I'm an oscars junkie, so Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest exists, for me and maybe a lot of other people, first as a quintessential Jack Nicholson film, with Randle P. McMurphy emerging as a role almost tailor-made for an actor who often bleeds his charisma into the contours of otherwise thinly written characters. Some of Nicholson's appeal, I think, comes from a glee in watching his powerful antiauthoritarian presence. We see it in his chicken-salad sandwich scene in Five Easy Pieces and his defiant courtroom bellowing in A Few Good Men. It's a bit of wish fulfillment, the urge to answer back to a world set on order, control, and strict authority, and McMurphy affords us many opportunities to see rebellion as a game of shrewd tactics and cunning.

McMurphy is, no doubt, the draw in the novel as well, and his attractiveness to a wide audience isn't difficult to understand. The desire to flip off the world comes with little satisfaction unless it can be done with some kind of adoring audience as witness. Whether that audience is mostly male is up for debate, but I have my suspicions, given the highly charged denouement with Nurse Ratched. The unquestionably cool Penguin Classics edition that I bought for this reading, with a graphic-novel cover featuring McMurphy, reinforces the myth of McMurphy as near-hunky rebel, plus it has illustrations by Kesey himself, and a foreword by none other than Chuck Palahniuk. When I read the book for two nights at the Gallo Blanco hotel bar in Phoenix, it brought remarks from just about every bartender and server, all of them beguiled by the nifty packaging, setting down my margarita with a final comment along the lines of, I gotta pick that up sometime.

It pleases me that a novel just over fifty years old still has such magnetism. But I chose to read Kesey's novel not for its memorable front man but for another character: the decidedly complex villain, Nurse Ratched, and the lingering questions of
her depiction in both the film and the book. The film version was difficult to cast (according to my well-loved paperback dish-fest, *Inside Oscar*), with formidable actresses like Anne Bancroft, Ellen Burstyn, Colleen Dewhurst, Angela Lansbury, and Geraldine Page all turning it down. This left the door open for little-known Louise Fletcher to sail into film history as one of the most hated women on the screen (and with a Best Actress Oscar to boot).

I thought the novel might give me some clues as to why so many talented women declined the role. Was the character’s celebrated treachery, as the novel’s reputation sometimes suggested, simply Kesey’s poisonous mix of misogyny and one-dimensional characterization?

To my surprise, the novel is narrated by Chief Bromden, whose quiet presence in the institution at first removes him from being an active participant in the plot. While he shields himself from the paralyzing scrutiny of the staff by playing deaf and dumb, his astute observational power proves instrumental in conveying the titanic forces of both McMurphy and Ratched. Since he is rarely a player (until McMurphy call his bluff), it’s initially easy to see Chief Bromden as less a character than a narrative device, though brilliantly employed. Like Nick Carraway does for Gatsby in that other American chestnut, Chief Bromden exists first as the chronicler of the hero, the witness to the myth in the making.

This does wonders for McMurphy, clearly, but Nurse Ratched is another matter. As a reader I’m still trying to put my finger on what to make of Chief Bromden’s introduction:

> Practice has steadied and strengthened [Nurse Ratched] until now she wields a sure power that extends in all directions on hairlike wires too small for anybody’s eye but mine; I see her sit in the center of this web of wires like a watchful robot, tend her network with mechanical insect skill, know every second which wire runs where and just what current to send up to get the results she wants.

The vision is strictly his, as Bromden reminds us, but the effect is powerful. The novel swiftly renders Nurse Ratched not as a powerful woman, but more as a networked monster.

When McMurphy arrives at the ward and begins challenging her, everything we suspect of Ratched as a soul-sucking representative of authority gets confirmed. Everything is tossed at her, even to comic effect: “Hoowee, I’ve seen some bitches in my time,” exclaims McMurphy to the men. One patient’s response seems curiously
self-aware of the overreaching done to demean her. “A bitch? But a moment ago, she was a ball-cutter, then a buzzard—or was it a chicken? Your metaphors are bumping into each other, my friend.”

Villains exude a particular charisma all their own, especially when their disdain and contempt comes from unidentifiable sources. Part of Nurse Ratched’s magnetic presence in this novel is her mystery, her existence in the world as a person willing to display a coldly insincere concern that, nevertheless, gets eaten up by the neediest as genuine care. Curiously—and this is the novel’s deft use of Chief Bromden in the beginning—McMurphy can talk of ball-busting and nut-grabbing and soul-sucking, invoking her emasculating presence without her ever being in the room. And that’s my disappointment with the novel. Any more proximity, in terms of point of view, would leave Nurse Ratched too susceptible to self-justification. Yet the novel could have used more of her, especially as a more balanced and lethal counter to McMurphy. When she commits her final act against him, it’s less a product of the character’s deviousness than of the novel’s thematic sensibilities riding themselves out. The law always wins.

Why law and authority must be represented by matriarchy is a question that a second read might answer. Right now, it’s hard not to see something deeply disturbing about McMurphy’s infamous assault of Big Nurse at the end of the novel. The assault itself has narrative weight as the inevitable, culminating event in a battle that had always teetered toward sexual violence. But once it happens, Nurse Ratched is exposed (literally; McMurphy tears her uniform) as a gargantuan monster, a concealed threat who was always capable of a terrifying enormity: “[She screamed] when he grabbed for her and ripped her uniform all the way down the front, screaming again when the two nipple circles started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had even imagined, warm and pink in the light.”

It is, among other things, a cruel image, and surely the passage that prompts the most dissection. It’s too bad, since some of the book’s most astounding moments occur when the exposition takes Chief Bromden not strictly as narrator but as a shaky and terrified man on his own terms. His hallucinatory walk through a ward “fog” is exceptional, as revelatory as it is disorienting, and a flashback to the moment in which he experiences a discriminatory dismissal is poignant without being sentimental.

These are the flashes of exposition that gave me the sense that Chief Bromden, as a troubled man, full of a conflict, was rich enough to elevate the book past easier
notions of put-upon masculinity. They justified Bromden as the legitimate center. McMurphy is all swagger, an angel of mercy who comes in to show the men how to speak for themselves, but he’s also too much of a constructed ideal, a lamb for the slaughter. I was intrigued to hear from a few friends that they’d read *Cuckoo’s Nest* in high school, which makes sense to me in a way. I recognized McMurphy as a trope, almost, of so many of the books I encountered in that period, which were focused on masculinity in the making (*Lord of the Flies, Bless the Beasts and Children, A Separate Peace*). Just about all of them insinuate the disastrous consequences of lacking the confidence and self-awareness of masculine power. It’s the case in this novel, too, but little did I know that so much of the blame and terror of inadequacy would be placed so squarely on the female body.