

A Confederacy of Dunces: mental illness in the life and work of John Kennedy Toole

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SUMMARY

This article examines the life and work of John Kennedy Toole, focusing on his 1981 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Toole finished the novel in 1966 and, after failing to rework his manuscript to his editor's satisfaction, he shelved the project. Following this, he displayed symptoms typical of paranoid schizophrenia and he took his own life at the age of 31. In his novel, Toole parodies both psychoanalysis and the practice of psychiatry at the time, with a strong overlap with the emerging perspectives critical of psychiatry popularised by figures such as Szasz, Laing and Foucault. Toole's life and work have relevance for psychiatrists interested in the relationship between creativity and mental illness, attitudes towards psychiatry in the 1960s, and the interplay between societal values and judgements of mental health.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

None.

'This guy was a real psycho,' Mr. Levy said. 'To you character is a psychosis. Integrity is a complex. I've heard it all before.'

A Confederacy of Dunces, John Kennedy Toole (1980: p. 165)

John Kennedy Toole was born on 17 December 1937 in New Orleans, USA.^a He would be the only child of John Dewey Toole and Thelma Agnes Ducoing. A talented singer and actress, Thelma had dreams of travelling to New York City, but she decided to stay in her hometown and teach music and theatre at local schools. She immersed her son in the culture of New Orleans, taking him to the Mardi Gras carnival at the age of two and to see Bizet's opera *Carmen* at the age of five. Toole was a precocious child and his aptitude for language and mathematics ensured his rapid progress through school. In adolescence, Toole became increasingly interested in essay and fiction writing, and his talent was recognised by his teachers.

He wrote his first novel, *The Neon Bible*, at the age of 16. The story describes a young boy

growing up in a rural town in Mississippi coming to grips with small-town attitudes towards race, poverty, sexuality, and religion. It contains a startling description of a mother who slips into a severe depression, to the point of requiring a full-time carer and becoming the talking point of the entire town. The shame, stigma and horrendous effect mental illness has on a family are starkly and simply conveyed.

Higher education and service

The following year, at the age of 17, Toole entered Tulane University with the intention of studying engineering, focusing on mathematics and science. Poverty had been a defining feature of his childhood, and he was drawn by the financial security promised by a career in engineering. However, he found it uninspiring, and he switched to studying English. Toole excelled in his studies and completed his undergraduate honours thesis on the 16th-century English writer and poet John Lyly.

Toole next went to Columbia University to pursue a Master of Arts degree, focusing almost exclusively on British literature, studying writers such as James Joyce and Edmund Spenser. Outside the classroom, he was impressed with Jack Kerouac and other members of the Beat Generation. He graduated from Columbia with High Honours, a grade rarely awarded. After teaching English at several colleges, Toole's academic career was put on hold when he was called up for army service to Puerto Rico to teach English to Spanish recruits.

A confederacy is born

Toole had been contemplating writing a novel for some time, and while he was on service he had a room of his own, free time and a regular paycheck – and, after borrowing a typewriter from a friend, the ideal conditions to write. He showed parts of the developing novel to his friends, who were very encouraging, and Toole was also pleased with his progress. When it came to leaving the army, Hunter College in New York had offered him an

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a. The biographical details in this article are taken from MacLauchlin (2012).

instructor position in the coming academic year, but he declined in favour of returning to New Orleans and finishing his novel. By the beginning of 1964, Toole had completed the manuscript and decided to submit it to Simon & Schuster, the reputable and prestigious publisher of Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*.

Publication

Simon & Schuster's editor Robert Gottlieb wrote to Toole encouragingly, but advised that the novel would require revisions, particularly: 'There must be a point to everything you have in the book, a real point, not just amusingness forced to figure itself out' and '[Ignatius, the book's protagonist] is not as good as you think he is. There is too much of him.' Toole spent a year trying to address Gottlieb's criticisms, but in January 1965 he wrote to Gottlieb explaining his difficulty in revising the novel:

'The book is not autobiography; neither is it altogether invention. While the plot is manipulation and juxtaposition of characters, with one or two exceptions the people and places in the book are drawn from observation and experience [...] no doubt this is why there's so much of Ignatius and why his verbosity becomes tiring. It's really not his verbosity but mine [...] this book is what I know, what I've seen and experienced. I can't throw these people away. No one has ever done much insofar as writing about this milieu is concerned, I don't think' (MacLauchlin 2012: p. 178).

He never submitted a revised manuscript.

Mental deterioration

In the following years, Toole developed symptoms typical of paranoid schizophrenia. Initially, he started worrying about his students stalking him and people driving past his house at night. In his graduate class, he stood up and declared 'There's a plot against me here'. Finally, while discussing his concerns about stalkers with one of his colleagues, he raised the possibility that the government had implanted a device in his brain. Toole also showed symptoms of depression, becoming increasingly withdrawn and uninterested in the people around him.

Toole had a family history of mental illness. His father became increasingly housebound and paranoid in middle age, obsessed with safety and security. His mother's uncle, James Ducoing, took his own life a few months before Toole was born. In 1966, his mother's brother, George Ducoing, was referred for committal to the Psychiatric Department at Charity Hospital in New Orleans.

On 19 January 1969, Toole had an argument with his mother – Thelma never confessed to its

cause – and stormed out of the house. He returned the next day to pack some belongings, went to the bank to withdraw some money, and then left in his car. On 26 March 1969, at the age of 31, he parked his car in Biloxi, Mississippi, wrote a number of letters to his parents and ran a hose from the exhaust in through the car window. Thelma destroyed the letters and refused to tell anyone about their contents.

A Confederacy of Dunces

Four years after her son's death, in March 1973, Thelma attempted to publish the manuscript of *A Confederacy of Dunces*. After a series of rejections, she found the support of the author Walker Percy, and eventually they persuaded Louisiana State University Press to publish it in 1980. In April 1981, the book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

A Confederacy of Dunces is about a 30-year-old medieval scholar, Ignatius Reilly, who attempts to find employment in New Orleans. Ignatius is rude, mean, manipulative, deceitful and on a crusade to thoroughly indict the society he finds himself in for its various crimes against taste, nature and decency. The book follows Ignatius's heroic efforts to restore some 'theology and geometry' to the city of New Orleans, famous for its 'gamblers, prostitutes, exhibitionists, anti-Christians, alcoholics, sodomites, drug addicts, fetishists, onanists, pornographers, frauds, jades, litterbugs and lesbians' (Toole 1980: p. 3).

At its core, *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a satire of 1960s New Orleans society, focusing on religion, race, sexuality and poverty – the same themes that Toole had written about in a far more serious tone in *The Neon Bible*. Ignatius turns his back on the values that are dear to American society, including being positive:

'I refuse to "look up." Optimism nauseates me. It is perverse. Ever since man's fall his proper position in the universe has been one of misery' (p. 63);

success:

'In other words, you want to become totally bourgeois. You people have all been brainwashed. I imagine that you'd like to become a success or something equally vile' (p. 325);

and Mark Twain:

'You may remember that Mark Twain preferred to lie supinely in bed while composing those rather dated and boring efforts which contemporary scholars try to prove meaningful. Veneration of Mark Twain is one of the roots of our current intellectual stalemate' (p. 50).

He also targets the less benign aspects of 1960s America, when he parodies contemporary racism

through Burma Jones, the only Black character in the book:

‘The old woman pulled the bell cord and got out of the seat, trying self-consciously to avoid any contact with the anatomy of Jones, who watched her writhing through the detachment of his green lenses. “Look at that. She think I got siphus and TB and a hard on and I gonna cut her up with a razor and lif her purse. Ooo-wee.”’ (p. 57).

Psychiatry in the 1960s

Ignatius is unemployed, sits in his room all day writing articles, and abhors work, success, ambition – he is out of place and out of time, and the strain on his long-suffering mother is immediately apparent in the story. Towards the end of the novel, her friends encourage her to consider placing Ignatius in Charity Hospital, the local asylum, and she raises this with him:

‘“Ignatius, don’t you think maybe you’d be happy if you went and took you a little rest at Charity?”

“Are you referring to the psychiatric ward by any chance?” Ignatius demanded in a rage. “Do you think that I am insane? Do you suppose that some stupid psychiatrists could even attempt to fathom the workings of my psyche?”

“You could just rest, honey. You could write some stuff in your little copy books.”

“They would try to make me into a moron who liked television and new cars and frozen food. Don’t you understand? Psychiatry is worse than communism. I refuse to be brainwashed. I won’t be a robot!”

“But, Ignatius, they help out a lot of people got problems.”

“Do you think that I have a problem?” Ignatius bellowed. “The only problem that those people have anyway is that they don’t like new cars and hair sprays. That’s why they are put away. They make the other members of the society fearful. Every asylum in this nation is filled with poor souls who simply cannot stand lanolin, cellophane, plastic, television, and subdivisions.”’ (p. 335)

And at the end of the novel, when psychiatric detention is imminent, Ignatius thinks things through:

‘Some cretin psychoanalyst would attempt to comprehend the singularity of his worldview. In frustration, the psychoanalyst would have him crammed into a cell three feet square. No. That was out of the question. Jail was preferable. There they

only limited you physically. In a mental ward they tampered with your soul and worldview and mind. He would never tolerate that.’ (p. 419)

Ignatius sees psychiatric illness as a social construct (the inability to like televisions, new cars, frozen food), the aetiology of mental illness as being primarily social (the culture is insane, not the individual), and psychiatric treatment as being invasive, coercive and, in the case of psychoanalysis, simply ineffective. These criticisms overlap with many of the ideas regarding psychiatry being introduced at the time. Three seminal critiques of psychiatry had been published around the time that Toole was writing: *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961) by Thomas Szasz, *The Divided Self* (1960) by R.D. Laing and *The History of Madness* (1964) by Michel Foucault. Also of note was the publication of Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962). It is not known whether Toole read these works, but part of the humour in reading the passages from *A Confederacy of Dunces* cited here arises from the celebration of individual freedom, the inversion of the power dynamic between the individual and psychiatry, and the relativisation of sanity – all of which are prominent themes running through them.

Conclusions

Toole harnessed his extensive reading, his personal experience of New Orleans and his considerable gift for writing to produce a story that is highly original and enjoyable. Toole was an extremely intelligent and talented individual, and his failure to find a publisher for *A Confederacy of Dunces* seems to have precipitated a serious decline in his mental health. A number of other factors contributed to this deterioration, but we can only speculate on why he took his own life. Toole parodies the psychiatry of the 1960s in *A Confederacy of Dunces*, but its inadequacies had a real and tragic impact on his life.

References

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