

Unforgettable prize-winner

John Kennedy Toole, aged 32 years, committed suicide in 1969. Total frustration and the attendant despondency resulting from his failure to interest a single publisher in the major novel he had written were large contributing factors.

Luckily, Toole's mother had his manuscript.

Recognizing it as the masterpiece it is, she persisted until eventually — and reluctantly at that — Walker Percy at Loyola University agreed to read it. The rest is literary history and “the stuff that

dreams are made of.” Unfortunately, the author was not alive to see nightmare transformed.

With the help of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, “A Confederacy of Dunces” was published in 1980 by the Louisiana State University Press. That same year this astonishing first — alas only — novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It doesn't seem far-fetched to say Toole's stunningly brilliant contribution to the reading world is surely destined to become a classic of American literature.

Here, then is Ignatius J. Reilly! In full glory he bursts upon us with his green ear flapped hunting cap, his plaid scarf, his monumental girth and his unrelenting belief in “theological and geometric standards.” Soon we come to know him as a lover of cold Dr. Nut soda pop, Big Chief writing tablets, a “rich inner life,” and being unemployed in the usual sense of that word.

As Walker Percy writes in his short introduction, itself a work of art, this most unusual hero is “slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one — who is in violent revolt against the entire modern age . . .” Once encountered, Ignatius J. Reilly is never to be forgotten.

There are quite a few other unforgettable characters in this unique, supremely funny-sad story. Mrs. Reilly, Santa Battaglia, Miss Trixie, Patrolman Mancuso, Lana Lee, Jones, M.

Minkoff, Mr. and Mrs. Levy among others. Each one is superbly depicted, so alive he or she seems far more than a character in a work of fiction.

The main plot traces Ignatius's forays into the working world, whence he is forced by his desperate mother. With inexorable, madcap, but totally plausible logic lunacy follows lunacy. Toole's imagination was awesome, yet his powers of observation must have been equally wonderful.

“A confederacy of Dunces” is as utterly, delightfully ridiculous as life itself. It's one of those rare books which become more enjoyable each time it's re-read. The scope of Toole's multi-dimensional talent as evidenced in his only book was apparently boundless. The tragedy is that such a writer is lost to us forever. The miracle is this work he left behind for all time.

