



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES BY JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE

1. Walker Percy (in the Introduction) uses the words gargantuan and Falstaffian to describe Ignatius. Is it only his size that makes Ignatius seem larger than life? Percy likens him to the late screen comic Oliver Hardy. To which more recent personalities could Ignatius be compared?
2. The first chapter of A Confederacy of Dunces is generally thought to be among the funniest in American literature. Do you agree? What other comic novels remind you of A Confederacy of Dunces and why?
3. Ignatius constantly criticizes and deprecates his mother while relying on her to keep his life together. Does she feel the same way about her son? What does she need from him and what does she get for her pains?
4. The city of New Orleans plays a central role in the novel, seeming to be a character in and of itself. Could this novel have been set in another American city? Elaborate.
5. Project Ignatius and Myrna into the future. They are supposed to be in love, but find themselves fighting before ever leaving the city. Will they make it to New York? Can New York survive Ignatius? What possibilities do you see for them?
6. Ignatius is a virgin, but Myrna declares herself to be sexually uninhibited. Is each telling the truth? Can you see them becoming intimate? Discuss this in light of your own experience or that of a friend's.
7. Ignatius thinks of himself as a knight errant seeking to set the modern world in line with his theories of good taste and solid geometry. Are his efforts doomed to failure? Has he chosen his quests unwisely or does the fault lie in his personality? Is the way he views the world askew?
8. Is Ignatius purely lazy or does his attitude toward work reflect his disdain for the modern world of commerce? Ignatius feels he is an anachronism. Where would he fit in?
9. Although the book is longer than the average novel, Walker Percy fought against it being severely edited. What do you think of his decision? If you were to expand or cut something, what would it be?
10. The book is elaborately plotted, but does it work? What do you find unbelievable or improbable?
11. In the forty years since A Confederacy of Dunces was written our attitudes toward what constitutes pornography have changed. Given the same circumstances, would Lana Lee be arrested today for her bird show? Develop a scenario suitable for today's more permissive times.



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12. It is unusual for a current novel to use written dialect. Would *A Confederacy of Dunces* be the same if characters like Burma and Santa spoke in standard English?
13. In the twenty-plus years since its publication *A Confederacy of Dunces* has become a cult novel. What does that mean to you? Give examples of other cult novels you may have read. Have you joined in slavish devotion to any of these works?
14. In a letter dated March 5, 1965, Toole critiques his own novel writing that he “was certain that the Levys were the book’s worst flaw” and “that couple kept slipping from my grasp as I tried to manipulate them throughout the book” (Nevils and Hardy, page 139). What did he mean? And do you agree? Are they the only characters who don’t come to life? Toole lauds other characters as being representative of New Orleans. Who do you think they might be?

Questions issued by the publisher.



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