

Slapstick tragedy from a writer rescued by Percy

A Confederacy of Dunces

By John Kennedy Toole

Foreword by Walker Percy

Louisiana State University Press, 338 pages, \$12.95

Reviewed by Shirley Ann Grau

"A Confederacy of Dunces" was written in the '60s, was rejected by the New York publishers of the day, and has been resurrected by the Louisiana State University Press only after receiving the blessings of Walker Percy. It is a wildly slapstick farce, set in New Orleans. Its hero is Ignatius Reilly, an abnormally fat gentleman. "A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. The green earflaps, full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once." Difficult, demanding, shift-

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police undercover agent who spends his days as a decoy in public urinals.

Predictably, Ignatius' career as a vendor ends in chaos and confusion; he returns to his mother's house, to his bed and his music. This time is different. This time his mother has reached the end of her patience. She decides to have her son committed to Charity Hospital for psychiatric observation. At the very last minute, and with the help of his girlfriend (theirs is a purely platonic relationship), Ignatius manages to avoid capture. As the book ends, they have escaped New Orleans together and are driving north in the general direction of New York.

"A Confederacy of Dunces" is in the general tradition of "Lucky Jim" and "The Ginger Man," with considerable influence by the New Orleans novels of Robert Tallant. It is also typical of a kind of novel popular in the '60s — the best example is Richard Farina's "Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me," a brilliant, witty, and marvelous book.

Unfortunately, "A Confederacy of Dunces"

less, Ignatius has finished college, has tried teaching, and is happy to be unemployed. He is supported in grudging fashion by his mother, a widow of modest means. He lounges about her small house — eating, talking, reading (he is fond of Boethius), playing his flute or his trumpet, squabbling with the neighbors. When he speaks, he sounds exactly like W. C. Fields as played by Don Rickles.

His idle days end abruptly. His mother insists that he find a job. He is hired as an office clerk in a pants factory and brings disaster with him. In a short while he has insulted one of the firm's best customers and he has instigated a riot by the factory workers. He is fired, of course. His mother remains adamant. He must have a job. This time he becomes a street vendor of hot dogs. Daily he pushes a cart up and down the streets of New Orleans. He doesn't sell any hot dogs, but he does have wild adventures with a zany assortment of French Quarter characters: a juvenile who sells pornographic pictures at school playgrounds; assorted homosexuals; a

isn't a very good novel, and it's not helped by arriving on the scene 15 years late. Like many amateur novels it seems to move in many directions at once. My guess is that much of this material was written originally in play form and then stitched into a novel. The dialog, which is a kind of New Orleans Uncle Remus, drags on far too long. The background is so lightly sketched in that many references will make no sense to a reader who does not know the city of New Orleans. The parade of grotesques, which might work well in a stage farce, is often confusing and pointless. The humor (which is about as subtle as that of the movie "Animal House") is curiously restrained and old-fashioned with its parodies of fluttering fairies, Jewish pants manufacturers, tricky blacks, dumb Italian cops.

Still "A Confederacy of Dunces" is the work of a promising writer, though Toole's promise, I think, did not lie in the direction of comedy. Scattered throughout this long book are passages of beauty and sensitivity — I remember particu-

Continued on page 2

Slapstick tragedy

Continued from page 1

larly scenes of male homosexuals drifting about the streets and alleys near the St. Louis Cathedral.

Toole died a suicide at 31 (see story on Page 2). The dust jacket has his picture, a pleasant chubby young man. And it was his broad Irish face that kept recurring to me as I read his novel. I began to feel that this was a most personal book. What I was reading was not so much a novel as a desperate attempt to vanquish personal devils. What seemed at first to be an out-pouring of hate cloaked in broad comedy was really a rite of exorcism, a cry nobody heard.

The most interesting thing about this book is the story of its author — and what an extraordinary novel his life would make.

Page 2—Section 7