Books of The Times; On Final Frontier, Nature Hits Back

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Sailor Song By Ken Kesey 533 pages. Pearson+Viking. $23.50.

Ken Kesey's wildly exuberant new book, "Sailor Song," is the first novel he has published since 1964. In the 28-year interval, he has brought out a collection of essays, "Demon Box"; several nonfiction works, among them "Kesey's Garage Sale" and "The Further Inquiry," and two children's stories, "Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear" and "The Sea Lion."

Still, in "Sailor Song" we are back with themes — the conflict between civilization and nature, the white man's marauding of the North American continent's natives — that preoccupied Mr. Kesey in his first two novels, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Sometimes a Great Notion." And though "Sailor Song" has considerable strength and originality, it is by no means the new form of fiction that some readers were led to expect by the vector of his early fiction and by the nearly three decades it has taken to produce this book.

The time of "Sailor Song" is some three decades from now, when America has begun to fragment into religious cults, and the ecological crisis has begun to spin out of control. The setting is the Alaskan fishing village of Kuinak, which is populated by DEAP's (Descendants of Early Aboriginal Peoples) and assorted refugees from the lower 48 states. Into this benighted setting cruises a Hollywood movie company aboard an ultramodern yacht called Silver Fox. The plan is to turn Kuinak into the setting for a film of a children's classic called "Shoola and the Sea Lion," by a presumably DEAP writer named Isabella Anootka.

What Mr. Kesey is up to here is often not very subtle. Some of the characters have labels attached to them as big and obvious as sandwich boards. The hero, Ike Sallas, is a disillusioned veteran of the environmental wars of the 90's, when he became an eco-terrorist, known as "the Bakatcha Bandit," because his daughter suffered from a fatal disease caused by chemical pollutants. Most of the citizens of Kuinak belong to a kind of Rotary Club called the Underdogs.

The villainous director of the movie company, Nicholas Levertov, is the albino offspring of a Kuinak native known as Alice the Angry Aleut. Nick and his partners plan to clean up Kuinak and turn it into a theme park once the movie has been completed. That he is an albino not only suggests the ultimate white man (often evil in Mr. Kesey's cosmology) but also the Nazi rocket man Blicero in "Gravity's Rainbow" by Thomas Pynchon, to whom Mr. Kesey pays several homages in "Sailor Song."

As for why Mr. Kesey has shifted his fictional setting from the Pacific Northwest of his first two novels to the Alaska of this one: "Because Alaska is the end, the finale, the Last Ditch of the Pioneer Dream. From Alaska there's no place left to go... So it came down to Alaska, the Final Frontier as far as this sick old ballgame goes. Top of the ninth..."

And of course in the final innings of "Sailor Song," nature rises up and punishes Western civilization with an apocalyptic electrical storm that zaps all its high-tech hardware and sends Kuinak back to its more primitive state.

Yet the way it is written, Mr. Kesey's novel doesn't strike you at all as the tendentious ideological drama that a summary of it makes it seem. For one thing, the story is narrated in a comically exaggerated style, full of ridiculous plays on words, that lends the book the reality of an animated cartoon. ("The pigs kept running until they reached the mountainous Kuinak Town Dump up at the tree line. One boar named Prigham, young and Mormonesque, proclaimed 'This is the place,' and they dug in.")

Even Mr. Kesey's more ideological flourishes have a comic-book flavor to them. Here is his description of the Underdogs woofing their dissatisfaction at a kennel meeting. "Ike heard the rumble rising — questions, demands, accusations... This wasn't any melodic howl of mutual Underdog blues: this was the dark and dangerous complaint of the mad underdog, of the left-out, the cheated, the long-toothed and empty-gutted. This was the universal growl of guys who had purchased the centerfold but didn't get the girl, of wives that had bought into the bubbles of daytime soap operas while life just got dirtier — this was the grumble of dreams being disappointed and glands being denied. What the crowd might do if that grumble kept growing to its uncharted end was anybody's guess."

At the same time, there are many passages in "Sailor Song" that are powerfully affecting. Mr. Kesey has an extraordinary command of the details of both technology and nature. There is a terrifying account of an out-of-control ride on a runaway railroad handcar. His fishing passages are compelling and his description of the concluding storm is altogether electric. Oddly enough, the children's story on which the film is to be based, which is printed in full a third of the way into the novel, is irresistible, despite Isabella Anootka's turning out to be a retired math teacher from New Jersey who "scrounged her stories together out of the ethnic wing of the public library."

Moreover, there are several characters in "Sailor Song" who really can't be ideologically pigeonholed beyond calling them passionate, instinctive and inclined to use their hearts when they ought to use their minds.

In any case, these characters get under your skin. "Sailor Song" gets under your skin. "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," the book that made Ken Kesey famous, worked its effects so powerfully that it was only when you stopped to think about it that you realized the speciousness of its controlling metaphor, that America was an insane asylum run by a lobotomizing mother.

"Sailor Song" doesn't seduce a reader as irresistibly as "Cuckoo" did. Yet in its way it's a more persuasive celebration of the values Mr. Kesey embraces in it, the sea over the land, the instinctive over the intellectual, the natural over the civilized. It's disappointing that he hasn't written another "Cuckoo's Nest," with a more convincing foundation. But it is good to have him writing fiction again. He is a novelist of unusual force.

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