

Introduction

The novel you hold in your hands represents the culmination of a strange and ironic chain of events. Almost twenty years to the day before its publication, John Kennedy Toole parked his car in a secluded spot near the Gulf Coast town of Biloxi, Mississippi, ran a length of garden hose from the exhaust pipe into the rear window, locked himself inside, and closed his eyes upon a world to which he had been acutely perceptive and sensitive but in which he was apparently unable to survive. It was March 26, 1969, and the New Orleans native was only thirty-one.

The circumstances and coincidences that have led to *The Neon Bible's* being in print at all partake of the very substance of Victorian romance: the tragic death of a promising young writer; the implacable determination of a grief-stricken mother whose faith and devotion were finally justified when her beloved lost son achieved posthumous fame; and a subsequent tangle of lawsuits involving legacies and publication rights.

Following John Toole's death, his estate was appraised at \$8,000 by a lawyer's inventory that made no mention of the typescripts of two novels. His mother, Thelma Ducoing Toole -- product of a typical New Orleans ethnic potpourri, original Creole French settlers and nineteenth-century Irish immigrants -- found herself at sixty-seven managing a household, caring for an invalid husband, and enduring an immeasurable share of grief. The loss of any child is agonizing for a caring parent, but the suicide of an only child made her suffering all the more intense.

"The darling," as Thelma referred to him, born when she was thirty-seven and had been assured by doctors that she would never have a child, was from the beginning exceptional. Bright, creative, talented in music and art, John skipped two grammar school grades and later attended Tulane University and Columbia graduate school on scholarships. During two years in the army in Puerto Rico, he completed *A Confederacy of Dunces*, a boisterous, picaresque novel about his New Orleans, a uniquely diverse city more Mediterranean than American, more Latin than Southern. In 1963 he submitted the work to Simon and Schuster, where it came to the attention of editor Robert Gottlieb. For two years, encouraged by Gottlieb, John made revisions, gradually growing more and more depressed, until he finally abandoned hope.

Meantime he was teaching at a New Orleans college, pursuing a Ph.D. in English, and living at home, where his salary relieved strained financial circumstances. His father was incapacitated by deafness, and the private elocution lessons with which Thelma had for years supplemented their income were no longer fashionable. Always rather reserved, even secretive, despite his marked skill at mimicry and his wry comments on people and events around him, John revealed little of his personal life to anyone. Only a few friends even knew that he was a writer, much less that he had submitted a novel to a publisher. During the 1968 fall semester, colleagues noticed a growing paranoia, and in January 1969 John disappeared from the college and his home. His family heard no more of him until that fateful March day when policemen came to tell them their son was dead by his own hand. He had left a note addressed "To my parents," which his mother read and then destroyed.

For Thelma the weeks of agonizing over John's whereabouts now stretched into years of