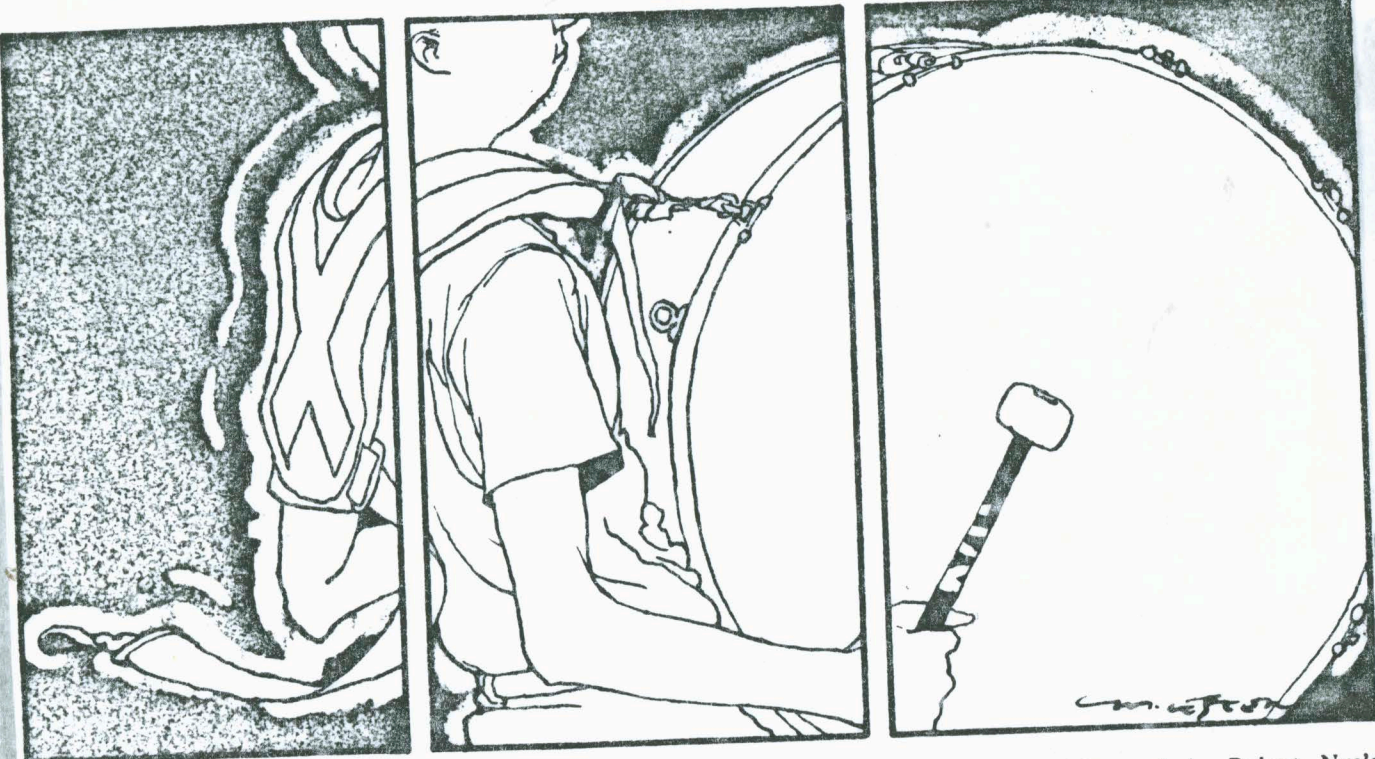


# The Thudding Of A Big, Dull Drum

By Thomas Cook



The story of how John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy Of Dunces* (Louisiana State University Press, \$12.95) came to be published certainly explains a good deal of the notoriety — and probably no small amount of the critical acclaim — it has received.

In 1976 while teaching at Loyola, Walker Percy received a call from the author's mother. She claimed her son — who had killed himself six years before — had written a great book, and she asked Mr. Percy to read it. Predictably, Mr. Percy declined, as any sane writer would. But the mother persisted; finally, Mr. Percy — with admirable generosity — agreed. He was duly given a badly smudged manuscript which he expected to be abominable. It was not, and as Mr. Percy read on, he became convinced the book deserved publication.

This is, of course, a dream story, very rare in publishing, one which smacks of the Hollywood ingenue suddenly rushed to stardom by way of Schwab's drug store.

Finally, however, the book must stand or fall upon its own merits, not those of its discoverer or even of those of a starry-eyed critical community more

charmed by romance than moored to actuality.

As a book, *A Confederacy Of Dunces* — though deserving of publication — is by no means the comic masterpiece it has been touted to be. Structurally, it is very loose, sometimes chaotic. Most of the characters are caricatures, and the language is so strained at times that one can almost feel sweat dropping from the author's brow.

**“Reilly is all bluster and blubber, his railing against modern culture nothing more than an excuse for sloth and dependency.”**

The “hero” is one Ignatius J. Reilly. In his introduction to the book, Walker Percy claims this character is “without progenitor in any literature.” This is a wild and feverish claim. It is also a ridiculous one. One thinks of Falstaff immediately, both in the original Shake-

spearean guise and in Robert Nye's more recent fictional rendering. Mr. Percy does admit, however, that Reilly is comparable to certain literary predecessors. He notes a similarity to Don Quixote. This is even worse, and it suggests more an advertising man's epiphany than the thoughtful consideration of a well-known and respected writer. To compare the sleazy, spoiled and repellent Reilly to the majestic character of Don Quixote is to simultaneously exalt the former and debase the latter. Reilly is no Don Quixote and Toole is no Cervantes.

But one must finally reach beyond this rabid overstatement and come to grips with the novel itself. Problems appear immediately, chiefly with Reilly himself. He is an obese and loquacious 31-year-old non-conformist who believes in nothing save “a good, strong monarchy with a tasteful and decent king who has some knowledge of theology and geometry and to cultivate the Rich Inner Life.” This is iconoclasm at its most infantile. Reilly is presented as one of R. D. Laing's absurdities, the crazy fellow we are all given to understand is saner than ourselves. This is the sort of

insufferable banality which keeps people reading *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, as if it actually had something important to tell us about the nature of mental illness. But clearly, Ken Kesey's novel is the work of a fine and gifted writer. The same cannot automatically be said of Mr. Toole, and because of his untimely death, we will never know the extent of his talent. But we can certainly say *A Confederacy Of Dunces* is by no means a great book or even a very good one.

The fact is, following Ignatius Reilly through the greasy perambulations of his life becomes tedious rather quickly. From his first confrontation with the police, through his employment at Levy Pants and later as a hot dog vendor to his final assignation with Myrna Minkoff, the wary reader looks in vain for some spark of intelligence or literary fire which will justify the journey. But Reilly is all bluster and blubber, his railing against modern culture nothing more than an excuse for sloth and dependency.

He is a kind of intellectual welfare chiseler, one who begrudges modern civilization while feeding off its fruits. His favorite pastime is rebuke, but the nature of his repudiation — and its language — is so hackneyed, juvenile and inconsequential that he becomes not the courageous opponent of modernity but its ultimate creation. His is a conservatism which conserves nothing, and like the society which surrounds and finally supports him, he has nothing of importance to say or do. While Quixote was a trumpet calling forth the better angels of our nature, Reilly is a big, dull drum thudding on for page after page with nothing but his own gas — and the incomprehensible indulgence of the society he despises — to keep him afloat.

If Reilly is the new hero for our age (as some critics have suggested), then he is perhaps an appropriate one — for he is a function of its malaise and negativism. The extraordinarily favorable critical reception of *A Confederacy Of Dunces* suggests rather than assaults the intellectual laziness and semi-literacy of our time.