

Toole's 'Confederacy of Dunces'

A 'masterpiece' found

"A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES," by John Kennedy Toole: Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1980, \$12.95.

In 1976, when author Walker Percy was teaching at Loyola, a New Orleans woman brought him a huge, dog-eared manuscript of a novel, the work of her son, then dead almost 10 years, and insisted that he read it with an eye to publication.

Such amateur enthusiasms are only too familiar to any professional writer, and Percy's initial reaction was one of normal skepticism, but he agreed to look it over.

This time, however, things were different, for he knew almost immediately that he was confronted with that rarest of all literary phenomena, a genuine, undiscovered masterpiece.

FOR COLLEGE English teacher John Kennedy Toole, who tragically took his own life in 1969 at the age of 32, had produced a comic novel of epic proportions, set in his native New Orleans and starring the strangest grotesque that ever waddled through the French Quarter, Ignatius Reilly, an overweight, good-for-nothing genius whose misadventures are nothing short of Faustian.

"A Confederacy of Dunces" is not only Ignatius' fantastic story, but also an hilarious guided tour of the seamier side of New Orleans as well, for Toole had an unerring eye and ear for the sights and sounds of real life, and an infinite talent for transferring them to paper.

Grossly fat, peevisish, lazy Ignatius is as unlikable as he is preposterous, a spoiled mama's boy with an unused master's degree and a delicate pyloric valve, a walking disaster if there ever was one.

WHEN EXCITABLE (and slightly drunk) Irene Reilly, who has made a career of being a poor widow with a child to support, knocks down the balcony of a Quarter house with their 1946 Plymouth and is faced with an incredible bill for damages, son Ignatius has to go to work, a traumatic upheaval for one of his tender sensibilities and superior mental powers.

He accidentally finds an office job at Levy Pants, a moribund manufacturing firm, and soon has things arranged to suit him — he simplifies the filing system by throwing out the folders, rewrites the boss' letters to suit his own strong sentiments, and organizes a worker's strike that will arouse the envy and admiration of his activist New York girlfriend,

too late

Myrna Minkoff.

Fired, he moves on to an even more desperate endeavor — manning a giant hot dog cart in the Quarter, dressed as a startlingly obese pirate and applying all his twisted ingenuity to the menial task.

AROUND HIM SWIRL a merry-go-round of wonderful people — long-suffering Patrolman Mancuso, assigned the thankless duty of arresting suspicious characters; practical-minded, black man-in-trouble Jones, who knows where danger lies ("I been frame by that flo' walk at Woolsworth"); nails-hard Lana Lee, proprietress of the Night of Joy bar; Miss Trixie, the dotty, octogenarian relic in the Levy Pants office; and a streetful of other candidates for Mancuso's attention.

Author Toole's marvelous grasp of New Orleans pronunciation and syntax equals his characterization and perhaps is superior to his plotting — the book is a delight to read aloud, just for the sheer joy of recognizing the way spoken street English looks in print.

We can only wonder at the obviously tragic story behind the writing of this remarkable book, and grieve at the loss of such talent.

—BARBARA HODGE HALL