

'Genius' vs. dunces

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES, by John Kennedy Toole (338 pages); Louisiana State University Press, \$12.95.

By RHONDA DICKEY

IN THIS satiric novel, set in modern New Orleans, it often is hard to determine what is being satirized. The book's title is taken from Jonathan Swift: "When a true genius appears in this world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him."

The "true genius" of Toole's novel is 30-year-old Ignatius J. Reilly, who lives with his mother, who sports a green hunting cap and excess weight and who sets down in Big Chief tablets his views on the regrettable turn of history since the Reformation.

To call him eccentric is to put it mildly. He haunts movie houses and department stores for examples of bad taste; he is never disappointed.

Here's Ignatius watching a rock-music TV program: "Do I believe the total perversion that I am witnessing?" Ignatius screamed from the

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parlor. The music had a frantic, tribal rhythm; a chorus of falsettos sang insinuatingly about loving all night long."

Ignatius Reilly's goal in life, since repeal of the Reformation is impossible, is total anarchy. His victories along the way are small.

The confederacy of dunces includes, among others, his mother, whose drinking and bowling irritate him constantly; Police Officer Mancuso, who, doing penance, is patrolling public restrooms for evidence of vice; and some characters employed at the Night of Joy bar.

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For any novel, but especially for a first one, this one is remarkably well-plotted and well-structured. The loose ends are tied up at the end; "Confederacy" is pretty funny, sometimes, and it is one of the few books with genuinely readable Southern dialect.

But Toole, in the end, misses his mark. Ignatius isn't a true genius, he's a true non-joiner. The dunces whose pretensions Ignatius aims himself against mostly are harmless flakes who aren't in league against anyone. There's no one in the confederacy mean enough — or even focused enough — to satirize.

'A CONFEDERACY of Dunces" has garnered attention in no small part because of the circumstances that surrounded its publication.

Toole had tried, unsuccessfully, to get the book published in the 1960s. He committed suicide in 1969. One could hypothesize that he was despondent over his book's non-publication, but that may not be the reason at all.

Toole's mother, Thelma, finally was able to get writer Walker Percy to read her son's manuscript. Percy had the literary weight to get it published, and, in fact, he has written a glowing foreword to the novel.

Percy, too, acknowledges that the fascination with the book is with Toole as well as Toole's characters. "I think all this [interest] is because of a combination of two things: the extraordinary quality of the novel and the tragic story of Toole's death. You hate to think so, but suicide seems to help sell books."

One could argue with Percy, as I would, about whether the quality of the novel is extraordinary, but he was right in making the effort to get "A Confederacy of Dunces" published.

Toole's "satire" isn't satire, but he created a complete world with his novel, an accomplishment that many serious writers don't even aim for any more.

Walker Percy and Thelma Toole are right, and the rejecting publishers were wrong. John Kennedy Toole has been vindicated, but not in time.