

Confederacy Of Dunces Called Very Good Book

By DAVID SHIELDS

Upon reading the final page of John Kennedy Toole's novel (A Confederacy of Dunces, LSU Press, \$12.95) one is confounded by a continuum of emotions ranging from fuming indignation at the one end to quiet astoundment at the other.

The astoundment springs from the book itself. The indignation from our realization of how very close mankind came to not having the book in print and available.

Toole's novel is a unique reading experience, a multifaceted, significant, artistic and soul-nourishing tragicomedy, the success of which cannot be accounted for by any previous knowledge or experience of literature. Actually, one wonders if the smell of a classic is not detected among the flatulent ordors of Ignatius J. Reilly that erupt from the pages.

Reilly, a ponderous and despicable slob of awesome dimensions, is an unlikely hero even in a comic novel. He should by all rights repulse a reader. And does if he is in any way considered outside the context in which he lives. But Ignatius Reilly is the magic of this book. He is Toole's legacy, an artistic achievement without apparent prototype or forerunner in all of literature.

ENSCONCED IN a filthy and smelly back bedroom of a shanty on Constantinople Street in New Orleans where he lives with his aging, muscatel-drinking mother, Reilly wages war against every precept and institution of modern man, traditional and otherwise, bar none.

Filling one "Big Chief" writing tablet after another with his invectives, drinking "Dr. Nuts," growing fatter and fatter and experiencing more and more trouble with his pyloric valve, worshipping slothfulness and the ancient Boethius, Ignatius is early on compelled to go to work when his mother rams the old Phymouth into a downtown New Orleans balcony.

His work experience is one lunatic adventure after another, but not, as Walker Percy notes in the book's forward, without "it's own eerie logic" that brings a myriad of finely drawn characters and plotlines together. And all without the slightest reliance on coincidence; this and the overall unity of the book are structural achievements unseen in the American novel since Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby."

All OF OF WHICH turns our attention to the indignant side of the continuum. Toole wrote "Dunces" in the 60's (Ignatius J. Reilly surely symbolizes that whole degenerate decade) but could find no major publishing house the least bit interested in it.

Toole took his own life in 1969, and his mother took up her son's crusade with no better luck than he had had. It wasn't until she turned away from the so called seat of all

our intelligence and taste and cultural sophistication in the New York and the northeastern publishing world that she finally won some attention for her dead son's book.

Through the gracious help and still lively sense of artistic integrity of Walker Percy, an established author, Mrs. Toole succeeded in having the Louisiana State University Press bring the book out in 1980, over a decade after it had made its New York rounds. It promptly won a Pulitzer. And the reading public's indignation.

HOW COULD so called professional editors, literate people across the board, editors who largely call the shots for what we see and read in America, for the art we are

and are not privileged to encounter, miss the boat so completely on this novel?

Quite frankly, it is impossible to believe they missed by accident. After reading Toole's novel, one has to believe that there was a deliberate effort somewhere in those ivory towers along the northeastern seaboard to keep this book from the reading public. Why?

Well, the answer to that would overrun this space and wouldn't be very pretty to boot. So let's content ourselves with the fact that a very good book has made it to us. The several readings it demands will make up in part for the many good books out there that undoubtedly will never be available to us.