

'Dunces' delivers New Orleans satire

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A Confederacy of Dunces by John Kennedy Toole. Louisiana State University Press. 338 pp., \$12.95.

Recognition came a dozen years too late for John Kennedy Toole.

In 1969 the 32-year-old college English instructor committed suicide in despair over the prospects of finding a publisher for his comic novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

Last week (Monday, April 13) the burlesque satire of New Orleans and modernity was accorded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Literature, a year after it was finally published due to the dogged determination of his mother.

The story of its publication almost rivals the bizarre antics of the book's protagonist, Ignatius J. Reilly, a corpulent philosopher-goldbricker who sees New Orleans and its denizens as an affront to his sensitivities.

"Confederacy" is a good, rambling tale, like quicksilver to pin down and a grin practically from cover to cover, spiced with the rich dialects of the pangloss Crescent City *gumbo humanicus*.

The author's mother, Thelma Toole, carried the unpublished manuscript from publisher to publisher after her son's death without success until she finally browbeat New Orleans novelist Walker Percy into reading it.

Percy, recoiling from the mother touting her dead son's proclaimed "masterpiece," recorded his initial misgivings about toiling through the worn carbon-copy manuscript.

But in this case, he writes in the book's foreword, "I read on. And on. First with the sinking feeling that it was not bad enough to quit, then with a prickle of interest, then a growing excitement, and finally an incredulity: surely it was not possible that it was so good."

Percy sent Mrs. Toole a postcard when he finished: "Most favorable novel of New Orleans I have ever read and will ever read."

With his lobbying, the Louisiana State University Press published *Confederacy of Dunces*, only the second novel published by the college press, last year.

Toole's colorful Reilly is a dismal bloated mama's boy who rebels as long as possible against the odious prospect of gainful employment. The rest of the cast, including his tipling mother, a patrolman who spends much of his time patrolling the French Quarter in drag costume searching for low-lives and a jive black who surveys the scene from the end of a broom in a Quarter clip joint, provide targets for Reilly's fusillades against the deplorable state of humanity, in his own mind.

While he spends most of the book railing against New Orleans and its residents, like any trueblooded New Orleans native, Reilly would take a beating rather than cross the causeway to solid ground and the 48 contiguous states. As recorded in the book, the protagonist becomes ill when forced to interview for a teaching job at LSU.

Toole reworked the novel throughout the 1960s before he took his life, a grotesque signature to its completion. The irrationality of his own end may be a fitting addendum to the volume. Toole may have believed in the novel so much that as the world rejected Reilly's vision so, he feared, the publishing world rejected his own. His death by breathing car exhaust may have been his most sincere expression of belief in the project.

It is sometimes said of art, "If this was his only accomplishment, he would be worth remembering for it."

The Pulitzer panel awarded only its second posthumous literary award for *Confederacy*, a vindication for Toole and his mother.