

Walpole's Been Reading

"A Confederacy of Dunces"

John Kennedy Toole. *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, c. 1980 by Thelma D. Toole.

In the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come!" But what would happen if a modern man believed literally in the moreal, social and esthetic canons of medieval Catholicism? What if such a person were alive today in modern America?

Enter the world of Ignatius Reilly, a hero of the medieval world that dominates his mental biosphere. Outrageously attired in a green cloth hunting cap with earflaps, this gross Don Quixote of the South mourns the decline of the West while lying at home in bed tormented by gargantuan flatulence and miniscule erections. His mother's chance accident with the family Plymouth loads the widow and her feckless slob of a son with a debt that can only be repaid by an increased income. According to Ignatius's voluminous (and unpublished) notes, "... Death, destruction, anarchy, progress, ambition and self-improvement were to be/his/new fate. And a vicious fate it was to be: now he was forced with the perversion of having to GO TO WORK." The world itself will have a heavy cross to bear in the misshapen Ignatius, who haunts movie houses to shout epithets at actresses who violate his standards of taste and decency, whose digestive system snaps shut in moments of tension, and who can mingle sexual fantasies with memories of his dead collie.

In his student days a girl had impressed herself on Ignatius's consciousness. Myrna Minkoff, a liberal, folk-singing Jewish minx perpetually in heat, is as far to the political Left as Ignatius is to the cultural Right. Her plans to stimulate a fertile interaction between sex and politics through a monster protest petition to Washington ("More and Better Sex for All and a Crash Program for Minorities!") excite Ignatius enough to mount a series of crazy schemes to expose the plasticity of the modern world. Above all, he longs to out-revolt Myrna — a goal that will be difficult to gain, for Myrna has a custom of offering herself as a sacrifice to equality on the bed of any really hard young radical. ("This liberal doxy must be impaled upon the member of a particularly large stallion," Ignatius mumbled furiously.)

It exceeds human capacity to fathom how Ignatius became a clerk at Levy's Pants. Absurdly, he works God's will to end Gus Levy's

alienation from his company's product and in curtailing said product into Levy's Shorts. Subsequently Ignatius attains his genuine stature as a hot-dog vendor in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Pushing his Paradise franks wagon ("Twelve Inches of Paradise!"), Ignatius is saved from an accident by George, a pimply-faced teenage crime runner who bribes him to hide a secret in his buns. Later Ignatius encounters Dorian, who practices close encounters of the gay kind, and in reaction to Myrna attempts to organize a party to infiltrate the government to organize orgies instead of nuclear war. This fantasy, too, fails to come off, and Ignatius is hustled into the street from a party by three Lesbians normally kept penned in the kitchen because of uncontrollable hostile tendencies. Somewhat peripherally he also becomes involved in a high school pornography ring. As Mrs. Reilly learns confusedly (from the front pages of a newspaper) of her son's involvement with unmentionable vice, she begins to listen to her friends' suggestion for a Final Solution.

Undeviatingly masculine in his own eyes, Ignatius is immediately perceived as sexually ambiguous by ordinary people. Ultimately it is women who activate this southern-fried mountain of sloth. His struggles to achieve authentic existence within society without renouncing his intellectual capacity remind one of the struggles of a fly caught on flypaper. But when he expostulates, "Psychiatry is worse than Communism. I refuse to be brainwashed. I won't be made a robot." He achieves the sympathy of every reader who has rebelled while passing through the twilight zone to adulthood.

Toole had a surprisingly faithful ear for Southern dialect. All of his developed characters appear to be real people. The last third of the novel is somewhat sketchier than the first chapters. Had the novel been revised, the lean conclusion would have been fleshed out. But the novel will not be revised, nor will there be a sequel to this comic masterpiece. "Optimism nauseates me," said Ignatius Reilly. "It is perverse." John Kennedy Toole killed himself in New Orleans in 1969. The existing manuscript has been published posthumously by his mother. *Fiat voluntas tua!*

—Mark Walpole