



## Ignatius Rising: The Life of John Kennedy Toole

*Rene Pol Nevils , Deborah George Hardy*

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The phenomenal success of John Kennedy Toole's comic masterpiece, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, is now legendary, a story that has long beckoned a deeper exploration into the life, imagination, and demise of the writer responsible for one of American literature's most memorable characters -- Ignatius J. Reilly. In *Ignatius Rising*, Ren? Pol Nevils and Deborah George Hardy present the first biography of Toole, drawing upon scores of interviews with contemporaries of the writer and acquaintances of his influencing mother, Thelma, as well as unpublished letters, documents, and photographs. Frank yet sympathetic, *Ignatius Rising* deftly describes a life that is dark, tragic, bizarre, and amazing -- but luminous with the gift of laughter, a life not unlike those of Toole's beloved characters, now loved the world over.

## **Ignatius Rising: The Life of John Kennedy Toole Details**

Date : Published April 1st 2005 by Louisiana State University Press (first published June 28th 2001)

ISBN : 9780807130599

Author : Rene Pol Nevils , Deborah George Hardy

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Biography, Nonfiction



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## **From Reader Review Ignatius Rising: The Life of John Kennedy Toole for online ebook**

### **Cynde Moya says**

Everything you wanted to know and more.

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### **Lucy Morrison says**

I find it interesting--considering how Joel Fletcher and others have lambasted this book as being sensationalist, poorly written, and even slanderous--that someone so highly regarded within the Louisiana writers' community as Andrei Codrescu would call it a "fluent, well-researched, and sympathetic biography." But then again, the opinion of a good writer who happens to be a fellow darling of LSU Press doesn't necessarily have the same weight as the opinions of people who actually knew Prof. Toole.

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### **Gail says**

Ken Toole is heartbreakingly like his fictitious character, Ignatius.

#### **From Library Journal**

By now, the tale of Toole's sprawling comic novel of New Orleans, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, lives on as a modern literary legend. A young novelist writes what he thinks is his masterpiece, is rejected by a famous New York publisher, and commits suicide only to be published posthumously and win the Pulitzer. But in this almost hagiographic account, first-time authors Nevils and Hardy reveal a story that is not quite so simple. Raised in New Orleans by a mostly distant and later mentally disturbed father and a clinging mother, Toole developed the love of reading early. When he finished *Confederacy*, he sent it to Simon and Schuster, where the famous Robert Gottlieb championed the manuscript and encouraged Toole to make some changes so that the book would be more publishable. Toole refused, asked for the manuscript back, and eventually descended into depression and paranoia, blaming Gottlieb for the novel's failure. After his death, his mother urged Walker Percy to publish *Confederacy*. The rest is history. Here, mother and son seem to have stepped right out of the Southern Gothic of a Tennessee Williams play, but this is a sad tale of one family's descent into despair and lonely ascent into posthumous fame

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### **Shadoshard says**

I was always very curious about the author of 'A Confederacy of Dunces'. The book was incredibly fascinating and I was disappointed that it and 'The Neon Bible' was the only things he'd ever written. 'Ignatius Rising' was an in-depth and objective compilation of the life of John Kennedy Toole helping to explain where the book came from and where the author ended. The authors did not judge and were careful in their tone that it steered the reader clear of any personal opinions the reader starts the book with. For example, I had always been resentful of the publishing houses that rejected Mr. Toole and felt them in part responsible for his end. The book was factual and objective enough to give me a more balanced perspective

and a better understanding of the writer and his background. This book has granted me a new perspective that will add a new dimension to my re-reading 'Confederacy' and the world from which it originated.

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### **Helen says**

If you are, as am I, "A Confederacy of Dunces" fanatic, then this is a must read despite not being the most captivating writing ever committed to paper.

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### **Katherine says**

If you loved Confederacy, you owe it to yourself to read Ignatius Rising. The story of John Kennedy Toole and his mother is every bit as insane as the characters in his fiction, and this biography allows a much more nuanced reading of Confederacy. It's a quick read and includes some good photos. Definitely take the second to last chapter with a grain of salt— that was the only time I felt like the authors were taking any real pot shots at Thelma, and honestly, you have to give them credit for holding back for so long. I was impressed at the quality of writing for two newbie authors.

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### **Max says**

Sometimes the only people that keep me feeling good about this ridiculous world are those lunatics on the fringes. God bless 'em.

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### **Leslie says**

This book gives a detailed look into the sad life of John Kennedy Toole. It tells of how his mother got Confederacy of Dunces published after his death. It also gives a look into New Orleans life.

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### **Ivy says**

Love Toole. Poorly written and edited.

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### **Rebecca Johnson says**

I greatly appreciated the added dimension this biography provides into the reading of Confederacy of Dunces. My primary objections to the biography are that it reads at times more like a tabloid than a researched biography, and also it damns Thelma Toole at the end. Granted, by all accounts she was probably as horribly domineering as she is made out to be in the biography, but I don't believe the authors ever interviewed her and as such the depiction at this point just seems mean.

The bio is divided into three basic parts:

- 1)establishing the groundwork for the assertion that Toole was a closeted homosexual
- 2)depicting his downward spiral into what was most likely schizophrenia, culminating in his suicide
- 3)depiction of Thelma Toole (his mother) as a narcissistic crazy woman who became obsessed with proving her son's genius (which would then be seen as a direct reflection on her own superiority over everyone).  
Thelma Toole is also portrayed in general as a totally domineering, controlling mother under whose thumb Toole never really escaped.

The most enlightening part of the biography, in my opinion, is the drawn-out attempt by Toole to get the book published at Simon and Schuster. Much of the correspondence between Toole and Robert Gottlieb, the editor, is reproduced in the book and is quite illuminating. They never met in person, but Gottlieb really tried to take Toole under his wing and mentor him. I wonder if authors have that kind of relationship with editors today? Ultimately, Toole asks for the manuscript to be returned because he can't bring himself to make the changes Gottlieb is suggesting, and it never gets published by S&S. I bet they're kicking themselves over that one! I believe the book was eventually published essentially unedited. Here are some excerpts from one of the final letters written to Gottlieb by Toole:

"I feel very paternal about the book; the feeling is actually androgynous because I feel as if I gave birth to it too."

"The book is not an autobiography; neither is it altogether an invention...the people and places in the book are drawn from observation and experience. I am not in the book; I've never pretended to be."

"It's true that in the unreality of my Puerto Rican experience, this book became more real to me than what was happening around me: I was beginning to talk and act like Ignatius. Not doubt this is why there's so much of him and why his verbosity becomes tiring. It's really not his verbosity, but mine."

A lot of reviewers have assumed that Ignatius is Toole, but I think he is actually more like Thelma. Thelma is this huge, inflated presence in Toole's life. She considers herself quite cultured and intelligent, while those around her are not nearly so. There are also several mentions in the biography that although Thelma was constantly talking about her genius son in public, in private she frequently berated him and called him stupid. So I think there is a bit of Toole in Mrs. Reilly and a lot of Thelma in Ignatius.

I have a totally different take on the book after reading the biography; I initially thought CoD was hysterical, but after reading the biography, it is actually incredibly sad.

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### **Briana says**

Verrrrry interesting. A must-read for Ignatius fans.

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### **Matt Evans says**

JKT wrote *Confederacy of Dunces*, his second novel, couldn't find a publisher, and then killed himself (JKT was diagnosed as a manic/depressive a few years before his suicide). Fourteen or so years later, JKT's mother, Thelma, after harrowing scores of editors and authors, convinced Walker Percy to read the manuscript -- a tattered, smudged bundled mess of papers kept in a shoe box. Almost against his will, Percy liked then loved then adored the book. With Percy onboard, the book found a publisher...and then won the

Pulitzer Prize.

If you let the foregoing paragraph be all you know about JKT and *Confederacy of Dunces*, then shame on you (and me) because you absolutely must read this book. It's very, very funny, wise, and enjoyable. You will love the repulsive protagonist, Ignatius, because he is so outrageous and arrogant and pathetic and sad that you can't help but love him. Fortuna's wheel has spun you here, follow the revolution on over to *Confederacy of Dunces*.

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### **Greg Brozeit says**

The story of how *A Confederacy of Dunces* came to be published is dramatic and tragic on its own merits. Most who are familiar with the novel know the essentials: a young, frustrated faculty member of a small women's college in New Orleans is unable to find a publisher for his transcript; he commits suicide in his early 30s; his domineering, eccentric mother tracks down writer Walker Percy while he is teaching a summer seminar and foists the tattered, typewritten novel in his hands; he reads it out of sympathy and realizes that he has found a literary gem; gets an excerpt published in the Loyola University literary magazine which leads to it being picked up by the LSU Press as it goes on to become a Pulitzer Prize-winning sensation.

In this sometimes choppy story of Toole's life and the story of his mother, Thelma, into the late 1980s, Nevils and Hardy fill in most of the blanks that should satisfy most who love the novel. Thelma was the model for Ignatius's mother, Irene, but is not nearly as endearing. Toole felt a great sense of duty to his parents. Perhaps his self-perception of not living up to their vision of him was a contributing factor to the decisions he ultimately made about his life.

The story of the post-publication and squabbles that Thelma often instigated take some of the gleam off the story of the novel's discovery and tumultuous release, but there is something of a minor Shakespearian tragedy combined with petty personal quirks in the story. Ultimately, reading this story is valuable to anyone who loves the novel.

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### **Karla Huebner says**

As I accidentally left the Erich Kästner novel I was reading on the plane, I turned to this while traveling. It gives an overview of Toole's life plus details of his mother's efforts to publish and publicize his novel after his death. The biography's level of analysis is not perhaps outstanding, but the authors succeeded in interviewing quite a few people who knew Toole and his mother, and it seems a creditable first biography (in both senses--of its subject and by its authors). Reading the correspondence sent by Toole's mother regarding his novel, I felt mildly depressed at the thought of anyone having to spend any length of time dealing with her. Her diction, however, reveals where the character Ignatius Reilly got his verbal style.

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### **Scott Lewis says**

Excellent and informative bio of Mr. Toole. Authors did their research and were familiar with New Orleans which adds a nice personal touch. If you enjoyed *Confederacy of Dunces* and *Neon Bible* learning about the life, talent and frustration of John will add another level to appreciating his works .

