

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

IMINGLE WITH my peers or no one, and since I have no peers, I mingle with no one," Ignatius J. Reilly jottles in his journal in New Orleans in the early 1960s. At 30, Reilly is a fat upstart genius who dusts a little for his mother and is "writing a lengthy indictment against our century." A belching slob who fantasizes himself as a swashbuckler, Reilly scrawls his diatribes in Big Chief tablets

and masturbates as "a hobby." He is a raging paranoid who consoles himself with Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*, endless guzzling of a Dixie-fried soft drink named Dr. Nut and down-front banzai cries at Doris Day matinees ("Filth! . . . Rape her!"). Reilly loathes movies in general, Scenicruiser buses, women's art guilds, swishy coxcombs, TV, frozen food, psychiatry, communism, capitalism, new cars and subdivisions. In short, he is an eminently sane man.

Reilly's mother, who wears white anklets and keeps a bottle or two of Gallo muscatel in the oven, begins to have her doubts on that score. She wades through a puddle of Big Chief tablets and asks her son what they are. "That is my worldview that you see," Reilly says. She asks if he is "a communiss." Stung, Reilly replies: "What I want is a good, strong monarchy with a tasteful and decent king who has some knowledge of theology and geometry. . . . You can always tell employes of the government by the total vacancy which occupies that space where most other people have faces."

When Mother Reilly threatens to commit him for shrinkage, Ignatius ventures forth from his womblike room to find a paying job. With a footlong hot dog in one hand and a plastic cutlass in the other (don't ask), he rambles through the French Quarter, encountering an incomparable and astonishing dunciad of comic characters: Burma Jones, perhaps the hippest black man in modern letters; Dorian Greene, who blows Reilly's plan to "Save the World Through Degeneracy"; and a dozen other dazzling eccentrics. The portraits are scathing, yet curiously fond, as in the case of Myrna Minkoff, "a loud, offensive maiden from the Bronx" who was "only happy when a police dog was sinking its fangs into her black leotards or when she was being dragged feet first down stone steps from a Senate hearing."

A Confederacy of Dunces has everything going for it, including a wonderful close-squeak ending. Written in the early sixties, the novel is belatedly published through the good offices of Walker Percy, another matinee moviegoer of note. Internal evidence suggests that John Kennedy Toole modeled the character of Ignatius Reilly after himself. The author committed suicide in 1969 at the age of 32.

Toole was on target about the variorum idiocies of his day and eerily prescient about the horrors to come: the consciousness hustle, the gay rumpus scene, the savagery between men and women, undercover cops and punks. *A Confederacy of Dunces* would make an extraordinary Broadway musical, an apocalyptic movie, even a truly offensive TV series. But with or without spinoffs, the book will last. It's a shame its author didn't, or couldn't.

Grover Lewis