

# Rejection Remains Writer's Hallmark

By Maurice Duke

If you keep a close eye on the world of fiction writing, or if you're one of the thousands who write it yourself with the hopes of someday publishing it, you might do well to stop for a few seconds and ponder the outcome of the recent Pulitzer Prize awards.

The Pulitzers, awarded each year in several categories, honor those who have produced, in the judges' views, the most significant works in their fields in the previous year. Unlike the Nobel Prize, which honors the recipient for a lifetime of work, it centers on one contribution only.

This year the award went to John Kennedy Toole for his comic novel "A Confederacy of Dunces." Nothing unusual here, you might say. But the awarding of the prize to Toole's work is only a tiny part of the story. The rest is sobering for any writer or would-be writer to contemplate.

The rest of the story is this: The novel was written almost 20 years ago by a then-young writer who met with repeated failure and disappointment in the literary world. So severe was his rejection, as a matter of fact, that it played a part in his suicide. At the age of 32, his manuscript having been repeatedly rejected.

Following Toole's death, his mother, confident of the worth of the book, began a remarkable odyssey in an attempt to get it into print. Her labors, however, met with no more success than her son's. According to an Associated Press story, she took the manuscript from publisher to publisher, each time meeting the same rejection. Finally, she showed her son's work to novelist Walker Percy, one of the major contemporary fiction writers, and met with a much different reaction. He was, in fact, so impressed with it that he sought successfully to have it published by Louisiana State University Press, a small but energetic publishing house with limited funds and distribution abilities.

The rest of the story, except one small aside, we already know: Week before last it got one of the highest accolades the literary world has to offer. The aside, incidentally, is that week before last, "A Confederacy of Dunces" was on the final list to receive the first annual P.E.N. Faulkner Award. Although the eventual winner was "How German Is It?" by Walter Abish, Toole's book was in the final running among the 200 novels considered by the judges.

This is disconcerting news. It makes all of us in the literary world twitch a bit. It conjures up memories of the hoax, "Naked Came the Stranger," widely touted a few years back and later discovered to have been written by a series of people, each of whom would receive the partially done manuscript and add a chapter of his own, then pass it on to another writer as a sort of literary joke. It also reminds us of the apparently-desperate writer who sometime ago copied word for word one of Jerzy Kosinski's novels and sent it the rounds of the publishing houses, only to have it repeatedly rejected. One publisher was astute enough to note that even if the book was not a particularly good one, it did remind him of Kosinski's writing style.

Maurice  
Duke



## Books

Edited By  
Maurice and Elizabeth Duke

Laying the blame and finding the answer to why so many qualified editors rejected Toole's book is probably impossible, but the incident dramatizes one of the central problems in today's world of literature.

If we look at the problem of recognizing the good from the bad from the publishers' point of view, and if we know anything at all about the world of publishing, we really can't help but be somewhat sympathetic, though.

Recently, the fiction editor of Redbook magazine told an audience at the annual Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in Vermont that she receives approximately 40,000 manuscripts yearly, 12 to 20 of which will be published. Sharing the same dais, the literary editor of the Atlantic Monthly had almost identical figures to quote to the audience later in the conference. The simple fact is, that there are just so many manuscripts in circulation in this country at the present time that the chances of seeing your own work up in lights are remote. Add to the good works those poems, short stories and novels that are written as therapy—and hundreds of them are—and that are sent to the publishers, and it's somewhat easier to understand why Toole's manuscript suffered the fate that it did on the way to publication.

There is still in the back of the mind, though, that nagging question: Why can't something be done to recognize the good from the bad? Part of it is economics. Part of it is the work load on the editorial staffs of the magazines and book publishers. Most of it, however, has to do with writers submitting their work to publishers with outrageously exaggerated expectations. So many of us confuse talent with hard work and perseverance with the old Horatio Alger concept of luck.

If you want a good job with high pay, take something easy that requires at least 10 hours a day, six days a week. Preferably make it something that requires you to punch a time clock so that you can forget the day's business when you go home, bone-weary, in the early evening. If you want a hard job, one with an annual income of a pittance, unless you've made it to the pinnacle, be a writer.