

A Confederacy of Dunces

JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE
Louisiana State University Press, \$12.95

Observations of An Outcast

IGNATIUS REILLY IS A GIANT, bizarrely-clothed intellectual who lives with his mother in an old house in New Orleans. Ignatius is employed at various times as a clerk-agent provocateur and as a hungry hot dog vendor. He fails miserably at these professions. Ignatius' real job is one of watchdog. He rails at his country, its morals, television, movies, fools and generally everything that does not coincide with his worldview. Unfortunately for Ignatius, the only thing in the universe that Ignatius can find peace in is his own hundreds of pounds of flabby flesh. He goes to movies that he abhors, stuffing popcorn into his face while screaming vituperations at the screen. For hours on end he watches on television the decadent dances of American teenagers, filling the fetid air of his bedroom with abuse against the corrupting abomination.

One cannot help liking Ignatius. He refuses absolutely to conform to anything society tries to lay on him. But he pays for his blatant nonconformity with neuroses, paranoia, a first-class superiority complex, and not incidentally, loneliness. Ignatius finds relief in the only thing he trusts — himself and his *weltanschauung*. One is hard pressed not to make comparisons between Toole and his creation. Both are outcasts.

Ignatius is angry. Angry at the world and the stupid people who comprise it. He is alone and likes it that way. It is difficult to imagine a century in which Ignatius would be comfortable. Ignatius and, I think, Toole, who

committed suicide at thirty-two, unpublished, are true radicals. Toole-Ignatius is bitter toward injustice, banality, philistines, and ignorance. But neither are egalitarians. They are snobs, maybe even monarchists. Toole-Ignatius despises living in the world so he writes, inveighs, and scolds; Ignatius in his Big Chief diary and Toole in his fiction.

A Confederacy of Dunces is not a very good novel despite its rapturous welcome by many publications. Sections of the book are truly funny, but many pages are filled with banal characters and unimaginative dialogue.

(The book is written largely in dialogue.) When the hero, the massive misfit, Ignatius Reilly, commands the page the reading is fun and the invective flies. However, Toole has seen fit to populate the novel with very dull minor characters. Two people he does manage to bring to life besides Ignatius are Jones, the sagacious, under-employed, put-upon black janitor and the radical, over-sexed Myrna Minkoff, Ignatius' old 'flame' and pen pal.

When Ignatius is not the cynosure, the novel suffers badly, but the book is worth reading for its anger, humor, pertinence, sensibility, and consistent iconoclasm. —

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JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE'S *A Confederacy of Dunces* went unpublished until 1980, eleven years after his death. Toole committed suicide in 1969 at the age of thirty-two. It was only through the tireless efforts of his mother that it saw the light of publication at all. Mrs. Toole, armed

only with her dogged belief in her son's unique gifts and a matted, ink-smearred manuscript, attempted to publish her son posthumously. She presented novelist Walker Percy with *Dunces* and demanded that he give it a reading. Percy was teaching at Loyola at the time and took on the assignment with

a dutiful sigh and a hefty skepticism. Percy was taken in by the strange novel with its accurate evocation of New Orleans and its uncanny presentation of dialect, slang, and inflections of speech, and helped arrange its publication.

