



John Kennedy Toole
Late Pulitzer Prize-winning author



Thelma Toole
Author's mother holding out

Rhoda Faust is suing for right to publish Toole's first novel.

STAFF PHOTO BY ELIOT KAMENITZ

Suit adds chapter to an early work by author of 'Dunces'

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By **SUSAN FEENEY**
Staff writer

Twenty-eight years before he won the Pulitzer Prize, 16 years before he took his own life and a decade before "A Confederacy of Dunces" was written, John Kennedy Toole wrote "The Neon Bible."

The year was 1954 and he had just graduated from Fortier High School.

Ken Toole submitted the manuscript for the novel, his first, to a writing contest only to have it

rejected. He never submitted it again to anyone.

"The Neon Bible," a poignant story about life in a small Southern town, was discussed in literary circles after "Confederacy," but it has never been published.

The reason, several people familiar with the manuscript say, is that it is caught in a bitter dispute between families and friends. A suit, expected to be filed Friday in Civil District Court, has revived interest in the manuscript.

Rhoda Faust, an owner of the

Maple Street Book Store, said Thelma Toole, the author's mother, promised her "around July 1979" that she could publish "The Neon Bible."

Faust said the promise was renewed several times, although never in writing. Faust said Mrs. Toole told her to wait to publish the manuscript so people could "meditate on the glory of 'Confederacy.'"

"Confederacy" sold 50,000

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A young author's prose

Excerpt from the manuscript of "The Neon Bible," as typed by Toole, showing his promise as a writer:

Toppa never did come home. They buried him in Italy somewhere. Mother got a picture of the place. It was nothing but rows and rows of white crosses, and Mother wondered which ~~one~~ one was Toppa's. Aunt Mae had to hide the picture from her because she just sat down and looked at it and said, "Maybe this one", and pointed or "It could be that one, Mae", or she'd ask Aunt Mae which one she thought it was. When she couldn't find it, she got mad so Aunt Mae had to give it back to her. Pretty soon it was all torn and yellow and the crosses were smeared and greasy from Mother rubbing her finger across it. When Aunt Mae went out to sing at night I'd sit with Mother and watch her look at the picture. She never even knew I was there, but just sat and felt the picture, and then turn it over and look on the back and laugh when she saw there wasn't anything there. I knew I shouldn't be frightened of my own mother, but I was, and I'd wait for Aunt Mae to come home and hope she'd hurry up.

The war plant closed. Aunt Mae didn't have her job any more.

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hardcover and 500,000 paperback copies, according to a spokesman for LSU Press. Faust and Mrs. Toole had a falling out in the fall of 1980, Faust said, that prompted Mrs. Toole to send her a letter denying that she had granted Faust permission to publish.

Faust is asking the court to force Mrs. Toole to fulfill her promise or award her damages, Brian Begue, Faust's attorney, said.

Mrs. Toole, 82, is hospitalized and could not be interviewed. Her attorney, John Hantel, said he could not comment without speaking with Mrs. Toole.

Arthur Ducoing, Mrs. Toole's brother, said she does not want the novel published. He said he does not know why. "Until she is recovered, I think the matter should be left undecided," he said.

But Mrs. Toole does not have exclusive rights to the manuscript. The author's uncle and four cousins on his father's side also own part of the rights.

The other heirs have had little contact with Mrs. Toole in recent

years, said Marion Toole Hosli, one of the heirs. And even among the heirs, there is a difference of opinion about whether Faust should be allowed to publish the manuscript.

Four of the Toole heirs, Harold Toole Sr., Harold Toole Jr., Althea Toole Farley and Hosli have signed a contract for publication with Faust, Hosli said. One of the cousins, Mary Margaret Toole McGuire, has refused to sign the contract. She also refused to be interviewed.

Faust said she believes the manuscript should be published, "because it is the only other finished work of a Pulitzer Prize-winning author — the highest award there is. It is a very beautiful novel in and of itself. Even if it was written by someone anonymous off of the street, it is still worth publishing."

Hosli has not read the manuscript. "But I think that since he had persisted for so long to get 'Confederacy' published and was so despondent when he couldn't, I think he would have wanted anything he wrote to be published."

Author Walker Percy, who was instrumental in getting "Confederacy" published, has read "The

Neon Bible" manuscript. "It holds up," he said. "I think it is publishable in its own right, and in light of 'Confederacy.'"

Percy said he thinks the manuscript "shows a style that most of us have to work very hard for many years to perfect. For a young writer to show such talents is remarkable."

Percy said the manuscript shows "extraordinary imagination" and the beginnings of the irony and satire apparent in "Confederacy."

Percy said he is perplexed about why Mrs. Toole, who worked long and hard to have "Confederacy" published, would not want to publish "The Neon Bible."

"I would hope that she would not deprive the readers of the pleasures of something written by her son," Percy said.

Neither Percy nor Faust expects "The Neon Bible" to be as successful as "Confederacy."

"It is naive, certainly," Faust said. "It is not funny in the way 'Confederacy' is funny. 'Confederacy' was so full of humor. People laughed out loud. This has some really beautiful, heartbreaking and poignant scenes. It is quiet and moving."