Posthumous find:
A young author’s wacky manuscript

By Walter Berkov

John Kennedy Toole committed suicide in 1969 at the age of 32. He left behind the unpublished manuscript of a novel. But let novelist Walker Percy tell about it:

"While I was teaching at Loyola (in New Orleans) in 1976 I began to get telephone calls from a lady unknown to me. What she proposed was preposterous. It was not that she had written a couple of chapters of a novel and wanted to get in my class. It was that her son, who was dead, had written an entire novel during the early sixties, a big novel, and she wanted me to read it. Why should I want to do that? I asked her. Because it is a great novel, she said.

"Over the years I have become very good at getting out of things I don’t want to do. And if ever there was something I didn’t want to do, this was surely it: to deal with the mother of a dead novelist, and worst of all, to have to read a manuscript that she said was great, and that, as it turned out, was a badly smeared, scarcely readable carbon."

From jacket of A Confederacy of Dunces.

Ignotius says, “When my brain begins to reel from my literary labors, I make an occasional cheese dip.”
But read it he did, "First with the sinking feeling that it was not bad enough to quit, then with a prickle of interest, then a growing excitement, and finally an incredulity: surely it was not possible that it was so good."

With Percy's help, the novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, has now been published by Louisiana State University Press (338 pp., $12.95).

Laid in New Orleans and full of the atmosphere and speech patterns of "that Hoboken near the Gulf of Mexico," this satire is a triumph of the imagination, full of belly laughs but sad, too, because its ultimate theme is failure. As Percy says in a foreword, Ignatius Reilly is "without progenitor in any literature I know of — slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas . . ."

The novel opens this way:

"A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. The green earflaps, full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once. Full, pursed lips protruded beneath the bushy black moustache and, at their corners, sank into little folds filled with disapproval and potato chips."

Ignatius, a 30-year-old medie-

He is given to acid pronouncements: "Canned food is a perversion. I suspect that it is ultimately very damaging to the soul." He shrinks from work of any kind ("Employers sense in me a denial of their values"). One disaster after another follows the demand of his mother (who suffers from "arthritis" and hides her wine bottle in the oven) that he find a job. Eventually he becomes a hot dog vendor, which gives him an opportunity to gluttonize the merchandise.

Into the story come other hilarious characters — Jones, a hip young black in space-age sunglasses and a cloud of cigarette smoke, who gets a $20-a-week job as sweeper at the Night of Joy, a saloon where shady things are going on; Ignatius' former girlfriend, the guitar-toting Myrna Mynkoff from the Bronx, a promoter of such causes as "Erotic Liberty as a Weapon Against Reactionaries;" Miss Trixie, a doddering octogenarian assistant accountant at Levy Pants; and the inept Patrolman Mancuso.

The tragedy is that Toole will not be giving us any more products of his wonderfully wacky imagination.