



Toole, John Kennedy (1936-1969)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Since its publication in 1980, John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* has been celebrated as the quintessential novel of post-World War II New Orleans. It offers as vibrant and telling a portrait of the Crescent City as John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* does of Savannah, or Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* does of San Francisco.

New Orleans--with its mix of French, Spanish, and Afro-Creole cultures, and its history as a pirates' refuge and a pleasure seeker's delight-- 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. The paradox of Toole's life and career is that the man who created such comically vibrant and emotionally resilient characters as Aunt Mae, Ignatius J. Reilly, Santa Battaglia, and Burma Jones should have committed suicide at only age 32.

Biography

Toole was born on December 17, 1936, the only son of a couple in their late 30s who had resigned themselves to remaining childless. His father was an ineffective but entertaining man who worked as an automobile salesman and mechanic before deafness and failing health forced him into early retirement. His mother, a charmingly flamboyant but deeply narcissistic woman, supplemented the family income by giving music and elocution lessons.

Doting on her son Ken (as John Kennedy was known within the family), Thelma Toole made him the star of the student recitals that she mounted annually. His precocity is evident in the novel, *The Neon Bible*, which Toole wrote at age 16, but which was only published twenty years after his death.

Having enrolled originally in the engineering program at Tulane University, Toole graduated finally as an English major, writing an honors thesis on sixteenth-century playwright and prose stylist John Lyly.

In 1958, a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship allowed Toole to escape his increasingly overbearing mother for a more independent life in New York City, where he completed a Master's degree in English literature at Columbia University. An Ivy League degree made him afterwards an attractive hire at Southwestern Louisiana Institute (now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette), where he proved a popular teacher and colleague, but where he quickly grew restless with life in a backwater community.

Toole returned to New York City on a doctoral fellowship at Columbia that permitted him simultaneously to teach at Hunter College, which then had a predominantly female enrollment. (He would later skewer in the character of Myrna Minkoff the earnest but, he felt, self-deluded female social activists that filled his classes there.) Frustrated by the degree program at Columbia, he resigned his fellowship in spring 1961 to

return to New Orleans, only to be called up by the draft.

Toole served two years at the U. S. Army Training Center at Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico, where he oversaw a group of young officers teaching English to Spanish-speaking enlistees. His relatively light duties, however, allowed him the time to complete a draft of the novel that would become *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

Concluding his tour of duty in 1963, Toole returned to New Orleans to teach at Dominican College, a Roman Catholic women's school. After several years his inability to find a publisher for his novel, coupled with the increased frustration of living with and supporting his dependent parents, brought about a breakdown of some kind. Drinking heavily, Toole grew increasingly eccentric in his behavior and dress, and his students began to complain of his rants and increasingly to avoid his once-popular classes.

Toole disappeared on January 20, 1969, following a quarrel with his mother. Receipts found afterwards in his car indicate that he drove to the West coast, then across the country to the home of writer Flannery O'Connor in Milledgeville, Georgia, and was on his way back to New Orleans when, on March 26, he stopped on an isolated road outside Biloxi, Mississippi, and connected a hose to his car's exhaust pipe. His death was ruled a suicide by asphyxiation.

Thelma Toole never divulged the contents of her son's suicide note, which she destroyed after reading. Following her husband's death in 1974, however, Mrs. Toole dedicated her energies to finding a publisher for *A Confederacy of Dunces*, eventually securing an effective champion in novelist Walker Percy. The novel's extraordinary commercial success, upon its publication by Louisiana State University Press in 1980, and its winning the Pulitzer Prize, seemed to surprise everyone but her. She was engaged in a heated legal battle with members of her late husband's family over the publishing rights to Toole's earlier novel, *The Neon Bible*, when she died in 1984.

A film based on *The Neon Bible* appeared under that title in 1995, directed by Terence Davies and starring Gena Rowlands as flamboyant Aunt Mae. Although several film versions of *A Confederacy of Dunces* have been rumored--one to have starred John Belushi shortly before the comic actor's death--Toole's best known work has proved more difficult to bring to the screen.

"the Christian thing to do"

"I knew the way the people in town thought about things," the young protagonist David explains in *The Neon Bible*, Toole's first attempt to explore the effects upon their more independent-minded neighbors of a narrow-minded community's discomfort with, and oftentimes outright opposition to, difference.

"They always had some time left over from their life to bother about other people and what they did. They thought they had to get together to help other people out, like the time they got together about the woman who let a colored man borrow her car and told her the best place for her was up north with all the other nigger lovers, and the time they got the veterans with overseas wives out. If you were different from anybody in town, you had to get out. That's why everybody was so much alike."

The Neon Bible is a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, set in a rural Mississippi town in the years from the start of the Great Depression through the end of World War II. David, an only child, is three years old when his maternal aunt comes to live with the family. Mae, a former nightclub singer, is in her sixties, continues to dye her hair a brassy blonde, and uses so much perfume that David has difficulty breathing in her presence.

Mae's love of a good time offends a community dominated by a Baptist preacher who does not doubt that his godliness makes him the fittest arbiter of other people's fates. He takes it upon himself to decide which of the indigent elderly should be moved into a state institution, and who among the town's broken hearted

should be confined to a mental hospital, rationalizing that such actions are "the Christian thing to do."

When servicemen return from the war with Asian- or Mediterranean-born brides, the minister organizes a campaign to drive those families out of town so that their valley might remain racially "pure." His ersatz religiousness is symbolized by the large neon Bible that sits atop the roof of his church and can be seen from David's bedroom window at night: the religion imposed by the minister on the town is glitzy show, not genuine Christian charity.

When, due to the Depression, David's father loses his job at the local factory and is unable to continue paying the family's annual dues to the town's Baptist church, David suffers his first experience of being socially ostracized. His teacher in the early grades happens to be the preacher's foul-breathed wife, a monster of ignorance and tyranny, who persecutes David for belonging to a non-church going family.

Their poverty forces David and his family to live outside of town on a cinder-strewn lot where nothing can grow. His father's emotional depression and subsequent death during the war, his mother's loss of mental stability, and Aunt Mae's eventual departure in pursuit of a final chance at a singing career, leave David both socially and emotionally isolated, and result in the novel's unexpectedly violent conclusion.

David's peculiar combination of isolation and intelligence, however, makes him an extraordinarily innocent, yet prescient observer of the townspeople's behaviors, and a powerful witness to the consequences of a community's inability to accept and deal with social--in particular, gender and religious--differences.

"Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste"

Even as he grows into young adulthood, David remains painfully thin, suggesting that the world has failed adequately to nourish him. At the center of Toole's second novel, however, is the Rabelaisian body of Ignatius J. Reilly, corpulent and gaseous, the source of thunderous eructations and of a never-ending flow of comforting warm air that fills the capacious folds of his corduroy trousers.

Ignatius lives on a seemingly endless supply of Paradise foot-long hot dogs and Dr. Nut sodas, depends upon macarons for roughage, and exerts himself occasionally to make what his otherwise beleaguered mother readily testifies is "a delicious cheese dip." This shift in tone and characterization suggests that in the ten years intervening between the completion of his first and second novels, Toole had grown from a tragic, and at times even melodramatic, world view to a festively comic, though satirical one.

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.

Thus, while Mrs. Levy, who has taken a single correspondence course in psychology, may take on as her personal project the rejuvenation of doddering Miss Trixie, in actuality the only one who profits from the arrangement is Mrs. Levy herself, who finishes feeling all the more superior to her husband in terms of social awareness and commitment to helping others. And however ardently Myrna Minkoff may preach a gospel of sexual liberation and social justice, she is invariably taken advantage of by the supposed idealists, her support for whom she advertises in a series of highly self-aggrandizing letters to Ignatius.

Likewise, while the reader may sympathize with hapless Officer Mancuso as he is daily tormented by his precinct sergeant, much of the novel's comedy comes from the ridiculous disguises that call attention to him as he works "undercover," and from his unerring ability to attempt to arrest the wrong person. Only Burma Jones, the jive-talking janitor who delivers a running commentary on the inequities of the American social system from behind a pair of dark glasses and a cloud of cigarette smoke, can escape being labeled hapless or self-deluded, but his motivating desire is not social justice, but simply to avoid being arrested on

a vagrancy charge.

At the center of the circus is Ignatius J. Reilly. 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 foods, Greyhound Scenicruiser buses, technicolor movies starring perky film actresses like 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.

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 immerse 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.

"the more surreptitious forms of living"

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.

In *The Neon Bible*, for example, David is taught in the later grades by Mr. Farley, a man who rolls his hips as he walks, overemphasizes his syllables, and lives with a fellow bachelor, who is the town's music teacher and whom Mr. Farley calls "dear." As the only intellectuals in town, the two men are saved from ostracism by their cultural superiority, and are valorized by Toole for their indifference to the town's values. But there remains something vaguely repellent about them.

Toole's discomfort with effeminacy, and his inability to present homosexuality except in such terms, is more evident in *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

Dorian Greene, whose name plays upon the eponymous hero of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is an effeminate young man in a bottle green velour jacket who runs a vintage clothing store in the French Quarter. After meeting him, Ignatius concludes that if gays were allowed to run the military, "the world will enjoy not war but global orgies conducted with the utmost protocol and the most truly international spirit, for these people do transcend simple national differences. Their minds are on one goal [pleasure]; they are truly united; they think as one."

Ignatius's audacious plan to "Save the World through Degeneracy," however, is undermined by the frivolity of an assembly of French Quarter gay men who would rather listen to Judy Garland and Lena Horne albums than be organized by Ignatius in a protest march. Thus, while Ignatius recognizes in homosexuals' love of sex and fashion a radical alternative to the dominant heterosexuality's militaristic instincts and Cold War animosities, he dismisses it finally as just one of the various "surreptitious forms of living" that plague the French Quarter.

Written soon before the Stonewall Riots, which Toole did not live to witness himself, *A Confederacy of Dunces* finally presents the notion of organizing homosexuals into a mass movement for equality as self-evidently comic.

Finally, there is the suggestion that Ignatius himself suffers a sexual identity issue. Sexually stunted, Ignatius is fixated emotionally upon his boyhood pet, Rex, and spends afternoons masturbating behind his locked bedroom door. The nearsighted Miss Trixie continually mistakes Ignatius for Gloria, a former employee at Levy Pants, creating a gender confusion that must be sorted out by novel's end. And, frustrated by Ignatius's rebuffing her sexual advances, Myrna repeatedly counsels him to acknowledge his repressed homosexuality.

Ignatius's confused sexuality, however, is part of a larger pattern concerning the ambivalence of all representations of sexuality in the novel. Toole's is a world of sexual carnival in which, finally, no one has any sex.

Santa Battaglia sways her large, fallen breasts in a grotesque dance that repels rather than attracts male companionship. Naive Darlene's partner in her disastrous strip show is a neurotic bird. Mrs. Levy's only emotional and physical attachment is to her vibrating exercise board. Lana displays her statuesque body naked in photographs that are purveyed to schoolchildren, allowing pubescent boys to look but not touch, and avoiding sexual contact with adult males entirely.

Myrna's fervidly delivered gospel of sexual liberation proves to be all talk and brings her no action . . . at least none that satisfies her. Even Aunt Mae, the character in Toole's world who is most open to sexual joy, is frustrated to see one seventy-year-old beau arrested for child molestation and to be left at the novel's end with foul-smelling, fumbling, grossly unsatisfying Clyde.

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 the 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.

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About the Author

Raymond-Jean Frontain is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.