

## Brief Review

### A Confederacy of Dunces by John Kennedy Toole

(Louisiana State University Press;  
\$12.95)

To the list of distinguished novels discovered and published after their authors' deaths we may add *A Confederacy of Dunces*. The failure of American publishers to bring out this book during John Kennedy Toole's abbreviated lifetime illustrates the aptness of its title. It comes from Swift: "When a true genius appears in the world, you shall know him by his sign, that all the dunces are in confederacy against him."

Luckily, Walker Percy and the Louisiana State University Press have rescued Mr. Toole's novel from oblivion. Percy, while teaching at Loyola University in New Orleans in 1976, was subject to the impassioned pleas of aspiring writers. One day Mr. Toole's mother called Percy and told him her son, who had died in 1963, had written a "great novel" which Mr. Percy must read. Dreading the prospect, Percy finally consented to glance through the opening pages of the first chapter, hoping to put it aside as yet another worthless manuscript. But wait. The first chapter

was well written and funny and eerily accurate in portraying the sights and sounds of New Orleans. The second was even better. This great big fat and flatulent hero, Ignatius J. Reilly, a medievalist raging against the 20th century, was one of a kind. In his forward to the novel, handsomely published by Louisiana State University Press, Percy describes the hero as "without progenitor in any literature that I know of, slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one."

Well, it's true. Ignatius J. Reilly especially reminds one of Don Quixote. His grand conception of the world, founded upon Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, strikes those around him as woefully out of touch with reality. The strivings of his contemporaries to achieve middle-class comfort—a TV, air conditioner, and stereo—are pitiful in Reilly's eyes. He would rather submit to the wheel of fortune. Sex, financial ambition, power, and fame—the engines driving the 20th-century American—all strike Reilly as the decadent desires of a spiritually destitute nation.

I mention the above not to characterize *A Confederacy of Dunces* as a medieval tract in disguise, pointing its finger at modern society. I mention it to alert readers to the richness of a novel which many may find merely hilarious. For it is, without question, one of the funniest books ever written. And by funny I don't mean merely witty. I mean that it will make you laugh out loud till your belly aches and your eyes water and you have to compose yourself so that you can read on without pain.

*A Confederacy of Dunces* begins with its hero in front of a New Orleans department store waiting for his mother. Standing there with his green hunting cap squeezed over his "fleshy balloon" of a head, his mountainous body testing the buttons on his flannel shirt, Ignatius J. Reilly is taken for a suspicious character and questioned by a local policeman. His haughty replies, bespeaking an elaborate education and a general distate for the world, irritate the policeman, who attempts to arrest him. An old man standing by begins to denounce the officer as a "communiss"

and suddenly a band of shoppers chimes in with opinions. The hero's mother returns and in the ensuing confusion mother and son escape to a French Quarter bar called the "Night of Joy" while the old man gets arrested.

The author picks up both stories. Indeed, the form of the novel represents a triumph all its own. Characters run into each other with an excess of coincidence rather like a Hardy novel, but every thread of the tale is followed and resolved with clarity and comedy. The climactic scene brings almost all the characters together in a dramatic accident.

What cannot be described here, but ranks high among this book's many virtues, is the singular accomplishment of capturing the flavor of a city. New Orleans is unique among American cities; indeed in many ways it is scarcely American. Its speech, customs, geography, philosophy all are recorded with uncanny accuracy in this gem of a book. I urge you to read it.

Phelps Gay

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