

METRO NEWS

Toole book freed for publishing

By **SUSAN FINCH**
Staff writer

One of the owners of the late John Kennedy Toole's unpublished first novel has reluctantly abandoned his fight to keep the manuscript under wraps, freeing the other owners to seek a national publisher, according to court records and interviews.

University of New Orleans English Professor Kenneth Holditch recoiled in horror in February when a judge ordered "The Neon Bible" auctioned off unless Holditch and four Toole cousins who inherited the other half of the manuscript could agree on another way to divide the property.

Holditch inherited a half-interest in "The Neon Bible" from Toole's mother, Thelma, who died in 1984, three years after her son's other novel, "A Confederacy of Dunces," won a Pulitzer Prize.

He said auctioning the book would violate the spirit of Mrs. Toole's bequest that "The Neon Bible" never be published. But Civil District Judge Gerald Fedoroff ruled Mrs. Toole's wish to keep the book private could not be enforced because she owned only part of the book.

Holditch said Tuesday he still objects to having "The Neon Bible" published. But he said Fedoroff left him two options: See the book auctioned where "any nut could buy it, and change it" or have it "published in some more reputable or palatable way," preferably by a nationally recognized publisher, he said.

Toole wrote "The Neon Bible"

when he was 16 and had recently graduated from New Orleans' Fortier High School. It is about life in a small Southern town.

New Orleans lawyer Raymond McGuire, who represents his wife, Mary Toole McGuire, and the three other Toole cousins, said he has contacted major publishers about the book.

"There is interest," he said. McGuire also said he has talked with a literary agent about trying to place the book with a major publisher.

McGuire said the manuscript's owners want to bring in a national publisher because they feel such a company has the financial resources and outlets to give the book a wide audience.

"I have not contacted LSU Press, which published the first book," McGuire said. "We want it to go to the national publishers first."

One person who disagrees with that approach is New Orleans bookseller and publisher Rhoda Faust, who failed last year to persuade Fedoroff that she had a verbal agreement with Mrs. Toole to let her publish "Neon Bible."

"It's going to be a much bigger publishing story if I get it," she said. "I'm a little publisher, and it makes a good story."

Toole killed himself in Biloxi, Miss., in 1969 at the age of 32. His frustration at being unable to publish "Dunces," written while he was stationed in Puerto Rico in the Army, was believed to have led to the suicide.

After his death, his mother spent years trying to get "Dunces" published. LSU Press published it in 1980, and it won the Pulitzer Prize the next year.

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