

Genial Eccentricity

Lunacy, Farce Abound In Sardonic Novel

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES. By John Kennedy Toole. Louisiana State University Press. 338 pages. \$12.95.

By EDWARD WHITE

The story of this book is almost as strange as the book's story. Author-teacher Walker Percy found the manuscript thrust upon him by the author's mother. Despite her son's suicide at the age of 32 in 1969, she treasured his novel and finally found an ally in Percy, who contributes an incredulous but appreciative foreword to the present edition.

This strange and funny novel is unlike any book you are likely to read this year. Its central character is a gross, affected, over-educated simp, whose unfitness for modern life develops from the outrageous to something close to the heroic. Ignatius Reilly moves through New Orleans low life like a fat and flatulent Don Quixote, seeking honor and heroism where only cosmic types are to be found.

Reilly lives with his mother, heaving his great bulk out of bed only for necessities or routine outrage (such as roaring disdain at TV or at awful films at the neighborhood movie house). The room is a precious mess, carpeted with affected jottings designed to become a great philosophical treatise. When Mrs. Reilly drives into a building, neatly demolishing it, and is liable for damages, she sends Ignatius off to work. The jobs — first at Levy's Pants, where he attempts to mobilize the black workers against the almost nonexistent management, then vending Paradise hotdogs — lead to a series of comic situations.

The function of the plot is perfectly traditional for comic farce: throw characters into a series of new and entertaining situations, so that all comic eccentricities will be fully displayed.

Thus Ignatius finds himself wearing a scimitar as a street vendor, or trying to give a political lecture at a homosexual party, or bringing chaos to a lewd nightclub act.

The other characters have their own comic circles as well. Mrs. Reilly's friends include an elderly suitor (always on the trail of "the communiss") and several raucous female friends; the Levy family of Levy pants includes a maniac wife and a senile, irascible employee, Miss Trixie; the Night of Joy nightclub group includes a series of shady characters, mostly seen through the eyes of an exploited black ("Say, who you callin' 'boy.' You ain' Scarla O'Horror.").

Some readers will find the relentless farce and the inevitable genial eccentricity a bit much; others may find Ignatius, with his grossness and selfishness, too offensive to be amusing. But the book has a surprising winning quality that grows as one reads and that hangs on afterward.

"With the breakdown of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy," Ignatius writes in one of his Big Chief tablets. While Ignatius is as much the example as the opponent of "Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste," he gives the book its thematic focus in his lunatic disdain for all that is modern, commercial, popular. A god of misrule, he offers nothing but his own absurdity in answer to the "obscenities" that he fulminates against.

Meanwhile, genial confusion reigns everywhere, while the novel expresses delight in the strange diversity of people, particularly at their most fanatic.

Edward White, a professor of English, wrote this review for the Los Angeles Times.