

Discovered: an amuck Aquinas in Falstaff's clothing

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES, by John Kennedy Toole. Foreword by Walker Percy. Louisiana State University Press, \$12.95.

BY MICHAEL HESKETT

IN 1976, while Walker Percy was teaching at Loyola University of New Orleans, a woman began to hound him to read a manuscript. His inclination was to say no. Too many chapters from too many deservedly unsung Great American Novels had come his way. When he learned the circumstances surrounding the manuscript he was determined to say no. The last thing he needed was to tell a mother that a novel her dead son had written in the early 1960s, a novel she insisted was not just good but great, was not what she imagined it to be. Fortunately for us, he was persuaded.

When he sat down with the smeared, barely legible typescript he hoped it would not be good enough that he would feel obliged to read more than the first few pages. But as he read the smiles began to come, then the laughs, and, soon, a growing sense that he was in the presence of

something singular. He finally recognized it for what it is: a Rabelaisian romp, a one-of-a-kind, rib-tickling, tilting after windmills, great galloping farce of a book.

"When a true genius appears in the world," Dean Swift wrote, "you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." The true genius in this case is elephantine Ignatius J. Reilly, an Oliver Hardy gone to seed and one of the most extraordinary characters to be encountered in fiction. He sits in red flannel underwared splendor in his back bedroom on Constantinople St. in New Orleans, while his mother tipples in the kitchen; and who can blame her, what with worrying about what will become of her dear, dear boy, and after all her scrimping and saving to get him such a fine education (M.A., LSU), and all he does is sit in his room. She wishes he would get a job.

But the world is already too much with Ignatius for him ever to seriously contemplate such a folly. For one thing, his pyloric valve would rebel, as it frequently does anyway, especially when he ruminates on the egregious errors mankind has fallen into; and, for another, his disquisitions on that subject (properly vituperative - no

quarter must be shown), which already fill the numerous Big Chief tablets littering his floor, would be interrupted. The world must at least be spared that. But nature's changing course untrimmed, in the forms of his mother, their battered old Plymouth and an immovable building, has the last word, and Ignatius is forced upon the world to seek gainful employment to pay the damages, first as a clerk in a decrepit pants factory and then as a pirate-suited vendor pushing a weenie wagon through the French Quarter. New Orleans would never be the same.

The bit players, who are swept up by Ignatius and his wild schemes to reorder the world, were not casually thrown in by Toole to fill scenes, but are carefully drawn, fully realized characters in their own right. Miss Trixie, the octagenarian assistant bookkeeper at Levy Pants, befriends Ignatius, after her fashion and between innumerable naps. Jones, a black hepcat in shades, plots a way to get even with his employer, a Nazi-like bar owner, who sweats poor Jones, a stripper named Darlene and a parrot at wages far below the minimum. Patrolman Mancuso, who naturally mistakes Ignatius for a pervert, is condemned by his desk sergeant to prowl men's rooms and

back streets until he breaks a real case. Myra Minkoff, an eager participant in any case as long as it is on the fringe of anything, is convinced Ignatius needs sex. Their "love" affair is one of the most bizarre in fiction.

Ignatius J. Reilly is a slob. Belching and bumbling his way through the French Quarter, his weenie wagon his mighty fortress, satisfied that the problem with the world is that it lacks "proper geometry and theology", he is an Aquinas run amuck in the garb of a Falstaff. The thing is, he begins to make sense. Anyone who has ever had ideas about how to make the world a little less cockeyed and run ahead on into their own confederacy of dunces will share some of his rage and see something of themselves in his gargantuan shape.

There is sadness at the heart of all great comedy - in this instance, not only in the novel, but also in the life of the man who created it. John Kennedy Toole committed suicide in 1969. Because of his mother's persistence and Walker Percy's recognition of its greatness, *A Confederacy of Dunces* is now available to a world of readers.

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