

ANALYSIS

A Confederacy of Dunces (1980)



John Kennedy Toole

(1937-1969)

INTRODUCTION

John Kennedy Toole of New Orleans could not find a publisher for his comic novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* and committed suicide in 1969 at age 32. He drew his title from Jonathan Swift, the clergyman and satirist. His first novel *The Neon Bible* is juvenilia written at age 16. Years after his death his mother persuaded the novelist Walker Percy to read the manuscript of *Dunces*, leading to its publication by Louisiana State University Press in 1980, for which Toole won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize. One project to film the book fell through when the star, John Belushi, died of a drug overdose. The novel has sold one and a half million copies in 18 languages and Toole has become a martyr to the literary incompetence of book editors since the 1960s. *The Neon Bible* was published in 1989 and filmed in 1995.

JACKET COPY

“Ignatius J. Reilly is a thirty-year-old, self-proclaimed genius out to reform the entire twentieth century, which doesn’t leave him much time for an ordinary nine-to-five job! Then one day, Mrs. Reilly pushes her reluctant son out of the nest and into the working world--a decision with unforeseeably hilarious results. The born-to-clash Ignatius takes on a colorful cast of characters as he roams through the city of New Orleans, leaving chaos in his wake.”

3 CRITICS DISCUSS

“When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him.”

Jonathan Swift

“Today, it stands as one of the most revered comic works in the modern canon. The book explores the misadventures of Ignatius J. Reilly, a 300-pound antihero who resides with his mother and is given to leisurely strolls around his native New Orleans, during which he levies his incisive judgments on everything he encounters. As described by Percy in the book’s forward, Ignatius is a ‘slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one.’ And for all of the novel’s literary qualities--the sensory-specific perfection of Toole’s descriptions of New Orleans, the loopy gracefulness of his prose, and his gift for black comedy--it is the creation of Ignatius that stands as its signature achievement.

Part of what makes *Dunces* so hilarious is the specificity of its language and tone. Much of this transpires in the peculiar inner-space of Ignatius' green-hunting-capped skull, coming forth in letters, monologues against all things modern, and a rambling manifesto, which he scribbles onto Big Chief writing tablets... Throughout *Dunces'* history, studio chiefs have been reluctant to bet on a colloquial story involving an overweight intellectual who avoids sex and is fond of alluding to Roman philosophers."

Peter Hyman

"A Conspiracy of Dunces:
Will John Kennedy Toole's comic masterpiece ever reach the big screen?"
Slate Magazine (14 December 2006)

"New Orleans...is a rewarding subject for a novelist like Toole, who is interested both in exposing social hypocrisy and in celebrating the ability of the socially marginalized not simply to survive, but to live with gusto in the face of the majority's disapproval. Toole, however, seems never to have fully accepted his homosexuality, and his writing reflects his discomfort with this marker of his own marginalization....

Toole's festivity is evident in the carnival of eccentrics that he assembles under the circus tent of *A Confederacy of Dunces*. They might be divided into exploiters and their helpless exploitees, but for the fact that the oppressors wield no real power and the exploited invariably are as much the victims of their own stupidity or laziness as they are of the abuse of others.... Far from being its ringmaster, however, Ignatius is notable for overshadowing everyone else in terms of the magnitude of his foibles. Ignatius, who professes a particular regard for the tranquility and austerity of the medieval nun Hroswitha and for the Roman moralist Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, is educated well beyond the attainments of any member of his immediate society, and is a startlingly original social critic. But he is so self-indulgently lazy that his intelligence is invariably employed to rationalize his own irresponsibility rather than to effect any real social change.

Words cascade from him as he rants against such 'horrors of modern life' as canned goods, Greyhound Scenicruiser buses, technicolor movies starring perky film actresses Doris Day and Debbie Reynolds, the rock and roll gyrations of teenagers on the television program *American Bandstand*, and 'that dreary fraud, Mark Twain' (whose Mississippi narratives are the antitheses of Toole's own). He is moved to interact with other people only when forced by his mother to find employment or when his self-regard is insulted by his college nemesis and would-be seducer, the self-proclaimed 'social radical' Myrna Minkoff.

Ultimately, Ignatius is as much a victimizer as a victim. He exploits his mother financially, terrorizes his hard-working but mild-mannered supervisor at his first place of employment, daily consumes the stock of the mobile hot dog stand that he tends as his second job, is indifferent to the arrest of an elderly man who attempts to defend him when he is accosted by a policeman who suspects him of aberrant activities, and even coerces a junior high school panderer into watching his cart while he catches a matinee at the local cinema.

At the same time, however, Ignatius is continuously put upon by the less imaginative for his failure to conform to their narrow expectations. Early in the novel he is nearly arrested in a department store simply for looking odd, and the novel concludes with him narrowly escaping being forcibly committed by his mother to a state mental hospital. As Ignatius writes in his journal (at what the reader must remember was the height of the Civil Rights Movement), 'In a sense I have always felt something of a kinship with the colored race because its position is the same as mine: we both exist outside the inner realm of American society. Of course, my exile is voluntary.'

Toole's is a world of dunces, none of its inhabitants proving capable of clear-sightedness or the most rudimentary act of self-realization. For Toole, Fortuna's Wheel spins round and round, making this a world without stability or any permanent values [this last point is debatable]... Contrary to the teaching of Ignatius's spiritual mentor, the Roman philosopher Boethius, who sought consolation or transcendence of flux through a stoical philosophy, all one can do in Toole's world is immure oneself to human idiocy and enjoy the outrageous spectacle that it creates. If, as Ignatius laments, 'the gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad

Taste' have indeed gained ascendancy over humankind, the reader can only admire the fervor with which they are worshipped, even at times by Ignatius himself.

Despite his sympathy for the socially marginalized and his animosity towards the powers that enforce conformity, Toole was never comfortable with his own homosexuality and in his writing presents sexual non-conformity in highly ambivalent and conflicted ways... Apparently Toole could imagine sex but could not allow himself to enjoy it. Like eighteenth-century satirist Jonathan Swift, from whom he took the title of his most famous novel, Toole understood the power of sexual impulse but was dismayed by the grotesquerie of sexual desire. In the final analysis, it was sexuality of all kinds that repelled Toole, not simply his own homosexuality.”

Raymond-Jean Frontain
www.glbtc.com

Michael Hollister (2015)