

# **"A Confederacy of Dunces" by John Kennedy Toole [B2]**

Rifiutato in diverse occasioni e pubblicato a posteriori, questo romanzo su un disadattato sociale e sulle sue elucubrazioni intellettuali è un vero capolavoro della letteratura umoristica.

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A clever comic novel with a tragic story behind it: John Kennedy Toole, the brilliant Louisiana-born author of *A Confederacy of Dunces* wrote the book in the early 1960s. But unable to find a publisher and in declining mental health, he took his own life. For decades his mother continued to approach writers and publishers with her son's manuscript. The novel was finally published in 1980, and won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction the following year.

## **ALMOST ARRESTED**

The title is a quote by the 18th-century Irish author Jonathan Swift: "When a true genius appears in the world, you may know him by this sign, that the dunces are all in confederacy against him." Set in New Orleans, Toole's novel follows the life of the eccentric Ignatius J. Reilly, a medieval scholar and misfit in the modern world. Overweight, oddly dressed and , Ignatius riles the police as he waits for his mother outside a grocery store. She arrives just as Ignatius faces arrest: "'How old is he?' the policeman asked Mrs. Reilly. 'I am thirty,' Ignatius said condescendingly. 'You got a job?' 'Ignatius hasta help me at home,' Mrs. Reilly said [...] 'I got terrible arthritis.' 'I dust a bit', Ignatius told the policeman. 'In addition, I am at the moment writing a lengthy indictment against our century. When my brain begins to reel from my literary labors, I make an occasional cheese dip.'" «"Quanti anni ha questo giovanotto?" chiese il poliziotto alla signora Reilly. "Ne ho trenta" rispose Ignatius accondiscendente. "Che lavoro fa?" "Ignatius mi aiuta nei lavori domestici" disse la signora Reilly.[...] "Soffro terribilmente di artrite". "In casa aiuto a spolverare e, in più, sto scrivendo una lunga accusa contro il nostro secolo. A volte, quando il cervello comincia a fondersi per il troppo lavoro intellettuale, mi metto a fare la crema di formaggio".»

## FINDING WORK

Still living for free in the comfort of his mother's home, Ignatius is spoilt, superior and overcritical of the "dunces" he meets everywhere. He spends his time eating, drinking and thinking, and writing letters to his activist girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff. When his mother crashes her car and faces a claim for damages, she tells Ignatius that he must go out and earn some money. "I doubt very seriously whether anyone will hire me." 'What do you mean, babe? You a fine boy with a good education.' 'Employers sense in me a denial of their values [...] They fear me. I suspect they can see that I am forced to function in a century which I loathe.'" «" [...] dubito che qualcuno voglia assumermi". "Ma che dici, caro? Tu sei un bravo ragazzo e poi hai studiato". "Tutti i datori di lavoro vedono in me una negazione di ciò che loro ritengono valori essenziali". Si mise supino. "Hanno paura di me, forse capiscono che sono obbligato a esistere in un'epoca che mi disgusta."»

## GETTING WORK

Ignatius gets a job at a clothing factory, where his bizarre misadventures take a satirical swipe at the values and politics of the US. Ignatius writes a rude letter to an important client, and attempts to lead an uprising of Black employees aimed at improving everyone's pay. Inevitably, he loses his job. "Ignatius! So you got yourself fired." 'Please, Mother, I am near breaking point' [...] 'A little job in a office and you can't hold it down. With all your education' [...] 'My excellence confused them.'" «"Ignatius" Ti sei fatto licenziare!" "Per favore, mamma, sono sull'orlo di un collasso". [...] "Avevi un bel lavoretto in ufficio e non sei riuscito a tenerti stretto nemmeno quello. E pensare che hai studiato". [...] "Sono rimasti confusi dalla mia grandezza".»

## HOTDOGS

Ignatius's defiant "excellence" lands him another job, selling hotdogs. It's a task for which he proves unsuitable, consuming vast numbers of the product. Soon he is unemployed again. Inspired by Myrna's activism, he decides to go into politics. However, when he makes the news headlines for

all the wrong reasons (read the book to find out more), his mother decides to put him in a psychiatric hospital. "I'm gonna take care of you. I'm gonna fix you up.' Yes, she would fix him up all right. A hose would be turned on him. 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." «"Mi prenderò cura di te. Penso io a sistemare tutto". Sì, l'avrebbe sistemato veramente, a modo suo. Lo avrebbero preso, buttato sotto una doccia gelata, e qualche idiota di psicanalista avrebbe tentato di penetrare i misteri della singolarità del suo modo di vedere le cose; non riuscendoci, lo avrebbe gettato in una celletta di tre metri quadrati."»

## ESCAPE ROUTE

Can Myrna provide Ignatius with an escape route? The ending for Toole's fast-moving farce is as unlikely as it is clever; no wonder the book, way ahead of its time, went on to become an international cult classic and still resonates with readers today.

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# Glossary

- **lands** = ottenere
- **unsuitable** = inappropriato
- **Dunces** = idioti, cretini
- **grocery store** = tienda de comestibles
- **swipe** = schiaffo
- **oddly** = in modo strano
- **riles** = esasperare
- **spoilt** = viziato, maleducato
- **claim** = risarcimento
- **damages** = danni
- **clever** = ingegnoso
- **scholar** = accademico
- **misfit** = emarginato
- **uprising** = rivolta
- **resonates** = trovare il favore di
- **quote** = citazione
- **Overweight** = in sovrappeso
- **unlikely** = improbabile
- **makes the news headlines** = fare notizia
- **unable** = incapaci
- **misadventures** = disavventure
- **rude** = scortese