

By Nina King

Newsday Book Editor

*"A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES,"*  
by John Kennedy Toole, foreword by  
Walker Percy (Louisiana State Uni-  
versity Press, 338 pp., \$12.95).

Though not quite the "great rumbling farce of Falstaffian dimensions" hailed by Walker Percy in his foreword, "A Confederacy of Dunces" is an immensely appealing book. What it lacks in direction and focus, it makes up for in energy and atmosphere.

The protagonist of "A Confederacy of Dunces" is Ignatius Reilly of New Orleans. He is fat, 30-ish, slovenly, over-educated and triumphantly maladjusted, the corners of his mouth "filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs." He suffers from a faulty pyloric valve, has a fondness for the more colorful Catholic saints ("St. Medericus the Hermit, who is invoked against intestinal disorders"), revels in Boethius' "Consolations of Philosophy" and fills Big Chief writing pads with torrents of invective against the post-medieval world. It is a world that, in his view, suffers from a horrendous lack of "theology and geometry," of "taste and decency."

Ignatius, who lives with his henna-haired and bewildered mother, is "catapulted into the fever of contemporary existence" by an unexpected need for money. He takes an office job at a marvelously seedy firm called Levy Pants where he attempts to organize the black factory workers in a "Crusade for Moorish Dignity." The results are disastrous, but Ignatius is enthralled with the idea of social action. While employed as a hot-dog vendor, he toys with the idea of a "Divine Right Party." ("What I want is a good, strong monarchy with a tasteful and decent king who has some knowledge of theology and geometry and to cultivate a Rich Inner Life.") But he opts instead to organize the French Quarter's homosexuals in a campaign to "Save the World Through Degeneracy."

Ignatius' pratfalls and railing are sometimes fatiguing, but they provide the excuse for some wonderful scenes of New Orleans lowlife. As he lumbers from misadventure to misadventure, Ignatius crosses paths with a colorful and engaging cast of secondary characters—Miss Trixie, the senile assistant accountant at Levy Pants, who is obsessed with the Easter ham she has never received; Dorian Greene, a stereotyped but endearing leader of the gay community; Patrolman Mancuso, who wears outrageous disguises in his undercover pursuit of "suspicious characters." Best of all are the denizens of the Night of Joy bar: Lana Lee, the tough proprietor who poses for special-order pornographic postcards as a sideline; Darlene, who makes her show-biz debut as "Harlot O'Hara," a "pure Virgin-ny Belle" who performs a strip tease with the aid of her pet-cockatoo; and Burma Jones, a quickwitted black floor-sweeper dedicated to sabotaging the bar where he is employed "on a salary ain even startin to be a minimal wage."

The title of Toole's novel comes from Jonathan Swift: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." There is indeed something Swiftian in the ravings of the enormously self-obsessed Ignatius, but Toole's own point of view in this scattershot and unfocused satire is not very clear. He had, however, a terrific ear for dialect and individual idiosyncrasies and a comic verve that makes the story behind his novel's delayed appearance all the more poignant. ■■