

Tacky vocations

By Richard Brown

JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE:

A Confederacy of Dunces

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All but the most dedicated admirers of comic fantasy will be made wary by their first impressions of *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Its paranoid title, adapted from Swift, promises the kind of literary self-consciousness that can so often become tedious. It carries an off-putting foreword explaining the author's suicide and the discovery of the manuscript by an American college tutor. The central character is a grotesque version of the unemployable, self-indulgent, middle-aged adolescent with a master's degree and a sordid bedroom scattered with the notebook jottings that are one day to become his major indictment of the modern world. We might be excused for thinking that this has been done before—in Anthony Burgess's Enderby novels, for instance, or more commercially by Tom Sharpe.

Nevertheless, *A Confederacy of Dunces* manages to gather a considerable momentum, has its own distinctive voice and is imaginative enough to escape the cliché. It opens with Ignatius Reilly waiting for his mother by a New Orleans department store and immediately involved in a confrontation with the gauche Patrolman Mancuso who first accuses him of loitering and then tries to save face by arresting an innocent onlooker. As it turns out, arrest for Ignatius would have been a more satisfactory result: his favourite book is Boethius's *Consolations of Philosophy* (composed in prison), and in preserving a precarious freedom he is forced to seek employment compatible with his "world-view" and his "valve" (the temperamental gastric seat of his creativity).

First he works for a company called Levy Pants, re-organizing the rat-infested filing system and attempting to start a revolution of the black factory workers. Then he becomes a street hot-dog vendor—which leads him into a plan for global peace based on homosexual infiltration of the armed forces. His mother deserts him and allies herself with the patrolman and the

arrested bystander who somehow manage to expose a pornography racket run from the Night of Joy nightclub. They try to get Ignatius committed as insane but he escapes at the last with Myrna Minkoff, an old college flame and dogooding liberationist with whom he has been conducting a love-hate correspondence.

But the strengths of this novel do not really reside in this wild narrative and the countless absurd situations it generates. It succeeds, where it does succeed, through the clarity of its episodic architecture, its ability to rely effectively on dialogue for the evocation of scene and character, and through some splendid close observation which arises mainly from a determination to work with the peculiarities of a New Orleans setting and language. From the proprietress of the Night of Joy, as she discusses a new striptease gimmick to revive flagging custom, we are given an uncommonly vivid impression of the French quarter of the city. Ignatius's mother and her new friends, with their bowling parties and tastelessness ("honey,

that's a sweet little Ee-see-ee-ee you got on top that TV"), give us "tacky" provincial urban American life. And the black population from Mattie's Ramble Inn have their spokesman in Jones whose comedy again comes from his language as much as from his situation.

"Hey! I'm working in modern slavery. If I quit, I get reprimanded for being vagrant. If I stay, I'm gainfully employ on a salary and ever startin' to be a minimal wage."

The dialogue is pointedly American and there is an added pleasure in a cisatlantic audience in having to translate—for instance when the steatopygic Ignatius on a bar stool "looked like an eggplant balanced atop a thumb tack".

The choice of intellectual endeavour and social change as objects of the novel's satire and the fact that it does have a comic nigger (however free of the worst racist characterization he may be) are rather questionable. But the comedy works and has a tragic, hopeless edge. It is indeed a matter of some regret that we will hear no more from the author.