

'Confederacy of Dunces' surprises as best book

By Scott F. Williams

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Success came too late for John Kennedy Toole.

His comic novel, "Confederacy of Dunces," has been hailed by critics as one of 1980's best. The book is holding its own on some bestseller lists.

Paperback rights, movie rights, and translation rights were snapped up, and "Confederacy of Dunces" is an alternate selection of The Book-of-the-Month Club.

The book relates the delightfully lunatic adventures of Ignatius J. Reilly, an obese New Orleanian who is rebelling against the modern world's lack of a proper "geometry and theology."

"My son used his genius to portray this big gob of flobberino," said the author's elderly mother, Thelma Toole. "On the surface, it's a comedy, but underneath the surface is all that erudition."

But the success story behind "Confederacy of Dunces" is a sad one, because it begins with the death of the author. In 1969, at the age of 32, John Kennedy Toole took his own life.

Mrs. Toole said her son committed suicide during a prolonged despondency that began when a New York publisher abandoned the book two years after taking it under consideration.

"Two years they kept my son on tenterhooks. Two years," she said bitterly. "Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite, and then the last letter came. It said the book isn't about anything."

Toole was desolated by his book's apparent failure with the prestigious publishing house.

"He began to withdraw," Mrs. Toole said simply. "He was a changed man. He lost his confidence. We lost the rapport that we had because of that rejection."

"I think it was principally his sadness. And he felt he didn't have control of his mind. He said to me once, 'I was so amused at people, and now they might be amused at me.' It got worse and worse."

After his death, she tried to interest other publishers in the book — without success.

Several years passed, and she took the book to novelist Walker Percy.

Reluctantly, he agreed to read the manuscript, hoping that the book would be bad enough for him to give up with a clean conscience.

As Percy wrote in the book's foreword, "In this case I read on. And on. 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."

Percy tried unsuccessfully to interest his own publishers in the book, and then went to Les Phillabaum, director of the Louisiana State University Press in Baton Rouge.

"I was absolutely stunned that the book had not been published," Phillabaum said. "Needless to say I have great regard for Walker Percy, but I like to think that nearly anyone who reads it is going to respond positively to it."

Phillabaum said the book's success was due to the infectious enthusiasm which the novel generated among the staff of LSU press.

That same enthusiasm spread to the general publishing community, he said.

"Grove Press, which bought the paperback rights, was very helpful in getting word of our edition around." Surprise followed surprise.

Publishers Weekly and Kirkus Reviews, the industry's reviewers, gave it rave notices. The critics, intrigued by the story, read the book and resoundingly acclaimed it.

The book is a major success for the LSU press. Now in its fifth printing, "Confederacy of Dunces" has 40,000 copies in print.