

John Kennedy Toole

## Rumblings

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES  
by John Kennedy Toole  
Louisiana State University Press  
338 pages; \$12.95

Into each literary life some unsolicited manuscripts must fall, and fall and fall and fall. They are almost never any good. Established authors, editors, critics and agents read them glumly, but with a touch of the spirit that moves others to buy lottery tickets. The big payoff may be ridiculously unlikely, but the lure is irresistible. Novelist Walker Percy was handed an improbable winning number in 1976. A teaching stint in New Orleans left him vulnerable to would-be writers. One day a bulky manuscript was thrust upon him by a middle-aged woman wearing white gloves and accompanied by a chauffeur. She firmly advised Percy to read the "great book" her son had written. Seeing no gentlemanly way out, he began to riffle pages and then to read slowly. Before long, he decided that *A Confederacy of Dunces* was "a great rumbling farce" that had to be published.

The story behind this novel has a happy ending; the story of its author does not. John Kennedy Toole was born in New Orleans in 1937. He graduated from high school at 16 and then from Tulane in 1958. He received a master's degree in English from Columbia a year later, taught for a year in New York City and then returned to Louisiana. He served two years in the Army, chiefly based in Puerto Rico, where he wrote his novel. He went back to New Orleans to teach and to find a publisher. Years passed with no success. As his frustrations continued, Toole grew increasingly withdrawn. He was found asphyxiated in his car in 1969.

In his posthumous exuberant comic novel, laughter prevails. Ignatius J. Reil-

ly, 30, is a monumental slob whose mere appearance on the streets of New Orleans makes policemen itch to arrest him. "To think," one character tells him, "that they're letting you run around loose." Ignatius' ruling passion is his utter contempt for the modern age; its manifestations make his pyloric valve close, trapping gas in his cavernous stomach. His heart belongs to the early Middle Ages. He thinks that contemporary domestic life would be improved if chains and manacles were put back in the home, where they belong: "When father came in from work, the whole family could grab him and chain him for being stupid enough to be working all day long to support them."

Unfortunately for Ignatius, his dipsomaniacal mother forces him to look for a 20th century job. He first fetches up at Levy Pants, a somnolent factory with a senile secretary named Miss Trixie. "Am I retired?" she asks often. Ignatius tries to organize the black workers into an ill-fated Crusade for Moorish Dignity. Then he takes up selling hot dogs in the French Quarter. His mother comes to the belated conclusion that Ignatius is disgracing her and wonders about committing him to Charity Hospital. A friend urges her on: "If it's free and they lock people away, Ignatius oughta be there."

A number of satellite characters keep orbiting Ignatius' girth. There is Burma Jones, a young black who has to take a low-paying job at a Bourbon Street strip joint or be arrested for vagrancy. As a sidewalk shill for the acts inside, Jones seeks his revenge: "Night of Joy got genuine color peoples workin below the minimal wage." Then there is Patrolman Mancuso, who has been ordered by his chief to bring in at least one suspicious character. Donning the odd costumes he is forced to wear for the purpose of enticement, Mancuso constantly goes out and gets himself arrested. Much of the comedy in the novel is of the atom-smashing variety; people and props ricochet off each other into unforeseen trajectories. Ignatius' favorite work is Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. This book passes from his hands to a policeman's; it is stolen by a juvenile delinquent and next appears as a prop in a pornographic photograph, which winds up back in Ignatius' hands.

The title comes from Jonathan Swift: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." Ultimately, Ignatius is simply too grotesque and loony to be taken for a genius; the world he howls at seems less awful than he does. Pratfalls can pass beyond slapstick only if they echo, and most of the ones in this novel do not. They are terribly funny, though, and if a book's price is measured against the laughs it provokes, *A Confederacy of Dunces* is the bargain of the year. — Paul Gray

## Dear Theo

STRANGER

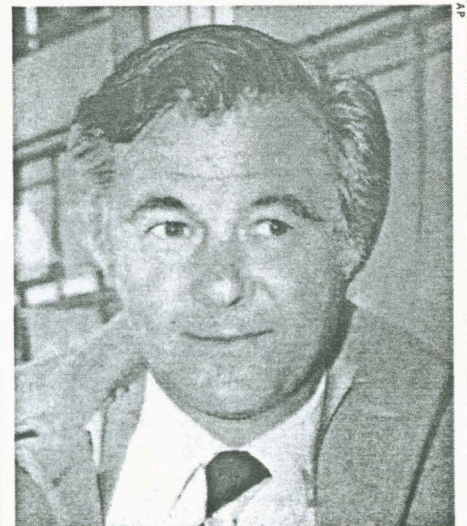
by Bryan Forbes

Doubleday; 474 pages; \$12.95

For the well-born and well-off, Cambridge University was an oasis in the wasteland of prewar Europe. Yet, for a few, the green fields were mined with sexual intrigue and high treason. For Cambridge was also a school for scandal. The most notorious Soviet spies were recruited there: Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Kim Philby and, it turned out late last year, Sir Anthony Blunt, now deknighthed and deposed as art adviser to the Queen. How, from this world of privilege, philosophy and vintage port, could the Soviets have enlisted such consummate traitors?

In *Stranger*, subtitled *A Novel About the Fourth Man*, the narrator concludes: "They picked carefully and they picked well . . . I feel it was no accident that their four most successful recruits were all taken from the ranks of those who considered themselves unloved." He adds: "It was the adultery of the soul that claimed most of their spare time." In this arrangement of the Cantabrigian quartet, Bryan Forbes, the English actor, director (*The L-Shaped Room*) and novelist, homes in on Theo Gittings, who bears a passing resemblance to Blunt. Theo, a brilliant, alienated invert who becomes a pillar of the literary establishment, is compared by critics to E.M. Forster (a fellow homosexual who issued the closet *cri de coeur*: "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country"). Theo's career as Communist agent is unraveled after his death by bestselling Writer Anthony Stern, a straight second cousin who had been his social inferior and dearest friend.

Theo is an imaginary character,



Bryan Forbes

*Treachery in the name of humanity.*