

# Talk About Books

By BOB SUMMER

Our enterprising local university press has pulled off a coup — the publication of a novel (yes, a novel!) that is receiving the kind of attention that the largest commercial publishers dream about. Friends in New York report that the book — *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole — is the talk of the publishing world there.

EXCITEMENT began building this spring when the advance reviews came out. Publishers Weekly, the bible of the book industry, hailed *Confederacy* as "a crazily magnificent once-in-a-blue-moon first novel," while the hard-to-please Kirkus Reviews praised it as "a masterpiece of comic character." Soon book scribes for the Washington Post, the Chicago Sun-Times and the New York Times were writing enthusiastic columns about the rollicking New Orleans novel and its zany cast of characters. Both Time and Newsweek have picked it up for review, People is doing a story on it and Esquire has one ready for their August issue.

But before all this developed, an editor at Grove Press in New York became enthralled with the advance galleys that Dianne Guidry (LSU Press rights and permissions manager) had sent for paperback consideration. Later, after the PW and Kirkus raves were out, less discerning editors — who had also been sent galleys — lost no time getting on the phone to Guidry. Sorry, she told

them, Grove had already snapped up the paperback rights. Whether they will bring it out next year in a larger format, higher priced trade edition or a cheaper, smaller format mass-market one is undecided. But whichever, Grove is very bullish on *Confederacy*. Having their help, according to Press director Les Phillabaum "is like having a branch office in New York."

ADDING TO THE potential rights bonanza have been the requests received from abroad. Publishers in Holland, France and Italy have taken options, while others in Denmark and Great Britain are reading it for possible offers. Most notably, Hollywood and New York movie and TV people have zeroed in on the novel. "Some of their inquiries have been routine," says Guidry, "but some have passed that point and are more serious." So though there is nothing definite now, film treatment is a distinct possibility.

As remarkable as all this is, however, the story behind the novel is even more intriguing. Several years ago the author's mother began pestering Walker Percy, then teaching at Loyola, to read her son's "great novel" (her words). Those New Orleans mommas can be mighty persistent, and one day she showed up at Percy's office with manuscript in hand. Reluctantly he agreed to look at it, thinking (he says in *Confederacy's* foreword) that a few pages would reveal it to be another well-intentioned but hopeless effort. This isn't how it happened, how-

ever, and after one look he was hooked — a pattern that has been repeated by many readers since then.

WHEN AN EXTRACT appeared in the New Orleans Review, Percy sent a copy up to Phillabaum, along with a note asking about his interest. (A New York publisher had said "no, thanks" to a similar inquiry from Percy, as had been the case when Toole failed to get his work into print.) The Press had recently launched a program of publishing novels, so Phillabaum jumped at the opportunity. "If we had not had that program," he observed, "we wouldn't have published the book — great as it is. But if fitted right in. Even so, we had no way of knowing how it would sell, although we knew the market wouldn't take more than a \$12.95 price. It is a big book, and we weren't sure we could afford it. So we went to the National Endowment for the Arts. They gave us a small grant, but under their terms we have to pay it back if the book makes money. I'm not at all unhappy that we will be sending them a check," he says with a big smile, adding "The book won't cost the taxpayers a cent." Even before the May 31 publication date there were 20,000 copies available, after three printings.

A few weeks ago all concerned with the making of *Confederacy* gathered in New Orleans to celebrate its publication. Or almost all, that is. The author wasn't there; he committed suicide in 1969.