

Cover to Cover

KNOXVILLE Lifestyle's monthly book review

A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES
A Novel By John Kennedy Toole,
with a forward by Walker Percy,
LSU Press, Baton Rouge, \$12.95 338 pp.

Richard Elman is the author of numerous novels, including the recently published Breadfruit Lotteries (Methuen) and John Howland Spyker's Little Lives, (Avon).



Richard Elman

The author's photo on the dust jacket of this posthumously published satiric novel about "respectable" New Orleans squalor is that of a malevolent choir boy. Smooth-skinned, puckish, with lips caught between a grin and a sneer, and cautious eyes. This baby face is suggestive of innocence abashed and a baleful wry dubiety. Being, perhaps, more than a little chubby, John Kennedy Toole presented himself in this photo from the neck up, as a less exaggerated version of his own outrageously comic protagonist, Ignatius Reilly: flatulent, indolent, splenetic momma's boy with a "valve" problem; a "big crazy fruit," as he is labelled by one street-wise New Orleans hoodlum he encounters.

But perhaps sex really wasn't so much a problem for the masturbatory self-absorbed Reilly as his own uncontrollable big mouth. He was, to put it banally, an unattractive person, somebody who had problems making friends and influencing people, as well as being a slob.

A number of characters in this burlesque propose solutions to Ignatius: his alcoholic mom stresses the values of work and thrift even as she stuffs him with jelly donuts; his estranged New York Jewish girlfriend Myra

Minkoff, self-righteous in the extreme, seems to be for the big-bang theory of wholesome orgasm, as well as social and intellectual "engagement." Ignatius himself believes it's not his problem, but has to do with his entire disgust with a world and culture and century he has been brought up to inhabit. In a moment of pique he declares, more often than once, and with variations: "I thought I had adequately described to you the horrors I must face daily. . ."

Such horrors consist of work in the exploitative ramshackle Levey's Pants Factory as a hot dog vender of weenies compounded of rubber and rat feces along with other fillings, and also of the world's view of his odd raiment (a large green hunting cap—borrowed from Charles Bovary perhaps—an enormous scarf, among other things). They might also be depicted as the face he sees at home all the time—mom: "His mother's maroon hair was fluffed high over her forehead; her cheekbones were red with rouge that spread nervously up to the eyeballs. One wide puff of powder had whitened Mrs. Reilly's face, the front of her dress, and a few loose maroon wisps."

Confederacy was really John Kennedy Toole's second full-scale attempt at writing fiction. At 16, just out of high school in New Orleans, he composed something called "The Neon Bible" which remains unpublished. It's not clear whether he ever submitted this work for publication during his lifetime, but after his death his mother—a teacher of speech and drama in New Orleans—tried to get a number of New York publishers interested, and failed to get an acceptance. She then was able to cajole that fine novelist, Walker Percy, teaching at Loyola University in New Orleans to look at the difficult-to-read carbon copy, and after a good deal of procrastination, and doubt, Percy finally read it and discovered himself in the posthumous presence of the very genius which John Kennedy Toole, at least through Ignatius Reilly, had always advertised himself as being.

So Toole's premature death by his own hands vindicated both mother and son, alas posthumously for the latter; and Percy's present and generous act of enthusiasm

accounts for the publication of *Confederacy* which is a grotesque, of funny, painful and irritating reading experiences in the form of episodes in the overweight manhood of a misunderstood genius of the lower middle class deep South who also happens to be a clown, a klutz, and a self-pitying self-deceiver.

Make no mistake about Toole's intentions: The dunces of *Confederacy*—though originating in a quotation from Jonathan Swift—are nearly all Southerners: white and black, genteel and Jewish, freaky, and straight, whores, businessmen, cops; against these Ignatius rails constantly with verve, acumen, and an occasional overbite. They all suffer from such a profound mental and moral slovenliness whereas Ignatius, though overweight and prolix about his denunciations of his age, his world, and culture, is generally a sort of divine fool. So Toole, apparently, was, to judge from his fine ear for black and white dialect, which was acute, and superb, and his encyclopedic knowledge of New Orleans low-life and traditional Catholic theological argument. The prose of *Confederacy* is often rumbling, funny, fine; it shakes us with belly laughs; it's vital, and real (like a hallucination) but the total effect, as in many such meandering episodic works of this sort, is a little tedious.

Because the only function of this writing is to entertain by satire from the point of view of the hard core of Reilly's indignant disaffection, (and no sequence of actions leading anywhere is allowed to develop except through coincidence) the tedium is of that sort of a genius proclaiming himself through his hyperboles; it's as if Joyce's *Ulysses* had been composed solely about a comic version of Stephen Dedalus, without Bloom's discouraged charm, humility, and simple human candor.

It's also true, I suspect, that Toole was sometimes off-the-mark in his satirizing, or his value center was too soggy, a fault in a basically hard-nosed form like satire. For example, Myra Minkoff, though silly, of course, may not be very far off the mark in what she recommends: Ignatius does need to get out of that house, see less of his mother, have friends, a decent orgasm, and—God forbid—see a shrink, perhaps, as Toole's subsequent self-destruct all-too-sadly may establish.

So one reads on, after a while, peevishly, out of a knowledge larger than the novel itself, but that really can't be avoided when so much is denounced by a character whom we may care to enjoy and love, with sympathy, whenever possible.

Toole's talent here was so large it was unmistakable: an ear, an eye, humor, and a gusto for language, as it is spoken, as well as written down. What a calamity he was so determined to prove his mother right that he was her very own little genius that he took his own life, the real well-spring of that talent, out of discouragement, at age 32. Had he lived to go on to write and entertain us with the fecund, worldly implications of that talent, charm, curiosity, and imagination, we'd all be having a lot more to cheer about. **K**

