

Burrelle's
T.V. CLIPS

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Tom Snyder moderating:

Next up, a woman of rare perserverance, who for years has been fighting for recognition for a book written by her son, who died eleven years ago. Last week, that book, which his mother finally had published, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for 1980. Mrs. Thelma Moore (sic) is a woman who never gave up her fight for her son's literary recognition, and she's here tonight to tell us about winning that fight for one of the best books of 1980 or any year, John Kennedy Toole's "A Confederacy of Dunces." Would you please welcome Mrs. Thelma Toole. Thelma.

Toole: Thank you, Tom.

Snyder: You know, your story completely wiped out the feelings that might have been created by the phoney story submitted by the newspaper in Washington, The Post, that won the Pulitzer Prize, that had to be sent back.

Toole: Yes. I was distressed.

Snyder: Well, but your story overwhelmed all that bad publicity and all those bad feeling that people might've had. Why did you not just put your son's book in the drawer and forget about it? Why did you fight so hard for it?

Toole: Because I knew, from his birth, there was an aura of greatness. He was a magnificent baby, and he had the appearance of a six month old child, and he was the talk of the nursery department in...Infirmary. They told me he was the only baby that they had ever seen, who had facial expressions. The nurses would crowd around his crib and admire him. Well, he lived up to that promise, and when he was three years old, I took him to a nursery school, and then when he was four, he went to a public school kindergarten, and the teacher thought he was a little prince.

Snyder: Why aren't you looking at me? ...

Toole: Indeed. It's dedicated to you. Pardon my being so remiss.

Snyder: Now, when your son was writing this book, did you know what he was writing about? Did he go over the story with you day by day?

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Toole: No, no. He wrote that when he was in Puerto Rico in the Army in two years, and he was so superior that they gave him a private room, and he was leader of the English team. He was the only one who could speak Spanish, and he also had charge of discipline, and while he was there, this idea originated, this "Confederacy of Dunces," all about New Orleans and the people of New Orleans.

Snyder: Can you tell us what the "Confederacy of Dunces" means? Didn't your son open his book...

Toole: Yes. Jonathan Swift said, "when a true genius appears in the world, you can be sure that a confederacy of dunces will assail him." Now, someone said to me, "did your son think he was a genius?" I said, "he didn't think it, but he knew he was, but he was very modest, a very modest man."

Snyder: When you first heard the news from the Pulitzer Committee, what were you thinking right then?

Toole: What was I thinking right then? I was in a transcendent mood of such triumph for someone who suffered so much during his life. You see, he was so brilliant that, when he was in grammar school, I had to fight twice to have him transferred to another grade, and they fought me, and I was out in the hall with the principal, and his first grade teacher said, "he's a different child. You can't stifle that mind. You have to give him a chance," so when he was six, he entered second grade, and then when he was in fourth grade, he skipped fourth grade and went into ^{5th} grade, he entered departmental. Now, he was tall for his age, sturdy and developed into a football type physique. That saved him, because if that darling had been puny and bespectacled, the older boys might've been tumbling him. Am I right?

Snyder: I think you probably are exactly correct, yeah.

Toole: So, he went into high school when he was twelve, at Tulane University when he was sixteen.

Snyder: A smart young man, huh?

Toole: A scholarly genius. Tom, you're putting it mildly.

Snyder: Well, but now, was he...

Toole: Now, listen to me. Alright, Tom, alright. I told you, when I met you, I'm Irish.

Snyder: Okay.

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Toole: Someone told me that perception extends to the *lower* classes in Ireland.

Audience member: That's right.

Toole: Now, is there any...Who says "right?" That's beautiful. The Irish are perceptive, the most perceptive nation in the world. Maybe East Indians are. I don't know any East Indians.

Snyder: We will continue with Mrs. O'Toole right after these announcements. Let me do these little commercials now, and we'll be right back.

Toole: I don't think I can spare the time.

Snyder: Oh, you can. We will continue right after these announcements.

Toole: Thank you.

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Snyder: We're back with Thelma Toole. I called you O'Toole because, in your words, you have the map of Ireland written on your face.

Toole: That's fine instinct, because it is O'Toole. It was O'Toole in Ireland, and America found it too Irish, so it lopped off the O.

Snyder: Lost your O, did you?

Toole: Yeah, I lost my O. Oh, oh.

Snyder: Who were you finally able to convince...

Toole: Yes.

Snyder: ...that this book...

Toole: Yes.

Snyder: ... "A Confederacy of Dunces" ought to be published, after all the rejections that I know that you received? The stories have been in the paper.

Toole: Yes, that's...not...it was tragic to me. Eight New York publishers that write rejection slips--and one particularly--I'm not going to mention the publisher.

Snyder: Oh, go ahead.

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Toole: You want me to?

Snyder: Yeah, give it to 'em.

Toole: W.W. Norton, and the editor said it...I memorized, because, since I was three years old, I've been memorizing in the dramatic arts school, well, she said, "it has literary style, but comic novels don't sell."

Snyder: She never read "The World According to Garth," did she?

Toole: I like that. I like "The World According to Garth." John Irving?

Snyder: So did I. Uh huh.

Toole: Yeah.

Snyder: Millions of people liked it.

Toole: Millions, yes. Well, she said, "comic novels don't sell." If the world doesn't need comedy now, when will it ever need it?

Snyder: Yes, exactly.

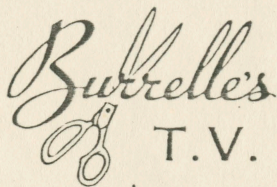
Toole: Charles Dickens wrote, "there is nothing in this world so inevitably contagious as laughter and good humor." To me, he was the master magician of humor, and people say my son's novel had a Dickensian flavor. His comedy does.

Snyder: I want to get back to the person or persons who really saw the light on this, and said, "let's go forward."

Toole: Alright. In the Times Picayune, I read that Walker Percy, the distinguished American novelist, was teaching creative writing at Loyola University in New Orleans, and I tried to reach him twice, and I didn't, and the third time, I met him, and I think what gave me entry--I told him that *entree* my son and I loved his relative's, William Alexander Percy's "Lanterns on the Levee." It might have given me entry, but he granted me an audience, I presented the manuscript, took about ten or fifteen minutes of his time, and he said, "you're prejudiced." I said, "oh no." I said, "I'm not a great literary critic, but I've been an avid reader all my life. I think it's a masterpiece, Dr. Percy." He's a medical man, as you know.

Snyder: And what did he say?

Toole: He accepted it. That's all I wanted, for him to read



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it. A week later, I received a postcard saying that it's the most flavorful novel of New Orleans that he had ever read, and he sent it to his publisher, author agent Levine, and we would have no future with him-- two other New York publishers, and with his prestigious name, so he sent it to Les Philibaum of the LSU Press in Baton Rouge, and for six months, we didn't hear from him, and I said, "Walker, darling, sweetheart man..."

Snyder: You are persistent, aren't you?

Toole: I'm persistent. I said, "please write to him or phone him and tell him to make his decision. I can't stand this, none of this tension."

Snyder: So, ultimately, the book was published by the LSU Press.

Toole: Philibaum said, "I'm stunned by the whole situation, and we are going to publish it," and from then on, Walker Percy is the guiding light and the master of this great project that has brought such honor to the city of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana.

Snyder: And not to mention the good family Toole, who dwell therein, huh?

Toole: That's beautiful.

Snyder: Well, so are you.

Toole: I walk in the world for my son. I'm humble, because I was a vessel to bring a scholarly genius--he was a scholarly genius and a literary genius.

Snyder: Well, I'll tell you something. His mom ain't too shabby, either. Now, Mrs. Toole, I want to thank you for coming up here tonight.

Toole: I ain't something that cat dragged in, am I?

Snyder: You sure ain't. Thank you for being here tonight. You come back and see us, and next time you come up here, I want to ask you about the book you're working on. Thank you Mrs. Toole. We'll continue after these announcements.