

Toole's Biting Satire Indicts Modern, Unspiritual Society

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES
By John Kennedy Toole
LSU Press
330 pp, \$12.95

A *Confederacy of Dunces* is a rollicking satire that indicts the modern world for its material and spiritual rootlessness.

Set in New Orleans, the story follows the exploits of Ignatius J. Reilly, a rotund, gaseous former graduate student who at the age of 30 is forced to face a world outside a littered room in his mother's house.

Ignatius is excessive in every sense of the word except sexually. He has left (or been left by) the one person in the world who truly understands his anger. Much of the novel concerns his correspondence with this girl, and it is apparent that despite his stated disgust that Ignatius is in love with her.

Ignatius is a satirical figure as is everyone in the novel to some extent; he hates the modern world, reads Boethius, would welcome the order produced by an all-powerful Roman Church. But it is significant that once forced to take a job and assume responsibility, he does not shirk it.

In fact, he sees as his responsibility the necessity to change the world, not run away from it. At the end of the story, when it would be possible for him to escape his situation through voluntary commitment by his mother (a truly hideous character) he does not do so. Instead he leaves for that utmost symbol of modernity — New York City.

IF Ignatius is more of a "type" than a character, the same can be said about most of the others. Police officer Manusco spends most of his time running around in ridiculous disguises and is the very symbol of ineffective and farcical law enforcement.

Mr. and Mrs. Gus Levy (the factory owner for whom Ignatius

first works and his wife who is the epitome of the upper society "help the poor downtrodden" social worker) invite our disgust.

Then there is Burma Jones, the black ex-convict who spends most of the novel working for slave wages in a French Quarter bar. He, like Ignatius, hates the system and plots its undoing. But there is very little humor in the portrait of Jones. He may be the only person in the book for whom there is pity without some measure of contempt.

A Confederacy of Dunces is saturated with the possibility of tragedy because we know in the end that the dunces are going to prevail, even over Ignatius and Jones. Thank God the comedy is there to make us laugh along the way.

ADDING, almost surely, to the book's sense of tragedy is the story of the author. Certainly it is passe' to say that a writer puts a bit of himself into his characters, but just how much of Ignatius' rage John Kennedy Toole shared, we do not know. The amount must have been considerable. For years he tried to interest New York presses in what he had to say, and when that failed, he ended his life. How ironic then that Walker Percy (whose own characters echo many of Ignatius' thoughts) should have persuaded a Southern publisher to print Toole's book. It seems that the dunces lived along Madison Avenue.

I believe that this book is going to last. It is going to last as a tear-jerking, uproarious satire with many undeniable truths, and the fate of its author may very well catapult it into a special category reserved for novels like *On the Road*, or *A Death in the Family* — that contentious cultural reservoir of an alienated few who knew the folly of challenging Fate, but did it anyway — sometimes at the cost of their lives.

— ROBERT HOLLADAY