

words worth

The Best Books of 1980

A Confederacy of Dunces John Kennedy Toole LSU Press

A Confederacy of Dunces is a magnificent farce and its author, the late John Kennedy Toole, may be the best American social satirist since Mark Twain. At the center of the work is Ignatius J. Reilly, a fat, overeducated, 30-year-old virgin. Ignatius, "a perverse Thomas Aquinas," withdrew from the modern world to spend his life writing in a bedroom of his mother's house located in the slums of New Orleans. A devout Catholic, Ignatius rejects both the Reformation and the Enlightenment and longs for a return to the Medieval system.

When his life is given an unpleasant spin by the goddess Fortuna, Ignatius is forced to find a job. Working first as a clerk in the Levy Pants factory and later as a hot dog vendor Reilly determines to turn his misfortune into an opportunity to solve "the crises of our times." This involves leading black workers at the Levy

Pants factory in an abortive "Crusade for Moorish Dignity" and bringing about world peace by organizing the Crescent City's homosexual community.

This novel also contains a multitude of well-drawn comic characters woven together in a plot reminiscent of the plays of Moliere. They include Ignatius' alcoholic mother; Jones, a black janitor in a Bourbon Street nightclub called "Night of Joy"; Claude Robichaux, an old man who is obsessed with the "communiss" conspiracy; Myrna Minkoff, Ignatius' Socialist girlfriend from the Bronx; and the hapless Patrolman Mancuso who, after crossing paths with Reilly, is condemned by his sergeant to apprehend "suspicious characters" in the lavatory of a bus station in the French Quarter.

—Clark Miller

"An ill wind blows no good," Ignatius Reilly philosophizes. "With the breakdown of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy and Bad Taste gained ascendancy. What had once been dedicated to the soul was now dedicated to the sale."

Acting on this inflated analysis of a world in decay, Ignatius Reilly bellows and breaks wind all across John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*—a constipated Gothic nightmare set in mid-1960s New Orleans. Toole's non-hero is in near-constant pain, bloated by gas and the most pompous human quirks. Reilly rants about civilization's excesses from the front rows of seedy movie houses and sneers at humanity's rot from behind a hot dog cart. In his private moments, he fantasizes sensuously about a white collie running across a green field as he spills his seed into a rubber glove.

A whirlpool of marginal characters swirls around the vortex of Reilly's lower tract: his mother, a woman on the skids still prowling howling alleys for kicks; Patrolman Mancuso, an inept cop who's been relegated to a bus station restroom to arrest "characters"; and Jones, a near-vagrant hipster in orbit behind shades and a cloud of smoke.

In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Toole has taken the ignorant and the ostentatious, the obnoxious and the incomprehensible, and hammered them into the most engaging farce in recent fiction. The bizarre humor has a curbing edge, though, and Toole may have been using it to conceal his own scars. He committed suicide not long after the book was written, at the age of 32.

—Richard Hoops

