

Ignatius Reilly: Slob, philosopher, genius

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES

By John Kennedy Toole (LSU Press, \$12.95).

When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him.

—Jonathan Swift

By LEE MILAZZO

THE STORY behind the publication of John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* is almost as fascinating as the novel itself. While distinguished novelist Walker Percy was teaching at Loyola University in 1976, he received numerous telephone calls from a strange woman who pleaded with him to read her son's manuscript. Knowing that such requests nearly always result in disaster, Percy refused again and again — but when the woman brought the smeared carbon to his office, Percy was finally forced to investigate the work of the young man, who had committed suicide in 1969 at the age of 32.

Percy was simply bowled over by the book. Entranced by Toole's portrayal of Ignatius Reilly, "slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one," Percy persuaded the LSU Press to publish the novel. To both Percy and the Press, then, readers owe a great debt, for *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a remarkable book, large and bawdy, sprawling, hilarious, thoughtful, moving. Some may point to Toole's inspirations, a diverse group ranging from Fielding and Smollett to Heller and Pynchon, but the truth is that *Confederacy* can stand on its own as an accomplished work of art.

Thoroughly dominating the book is Ignatius Reilly, at age 30 a gargan-

tuan Falstaffian figure of immense appetites and iconoclastic opinions. As Percy puts it, Ignatius lives in "violent revolt against the entire modern age." He is actually a failed medieval scholar who believes that nothing good has happened in at least 800 years. In fact, he is totally convinced that "the United States needs some theology and geometry, some taste and decency," and he even suspects that "we are teetering on the edge of the abyss." So he rails against everyone and everything, including psychiatry, homosexuality, capitalism, communism, Protestantism and movies.

YET IGNATIUS has constructed his arcane world view from living entirely within New Orleans, for "outside of the city limits the heart of darkness, the true wasteland begins." His only excursion outside the Crescent city, a trip to nearby Baton Rouge, disrupted his cranky pyloric (digestive) valve so badly that he had to take a taxi back home. Since then, bloated and subject to explosive belches, Ignatius has spent his time composing essays and articles on countless Big Chief tablets that have practically filled his incredibly cluttered room.

Ignatius sees himself this way: "The grandeur of my physique, the complexity of my world view, the decency and taste implicit in my carriage, the grace with which I function in the mire of today's world — all of these at once confuse and astound those around me." Others, however, regard him as an unkempt madman who once taught a class but refused to grade any papers; who worked in a library for two weeks but pasted in only three or four slips per day because of his heightened "esthetic"; who quickly solves the Levy Company's filing problems by simply throwing away all of the pa-



Drawing of Ignatius Reilly by Ed Lindlof

pers. In his new job, Ignatius, dressed in a ridiculous pirate costume that makes him look like "Charles Laughton in drag as the Queen of the Gypsies," pushes a Paradise Vendors hot dog cart through the French Quarter, eating virtually all of his meager profits.

ON THESE picaresque journeys, our hero encounters every conceivable character, a menagerie of New Orleans' best and worst. The bickering wealthy owner of Levy Pants and his hateful wife, the plainclothes policeman dedicated to snaring "perverts," Ignatius' liberal nemesis Myrna Minkoff, the streetwise black man, the sleazy bar owner, the imbecilic would-be stripper — all are portrayed with tremendous gusto and humor. Indeed, one of the most captivating features of the book is Toole's superb feel for the whole ambience of New Orleans, perhaps best exemplified by his marvelous ear for its inimitable dialect (no verbs, dropped endings of words, etc.).

Slapstick abounds, too — Igna-

tius' presence at a sparkling, lively, gay party complete with the obligatory Judy Garland and Ethel Merman worshippers, or his futile attempts to lead a demonstration of factory workers, or any of the other outrageous scenes, must be read to be appreciated. On a rather different level, Ignatius' diary and letters, which contain his thoughts on man's place in the grand scheme of things, often make more than a little common and philosophical sense. Yet discerning readers will not allow the wild comedy to obscure the deep sense of tragedy that underlies Ignatius' tilting at the windmills.

The real tragedy of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, of course, is that we will never know what happened to Ignatius after he is saved at the last moment from incarnation in a mental hospital; the triumph of this wonderful novel is that we are at least given this much of the unforgettable Ignatius Reilly. And for that we must be grateful.

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