

# Bestseller that didn't make it for its author



Angus Lind

Nineteen years ago, in the unlikely setting of the Army's Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico, Cpl. Ken Toole of New Orleans went to work on a piece of fiction that would capture New Orleans as no book of fact ever could.

He called his manuscript "A Confederacy of Dunces."

The central character is this comic novel is a mad, mad fat man named Ignatius J. Reilly. Ignatius wears a hunting cap with ear flaps and lives by his momma on Constantinople Street. Orleanians will quickly realize that means he resides with his mother on Constantinople Street, but for those outsiders unfamiliar with the "where y'at" and "Jesus Gawd, dawlin" dialects of the city, that note of syntax may be necessary.

In between guzzling bottles of Dr. Nut, a short-lived soft drink which tasted like carbonated prune juice, and stuffing his already overstuffed face with cakes from D.H. Holmes bakery, Ignatius waddles around the city expelling gas and belching while pontificating on every subject known to man. In his stilted medieval tongue, he denounces everything from church to state to his mother's intelligence. But perhaps his favorite topic is the evils of working for an honest living.

Mention work and Ignatius' valve starts closing.

Ignatius, his poor momma Irene, a pitiful specimen of a bungling policeman named Mancuso, a jive-talking black man named Burma Jones, and a whole bar full of Ninth Ward and Irish Channel characters straight out of Schwegmann's, fill the book with "flush da terlet" and "put da dishes in da zink."

When Ignatius' momma tells Miss Inez at the Holmes bakery that she's got "arthuritis" of the elbow, Miss Inez sympathizes: "My poor old poppa's got that. We make him go set himself in a hot tub fulla berling water."

Ignatius, during the hilariously erratic course of the book, pushes a

hot dog vendor's cart and eats more hot dogs than he pushes, stages a rebellion at a place called Levy Pants where he briefly works, and writes about his misadventures in Big Chief tablets, which are his diary.

The creator of all this madness, John Kennedy Toole, breezed through McDonogh 14 by skipping two grades and finished Fortier at age 16. Voted 'Most Intelligent' of the senior class of '54, he graduated from Tulane a Phi Beta Kappa. He got a Woodrow Wilson fellowship to Columbia and received a master's degree in English there. He taught English at college campuses close to home and far from home, including the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, Dominican College in New Orleans, and Hunter College in New York.

For six long years after the service, he sought to have his book published. His mother, Thelma Ducoing Toole, a strong-willed academician and drama instructor, always hoped that her son would be a writer or poet and encouraged him in that direction. Ken Toole's classmates remember that he always wanted to please his mother.

When he approached publishers,

he was told the book was too short or too long. He was told it had too much dialogue, and he was told it had too little dialogue. On a final try, he received a letter saying, "It isn't about anything. It could be improved, but it wouldn't sell."

This solemn, sober, introverted man with a dry sense of humor hurt inside. He grew moody. He withdrew. He saddened. His mother thought it would pass. But the book had become all that mattered in his life. He lost his sense of humor. He stopped talking. In December of 1968, he went away and no one knew where he was. Two and a half months later came the startling news: Ken Toole had asphyxiated himself in a car in Mississippi.

The ironies of the tragedy are many.

For a decade after his death, Thelma Toole, not always in the best of health, off and on tried to get the book published. She had many doors closed in her face. On a final stab, she was directed to Walker Percy.

Walker Percy put the kiss of life on the book.

Unable to interest his own pub-



Ignatius J. Reilly on the cover of "A Confederacy of Dunces"

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# Bestseller didn't make it for author

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lishers, Percy contacted a friend, Les Phillabaum, director of Louisiana State University Press in Baton Rouge. LSU Press had only started publishing novels in 1978. Phillabaum liked the book's bizarre humor and agreed to publish it. But as he recalled recently, "I anticipated losing money on it. One of our reasons was that it was such a regional setting. But obviously it transcended that."

Provincial or not, the book went to press. Walker Percy wrote the foreword. Two staid reviewers who service bookstores gave it uncommonly enthusiastic reviews. And certainly having Percy's name attached to the book did no harm.

Since then, more than 40,000 copies have been sold. The book has been a hit nationwide, on best-seller lists everywhere and was displayed prominently in New York's Fifth Avenue bookstores. Now in its sixth printing, it is LSU's biggest, fastest seller. "We keep waiting for it to taper off," said Phillabaum, "but last month we sold a thousand copies. Our scholarly books we usually print 1,500 of and that's it."



John Kennedy Toole

The movie rights for the book Ken Toole couldn't get published have gone to Scott Kramer, formerly of 20th Century Fox. John Belushi of "Animal House" fame has been mentioned as a possible Ignatius.

The translation rights to eight foreign countries, including Russia, have been sold. And ironically, both "A Confederacy of Dunces" and the latest book of the man primarily responsible for getting "Dunces" published, Walker Percy's "The Second Coming," are both among the only five books nominated for the coveted national award, the Pen Faulkner award.

On a lighter note, but to demonstrate the book's impact, members of a walking Carnival organization named the Krewe of Boethius masked as Ignatius and Mrs. Reilly. One member had his ear pierced so he could wear Ignatius' earring. The krewe caused a mild run on hunting caps in the New Orleans area. In Washington, at a pre-election party hosted by politicians not enamored with either Reagan or Carter, the name of Ignatius J. Reilly was on the ballot.

The fact that it had a tragic young author with unfulfilled promise may have lent a romantic notion which helped sell the book, but it also helped to keep it from being published. At least one publishing house said that the certainty there would be no additional work forthcoming figured in its decision not to print it.

"Suicide is definitely a big help in putting a book over," said Percy. "But that wouldn't be enough. His extraordinary inventiveness, outrageous humor, bizarre situations and characters, his ear for accent and eye for detail all make it a small masterpiece."

So why did it go unpublished for 19 years? "It beats me," said Percy. "I couldn't get my own copy to publish it." At one time Simon and Schuster turned Toole down. They had just published a hit, "Catch 22," every bit as crazy a book, so they wouldn't have been shy about the deranged madness in "Dunces."

"It's just unfair," said Percy. "Judgements in fiction are so subjective," said Phillabaum. "It is purely speculation. It is simply an indication of what a big crashout this whole thing is - getting the right manuscript to the right person at the right time."

That didn't happen for Ken Toole.

Friday: An interview with the mother of John Kennedy Toole