Republic. Poor impatient John Kennedy Toole! But, on the other hand, isn't this every young novelist's secret dream? I just don't believe it. I've got no proof one way or the other, but every instinct tells me that A Confederacy of Dunces is some kind of hoax.

1) The name John Kennedy Toole is like a flag before my eyes. It just looks weird, especially since the book is set in the early 1960s. 2) Ditto for the story about Mother Toole. Not that she herself is implausible; but I've run into her in too many other novels. 3) I don't believe "Toole" couldn't find a publisher. It's a myth, prized by mediocre writers, especially out here in the provinces, that the very writing of mediocre writers, especially out here in the provinces, that the very best writing often never sees the light of day. Bull. 4) I don't believe that, in 1980, the book could only be published by a university press. 5) Look again at the book's hero, Ignatius Reilly, the moviegoing, madly arrogant, pseudo-aristocratic, medievalist New Orleans Catholic rebel. "I dust a bit. I am at the moment writing a lengthy indictment against our century. I make an occasional cheese dip." Who's kidding whom here? A Confederacy of Dunces reads like nothing so much as a parody of the ideas, novels and even person of its midwife, Walker Percy. I'm not quite ready to say that Percy is Toole—because of the apparent radical differences in their writing styles. But I know Walker Percy and I know something of the special deviousness of his mind. With the publication of this book, he has become at least an unindicted co-conspirator of the greatest literary practical joke of our time. And now he's been indicted.

Meanwhile, how good is the novel? I was afraid you'd ask. Let me put it this way. I'd argue that the funniest, and therefore most American, American books of the past 40 years have been Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Joseph Heller's Catch-22, Thomas Berger's Reinhart in Love and Stanley Elkin's The Dick Gibson Show, and that the first 200 pages of A Confederacy of Dunces belong in this small crowd. Unfortunately it runs on another 215 pages.

A Masterpiece—
Also a Hoax?

Walker Percy has become an unindicted co-conspirator of the greatest literary practical joke of our time

By Gordon Burnside

Ignatius J. Reilly, the obese, lazy, monstrously egocentric chief dunce of John Kennedy Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces (Grove, paperback, $3.50), is waylaid, on page 24, by a suspicious cop: "You got a job?" "'I dust a bit,' Ignatius told the policeman. 'In addition, I am at the moment writing a lengthy indictment against our century. When my brain begins to reel from my literary labors, I make an occasional cheese dip.' "'Ignatius makes delicious cheese dips,' Mrs. Reilly said."

And right about there I began to smell a rat.

Bookish people already know the story behind the story of A Confederacy of Dunces, but it is told again in the foreword by Walker Percy. John Kennedy Toole remains a highly mysterious figure. A New Orleans writer, he committed suicide in 1969, at age 32, apparently in despair because he could find no publisher for his novel. In 1976 Toole's mother tracked down Percy, the dean of New Orleans writers, and badgered him into reading her son's book. "If ever there was something I didn't want to do," Percy says, "this was surely it: to deal with the mother of a dead novelist and, worst of all, to have to read a manuscript that she said was great, and that, as it turned out, was a badly smeared, scarcely readable carbon." But Toole mere was not to be evaded. Smearsed carbon, fanatical mother and all, Percy did read the manuscript, found it to be a "gargantuan tumultuous human tragicomedy," and last year, finally, arranged its publication through the Louisiana State University Press. Reviewers flew to the book like dogs to a ham bone. "An epic comedy," said a nameless critic in the Washington Post. (I quote from blurbs on the new Grove paperback.) "A masterpiece of comedy," wrote somebody in the New York Times Book Review. "One of the finest books ever written," said somebody in the New