

# BOOKS

## 'Dunces':

By Ira Einhorn  
ELECTRICity Book Editor

*A Confederacy of Dunces, John Kennedy Toole; Foreword by Walker Percy; Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1980. 338 pages. \$12.95.*

John Kennedy Toole took his own life in 1969, leaving behind him a legacy that, some 15 years after its completion, I have just had the extreme pleasure of reading. Thanks to Mom, that mythical figure that is the constant support of the son she bore, *A Confederacy of Dunces* is now available to the reading public. The persistence of

this one woman's sense that the manuscript she had, as one of the only remnants of a life cut short, was valuable, has brought comedy to us all at a length and a level of intelligence that is rare indeed.

Comedy is much more difficult to sustain than tragedy. In most instances its extent is limited by its most common forms of appearance: the joke or the skit. Think upon your reading of the daily paper. It may seem like a cruel joke to the discerning eye, but how little of it is really intended as comedy! So, thank you Walker Percy for heeding the important pleas of a mother and reading a barely legible carbon to discover that *A Confederacy of Dunces* should be rescued from obscurity and see the light of day.

"At times, I could not continue reading, I was laughing so hard, and a few times I laughed myself into a painful stomach ache. The book is that funny."

Ignatius J. Reilly, the comic center of energy, is introduced to us on page one:

*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. Full, pursed lips protruded beneath the bushy black moustache and, at their corners, sank into little folds filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs. In the shadow under the green visor of the cap, Ignatius J. Reilly's supercilious blue and yellow eyes looked down*

*continued on page 10*

## Dunces

*continued from page 8*

*upon the other people waiting under the clock at D. H. Holmes department store, studying the crowd of people for signs of bad taste in dress. Several of the outfits, Ignatius noticed, were new enough and expensive enough to be properly considered offenses against taste and decency. Possession of anything new or expensive only reflected a person's lack of theology and geometry; it could even cast doubts upon one's soul.*

It is this being who dominates this entire new Orleans adventure in high comedy. As I read this book, slowly, so as to make it last, I often found myself bouncing up and down upon my bed with manic

laughter. At times, I could not continue reading, I was laughing so hard, and a few times I laughed myself into a painful stomach ache. The book is that funny.

Toole manages a tone for Ignatius that never falters. It is tone of arch diffidence that he (Ignatius) maintains in every encounter with this fictive world so lacking in proper "theology and geometry." Whether selling hot dogs in New Orleans' French quarter, sitting in a bar, reprimanding his mother, hurling enraged insults at the insipid TV programs and movies he looks at, or filling his big chief tablets with marvelous medieval criticism of the contemporary world, he never wavers for a moment. So much of the humor is a direct outgrowth of an inflexible essence and its continual battle

with the world that surrounds.

Imagine a rhinoceros lying in its own excrement at the zoo suddenly criticizing your speech and dress in impeccable English. It would put you back a bit. In the same way, Ignatius J. Reilly puts his fictitious world back a bit.

Reilly has no models in past literature with which I'm familiar. This would lead me to believe that Toole put a lot of his sad, soon to be dead, self into the creation of Ignatius. Our temporary gain in this wonderful book, but our ultimate loss; for once we leave Ignatius fleeing New Orleans in the back of his girlfriend's Renault, we leave both Ignatius and Toole for good. Unfortunate, for a talent so full and comic would be most welcome in our very chaotic world of 1980. ❧