

Lunacy and Chaos Take Over in Zany New Orleans Story

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES. By John Kennedy Toole. Louisiana State University Press. \$12.95

By **THOMAS BONNER JR.**

John Kennedy Toole, the author of this posthumously published novel, "A Confederacy of Dunces," drew the title from Jonathan Swift's observation: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." But this comment also provides the basis of the conflict in this bounding comic novel set in New Orleans.

The "genius" is Ignatius J. Reilly, a larger than life character with a medieval world view in combat with the vacuity of the modern world in its

manifold aspects: Church, state, business, entertainment, education, and neighborhood among others.

Waiting for his mother under the clock at Holmes, Reilly attracts the police and nearly causes a riot. Rescued by an old man and then his mother, the two escape into the French Quarter and take refuge in a bar. On their leaving, an accident occurs with the mother at the wheel of the car. Now Reilly must become employed to defray any costs of the damages. Wherever he goes to work, he brings a marvelous anarchy — first at Levy's Pants and then selling hot dogs from a cart; he is, of course, released from both occupations. Finally he unwittingly becomes involved in a por-

nography ring and is instrumental in its discovery by the police. When his mother gives up all hope for him and makes arrangements for an examination at Charity Hospital, his bizarre friend from college, Myrna, happens by to whisk him away from the city in the nick of time.

Although the work is strong in the development of minor characters who fulfill these various roles, its principal merit lies in the creation of Reilly. In his forward to the novel, Walker Percy writes that he is "without progenitor in any literature I know of — slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one." He is describable and yet indescribable,

attractive and yet repelling, funny and yet sad.

University educated Reilly ventures from his "cell" in his mother's home on Constantinople Street only when family circumstances compel his bringing home a pay check. These excursions lead to disasters for nearly all concerned and hinder his filling the "Big Chief" tablets with his ponderous script. From his introduction "under the clock at the D.H. Holmes Department Store" to his final escape past "the last twinkling streetlight of the last swampy suburb," Reilly regales readers with his eructations, bloatings, valve openings and closings, and his costumes.

Other characters deserve mention:

Mrs. Reilly, who discovers that there is more in life than buying cakes and Dr. Nut for her son; Patrolman Mancuso, who in disguise is staked out on a men's room for eight-hour stretches; Myrna Minkoff, who urges sexual freedom and rescues Reilly from the possibilities of Charity Hospital; Mrs. Levy who punishes her husband by inciting their daughters' liberal impulses; and Santa Battaglia, who takes chances on rosaries and makes love matches at the bowling alley. Caricatures like Miss Trixie, the mad unretired retiree, and Dorian Greene, the leader of the homosexual community, complement the range of characters.

Two significant accomplishments are

the dialogue and the counter-point structure. Toole captures the dialect of that Brooklyn sounding area of New Orleans with the specially picturesque exchanges between Mrs. Reilly and Santa Battaglia.

"A Confederacy of Dunces" is the Alpha and Omega of John Kennedy Toole, who studied and taught at Tulane and Dominican College respectively. A literary curiosity in one aspect, the novel explores stretches of Walker Percy's fictive world and yet strikes an original note. Ignatius Reilly writes at the beginning of Chapter Two: "With the breakdown of the Medieval system, the Gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy."