

# Three hundred pounds of joy and sorrow

By Greil Marcus

IT IS MY BELIEF THAT I am not alone in harboring hateful desires, the main purpose of which is to produce a transcendent sense of reasonableness. For example, when people are talking in a movie theater, I generally devote a considerable amount of time to the problem of whether the offenders should be struck dead by the laser beam in my eyes or simply frozen in their seats until the picture is over.

Now, imagine a man whose whole life revolves around such a response to the modern world, a man who has resigned from the modern world—and who revels in its gruesomeness, because only by so doing can he justify his resignation. Imagine that he is also big, fat, flatulent and a thirty-year-old virgin living in a New Orleans slum with his dim and alcoholic mother; that he is overeducated (his basic point of reference is the medieval philosophy of Boethius), infantile (he wears a Mickey Mouse watch and drinks from a Shirley Temple mug) and unemployable; that he is a noble crusader for decency in his fantasies and a walking affront to all decent citizens in what passes for real life. "He's out in the parlor right now looking at TV," his bewildered mother says. "Every afternoon, as right as rain, he looks at that show where them kids dance. . . . He don't like the show at all, but he won't miss it. You oughta hear what he says about them poor kids." "Do I believe the total perversion I am witnessing?" her son screams, his eyes still

in, scans first page, can't stop, discovers masterpiece). *A Confederacy of Dunces* has been reviewed almost everywhere, and every reviewer has loved it. For once, everyone is right.]

Ignatius is crazy (plainly committable, his mother finally decides), but then, so is everyone else in the novel—his madness is just a bit less circum-

could turn out to be one massive orgy. Good grief. How many of the military leaders of the world may simply be deranged old sodomites acting out some fake fantasy role? Actually, this might be quite beneficial to the world. It could mean an end of war forever. This could be the key to lasting peace. . . . The power-crazed leaders of the world would certainly be surprised to find that their military leaders and troops were only masquerading sodomites who were only too eager to meet the masquerading sodomites of other nations in order to have dances and balls and learn some foreign dance steps."

His whole life is a blunder; he can communicate with no one; he can't separate a love-hate relationship with Doris Day from his quest to inflict good taste on the benighted masses. And yet even in his most absurd moments he is, somehow, reasonable, sensible, noble—for his



scribed, a bit more *ambitious*. Everyone else (Ignatius' mother, a hapless cop, a black janitor, a nightclub owner, an old man worried about the "communiss") takes life as a mild conspiracy; it's Ignatius who sees it as a grand conspiracy, and he wants to head it. Yet there's nothing of the Sixties notion that the crazy are the blessed here: Ignatius is pathetic, his life is horrible, and the discrepancy between what happens to him and how he sees it is appalling. He's astonishingly funny—but he does nothing with humorous in-

own sense of self spills over into the coolly objective narrative, scrambling reality until the reader cannot believe what is happening but accepts it as inevitable, as *obvious*.

Twain could have written this book, if he'd lived in the early 1960s—probably he would have written it. John Irving could have written it, if he were at the top of his form and didn't give a damn what anyone thought. The language is that vital, the invention that free. As for Kurt Vonnegut and Tom Robbins, who would have written this book if

glued to *American Bandstand*. "The children on that program should all be gassed."

Thus Ignatius J. Reilly, the overpowering protagonist of John Kennedy Toole's sole novel, *A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES* (Louisiana State University Press, 338 pp., \$12.95), a book that has come to the nation's attention because, seven years after the author killed himself in 1969, his mother brought a smeared manuscript to Walker Percy, who has gotten it published. No doubt because of the irresistible human-interest hook of that story (strange woman pesters famous writer to read fifteen-year-old "great novel" by dead son, famous writer gives

tent, and never gets the joke.

Forced to find a job, he becomes the file clerk of a moribund pants factory, but ends up dressed as a pirate peddling hot dogs from a cart. Hectored by incessant letters from his radical girlfriend in New York, he tries to get the best of her by organizing the black workers at the pants factory into a Crusade for Moorish Dignity, and, when that costs him his job, turns to New Orleans' homosexuals, whom he imagines as the spearhead of a movement to destroy every army in the world.

"Of course," Ignatius said in a thoughtful, serious voice, "this could be a worldwide deception." The red satcen scarf rode up and down. "The next war

they could, they must be wishing that John Toole's mother had buried *A Confederacy of Dunces* along with her son.

### ***But is it art?***

**'NO ONE HERE GETS OUT ALIVE**, by Jerry Hopkins and Daniel Sugerman (Warner Books, 387 pp., illustrated, \$7.95 paperback). Already a best seller, this mindless, clumsy biography of Jim Morrison is based on the premise that "art" justifies any excess; every cruelty, every stupidity, every act of waste validates the existence of the poetic spirit. Or something like that.