

The life and times of Ignatius J. Reilly

John Kennedy Toole wrote this novel in the early '60s. He submitted it to a New York editor who held on to it for a couple of years, subjecting Toole to endless demands for revision. In 1969, for reasons that remain unclear but presumably had something to do with his failure to place the book, Toole committed suicide. He was 32 years old.

His mother remained a believer in the book and submitted it to a number of publishers — all of whom turned it down. In 1976 she took it to Louisiana State University Press, which quickly agreed to publish it as part of a fiction program it established in 1978. Paperback rights subsequently were sold to Grove Press, there has been lively interest in a movie adaptation, and a commercial success of sorts seems assured.

There's a temptation, in the circumstances, to regard the book as a freak — a novel more notable for its history than for its merits. Nearly a dozen New York publishers can't be wrong, can they?

Yes, they can; even the best of them make mistakes. "A Confederacy of Dunces" is a marvelous book. It may be a trifle shapeless and discursive, but that simply doesn't matter. This is rich, outrageous, hilarious, moving stuff.

That the novel should have caught Walker Percy's eye is not surprising, for it is strikingly in tune with Percy's own fiction. Its similarities to Percy's first novel, "The Moviegoer," are haunting: the New Orleans setting, the alienated protagonist, the preoccupation with movies, the despair over a soulless modern world. Yet there's no particular reason to think Toole had read "The Moviegoer," which was published at about the time he began writing his novel; in any event, "A Confederacy of Dunces" is anything but a work of imitation.

Its protagonist is Ignatius J. Reilly, a vast, 30-year-old blob of flesh who lives with his bibulous mother and spends his days either watching movies (because they feed his distaste for modern civilization) or pouring his angry protests onto tablet after tablet of Big Chief paper. He yearns for the Middle Ages: "A firm rule must be imposed upon our nation before it destroys itself. The United States needs some theology and geometry, some taste and decency. I suspect that we are teetering on the edge of the abyss."

Book Columnist

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A Confederacy of Dunces.

By John Kennedy Toole.
Louisiana State University Press.
\$12.95.

lent and smoky plea for urban renewal."

Reilly lasts at Levy Pants just long enough to incite its black labor force into feckless and hilarious rebellion. Then he's on to a new career as a hot-dog vendor, careening around the streets behind his bun-shaped cart, getting himself into trouble every time he turns around. Over and over again his adventures take him to the Night of Joy, a seedy bar; its black janitor, Jones, is a complex and wonderful character whose earthy wisdom stands in perfect counterpoint to Reilly's wild posturing — and who engineers the novel's delicious climatic scene.

Along the way, Ignatius J. Reilly takes on just about everything and everybody. With uncanny prescience, John Kennedy Toole recognized in the early '60s phenomena that didn't really emerge until the late '60s and early '70s. There is, for example, Reilly's girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff, who tells him in a letter: "I respect your mind and I have always accepted your eccentric tendencies and that is why I want to see you reach the plateau of perfect mental-sexual balance. (A good, explosive orgasm would cleanse your being and bring you out of the shadows.)" Or this description of a homosexual cocktail party:

Reilly has never really held a job, but when his mother has an auto accident involving property damage and needs money, he is nagged into finding work. Thus begins his wild sojourn into the real world. It takes him first to the offices of Levy Pants:

"Levy Pants was two structures fused into one macabre unit. The front of the plant was a brick commercial building of the 19th century with a mansard roof that bulged out into several rococo dormer windows, the panes of which were mostly cracked.

"Attached to this building, which Mr. Gonzalez referred to as 'the brain center,' was the factory, a barrilike prototype of an airplane hangar. The two smokestacks that rose from the factory's tin roof leaned apart at an angle that formed an outsized rabbit-eared television antenna, an antenna that received no hopeful electronic signal from the outside world but instead discharged occasional smoke of a very sickly shade. Alongside the neat gray wharf sheds that lined the river and canal across the railroad tracks, Levy Pants huddled, a si-

"Herringbones and madras and lamb's wool and cashmere flashed past in a blur as hands and arms rent the air in a variety of graceful gestures. Fingernails, cuff links, pinky rings, teeth, eyes — all glittered. In the center of one knot of elegant guests a cowboy with a little riding crop flicked the crop at one of his fans, producing a response of exaggerated screaming and pleased giggling. In the center of another knot stood a lout in a black leather jacket who was teaching judo holds, to the great delight of his episcene students. 'Oh, do teach me that,' someone near the wrestler screamed after an elegant guest had been twisted into an obscene position and then thrown to the floor to land with a crash of cuff links and other assorted jewelry."

As hilarious as it indisputably is, "A Confederacy of Dunces" is a serious, even mournful work. The eye it casts on the contemporary nuthouse is at once clinical and despairing; the compassion it extends to great, lumbering Ignatius is tender. As Percy writes: "It is a great pity that John Kennedy Toole is not alive and well and writing. But he is not, and there is nothing we can do about it but make sure that this gargantuan tumultuous human tragicomedy is at least made available to a world of readers." Amen.

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