

Tragic laughter

Toole handles fictional reality, but not real life

by Larry Doyle

John Kennedy Toole's first novel, **A Confederacy of Dunces** received extraordinarily good reviews, having been called at times "a great rumbling farce of Falstaffian dimensions" and "a touch of genius." It was a literary reception usually reserved for classics, and most certainly would have cheered the author on to even better works if he had not committed suicide 11 years prior to his book's publication.

So here is a very funny book written by a man who killed himself. This, in and of itself, should not be surprising, but perhaps even expected; most of our revered comic writers make no secret of their fascination with death—Heller and Vonnegut being particularly good examples—and the sense of utter despair prevalent in modern black humor must, from time to time, manifest itself in thoughts, if not actions, of suicide in the minds of its creators. What is surprising is how magnificently funny this book is, and consequently, how truly tragic the loss of its author is.

In the heart of New Orleans, Ignatius J. Reilly is our hero, our anti-hero—the book was, after all, written in the early '60s—and in this capacity, he is unlike anything I have ever encountered in print. Long past plump, he is a slovenly beast with a cartoon character's wardrobe: bursting desert boots, tweed voluminous trousers, plaid flannel shirt and the ever-present green hunting cap, earflaps down when he didn't want to hear. And like the cartoon, the ensemble never changes, acceptable

in the comics but with unpleasant results when the character sweats and exudes as Reilly does.

He is a consummate slob, with the most vile of bodily functions (a unspecified "valve" is forever closing on him, causing many a gaseous dilemma) and with a personal outlook even more disgusting. Reilly has given up on the world, deciding that civilization is not worthy of him, particularly because it would require him to *work*; he has taken instead to staying in his room, which reeks of "old tea," drinking bottles and cases of Dr. Nut, and writing his ranting and ravings of the cruel, sick world on "Big Chief" yellow legal pads. He takes jobs only when forced by his long-suffering mother, and fails at all of them, in spite of or perhaps because of his master's degree. He lies whenever he can.

You have to love him. He is so blatant in his grotesqueness and so unique in fiction—Pynchon's Profane is close, but lacks the spirit—that you find yourself uncomfortably empathizing with his plight. His crusade against the evils of mankind are somewhat justified, if a little self-righteous, and his episodic dealings with reality, though pathetic, are nothing short of hilarious.

The magic of this book is not just the main character, but the carnival of a supporting cast. There is the brutally comic but endearing portrayal of Reilly's mother, throughout the book referred to as "Mrs. Reilly." She, egged on by the uneducated and gruff Santa Battaglia, finally loses patience with her no-account son and forces him to take responsibility, "commits him to a life of hard labor," as he puts it.

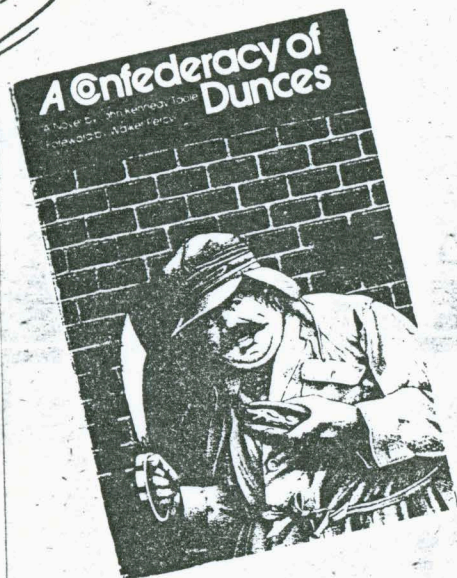
You feel sorry for her, *hope* she can straighten out her son, knowing full well she has as much chance at that as Reilly has of running the four-minute mile.

The streets are full of walking idiosyncrasies: Jones, the black who must take a job as a janitor, far below minimum wage, in order not to be picked up for vagrancy; Lana Lee, vixen proprietress of the Night of Joy, who makes a little extra cash posing exposed with priapic chalk in hand; Patrolman Mancuso, who, after one small mistake, is delegated to weirdo duty and forced to wear increasing silly disguises; Miss Trixie, an 80-year-old geriatric whose only wish is to retire, but who cannot because the boss' wife has a psychology degree and thinks Trixie will lose her purpose if retired.

And offstage, there is the immutable Myrna Minx, the free-love letter-writing foe and sometime fiancée of Reilly. Some of the funniest portions of this book are the correspondence between these two. Myrna thinks all Reilly needs is a good orgasm to bring him around; Reilly thinks her speeches on free and accessible love among the races is lewd, disgusting and should be punishable by death. It is one of the greatest literary love affairs ever.

Preceding the book, there is this quotation by Jonathan Swift: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in a confederacy against him."

I don't know if Toole felt this way about himself, it's not unthinkable; it's only too bad it has taken this long for the other side to rally.



A Confederacy of Dunces

John Kennedy Toole
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