

A Confederacy of Dunces**John Kennedy Toole**

Louisiana State University Press, Baton

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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

Imagine this for the plot of a made-for-TV movie: a harried teacher of creative writing at Loyola University in New Orleans (portrayed here by Walker Percy in a cameo role) is approached by a woman who wants him to read the manuscript for a book written by her son. The son had killed himself seven years before. So sad.

The teacher begs off, makes excuses, goes out of his way to avoid the woman, but at last, one day after he has read a mountain of manuscripts submitted by students who want to take a seminar in novel writing, he looks up to find a woman

standing before him. It is, of course, the woman with her son's manuscript; she hands it to him and he takes it. He notices that it is a carbon copy and not in very good shape at that.

Realizing that he can't get out of it this time, he looks at a couple of pages in her presence, hoping that he can tell her right away that it is garbage so he can go back to more important things.

He finds he can't tell her that, however. Because, as he sinks deeper and deeper into the book, he finds that it is indeed a genuine gem. The campus literary magazine publishes excerpts, and soon, a large university press expresses interest in publishing it in book form.

The book is published. An initial press run of 2,500 has to be supplemented before the release date by a second run, and then by a third, so that by the time the book is scheduled to hit the stores, 20,000 copies have been printed. Paperback rights are sold. Movie companies fight for film rights. Publishers in Europe consider it for

translation.

The book gains more following when Kirkus Reviews gives it good marks. Publishers Weekly loves it, too. Newsweek gives it a big spread. The Book-of-the-Month Club lets out word that it is interested. . .

So it was with **A Confederacy of Dunces**, which raised its bright green hunting cap-clad head in Baton Rouge in May, put out by, of all things, LSU Press, a publisher one associates more with books on the Southern Confederacy than with confederacies of another sort. In fact, this, John Kennedy Toole's sole published work, is only the third novel that University Press has released.

And all of the above is true. Newsweek really did review the book in its issue of May 29. Publishers Weekly scrutinized it also, proclaiming April 11: "The way he (Toole) crams invention and exuberance into a perversely logical plot and molds his Pandora's box of ills into a comic novel which rings with laughter is something of a miracle."

Toole's protagonist is one Ignatius J. Reilly, a 30-year-old mountain of flesh who lives with his mother on Constantinople Street in New Orleans. Ignatius has no job; he occupies his time watching television, going to the movies, and scribbling philosophy onto the pages of red Big Chief tablets. But his idyllic bubble is burst when his mother's car runs into a building in the French Quarter, and Ignatius must get a just to help pay for the damage.

His trials in the working world are many. He gets a job as a filing clerk at a pants factory, but finds the work too taxing; thus, he throws all material to be filed in the trash, and occupies his time constructing Celtic crosses and signs to decorate the office. He also fires up the black factory workers, leading them to demonstrate for higher wages in what he calls a "Crusade for Moorish Dignity."

Needless to say, he doesn't last long as a clerk.

Ignatius next finds employment as a hot dog vendor, wearing a pirate costume (to attract the tourists) and pushing around a large metal hot dog through the streets of the French Quarter. Most of his time is spent eating his own product. But this occupation, too, leads him to exert his political muscles as he tries to persuade some homosexuals to help him achieve "Peace Through Degeneracy." That doesn't work, either.

A Confederacy of Dunces is social satire as good as any I have ever read. Not only that, it is not doubt the finest portrayal of life and language in contemporary New Orleans that I have ever read. Its

characters, for example, "berl" water and eat "ersters."

This is definitely a book to watch out for. Read it.

MICHAEL KONVICKA