

A Confederacy Of Dunces

By John Kennedy Toole. Foreword by Walker Percy. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980. Pp. 338. Cloth. 12.95.

The tale of how this first novel, finished more than fifteen years ago, finally found a publisher will make any frustrated writer mutter knowingly, "I knew those New York guys couldn't tell from talent."

John Kennedy Toole committed suicide at age thirty-two after fruitlessly trying to find a publisher for this book for several years. After his death in 1969 his mother, Thelma, spent another seven years trying to arrange publication. Finally, in 1976, she convinced novelist Walker

Percy to examine a dog-eared and smeared carbon of the manuscript. In the foreword Percy has written to this volume, he admits that his reluctant commitment to read this book was made primarily to rid himself of Mrs. Toole's relentless pestering. Furthermore, it was made in the hope that the writing would prove so bad that he could, in good conscience, quit reading after the first page, or better yet, after the first paragraph. To Percy's initial dismay, the manuscript did not prove so bad. To his ultimate delight he found it a work that "made me gape, grin, laugh out loud, shake my head in wonderment . . . a great rumbling farce of Falstaffian dimensions." The book's chief character, Ignatius J. Reilly, Percy found "without progenitor in any literature I know of—slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one."

Convinced of the book's merits, Percy undertook to arrange publication. The large commercial houses still could not be interested in a first novel by a writer who would never produce a second. Finally Louisiana State University Press agreed to break with tradition and bring out a work of fiction. They are being rewarded for their decision. The book is a runaway bestseller in New Orleans. Bookstores cannot keep copies on the shelves and have had to resort to waiting lists.

Given the unusual nature of this book's history and what that history tends to indicate about the judgment of those powerful souls who run the publishing world, I would love to report that I stand fast with Percy in his assessment that *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a "great" book. But alas I find I can't do it.

There are things to admire, of course. Toole displays as thorough an understanding of the paradoxical elements that make up New Orleans as any writer who has ever

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written about this city. His mastery of the city's unique dialect and his rendering of its subtle variations among blacks and blue-blood up-towners, gays, and the Irish Channel and Italian "yats" (as in whea yat, or where are you at—New Orleans-ianese for hello) is marvelous. Toole demonstrates a rich imagination as he rouses his corpulent protagonist from a lifelong career as a loafer and leads him through adventures as a riot-inciting clerk at a decaying riverside trousers factory and later as a witless, porn-smuggling hot dog vendor pushing his wagon through the streets of the central business district and the French Quarter and forever running afoul of the ludicrously inept police. And there is much here that is funny, funny enough at times to make us laugh out loud. We laugh knowingly at the self-serving and self-deluding shallow liberalism of the factory owner's wife. And we laugh joyously at the smart-mouthed black janitor working for \$20 per week as he keeps his conscienceless employer at bay while laboring to sabotage her business.

But in the end this book isn't funny enough. It isn't funny enough to conceal that Toole has very little to tell us, to conceal that his bleak vision boils down to contempt for the entire human species. The author has no compassion for his characters and they have none for one another.

There is no hope in the world of *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Its characters are capable of movement and speech but not of development or self-recognition and certainly not of love. Their primary function is to torment one another. So in the end our laughter grows nervous. We tire of the process of humiliation, grow uncomfortable in the company of this array of fools; we long for a generosity that Toole doesn't offer. We begin to resent his refusal to let his characters learn and we cor-

last to resent the meanness in the author who has created this for us.

At the heart of this problem is the book's central character, Ignatius J. Reilly. He is a blimp of a social misfit. Dressed in his deerstalker with the ear flaps swinging loose, flannel hunting shirt even in the warmest weather, stained undershorts and baggy pants, he sports a messy mustache which collects the crumbs of the enormous meals we watch him eat. His gluttony and poor digestive system keep him surrounded in clouds of noxious odors which render him utterly repulsive. In the early going Ignatius's outlandishness makes him humorous. We share some of his prejudices and appreciate his attack on the hypocrisy in others. But by the middle of the book it becomes clear that Ignatius, like those he opposes, is incapable of self-examination, devoid of a potential for growth. He is petty, deceitful, ungrateful, and disloyal. And he is not going to change. When we realize this, the book loses its charm. We recognize that we have entered a static world in which all the characters are loathsome. When the end comes we are glad to be rid of their company.

At the end of his foreword, Percy comments about the underlying sadness of this book, a sadness, I submit, that derives from the bleakness of its vision. He says that the greatest sadness is the tragedy of Toole's death which has denied us a larger body of his work. Ironically, I agree. For though I do not share Percy's evaluation of this book's merits, I certainly find that *A Confederacy of Dunces* possesses enough strength of writing and imagination to indicate that Toole was a man of considerable talent. Indeed it is a loss that he died so young. Had he lived to see his book published, his vision may have softened so that he could have given us something more human.

Rick Barton