

# This book is dangerous to your decorum

## A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES

By John Kennedy Toole

Louisiana State University Press  
and Grove Press; \$12.95

Reviewed by HARRY JAMES CARGAS

Do not read this novel on an airplane or in a doctor's working room. You'll embarrass yourself by laughing out loud. Not smiling, not snickering but roaring, guffawing.

The plot is wonderfully weird, but that isn't the book's major strength. Characterization and language are the author's grand achievements. Let's have a go at the plot anyway:

Fat Ignatius Reilly, wishing he had lived in medieval Europe instead of contemporary New Orleans, has to get a job to support his eccentric, very critical mother. He goes to work for Levy Pants and immediately infects the factory with his style of discontent. Ignatius organizes the "Negro" employees to strike but they lose faith in him. He gets fired, much to his lazy relief.

Ignatius next becomes a hot dog vendor — but eats nearly all of the coney's every day. A seller of pornographic post cards to high school students uses our hero's cart to stash his ware. When Ignatius sees the nude woman a sight which would ordinarily disgust him, he becomes enamored of her because she seems to be reading from his favorite book, the sixth-century *Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius.

Before going to meet this wonderwoman,

Ignatius tries to organize a political party of homosexuals figuring that armies of "sodomites" will be busy romancing rather than fighting each other. The initial meeting of his group ends in a melee from which Ignatius barely escapes.

Off to the nightclub, Ignatius sees his dream girl's striptease with pet cockatoo routine and is mortified. The bird attacks the boisterous mound of flesh and a headline-making riot occurs. In danger of incarceration in a mental ward, Ignatius flees to New York with an old flame — a college friend who used to assist him in anonymously threatening an old prof.

Ignatius's widowed mother all the while is succumbing to the advances of a communist suitor, a friend of a police officer who once failed to arrest Ignatius in a street demonstration and therefore got a long assignment looking for criminals in the bus station toilet.

Ignatius's first employer, Mr. Levy, hates his own factory, refuses to take an interest in it and feels similarly about his wife. Mrs. Levy's major charitable project is 84-year-old Levy Pants accountant Miss Trixie who keeps dozing off at work and waking with "Am I retired yet?" Mrs. Levy tries to give the octogenarian something to live for, gets her a set of teeth and is bitten for her efforts.

There is a whole cast of hilariously memorable characters in this joyous novel, which would have been improved by judicious rewriting, but this was impossible since the author killed himself in 1969 because, we

are told, he could not get this work published.

Novelist Walker Percy, after much prodding by the author's mother, read the manuscript and championed it. We can be very thankful for that. As is, this is probably one of the five best humor novels by an American.

When it becomes a movie, sections that

will be clearly offensive to homosexuals and less obviously troublesome to black citizens will have to be tempered. Otherwise, I hope the scriptwriters don't tamper with the dialogue much. Toole's use of language is simply sensational.

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