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A REVIEW OF EXCERPTS FROM A NOVEL
Called
A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES
By
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Review based on
excerpts published in the
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If Mr. Toole's novel in its entirety achieves publication, it goes without saying that there will be a good initial market for it in New Orleans. Universally, people tend to relish the chance to pick up gossip about their neighbors, so long as the asking price for the gossip is not too dear. I daresay that Mr. Toole's "neighbors" in New Orleans will prove to be no exception, if he is published.

However, two important questions remain, which I am not qualified to answer, namely:

- (1) Would the book, if published, be well received by those who control American literary criticism?

and

- (2) Would the book, whether or not it were well-received critically, find a readership and become a monetary success in the national market?

Judgments about questions of this sort can be made only by insiders such as Walker Percy and his publishers. In the meantime, it is reasonable for even an outsider such as me to speculate that the book would be roundly denounced - almost to a man - by America's Chamber of Commerce types, who resist looking into any mirror that fails to portray them as "the fairest of all."

There is an essential difference, though, between the question of whether a book will be a saleable commodity and an immediate critical "hit," on the one hand, and the question, on the other hand, of whether -- in the long run -- it was worth the effort that it cost its author to get it written.

Mr. Toole's modus quickly brings to mind Charles Dickens and Damon Runyon. Among his own contemporaries, Toole reminds me of Kurt Vonnegut and Tom Robbins. All have had an ear for the speech patterns of "little" people. All have had the heart to respond to the tragedies of life around them (although modern cynics would call such circumstances "absurdities" rather than "tragedies," I suppose.) And all have had the drive and the craftsmanship to articulate their perceptions to good effect.

I am also reminded of Albert Goldstein, who called himself a newspaperman, and who died just this past week, after a long and effective career in local journalism. Mr. Goldstein had that same "ear" for the speech patterns he heard around him, and that same wry humor, although he probably disagreed with Toole's perception that what he was seeing and hearing was sick and tragic.

In my opinion, John Kennedy Toole (whoever he is) walks in good company: Dickens and Runyon. Vonnegut and Robbins. And Goldstein, even if Goldstein would prefer to protest the likeness.

Very good company, indeed!

Work of Toole's kind needs to be done, and apparently it needs to be done repeatedly and doggedly, in every culture and every decade. What Dickens and Runyon did for London and New York, Mr. Toole has attempted to do for New Orleans, giving local habitations and local names to a phenomenon that was first documented

over a century ago. The perception shared by all these men is simple but devastating -- that the life of a city can degenerate into total madness and exploitation, and yet can continue on for some time after the onset of madness, sheerly through the weight of inertia.

Mr. Toole speaks of people who live in the shadows of our "normal" city life, as its victims. Without their labor (we need to be reminded) our "normal" lifestyle would not go on. We resist being reminded of that.

He reminds us that we conspire, sometimes subconsciously but sometimes with "malice aforethought," to keep marginal people precisely where they are: at the bottom of the heap, outside-the-pale, confused, helpless, and at our mercy.

He speaks of a deep trouble, hard to cure, but which we must cure if any of us opt to survive. The trouble occurs whenever people who are caught within the matrix of the city cease to believe that they can be instrumental in fashioning a "new Jerusalem" -- a new city. The trouble is despair. Toole speaks of the greedy and ultimately suicidal effort of despairing people to dominate whatever is nearest, whether it be a thing or a person, and even if the dominance lasts only for a split-second, for no motive other than that it "feels good at the moment." It is the behavior of mad and famished dogs. Read what Toole has to say about the interaction between Reilly, his mother, and the wrought-iron balcony's supporting post!

It should be noted that modern "city-bred" psychologists tend to approve such behavior, saying that it is normal competitiveness, and that it's okay to do anything you can get away with, if it "feels good at the moment."

We need to be reminded of such things, if only for the sake of our own survival. If left to ourselves, most of us sweep under the rugs of our minds the feeling that there is "something wrong." We keep it up until the feeling dies of suffocation and leaves us at peace. We deny any personal responsibility for the people who sustain us, until their problems rot into a cesspool of such size that it engulfs all of us -- the "innocent" middle class along with the "eccentric" and disadvantaged creatures who make our mediocracy possible. In other words, most of us go so far as to deny that we are dependent on the city from which we draw (steal) our daily bread. Then we deny that we owe the city any loyalty whatsoever, until it is too late to save either the city, or, consequently, ourselves.

Since I haven't read Mr. Toole's full manuscript, I can't offer even my amateur's judgment as to whether he effectively accomplished what he seems to have been attempting. Is it great, or even good, literature? I can't judge. But, that the job needed to be attempted once again, is -- in my view -- beyond debate. And we, who are native to New Orleans, should be grateful to him for having undertaken such a large and thankless task. An effort of this kind is a "symptom" that there still is a spark of health left in our ill town.

Toole and his kind are prophets -- lone voices in the city's wilderness of exploitation, despair and death. And since

prophets usually are without honor in their own country, I doubt that Toole's work will be accepted with any better grace than the work of his predecessors. But, if the excerpts published by The New Orleans Review are representative of the whole novel, he aimed for the heart of the matter, whether or not he hit the heart, and whether or not our establishment is comfortable with his aim.

The excerpts are telling. They offer both titillation for our ladies (after their afternoon naps), and fightin' words for our gentlemen (after their three-martini lunches). They also offer a prophet's apocalyptic view of our city, for those who need neither naps nor martinis to shield them from reality.

Moreover, Mr. Toole offers his work without a coercive message. The reader is free to respond to the writing as he chooses -- depending only on his own capacity for gut-level responses and his own sense of responsibility to himself and to the commonweal.

In my opinion, Mr. Toole worked in a great and saving tradition, whether or not he realized it. Let's give him an "A" for effort, and let's hope for more like him in New Orleans.

I wonder what Walker Percy, who lives in Covington and who therefore is detached from the concerns of our city, thinks of all this to-do about the anguish of the streets? Perhaps Mr. Percy would be so kind as to try to peddle the book to a publisher, before he retreats again to the sanctuary of the North Shore, from whence -- in good middle-class form -- he can both sniff the ozone and sniff at the problems of the city.

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