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Toole's Farce Masks a Literary Tragedy

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The ultimate tragedy of John Kennedy Toole's "A Confederacy of Dunces" is that Toole won't be back to write other, probably better, novels.

The penultimate tragedy of the book is the way its macabre history and *cause celebre* status has warped most assessments of its worth.

Toole killed himself in 1969, at the age of 32. Simon and Schuster had rejected his novel after prolonged correspondences. Toole's mother picked up his fallen standard and led a charge at eight other publishing houses, all of which rebuffed her. She then browbeat novelist Walker Percy into reading the manuscript.

Percy became a convert. His endorsement was enough to persuade Louisiana State University Press to take the unusual (for an academic imprint) step of publishing a first novel. Book became bandwagon. Critics leapt aboard with almost feverish gusto. The paperback and film rights were sold. Two weeks ago, Toole won, posthumously, the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. That award, plus the issuance of the Grove Press paperback version this week, has prompted some reconsiderations of the novel.

In The New York Times Monday, reviewer Christopher Lehmann-Haupt suggested (rather underhandedly) that the Toole's suicide and the novel's backroads rise to prominence had triggered its commercial success and influenced the Pulitzer decision. Lehmann-Haupt called the book "distasteful," and raised (without resolving it) the question of whether the book was anti-Semitic.

Despite the petulant, argumentative and somewhat indivious qualities of Lehmann-Haupt's revisionism, his primary argument makes some sense: "A Confederacy of Dunces" probably won the Pulitzer on the strength of its history — specifically



John Kennedy Toole

for this year's Pulitzer, but I can think of several 1980 novels — Percy's own "The Second Coming," Barry Hannah's "Ray;" William Maxwell's "So Long, See You Tomorrow," Gilbert Rogin's "Preparations for the Ascent," and perhaps even "Amazons," by Cleo Birdwell (read Don DeLillo) — that surpass Toole's novel in depth of insight and literary craftsmanship.

It would be a shame, however, if "A Confederacy of Dunces" were disparaged in a critical backlash against its success. Toole wrote a wildly funny, left-handed novel populated by some of the most unique characters in modern fiction, especially the anti-heroical protagonist, the Falstaffian Ignatius J. O'Reilly, an obese, indolent, simpering, arrogant, sexually repressed junk-food consumer and Momma's boy *par tremendosi*, who yearns for the restoration of Middle Ages culture and values (and even tries to start a political party based on the concept of Divine Right

weeks in New Orleans. Reilly's path crosses back and forth over the trails of speakeasy-owner-cum-porn-purveyor, a hapless cop on undercover duty in a men's room, a rabid communist-hater, a world-weary pants factory owner (whose wife has a fetishistic relationship with a motorized exercise table), a faddish New York radical, a stylish homosexual, a stripper who does an act with a parrot and, best of all, the endlessly appealing Jones, a wistful black drifter who punctuates his amusing jivetalk patter with the frequent exclamation "Whoa!"

Jones is so beguiling, in fact, that he creates a slight pacing problem for the book. The reader tends to mark time in between his appearances. Extended scenarios involving the boorish Reilly are often ponderous by comparison.

In centering his novel on the loathsome, buffoonish Reilly, Toole undertook an almost oppressive challenge. A comic novel is hard-pressed to entertain us when so much time must be spent with such an unpleasant character. Toole stumbled in places, but the overall effort was a marvelous success. Reilly, although despicable, is a hilariously funny character.

Consider, for example, his behavior on the first day of work as a clerk in a pants factory: Reilly intercepts a correspondence from a retailer who complains that his last shipment of trousers was only two feet long in the leg. Reilly dashes off a caustic reply, over the president's signature, which concludes: *We do not wish to be bothered in the future by such tedious complaints. Please confine your correspondence to orders only. We are a busy and dynamic organization whose mission needless effrontery and harassment can only hinder. If you molest us again, sir, you may feel the sting of the lash across your pitiful shoulders.*

This letter touches off one of the

the cloth-covered head of Reilly in the book's denouement, which resolves itself in the all-too-pat conventions of an Elizabethan farce.

In its rambling, chaotic celebration of the Southern grotesque, Toole's book closley resembled Hannah's first novel — "Geronimo Rex" (actually written later). Toole lagged behind Hannah in sheer writing style. Although capable of some beguiling turns of phrase, he was not the sophisticated, viscerally colorful writer Hannah was and is. Where he outstripped Hannah was in his almost anarchical solution to the point-of-view question. The strongest (and, simultaneously, weakest) aspect of "A Confederacy of Dunces" is Toole's astounding decision to take no sides. No character — least of all Reilly — is the book's Chorus or prophet.

(This, by the way, is what makes Lehmann-Haupt's anti-Semitism argument utterly spurious. Reilly's denigrations of Jews, blacks, whites, Christians, homosexuals, heterosexuals and practically everyone else in the world are never given the slightest weight. They are as ludicrous as everything else Reilly says and does. It should be added that Reilly exhibits a Martin Luther-like capacity for suddenly converting patronizing beneficence to vitriolic resentment: When his attempt to aid black factory workers backfires, he engages in venomous racist invective.)

All of Toole's characters are, in fact, dunces — ludicrous and ignoble stooges, inferior even to the cinematic troika. This makes it difficult for the book to come to any particular conclusions, but it could be argued that the characters, including Reilly, are redeemed when they step out of their individual madneses and begin, in the end, to make concessions to the world around them — something Toole, apparently, found it ultimately impossible to do.

The loss of the five or ten good books he might have gone on to write is a gnawing calamity.