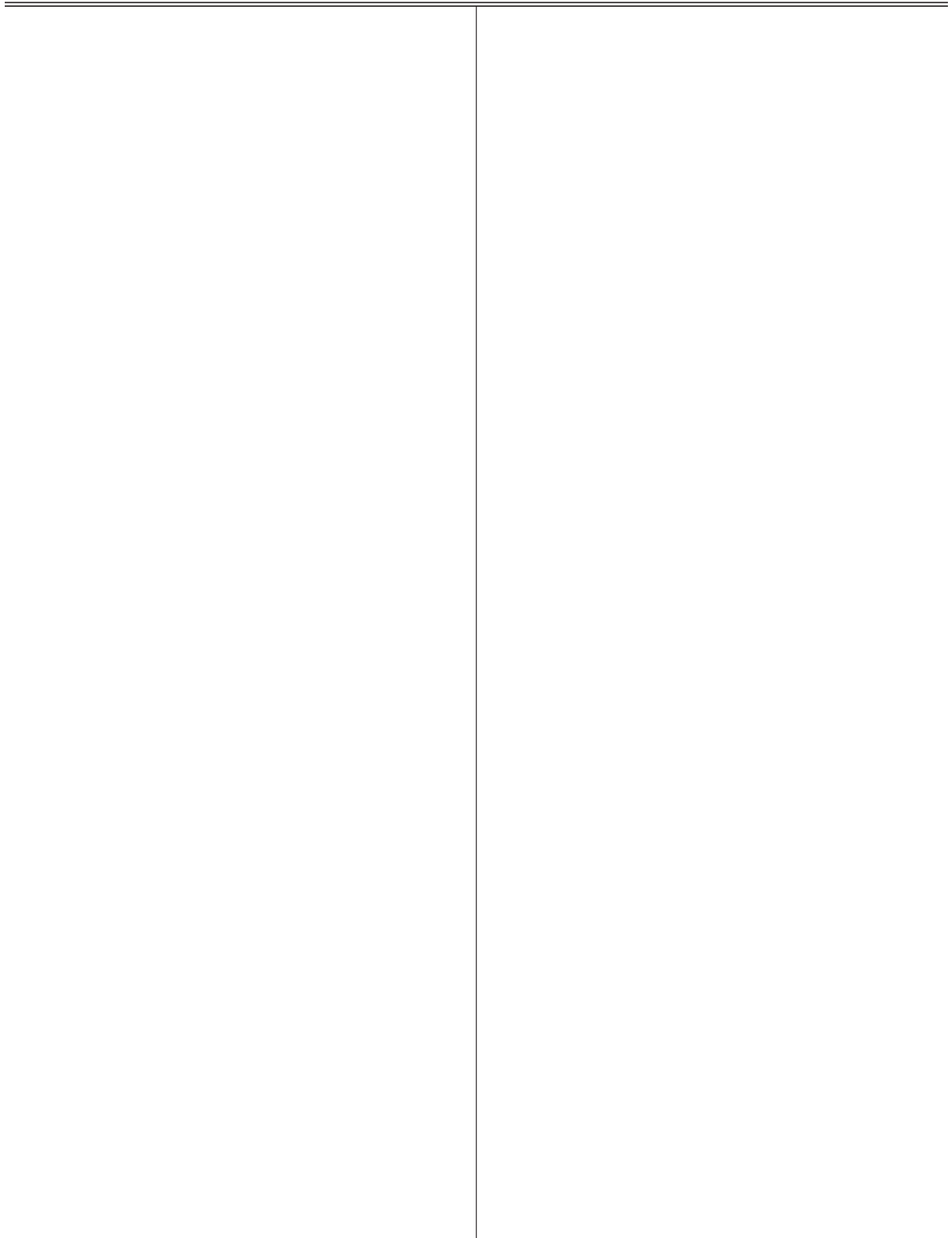
#### Part III: Fill-in (20 points)

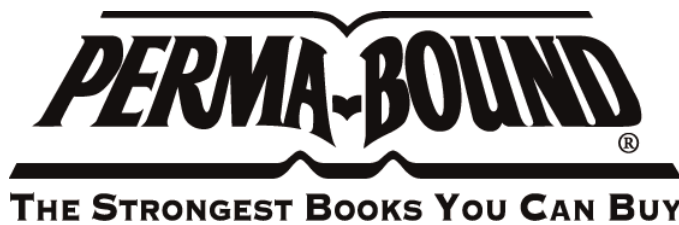
1. Billy Bibbit, his mother
2. sex, Sandy
3. window, cigarettes
4. wrestler, Canada
5. hospital administrator, Army

#### Part IV: Essay Questions (30 points)

Answers will vary.







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