

Toole's Trade

by LYNTON LESSERDAY

A Confederacy of Dunces

John Kennedy Toole

Allen Lane £7.95, King Penguin £2.50

AMERICA's top journalistic award, the Pulitzer Prize, ran into a lot of trouble this year when it was learned that the *Washington Post* reporter who won the features section award had made up the whole prize-winning story. Confidence in the famous newspaper's fact-checking zeal was rather crushed. The Pulitzer Prize committee was blushing as well. Neither was confidence restored when it was found that the *Village Voice* feature, which had won second place, was also a phoney. But the Pulitzer Prize is not only awarded to newspapers but also to novels and this year's novel is a certain winner. Or is it?

There is something very rum about John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Not that the novel is bad. It is a truly funny book. It made me smile, chuckle, giggle, laugh so much I had to clutch my sides and then bore everybody by reading bits out loud which were not really very funny out of context. Still, there was also the nagging suspicion that it may be yet another Pulitzer hoax. The reason for this is that the story beyond the novel is too good. We are supposed to believe that there was this comic genius with the odd name, John Kennedy Toole, and that he wrote this brilliantly funny novel eighteen years ago in the early Sixties, that he could not find a publisher for it and because of this took his own life in 1969 at the age of 32. Ever since his mother has crusaded for publication of the book and finally, last year, an obscure, backwoods American university, Louisiana State University, published it.

It became an instant success. "A masterwork of comedy," the *New York Times* said. "A great original comic talent," Anthony Burgess said. "Every reviewer loved it. For once, everyone is right," said *Rolling Stone*. It says something for the American reviewers that they bothered at all to look at a novel published by an esoteric house like the Louisiana State University Press.

But the fairy tale story is evidently true. There was a John Kennedy Toole, he was born in New Orleans in 1937, was graduated from Columbia University and taught English at Hunter College in New York before returning home to New Orleans where this novel is set. The amazing thing

then becomes, why wouldn't anyone publish it? The mad hero, Ignatius J. Reilly, a sort of presentable Elephant Man, who swells up to a giant size when he is agitated, is a Medievalist, a genius who hates the 20th century. But he also abhors the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment, as well. He is a Roman Catholic who believes in the Fall and believes that after the Fall Man's lot was inescapable misery—and quite rightly too.

As he wanders about New Orleans, scribbling down long passages of philosophy, as he sits in the cinema shouting out in pain at the nonsense on the screen—ditto with television—as he converses with his moronic and often drunken mother or writes to his former girlfriend in New York City you soon realise that Ignatius is serious about his loathing of the modern world. He belittles the Civil Rights movement, the blacks, aspirations to join the middle class, modern, progressive Catholic thinking, the Protestant Work Ethic, the Communists, the McCarthyites, Gay Lib, everything, indeed, since the Reformation.

But why wasn't the novel published? Anything was supposed to go in America in the Sixties, it was the Era of Protest. But John Toole's novel did not go. I don't think it was because he was a complete and utter anarchist. It was simply because he was so funny about everything. No earnest liberal in a New York publishing house, laugh though he might at Toole's attacks on the red necks, would take the book after reading him rip into Ignatius's girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff. And, oddly enough, times have not seemed to have changed all that much. Remember it was not a New York house which published this novel but Louisiana State University Press and they, perhaps, only did so because the novel is about New Orleans, the way Joyce's *Ulysses* is about Dublin, and also Toole's mother finally

found herself a champion in the literary establishment, Professor Walker Percy.

Basically the plot is simple. Ignatius, aged 30, after ten years in university, is forced to find work. He is hindered by his attitude and appearance. He finds work first in a run-down factory, the Levy Pants Company, and then as a street vendor of Paradise hot dogs. He gets up to all sorts of misadventures, meets many weird and comic characters and, as the novel approaches the end, would appear to have the choice of doing a long prison sentence or spending the rest of his days in an insane asylum.

There is, however, a surprise ending, one which I hope other reviewers will not reveal, and the strange, meandering threads of the plot are all brought together, rather like Dickens. One American critic called Toole's hero "a perverse Thomas Aquinas" and most of the reviews have spoken about Toole being a genius and this novel being a classic and I am afraid that might put the general reader off. There is nothing difficult in this book. There are no "layers of meaning". It is, of course, a bad-tempered book—but it is also very, very funny with some of the best rendering of naturalistic American speech I have read. To say that Toole is against the blacks or the Jews gives a false picture. Burma Jones, a black man, a marvellous character, is treated with great sympathy both by Ignatius and the author, who sees poor Burma Jones all right in the end. This is likewise true of Gus Levy, owner of Levy Pants, who comes on as a comic grotesque at first but ends as a true human being.

The curious title of the novel is from Jonathan Swift—"When a true genius appears in this world, you may know him by this sign: that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." Poor John Toole, when he picked that title he did not realise how right Dean Swift sometimes could be.