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# METRO NEWS

## Toole's mother broke promise, shopowner says

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Staff writer

New Orleans bookseller Rhoda Faust said Wednesday that the mother of John Kennedy Toole, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "A Confederacy of Dunces," reneged on a 1979 promise that Faust could publish the writer's only other novel.

The Maple Street Book Shop owner testified in trial of a Civil District Court suit she filed last year to force Thelma Toole to honor the alleged verbal agreement for publication of "The Neon Bible," written by her son when he was 16, or pay Faust \$250,000 in damages.

Thelma Toole died last year a week after the suit was filed, so Faust's fight to publish the book about life in a small Southern town is now with the estate of Mrs. Toole. In her will, the 82-year-old Toole specifically forbade publication of the book.

Toole estate attorney John Hantel tried to show in the hearing before Civil Court Judge Gerald J. Fedoroff that Mrs. Toole never agreed to let Faust publish "Neon Bible."

John Kennedy Toole, who wrote the book just after graduating from Fortier High School, killed himself in Biloxi, Miss., in 1969. He was 32.

His frustration in being unable to publish "Dunces," written while he was stationed in Puerto Rico in the Army, was believed to have led to the suicide.

After his death, Mrs. Toole spent years trying to get "Dunces" published, finally succeeding in 1980 with the help of novelist Walker Percy, on whom she had thrust the manuscript while he was teaching a creative writing course at Loyola University.

"Dunces," published by the LSU Press in 1980, won the Pulitzer Prize the following year.

Faust said she met Thelma Toole in 1979 through Percy, a family friend she had consulted about finding manuscripts to publish.

She said she had wanted to publish "Dunces" herself, and Mrs. Toole had agreed to that, but did not because, "I just never did come up with the money in time."

Faust said that about a month after she gave a party for Mrs. Toole in the spring of 1979 to celebrate plans for LSU Press to publish "Dunces," Mrs. Toole gave her a copy of the "Neon Bible" manuscript to read, later told her she could keep it and agreed to let her publish the novel.

Faust's friend Chris Wiltz Pecot said that she was present when Mrs. Toole told Faust she could publish "Neon Bible" and also during a later visit when the two women talked excitedly about publication plans.

"Do you recollect that there was an agreement reached between Thelma Toole and Rhoda Faust?" Faust attorney Brian Begue asked.

"Yes, definitely," she said.

Faust said Mrs. Toole started to "waffle" on the promise to let her publish "Neon Bible," beginning with an autograph party Faust threw at one of her bookshops to celebrate publication of "Dunces."

Faust said that when she brought up the idea of publishing the earlier novel then, Mrs. Toole said, "That'll have to wait."

Later, Mrs. Toole followed up with a letter saying, "It is my firm decision there shall be no contract, no publicity, no publication at present."

"I thought she was reneging," said Faust, who added that she did not sue Mrs. Toole until last year because until then she wasn't sure she had a good case.