

Madhouse novel spins around wheel of fortune

A Confederacy of Dunces

By JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE.

Louisiana State University Press. \$12.95.

Fortuna has not been kind to Ignatius Reilly.

First, there was the shocking blunder of plunking Ignatius down, cavalierly, in the modern world. What possessed Fortuna to pass over the much more worthy Middle Ages? To place him in a shabby New Orleans home with his kindly widowed mother, a devout Muscatel adherent who does not grasp his genius? The brain reels at the thought. Then to force him to put aside his idle philosophical reverie and writing — scrawled in pencil on the fat blue lines of a Big Chief tablet — for a paying job? The nerve.

These are but a few of the plagues Fortuna has sent crashing down on the head of Ignatius Reilly, surely one of the most laughably repugnant, but wonderfully unique characters created by an American author in this century.

Ignatius' many tangles with Fortuna's vicissitudes are the reader's gain. Ignatius is the anchor — and a hefty one at that — of John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, the novel chosen as the Pulitzer Prize fiction winner this year.

TOOLE DRAWS HIS title from a Jonathan Swift quote: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him."

Calling the strange characters who people Ignatius' world *dunces* is a bit harsh, just as calling Ignatius a genius is relaxing the standards for admission a little. But Ignatius' addled perceptions are the soul of this story, a warm, satirical bundle of events that take place in New Orleans.

Ignatius is a follower of the Roman philosopher Boethius, who devised the concept of cycles of the wheel of fortune. Ignatius tends to invoke Fortuna in the way others invoke God.

He is the spoiled and imperious son of Irene Reilly, a kindly widow who keeps her bottle of wine in a cold oven. Ignatius is a gargantuan figure of a man, a mass of fleshy folds under his meticulously absurd style of dress: an omnipresent green hunting cap and muffler, a plaid flannel shirt, baggy tweed trousers.

As the book opens he is unemployed, spending his days sprawled on his bed, writing away at a peculiar medieval commentary. He is every parent's nightmare — after an eight-year tenure in college, he is equipped to do nothing, and furthermore, he doesn't care to soil his hands in the workplace.

WORKING WOULD require him to matriculate into the modern world, something he finds offensive. And when Ignatius is offended in the least, he tends to have trouble with "my valve," — he has pinpointed the trouble as his pyloric valve, the opening between his stomach and small intestine — a condition that bloats and incapacitates him whenever it's convenient.

Ignatius goes to the movies and loudly disapproves of virtually everything he sees, and each afternoon he watches a popular music-and-dancing television program, probably one of the old shows like *Where the Action Is*, in order to bray loudly at the "egregious insult to good taste."

"Do I believe the total perversion that I am witnessing," Ignatius screamed from the parlor. "The children on that program should all be gassed."

When Ignatius does go to work as a clerk in a trouser factory, his sense of history inspires him to lead an uprising among the factory workers. This isn't just a strike or demonstration. It's a "Crusade for Moorish Dignity."

The novel follows Ignatius through the streets of New Orleans, through social classes from moneyed entrepreneur to black poverty, into academe and into the Night of Joy lounge, through encounters with gays, capitalists and political activists.

This is not the haunted, slightly decadent New Orleans of Walker Percy or Tennessee Williams. It is strange, all right. But it is wonderfully alive with a diverse sampling of characters from all corners of the city.

THERE IS Burma Jones, the savvy, put-upon porter in the Night of Joy lounge who longs to escape a devil-or-the-deep-blue sea existence: he can either push a broom for sub-minimum wages at the bar, or go to jail for vagrancy.

There is Mancuso, a downtrodden police patrolman, sentenced by a sadistic sergeant to patrol bus station restrooms because he is not arresting his quota of weirdos on the streets.

A fellow student of Ignatius' from college, a professional political activist from New York named Myrna Minkoff, is revealed mainly in the insufferable letters she sends him about her current projects, and goading him about his philosophies. She thinks Ignatius' problem is lack of sex — he has forsworn it, to remain pure.

And in Irene Reilly, we see the congenitally sweet southern lady, a wilted magnolia but still a bit of a flirt, calling everyone she meets "honey," devoted to her son despite his lack of redeeming qualities and the verbal abuse he spews at her.

TOOLE, WHO COMMITTED suicide in 1969, had a wonderful ear for dialogue and dialect. Most of the story unfolds in conversation between the characters. It could almost be a play. The book is written in separate threads that slowly come together as the novel progresses.

It is a joyfully written, madhouse of a book that is a delight to read for its story and to savor for its fertile writing. But it is a delight tinged with tragedy, for it is the only work of Kennedy's we are likely to share.

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