



The Mother Who Would Not Take No

Thelma Toole was not your average literary agent. For one thing, she was not a literary agent at all. She was a mother in New Orleans who gave private lessons in music, speech, and dramatic expression, and she had a son she believed was a genius.

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Her son, John Kennedy Toole, had written a novel. It was called "A Confederacy of Dunces", and it was very, very funny.

There was only one problem: by the time the world got around to reading it, John was gone.

This is a sad story in places. But it is also a story about stubbornness, and about a very persistent lady with a very heavy manuscript.

A Book Written in Puerto Rico

John Kennedy Toole was born in New Orleans in 1937. He was a bright student who went on to teach college English. In 1961 he was drafted into the Army and stationed mostly at Fort Buchanan in Puerto Rico, where he taught English to Spanish-speaking recruits. In his spare time there, he wrote much of his novel.

The hero of the book is Ignatius J. Reilly, a large, loud, deeply opinionated man who lives with his mother in New Orleans. Ignatius looks down on the modern world, wears a green hunting cap, and causes chaos wherever he goes, all while believing he is the most reasonable person in the room. The city of New Orleans, with all its accents and oddballs, is practically a character too.

So Close, and Then Not

In 1964, John sent the manuscript to Simon & Schuster. An editor there named Robert Gottlieb was interested enough to write back. He liked parts of it. He suggested changes. Letters went back and forth, and John revised.

But Gottlieb was never quite convinced. He felt the book, for all its humor, did not have a point. Eventually John asked for his manuscript back, and in 1965 the deal was finished before it ever really began.

John was deeply disappointed. In the years that followed, he struggled with depression and other troubles. In March 1969, he died by suicide. He was 31 years old.

The Manuscript on the Armoire

After John's death, Thelma suffered from depression for about two years. The manuscript sat on top of an armoire in her son's old room.

Then she picked it up and started mailing it out.

Over a five-year period, she sent it to seven publishers. All seven sent it back. Thelma later said that every time it was returned, a little part of her died. And yet she kept sending it.

The Professor Who Couldn't Escape

In 1976, Thelma learned that a famous author named Walker Percy was teaching at Loyola University in New Orleans. Percy had won the National Book Award for his own novel, "The Moviegoer". If anyone could recognize her son's talent, she thought, it was him.

She began calling his office. She wrote him letters. She called again.

Percy did his very best to avoid her. He later admitted as much, quite cheerfully, in the foreword he wrote for the book. He did not want to read a manuscript handed to him by a grieving mother. In his experience, that sort of thing rarely ended well.

But Thelma was persistent. Eventually she simply appeared in his office and handed him the hefty stack of pages.

Percy admitted he was hoping it would be so bad he could put it down after a few pages and be done with it. Instead he kept reading. And reading. In the foreword, he describes a growing feeling of disbelief. Surely, he thought, it could not be this good.

It was.

A Small Press and a Big Prize

Percy recommended the novel to Louisiana State University Press, which had only recently begun publishing literary fiction. Even then, getting it accepted took more than three years. Finally, in 1980, LSU Press published "A Confederacy of Dunces" with a foreword by Walker Percy.

The first printing was just 2,500 copies. Nobody, it seems, expected much.

In 1981, "A Confederacy of Dunces" won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. John Kennedy Toole was awarded it after his death, more than a decade after the novel had been turned away.

The book has since sold more than 1.5 million copies in 18 languages. It is now considered a comic classic. Today, a bronze statue of Ignatius J. Reilly, green hunting cap and all, stands on Canal Street in New Orleans, under the clock where the D. H. Holmes department store used to be. That is the very spot where Ignatius waits for his mother in the opening scene.

Thelma Toole remained a tireless, and often flamboyant, promoter of her son's work until her death in 1984.

What We Can Learn From a Mother

Most of us will not need our mothers to find a publisher for us. (Though it would be nice.) But Thelma Toole's story is worth remembering all the same.

Seven publishers said no. A famous author tried to dodge her phone calls. She kept going anyway, because she had read the book and she knew it was good. In the end, all it took was one right reader. Once Walker Percy actually turned the pages, the book did the rest of the work by itself.

So if your manuscript keeps coming back in the mail, take heart from Thelma. Somewhere out there is the reader who can't put it down. Sometimes you just have to stand in their office until they pick it up.

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