

Bromden as the ideal  
confidant in one flew  
over the cuckoo's  
nest



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is unique in that the narrator and arguably main character of the story, Chief Bromden, is not the protagonist. Instead, McMurphy fills this role, and Bromden acts as both the main character, providing our view of the story, and the confidant of the true protagonist, McMurphy. Throughout the novel, Bromden acts as a both an intentional and unintentional confidant, and through his proximity to McMurphy becomes close enough to realize McMurphy's true fears and motivations and fears, ultimately carrying out McMurphy's final escape plan.

From the first scene in the book, we see that people say things in front of Bromden that they otherwise wouldn't have. Thanks to his perceived deafness and muteness, both staff and patients are comfortable saying things in front of Bromden that they otherwise would not have. For example, according to Bromden the black boys " don't bother not talking out loud about their hate secrets when I'm nearby because they think I'm deaf and dumb. Everybody thinks so." (Kesey 3) The idea that everyone is comfortable discussing private details with Bromden around is crucial to his development as a confidant in the novel, because even when he reveals his ability to speak later in the novel the people of the ward are conditioned to his role as a confidant. For example, even after revealing that he can hear by voting for being able to watch the World Series, Bromden is allowed to clean the staff room during a meeting. This role is also important for the narration of the novel, as it provides a means for the readers to know the intimate details of those on the ward while allowing the narration to remain from the perspective of a character.

While Bromden's perceived deafness and muteness serve him well in the role of a general ward confidant, he becomes closer to McMurphy by sheer proximity. From the beginning, McMurphy realizes that Bromden might not actually be deaf and dumb, because while talking to Bromden at night he realizes that Bromden responded when he mentioned that the black boys were coming, saying " Why you sure did give a jump when I told you that coon was coming, Chief. I thought somebody told me you was deaf." (Kesey 84) Later, the bond between McMurphy and Bromden grows as they continue to talk in their room. McMurphy gets Bromden to laugh by asking him about the gum under his bed, and makes him feel " big" again by slowly restoring his self-confidence. Their bond is at its strongest when they are sent to the disturbed ward together, and McMurphy experiences the electroshock therapy that the Bromden had experienced so many times.

Bromden acts in the role of McMurphy's confidant several times while their bond strengthens as previously described. When they are sent to the disturbed ward following their fight in the showers, McMurphy asks for Bromden's insight on what they are about to face, asking " What they got on the program for us now, Chief?" (Kesey 279) After McMurphy undergoes a lobotomy, Bromden demonstrates that he understands McMurphy beyond his appearance and the appearance that he put out to the world through acting as his confidant when he says " Sure, they can do things like scars and broken noses, but they can't do that look. There's nothing' in the face. Just like one of those store dummies..." (Kesey 321) By showing that he sees beyond the physicality and pure symbol of masculinity that most of the ward viewed as McMurphy, Bromden reveals that he has a deeper understanding

of the complexities of McMurphy's character, thanks mostly to their conversations as roommates. Additionally, by carrying out McMurphy's escape plan, throwing the console through the window and leaving, Bromden acts as a sort of successor to the spirit of McMurphy. Bromden's escape is McMurphy's legacy made tangible through the actions of the person he confided in taking his ideas and making them a reality.

At the beginning of the novel, we see Bromden as the perfect confidant. Because the other characters believe he can neither hear nor talk, they also believe there's no risk in being purely, brutally honest in his presence. While the readers know the deafness and muteness are a façade, the character's belief in them lends the readers a more informed narrator. Beyond the function as a narrator, though, Bromden's role as a confidant to the protagonist, McMurphy, allows him to act as the Irishman's spiritual successor, and carry out the escape plan where McMurphy had failed. Through proximity to McMurphy, conditioning of the ward, and Bromden's keen ear, he acts throughout the novel as the perfect confidant.