

# Southern tale is funny, affecting

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES, by John Kennedy Toole. Foreword by Walker Percy. 338 pages. Louisiana State University Press. \$12.95.

Review by  
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On a street corner in New Orleans, a young man is nearly arrested for looking suspicious. He is wearing a green hunting cap, plaid flannel shirt, muffler and "voluminous tweed trousers" to clothe his more than ample body. He is casually surveying the passersby for signs of bad taste in dress, while waiting for his mother to buy him wine cakes and macaroons.

This is our first view of Ignatius Reilly, a 30-year-old mama's boy, convinced that he is a genius harassed by a "confederacy of dunces." And this improbable character is at the center of an exceptionally funny and affecting novel.

Asked about his occupation, he tells the almost-arresting officer, "I am at the moment writing a lengthy indictment against our century." Irene Reilly, his spunky little maroon-haired mother, arrives on the scene and snaps: "Ignatius, what you done, boy?"

She knows his career consists of sleeping late, complaining about his delicate digestive system, going to bad movies, and wolfing down a dozen jelly doughnuts at a sitting. She suspects he's done plenty.

## Genius menaced by dunces

THIS IS the kind of novel in which each move Ignatius makes sets off an unlikely chain of events, the plot twists and turns in on itself, characters multiply, and everything folds together neatly and happily at the end.

Angelo Mancuso, the policeman who found Ignatius so likely a suspect, reappears later that day when Mrs. Reilly, slightly drunk after having escaped with Ignatius into a sleazy bar called "The Night of Joy," drives her car into a porch.

Mancuso befriends Irene, introduces her to his aunt, Santa Battaglia, and before long the three of them are going bowling as therapy for Irene's loneliness and her "arthrititis."

Meanwhile, Ignatius must find a job to help pay for the destroyed porch. Then things really get complicated.

As the story moves on, we come to know these people who are like cartoons come to life, potential caricatures who have been given human warmth and depth with no loss of comic exaggeration.

Ignatius is arrogant, supercilious and inconsiderate, but never despicable, because he is too afraid of the world. He works for a time at a pants factory, but is fired after accidentally starting a race riot.

He decides he might be able to cope with life as a hot dog vendor, and, dressed as a pirate with one earring and a sword, he pushes a frankfurter-shaped cart through the French Quarter.

IRENE IS devoted to him, but is hard put to deal with her genius son. Some of the novel's best scenes occur as she and Santa, in a dialect described as part New Orleans and part Hoboken, try to understand Ignatius.

The hot dog venture ends when Ignatius gets his picture in the newspaper, shown lying outside "The Night of Joy," under the headline, WILD INCIDENT ON BOURBON STREET. A distraught Irene can only ask, "Ain't this awful? What I'm gonna do? Now our name is really ruind."

Santa thinks Ignatius should be hit in the head, and/or sent to the charity hospital. But, like Irene, she is at heart a kindly soul.

Before leaving her house, she is apt to pick up the photograph of her long-dead mother, give it a loud kiss, and say, "Take it easy, babe. I'm praying for you."

It seems that this entire novel supports one of Ignatius' own philosophical proclamations: "Once a person was asked to

step into this brutal century, anything could happen."

The publication of Toole's book is itself an unlikely occurrence.

Walker Percy's introduction explains that in 1976 he received a call from an unknown woman asking him to read a manuscript left by her son. John Toole had written the novel in the early '60s and committed suicide in 1969.

Thelma Toole was as strenuously devoted to her son as Irene Reilly was to Ignatius, and she kept after Percy until he agreed to read the work, eventually found himself agreeing that it was a great novel, and helped her find a publisher.

PERCY COMPARES this work to *Don Quixote*, and it can stand up to such standards, for, unlike Ignatius, Toole probably did have a touch of genius.

His novel might also be compared to John Irving's *The World According to Garp*. They share the same ability to make us laugh out loud while making us believe in the reality of characters who are not to be believed by any rational standards.

But ultimately all comparisons fail to capture the originality of this work. It has a unique combination of liveliness, depth and humor, which should make it not only a classic but a favorite novel.

Caryn Fuoroli is a freelance reviewer.