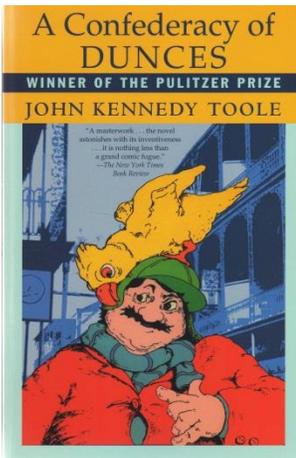


A Confederacy of Dunces

By John Kennedy Toole



Paperback: 405 pages

Publisher: Grove Weidenfeld; Reissue edition (1987)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0802130208

ISBN-13: 978-0802130204

ABOUT THIS BOOK

*“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, *“Thoughts on Various Subjects, Moral and Diverting”*

“A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. The green earflaps, full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once.”

So enters one of the most memorable characters in American fiction, Ignatius J. Reilly. John Kennedy Toole’s hero is one, “huge, obese, fractious, fastidious, a latter-day Gargantua, a Don Quixote of the French Quarter. His story bursts with wholly original characters, denizens of New Orleans’ lower depths, incredibly true-to-life dialogue, and the zaniest series of high and low comic adventures” (Henry Kisor, *Chicago Sun-Times*).

Ignatius J. Reilly is a flatulent frustrated scholar deeply learned in Medieval philosophy and American junk food, a brainy mammoth misfit imprisoned in a trashy world of Greyhound Buses and Doris Day movies. He is in violent revolt against the entire modern age. Ignatius’ peripatetic employment takes him from Levy Pants, where he leads a workers’ revolt, to the French Quarter, where he waddles behind a hot dog wagon that serves as his fortress.

A Confederacy of Dunces is an American comic masterpiece that outswifts Swift, whose poem gives the book its title. Set in New Orleans, the novel bursts into life on Canal Street under the clock at D. H. Holmes department store.

The characters leave the city and literature forever marked by their presences—Ignatius and his mother; Mrs. Reilly’s matchmaking friend, Santa Battaglia; Miss Trixie, the octogenarian assistant accountant at Levy Pants; inept, bemused Patrolman Mancuso; Jones, the jivecat in spaceage dark glasses. Juvenal, Rabelais, Cervantes, Fielding, Swift, Dickens—their spirits are all here. Filled with unforgettable characters and unbelievable plot twists, shimmering with intelligence, and dazzling in its originality, Toole’s comic classic just keeps getting better year after year.

Released by Louisiana State University Press in April 1980 and published in paperback in 1981 by Grove Press, *A Confederacy of Dunces* is nothing short of a publishing phenomenon. Turned down by countless publishers and submitted by the author's mother years after his suicide, the book won the 1981 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Today, there are over 1,500,000 copies in print worldwide in eighteen languages. (*From the publisher.*)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Walker Percy (in the Introduction) uses the words gargantuan and Falstaffian to describe Ignatius. Is it only his size that makes Ignatius seem larger than life? Percy likens him to the late screen comic Oliver Hardy. To which more recent personalities could Ignatius be compared?
2. The first chapter of *A Confederacy of Dunces* is generally thought to be among the funniest in American literature. Do you agree? What other comic novels remind you of *A Confederacy of Dunces* and why?
3. Ignatius constantly criticizes and deprecates his mother while relying on her to keep his life together. Does she feel the same way about her son? What does she need from him and what does she get for her pains?
4. The city of New Orleans plays a central role in the novel, seeming to be a character in and of itself. Could this novel have been set in another American city? Elaborate.
5. Project Ignatius and Myrna into the future. They are supposed to be in love, but find themselves fighting before ever leaving the city. Will they make it to New York? Can New York survive Ignatius? What possibilities do you see for them?
6. Ignatius is a virgin, but Myrna declares herself to be sexually uninhibited. Is each telling the truth? Can you see them becoming intimate? Discuss this in light of your own experience or that of a friend's.
7. Ignatius thinks of himself as a knight errant seeking to set the modern world in line with his theories of good taste and solid geometry. Are his efforts doomed to failure? Has he chosen his quests unwisely or does the fault lie in his personality? Is the way he views the world askew?
8. Is Ignatius purely lazy or does his attitude toward work reflect his disdain for the modern world of commerce? Ignatius feels he is an anachronism. Where would he fit in?
9. Although the book is longer than the average novel, Walker Percy fought against it being severely edited. What do you think of his decision? If you were to expand or cut something, what would it be?
10. The book is elaborately plotted, but does it work? What do you find unbelievable or improbable?
11. In the forty years since *A Confederacy of Dunces* was written our attitudes toward what constitutes pornography have changed. Given the same circumstances, would Lana Lee be arrested today for her bird show? Develop a scenario suitable for today's more permissive times.
12. It is unusual for a current novel to use written dialect. Would *A Confederacy of Dunces* be the same if characters like Burma and Santa spoke in standard English?

13. In the twenty-plus years since its publication *A Confederacy of Dunces* has become a cult novel. What does that mean to you? Give examples of other cult novels you may have read. Have you joined in slavish devotion to any of these works?

14. In a letter dated March 5, 1965, Toole critiques his own novel writing that he “was certain that the Levys were the book’s worst flaw” and “that couple kept slipping from my grasp as I tried to manipulate them throughout the book” (Nevils and Hardy, page 139). What did he mean? And do you agree? Are they the only characters who don’t come to life? Toole lauds other characters as being representative of New Orleans. Who do you think they might be? (Questions issued by publisher.)

John Kennedy Toole, Remembered

Kevin Allman on *Butterfly in the Typewriter*, a new biography of the author of *A Confederacy of Dunces*

by Kevin Allman @NOLAKevin



Funny ain't easy – particularly when it comes to fiction. In the last 50 years, only one purely comic novel has won the Pulitzer Prize: *A Confederacy of Dunces*, John Kennedy Toole's posthumously published book that has become, for better or for worse, New Orleans' own *Gone With the Wind*. Instead of Rhett and Scarlett, though, Toole conjured New Orleanians who were simultaneously caricatures, grotesques and completely real, recognizable people. Odd as they are, you see stranger folks every day at Rouses, Bud's Broiler or in your own living room.

Who in New Orleans hasn't met a variant on Ignatius Reilly, the bombastic slob filled with equal parts contempt and flatulence, who rails away at the lack of "theology and geometry" in modern life while living in terror of the world outside the Orleans Parish line? Or his mother, Irene Reilly, who was certainly one of the Schwegmann "slipper ladies" of not-so-long-ago, making groceries while clad in their best housecoats and fuzzy footwear? Or Irene's friend Santa Battaglia, slapping around her "granchirren" and making party-sized bowls of "potatis salad" — honking away in what Toole called "that accent that occurs south of New Jersey only in New Orleans, that Hoboken near the Gulf of Mexico"?

"In the scope of Southern literature, *Confederacy* seems an aberration," writes Cory Mac-Lauchlin in his introduction to his new biography, *Butterfly in the Typewriter: The Tragic Life of John Kennedy Toole and the Remarkable Story of A Confederacy of Dunces*. It's true; Toole was plumbing stories from New Orleans backatown neighborhoods 50 years before people like TV producer David Simon were straining themselves to avoid wrought-iron jazz-baby Big Easy cliches.

Mainstream publishers and American readers have always had preconceived notions regarding "Southern literature," and whatever those notions encompass, Toole's world probably wasn't it. Harper Lee and Eudora Welty's depictions of small Southern-town life would have been instantly recognizable to any New York publisher, as would Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner's Grand Guignol stories, or Tennessee Williams' many neurotic magnolias in yellowing lace. Toole's blue-collar Yats, Black Pearl porters and Irish Channel biddies were none of these. And then there was

Ignatius himself, a grand comic figure who was the polar opposite of witty, epigrammatic comic-novel characters like P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves and Wooster. In those more staid days, "serious" literature, even serious comic literature, didn't concern itself with someone like a slobbus gloriosus French Quarter hot dog vendor, who sat in his bedrooms penning a "lengthy indictment against our century" — when he wasn't jerking off, screaming at the neighbors or watching teen dance shows.

John Updike this wasn't. And lucky us for that.

Anyone familiar with *Confederacy* has probably heard of the book's long strange path to publication, which almost didn't come to pass after Toole committed suicide in 1969 at the age of 31. A few years later, his mother, Thelma Ducoing Toole, determined that her son's manuscript would see print, and spent years trying to interest a variety of publishers. When that went nowhere, she got the "badly smeared, scarcely readable carbon" into the hands of Covington writer Walker Percy, whose own masterpiece, *The Moviegoer*, had won the National Book Award a few years earlier. Percy, who was teaching at Loyola University when Thelma Toole buttonholed him on campus, was understandably unenthusiastic about reading the manuscript she proffered. But read it he did, dazzled he was. Thelma Toole had her vindication. Percy spent several years himself trying to interest a publisher. *Confederacy* was ultimately published in 1980 by Louisiana State University (LSU) Press to acclaim. A year later, it became the first novel by a university press to capture the Pulitzer Prize — sending Thelma Toole into a twilight career as the "mother of the book," turning her into a minor New Orleans celebrity.

Butterfly in the Typewriter is the third book that attempts to parse Toole's short and extraordinary life. In 2011, LSU Press published *Ignatius Rising: The Life of John Kennedy Toole*, a perplexing and ultimately frustrating attempt at biography that relied heavily upon his letters, especially extensive reprints of his 1960s correspondence with Robert Gottlieb, the Simon & Schuster editor who had initially expressed interest in publishing *Confederacy* while Toole was still alive. Gottlieb and Toole exchanged many letters, many of which were reproduced verbatim by the authors of *Ignatius Rising*, Rene Pol Nevils and Deborah George Hardy. In *Butterfly*, MacLauchlin asserts the authors didn't have Gottlieb's permission to publish them.

Ignatius Rising had other problems, including a complete disinterest in the plot of *Confederacy*; many of the book's memorable characters were given glancing mention or no mention at all. Toole's life growing up in New Orleans was also given short shrift, as was his stint at New York's Columbia University. The authors were more interested in *People* magazine-style pop psychology than examining his bizarre family life. (MacLauchlin sums up their approach, accurately, as depicting "Toole as a man suffering from an Oedipal complex, suppressed homosexuality, alcoholism, madness and an appetite for promiscuity.")

Nevils and Hardy decided Toole was most certainly gay and enjoyed the company of male prostitutes, buttressing their argument almost completely on the testimony of a man who claimed he'd picked up Toole in 1967 — but he hadn't known who Toole was until more than a decade later, when he saw the author's photo on the *Confederacy* dust jacket.

The authors didn't even comprehend New Orleans. In describing Thelma Toole's blue-collar upbringing in the Faubourg Marigny, they refer to it as "a lovely, exclusive area of wide, shady streets." Mrs. Toole lived on Elysian Fields Avenue just off St. Claude Avenue, across the street from the ruins of the old Schwegmann market, just a few houses down from what is now Gene's Po-Boys. Exclusive?

In 2011, after I published a critical review of Ignatius Rising, an old friend of Toole's contacted me by mail. Joel L. Fletcher had known Toole well, and was one of the old friends who had rallied around Toole's mother Thelma in her last years, driving her to appointments and taking down some of her memories via tape recorder. (Thelma Toole told a reporter from the now-defunct New Orleans paper Figaro that Fletcher would be writing her biography, which was news to him.) Fletcher was a Lafayette native whose father was the president of the University of Southwest Louisiana (USL, now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette). Toole was teaching there in 1960 when the men met and became friends, and Fletcher had remained close to Toole and his mother until she died in August 1984.

Fletcher said he had cooperated with Nevils and Hardy when they requested an interview and follow-ups, but loathed their finished book. A subsequent phone conversation with Fletcher, who was now an art dealer in Virginia, convinced me he wasn't a crank, but a man outraged by what he saw as a shabbily researched, tabloidish treatment of a family he'd known well. He insisted Toole never had to "practice" his repartee, as the authors had suggested; was no more a drunkard than the average New Orleanian, and had always found his friend more asexual than anything else. (MacLauchlin draws no conclusion on that score.) Other Toole family friends, including John Geiser, an Uptown man who knew "Kenny" throughout his life — the two attended their first day of school together, and Geiser later served as executor of Thelma Toole's estate — shared opinions closer to those of Fletcher than those of Nevils and Hardy.

Four years later, Fletcher published his own book, *Ken & Thelma: The Story of A Confederacy of Dunces*, filled with interesting tales like the time he escorted Thelma to New York to appear with Tom Snyder on his late-night talk show. (Rarely unsure of herself, Thelma gave advice to Anthony Quinn backstage before the show.) Still: "This is a memoir, not a biography," Fletcher cautioned. "A good biography of John Kennedy Toole is yet to be written."

Whatever Fletcher, Geiser and Toole's other friends might think of *Butterfly in the Typewriter*, it's hard to imagine a more comprehensive biography, given the circumstances. Much of the extant material on Toole and *Confederacy* has already been pored over and printed in other books and magazine articles; those of his friends who are still living have been interviewed. MacLauchlin takes those facts, finds others and draws new threads and connections between them. Some reviewers puzzled over the end of *Confederacy*, in which Ignatius rides out of New Orleans across the swamps in the back of his girlfriend's tiny Renault, fleeing "white supremacists, Protestants, or worse," bound for New York. Why the lighting out for the Manhattan territories? MacLauchlin finds many clues in Toole's collegiate career; Toole studied at Columbia (twice) and taught classes at Hunter College, where he met the girls who became the models for Ignatius' girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff.

Toole is presented as a good friend, a sharp wit and an uncanny mimic who could copy the speech patterns and turns of phrase of just about anyone he encountered, a skill on great display in the pages of *Confederacy*. Much of the humor in the book comes from Toole's incredible dialogue; even critics who complained that *Confederacy* was more a series of scenarios than a linear plot found little fault with his use of language, and *Butterfly* traces the origins of Toole's encounters with the real people who became characters in his book. Not only is funny not easy — comedy and comic writing often doesn't wear well from generation to generation, and it's a testament to Toole's talent that *Confederacy* is as hilarious today as it must have been nearly 50 years ago.

MacLauchlin is clear-eyed when it comes to Toole the man. He includes some contemptuously racist letters Toole wrote during his Army years while stationed in Puerto Rico, and chronicles his descent into paranoid schizophrenia. Mental illness ran in both sides of his family, and after he failed to get *Confederacy* published his mind began to decline. He became convinced an acquaintance had stolen his unpublished masterpiece and published it as his own. In his last years,

back home teaching at Dominican High School, Toole believed his students were stalking him, and asked a friend if he thought it possible that the government had implanted something in his brain.

Also getting her warts-and-all due here: Thelma Toole. She considered her son a great genius (indeed, he received a full scholarship to Tulane University and graduated from Columbia University with honors after just one year's study), and never wavered in the belief that he had produced a masterpiece. When it didn't get published, clearly the dunces were in confederacy against her son and, later, her.

After Toole's suicide, his mother Thelma sought for years to have her son's manuscript published, only to meet with rejection after rejection. Eventually she got it into the hands of writer Walker Percy, who helped shepherd it into print. Nearly 20 years after it was written, *A Confederacy of Dunces* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

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In her later years, after she had been forced to move back from Uptown to reduced circumstances on Elysian Fields Avenue, Thelma became even more eccentric, a grande dame in bedroom slippers and white gloves who made personal appearances where she reminisced about her son and sang songs. MacLauchlin acknowledges all this, even as he makes the point: For all her aggravations and affectations, Thelma Toole was no fool. She had been a popular teacher of elocution, music and theater, and she'd had the smarts not only to recognize the talent in her son's tattered manuscript, but to get it published. She deserved better than to be remembered as a camp figure, and in this book she's presented as a woman in whole.

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One thing MacLauchlin doesn't touch, though, is *Confederacy's* ending and Ignatius' leave-taking of New Orleans. The biographer makes it clear that Toole's relationship with New York City was nearly as complicated as his relationship with his hometown. Could it be that *Confederacy* was left open-ended with an eye toward a sequel? The thought of Ignatius Reilly lumbering through New York in the turbulent mid-1960s, laying waste to the bohemians of Greenwich Village and the serious liberals of the Upper East Side, would have made a hell of a follow-up. Since John Kennedy Toole is gone, let's hope nobody ever writes it.