

## **John Kennedy Toole: the omega point 2013 - by Joe Sanford**

Characters (in order of appearance)

**Joe Sanford (Narrator)**

**Joel Fletcher**

**Dr. Kenneth Holditch**

**Cory MacLauchlin**

**Dr. Patricia Kennedy Rickels**

**Thelma Ducoing Toole**

**Dr. Jane Bethune**

**Michael Arata (voice of Ken Toole)**

**David Kubach**

### **ACT I**

**Sanford:** For centuries, artists have painted, photographed, and describe New Orleans, but in the end, most fail to understand the meaning of this place, and it's not surprising, really. This is a city where the French Quarter is mostly Spanish. The sun rises over the West Bay, and the Catholic Church, combined with a Napoleonic code, creates chaos in all matters legal, moral, and ethical. A place like this is home to a million stories, most forever untold, entombed in the cities of the dead.

My favorite is the story of an artist who understood the counterintuitive nature of things as they are, an artist who through is Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, cracked the code and revealed the very essence of what it means to be here, an artist who, in the end, succeeded where others had failed, but after all his efforts, failed himself, leaving New Orleans its characters and corners, its secrets and scents, its decaying decadent flavor that he knew so well forever.

**Fletcher:** This is one of the most fascinating stories in American literature, and not only a novel, but the story of how it came to be published, and what happened after it was published.

**Holditch:** John Kennedy Toole is the most important New Orleans writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, really captures what is quintessential about the city of New Orleans.

**Fletcher:** Ken was an insider, and many of the other people who were there, Sherwood Anderson, Tennessee Williams, Faulkner, they were all coming from the outside, but Ken was indigenous New Orleans. He was part of New Orleans. It was part of the fabric of who he was, and he understood it in a way, and described it in a way that no one else ever has.

**MacLauchlin:** In letters, he said, you know, he's thinking about, uh, novels all the time, potential ideas for ... for novels.

**Rickels:** Ken Toole was the best and the brightest. It's a cliché, but it really applied to him, and also the baddest, because he was just shameless in his ... his pranks and his, uh, his jokes, and all these kind of things, and he was the most fun of anybody I've ever known, and I've known some fun people.

**Holditch:** He had a very keen eye, and a very, uh, wonderful sense of humor, and I think that helped him to recreate New Orleans, because I think sense of humor is absolutely essential in portraying this city. If we didn't have sense of humor, I think we would all go stark raving mad.

**Holditch:** Why did you choose that particular song?

**Thelma Toole:** I chose that because it's bouncy, reminds me of comedy in which confederacy excels, and the bridge is full of happiness and fruition, which has come to my son.

**Holditch:** She always said almost the same things, always, about how brilliant he was, and she seemed, after a while to almost to have memorized this, you know, perhaps as a way of keeping her from thinking about the awful end.

**Sanford:** On January 8, 1815, the last battle of the War of 1812 was fought right here. The battle of New Orleans was a great victory for Andrew Jackson. Unfortunately for some, it came two weeks after the war was over, but in a way typical of this place, even an event out of sync with itself somehow makes sense in the long run. Andrew Jackson was propelled to the White House, and John Kennedy Toole's maternal great-grandfather, John Francois Ducoing, as a reward for his bravery in battle, was granted land in Fauburg Marigny. His father's family, the Irish Toole's, immigrated to New Orleans a little later.

**MacLauchlin:** His life started December 17, 1937, in New Orleans. He was born at Touro Infirmary.

**Sanford:** Two corners of Europe came together here to form the quilt that gave rise to Ken, a brilliant child born 10 years into a troubled marriage, a marriage in which Thelma blamed her husband, John, for their lack of social and financial standing.

**Fletcher:** Thelma, I think, thought that John Toole was the curse of her life, and she had very high expectations when she married, and he had disappointed. She must have made his life hell.

**Sanford:** In fact, Thelma had problems with men all her life. Her father, a blatant philanderer, left his scars on the family, and she referred to her beleaguered brother, Author, who wrote advertising slogans, as the poet laureate of the

standard fruit company. But now she had a son, a son through whom she might fulfill all of her dreams, and finally realize her ambitions.

**MacLauchlin:** He was born uptown, and grew up, uptown, and ... and spent most of his years uptown.

**Thelma Toole:** He went to a nursery school when he was three. He had to be three. I told him he was going to school. Well, that set him off in the mentality of a six year old.

**Rickels:** When she gave elocution lessons ... that's the kind of person she was. Can you imagine that? And she always wanted him to perform before guests, and all that sort of thing, to show him off, and dress him up like a, like a doll. And she just made his life miserable.

**Bethune:** He would have been a child that was very protected by the mother, but pushed out onto the stage all of the time. I think with a mother who is so narcissistic, this boy was her project. If she couldn't make it on the stage herself, she couldn't be a superstar, then this boy would be.

**Rickels:** He told me that his father had always behaved so eccentrically when he was a kid that he would never like to bring anybody home from school. You know, because his father would embarrass him with his weird ways, and the strange eccentricities, you know? But that's nothing compared to Thelma. Oh, my God. When people used to ask me, "Well why did he commit suicide?" I said, "Well, you should have met his mother and you would have to ask."

**Holditch:** Thomas Wolfe's mother, said about him, he was always a child among us, taking notes. This consciousness of the, the child being different, and somehow blessed, sometimes that gets nurtured, and sometimes it gets suppressed. Mrs. Toole, of course, nurtured that artistic temperament in her child.

**Thelma Toole:** He was an artist, you know? He was an artist, the colorist to sketch you now.

**Male:** You told me that.

**Thelma Toole:** I found that funny. They never said a word of praise about him, *Confederacy of Dunces*, you see? That's his title. He caught it -- he caught it all his life.

**Sanford:** He did catch it all his life, and it started early. He was drifting out of sync with things. The process of accumulating indignities and disappointments had begun a process that accelerated through his life.

**Holditch:** She said he would come home and talk about those other children, and it was like he was set apart from all of them.

**Sanford:** One of Thelma's attempts at broadening the cultural scope of Ken's public education strikes me as odd. Scrapbooks. Page-after-page of poems cut from compilations, and articles called from newspapers, all arranged according to the gravitational patterns and waves of some fantasy world, a place that reflected Thelma's dreams for her son. And so, Ken skipped two grades, sailing through middle school, soaking in the spirit of his unique and interesting home, graduating at sixteen, and completing his first novel, the Neon Bible.

**Thelma Toole:** He entered a contest. He didn't let me read it. I found all of this out after he passed on. He did not want me to worry, you see? Whatever worries, he'd keep them mostly to himself.

**Sanford:** His Southern Gothic tale, wrapped in poverty and violence, was written for a contest. When it failed to take first place, he put it behind him forever. It would remain unrecognized for decades, finally published in 1989. So, at the age of 16, and with a failed first novel to his name, he entered Tulane University. He was Phi Beta Capa, honor roll, and by all accounts, intellectual, witty, and in possession of an uncanny ability to mimic friends, teachers, and characters he observed around the city. A talent he used to create glib cartoons that were published in the Tulane student newspaper.

Based on his success in Tulane, Ken was offered the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship at Columbia University, which he accepted for the fall semester, 1958. He was 20 years old.

## Act II

**MacLauchlin:** So, he was off to Columbia University to get his Master's in English, which he actually did, uh, in, in one year.

**Sanford:** His situation was financially challenging, but it was a challenge he relished. After a year in New York, he took a break from the financial and academic stress, and headed about as far down the road as one can go, the swamps of Acadiana, a place as rich and delicious as a Friday lunch at Galatoire's.

**MacLauchlin:** He, uh, secured a position at what was then, Southwestern Louisiana Institute, uh, now known as University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and he went to ... in the, in the heart of Cajun Country, as they say, which, uh, isn't that far, geographically, from New Orleans, but is worlds away, (laughs) um, from New Orleans, and would be very different for him.

**Rickels:** From the very first, I just thought he was so interesting, and so funny, and he was always on stage, you know? Like, he sort of dressed the part. He had come down from, uh, New England, and he was dressed up in kind of like in a

costume. This was, was called the Ivy league look, you know, those sort of, uh, form-fitting trousers and jackets, you know, no extra cloth in them. And he always put his necktie ... threw it over one shoulder, you know, to look as if he was on his way to something important.

**Fletcher:** I've never talked to anyone who had him as a teacher, who didn't think he was just a marvelous, marvelous teacher.

**Rickels:** We would sit outside each other's classroom door, and listen, you know? I can remember doing that, listening to Dick Wagner, and, and Ken Toole, and, uh, and Bob Byrne, and some of the other people, listen to them lecturing to their classes because I could always learn something.

**Fletcher:** I was spending the summer working in the, uh, news bureau at the, uh, campus, and Ken was, has, was teaching his last semester at, at, uh, what was what had just become USL, and um, a mutual friend of ours in Chicago, Nicholas Politus, uh, who was from New Orleans ... we had been, uh, students at Tulane, suggested that we meet. And, as I ... best as I recall, Ken must have come to the basement of the old Martin Hall, which was sort of a, a dank and dingy place where I was working.

**Rickels:** The buildings were just so weird you couldn't believe it. They were very decrepit and, um, they were full of termites. Women couldn't wear heels, shoes with heels, because they'd go through the floor, and we didn't want, you know, fancy buildings, and you know. Thank God computers and all that mess, they weren't even invented, you know? There was one telephone for the building, and it was in my office, so I got everybody's calls, and had to go and try to get them to come to the phone. When their wife wanted talk to them, and they didn't want to talk to her, I was supposed to say they weren't there. And I, I told them I'm not going to lie for you, but I did, you know, because I hated to say, "Well he's here, but he doesn't want to talk to you."

**Fletcher:** Ken was very good company, and a very amusing companion. I never felt that I knew him very, very well. I know Bobby Byrne in the, uh, interview he gave Carmen Palumbo said that, uh, Ken never really let people get very close to him, that, uh, one thought that he probably didn't have intimate friends, that he was always sort of on stage. But of course, this was, you know, great if you were with him, because he was very good company.

**Rickels:** It's hard for me to believe that he was only at this, this, this university for about a year, you know, because ... there were people that also had 50 years at the university. There were people that I spent 40 of those with that wouldn't impact me the way he did.

- Sanford:** In the fall semester, 1960, Ken returned to New York to pursue his PhD at Columbia. He honed his teaching skills at Hunter College, delighting in the liberal earnestness of the young women he taught.
- Male (Ken):** LETTER – *“October 18, 1960. Dear Nandy and Uncle Arthur. The students here are – for the most part – very sharp, very eager and interested, very worthwhile. I’m even teaching a Dominican nun, Sister Martha.”*
- Sanford:** And although disenchanted with the rigors of the program, he stuck with his strategy, but the United States government had other plans, and in the Spring of 1961, Ken was drafted. As it turns out, the Army needed English instructors at Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico, and Ken needed a private place away from the neurotic pressures of his family’s existence, to write.
- Kubach:** Well, we all referred to him as John. He told me that, in New Orleans, they called him Ken, but he didn’t invite me to call, uh, uh, call him Ken. I think he ... I think he knew he was John in, in Puerto Rico.
- Kubach:** This is one of the sillier units, I mean, that’s ever been put together. We were a bunch of Liberal Arts majors, uh, who had no duties, really other than to, uh, teach retreat from attack to, you know, these poor draftees.
- Sanford:** But retreat was deleted from the dialogue when the Cuban Missile Crisis exploded on the region.
- Kubach:** All of a sudden, our wacko general was replaced by a screaming eagle. I don’t know who we were going to fight exactly, but, uh, things were rocking and rolling in Puerto Rico. And I guess we were ... the military just, you know ... feels that you, you know, you’ve got to be prepared for the worst. So, suddenly we discovered that we had [00:16:00] rifles, I guess, somewhere, uh, safely kept away from us, under lock and key.
- Sanford:** There were rifles, and strangely, wool underwear, but more importantly, David Kubach had a typewriter that Ken borrowed to begin his masterpiece.
- Kubach:** It didn’t have any significance to me, then, of course, because I didn’t realize A Confederacy of Dunces was being composed. Uh, maybe I would have rented it to him at a higher price if I would have known. I know I just loaned it to him, and uh, uh, he merrily pecked away.
- MacLauchlin:** Puerto Rico was perfect for him. It was perfect for him in a lot of ways. Didn’t have to grade, uh, freshman composition essays. Uh, he didn’t have to really worry that much about his money. He talks about being able to save money. It’s the only time, in his letters, where he really talks about saving money. So, a

lot of the real-world pressures that were on him, that might have inhibited the creative work where, perhaps, ironically in the Army, he was free of those.

**Holditch:** He was fascinated by popular culture. He was devastated when he was in Puerto Rico, and read about the death of Marilyn Monroe.

**Sanford:** Her suicide, in 1962, affected Ken profoundly. He wrote about it in one of his letters home from the Army.

**Male (Ken):** LETTER – *“Dear Mother and Dad. Yesterday, in the post library, someone pointed out to me a headline in the local paper, Muerte Actriz Marilyn Monroe. Surrounding one of those ridiculously leering photographs was the story of her suicide. Marilyn Monroe and death are such incongruous partners. Marilyn Monroe made me happier. I can’t think of another word than any performer ever has. On the screen, she created the strangest, and perhaps, the most fascinating species a human being will ever see.”*

**Kubach:** Um, a remarkable thing about John was the ... the great number of people who liked him. I thought it was just amazing that he could get along with those, uh, those Puerto Rican field sergeants, uh, a whacko First Sergeant. Uh, I mean he, he, uh ... I always felt that, uh ... the training company A needed to get down and worship him, practically, because he kept those people off us.

**Fletcher:** He was away from, uh, his mother for one thing, perhaps, and um, from, uh ... he didn’t have to worry about earning a living. Uh, he was very successful with what he was doing. Uh, he had, uh, his own space, and uh, I think that was, uh, probably the best time in his life.

**Male (Ken):** LETTER - San Juan, Puerto Rico. *“April 10, 1963. Dear Parents. Writing feverishly. I’ve completed three chapters, and am deep into the fourth. What I’m doing will require a great amount of revision, editing, and rewriting I imagine, but I should have a basis at least. In my private room with the fan, easy chair, book case, and plant, I settle down with a borrowed typewriter, this one, and grind out my deathless prose.”*

**Kubach:** He was happily entertained if, if he could simply drink, and, and uh, you know, deliver, uh, comic routines, you know? He, he was a great mimic. He, he mimicked the people he used to know. He ... he mimicked the people who were his, uh, fellow instructors. Uh, he mimicked the Puerto Ricans, and uh, he mimicked the sergeants. He mimicked everybody.

**MacLauchlin:** And he was also doing something that he wanted to do for a long time, and that was write a novel about New Orleans that really showed New Orleans.

- Sanford:** Ken came home from a successful stint in the Army with his novel under his arm. The order and opportunities offered him as a soldier had, in fact, proved valuable. For the first time in his life, he had fit in, and not simply fit in, but excel.
- Thelma Toole:** The night he returned from Puerto Rico, he said, "Mother, here is a novel about New Orleans, and uh, I apprized you of it," and uh, he left the room, and I looked at it, and he had Ignatius under the clock of D.H. Holmes, as a famous meeting, uh, place in New Orleans, under the clock. I read, uh, two or three pages, and came back to the room. I said, "That's very promising, son," and the next day, I read about a third of it. I said, "It's a masterpiece, son."
- Kubach:** As a writer, he, he seemed to work from outside, in. Uh, John was not a person who, who was sort of at the ... in the thrall of a great inner force, uh, the language with the logo wasn't just boiling in ... deep inside John, waiting to pour out like it might have been with a Faulkner, or uh, or uh, Thomas Wolfe, you know. Uh, he uh, kind of got his direction, I think, you know, by observation, by comic skits that he worked up. They were kind of improvisations.
- Holditch:** He came back, um, with the manuscript finished, and I think with high hopes for it, but he came back to find that his family had serious problems.
- Kubach:** John had felt that life was going to get long. I think that Patricia Rickels said, uh, somewhere that, uh, uh, uh, "Your obligation to your parents is a real obligation," and he did have that, and he was, uh, living up to it, uh, as best he could.
- Sanford:** But, Ken had an ace in the hole. He sent *A Confederacy of Dunces* to Robert Gottlieb, that Simon and Schuster, and according to friends, Ken felt sure that eventually the novel would be published, his financial problems would be solved, and his career would take a more creative course.
- Fletcher:** Ken sent the, um, manuscript to Simon and Schuster because it, um, had published books that he admired, and uh, somehow it got to Gottlieb, and uh, Gottlieb, who had first wrote very enthusiastically about the, uh, book, and then, uh, worked with Ken for two years on it.
- Sanford:** In a letter to Joel Fletcher and Nicholas Polites, Ken wrote ...
- Male (Ken):** LETTER - *"Dear Nicky and Joel. Since both of you know of my writing project, I must say that eight airmail letters later, and one hour-long long distance call later, I'm still faced with revisions."*



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**Thelma Toole:** Rewrite. Rewrite. Rewrite. It has no plot. Ah ha. I'd bet in court about those plots.

**Professor:** [Crosstalk]

**Thelma Toole:** Do you know what my genius does? He gives you this card, to that card, to that card, to that, and some way, they converge.

**Professor:** That's true. He brings them all together.

**Thelma Toole:** All right. He brings them all together.

**Fletcher:** At one point, Ken made a trip up to New York to see Gottlieb, when he was beginning to feel a little desperate that it wasn't ... and Gottlieb was out of town, and he had a, uh, uh, sort of embarrassing encounter with Gottlieb's secretary, at least embarrassing for Ken. And then, uh, I ... it occurred to me, uh, while I was working on my book, that probably the decision not to publish was not Gottlieb's alone, but was probably a committee decision. You know, there must be an editorial committee at Simon and Schuster, and that Gottlieb may well still have believed in the book, but, uh, uh, I wonder if it was his decision alone not to publish. I suspect that it wasn't. A big mistake.

**Bethune:** The thing is that Gottlieb didn't, uh, ever really break the relationship with him. He just said, "It needs more work. It needs more work," and as an artist, I don't think that, uh, Toole was ready to do that, nor should he have, because what he had was a gem, was a masterpiece, [00:24:00] and he knew it. But, the authority figure didn't know it, and asked him to do something else with it, which would have destroyed it.

**Fletcher:** Thelma considered Gottlieb the devil incarnate, the person who destroyed her son, who made him commit suicide. And of course, this was, uh, very self-serving for Thelma, uh, who didn't recognize, uh, any part that she might have had in this tragedy, but uh, you know, she, uh, destroyed the ... she destroyed the revisions that Ken had made, because she considered them, you know, the work of Gottlieb, you know, distorting this work of genius that had come, uh, from, from her son.

**Thelma Toole:** I have Robert Gottlieb's letters, scathing. He led him on, and then, he started to attack him with, uh, vitriolic attacks. His last letter, it isn't about anything, imagine.

**Holditch:** Hm. Yeah.

**Thelma Toole:** It could be improved, but it wouldn't sell.

- Fletcher:** Gottlieb wanted to, to keep up the relationship with Ken. He was eager to see new things he had written, but he had just told him, you know, "I don't ... we can't publish this book because it won't sell."
- Sanford:** And if Ken couldn't have the best publisher in the world, he preferred no publisher at all. Instead of sending the manuscript to another publishing house, he boxed it up, and placed it on top of a cedar armoire in his parent's home where it would remain for a decade.
- Kubach:** I guess if you've been courted by, uh, you know, Simon and Schuster, uh, anything less than, uh, publication by them is a real comedown. I ... I don't think small press, uh, publication had any interest to John.
- Rickels:** He just said, in general, I don't remember if you mentioned, but that they were all persecuting him, just, just cruelly. And I, I believed him. And I, I was very shocked when Milton said, "Honey, you know, it ... this is not really true. It's classic paranoia." I said, "No. No. I didn't want to believe it."
- Fletcher:** Then, in the last letter he wrote to me about his dealings with Simon and Schuster, he said, uh, you know, "I don't know where this is all going to end," and in the very next paragraph, he says, "I was in Biloxi last week, and it didn't seem, you know, the way it used to when we used to go there in college."
- Sanford:** Biloxi was a constant in Ken's life, and during a visit with David Kubach, he insisted they take a ride there.
- Kubach:** It was his idea to go to Biloxi. I mean he was my guide. I had no itinerary, you know. So, we, we were there because he wanted to be there. And we were in the town, and then we drove to the outskirts, out near, I think we were along the Gulf Coast some of the time, and uh, he did stop the car at a particular point, uh, that had no significance to me. I had no idea why we stopped there, and I can't even remember for sure what we ... what ... what we said. I, I guess I wouldn't have brought somebody to that place unless there's something that happened, and in this case, was maybe about to happen.
- Sanford:** Ken was now at the end. He was teaching at St. Mary's Dominican College where as usual, he was beloved by his students. They remember him as erudite, polite, intelligent, and withdrawn. And although he loved teaching, his dream was to write. Besides, on a more practical note, a teaching salary would never lift his entire family out of their financial morass.
- Kubach:** It didn't look like his book was going to be published, and that was just as well, because if it were published, he would never be able to live in New Orleans again, and with such a savage satire, of, of, of the whole city. And I remember

just being sort of nonplussed with that, because I had read enough of the book to know that it, it, it wasn't savage, whatever else it is. It ... that satire is ... it's pretty gentle.

**Bethune:** He was as successful as in his academic career. He was successful in his Army career. He was successful as a writer, but I think he fell into the trap. I mean his personal confidence was eroded because the mother always talks about, or did talk about, the husband being such a failure. And then, when Ken came home, I think he took the full brunt of that, living with it every day. There'd be nothing that you could do to please that woman.

**Fletcher:** I think his mother was his best friend, and also his worst enemy, that uh, she um, she helped create him, and I think she helped destroy him in a way.

**Kubach:** I really didn't realize, you know, what a kind of splendid monster she was until, uh, all of the books had been written, and all the material dug up. Uh, I guess I found it ... mostly, where I come from, uh, especially back in the 50s, a boy left home by the time he was 30, you know, uh, and, and to find John still there, I, I didn't really, fully appreciate how impoverish they were, how much they depended on John.

**Sanford:** Ken enrolled in the PhD program at Tulane, in the Fall semester, 1967. He was back in the same library, same classrooms, and to make matters worse, his slim jackets and thin ties clashed with the psychedelic movement around him.

**Kubach:** I don't think John, uh, either was ready for what the 60s became, you know. This was ... people, uh, you know, taking their, taking their beliefs onto the streets again. I, I think that scared him. I think he was for all of the right things, but he was also for order, and I think he was a little scared, uh, what the times were becoming by the end of the 60s certainly.

**Holditch:** I think he, he felt cornered. He felt hopeless. He must have been in a very deep depression.

**Rickels:** I've always felt it was like, you know, what Ophelia said about Hamlet, "What a mind is here, our throne," you know? He was just ... he had just fallen to pieces. Absolutely. He was not the person that we had known, and loved, and had so much fun with always.

**Sanford:** But always implies forever, and Ken didn't have that long. His humor and wit in the classroom was replaced by anger, even rage sometimes.

**Holditch:** He stood up in, in class one day at, at Tulane, and, in a graduate, uh, um, course, and started, uh, berating, uh, people, and complaining. And it was during all that anti-war demonstration that was going on, on the Tulane campus, and all

over the country. And uh, then he simply didn't go back to ... he didn't go back to Tulane after that.

**Rickels:** The last time that he came, he was so different. He was just ... he wasn't like himself. And when he drove up into the driveway, and I went out to meet him, he was just sitting there. And I said, "Get out, Ken." He said, "No. I'm not going to get out. I know you don't really want me to be here. You're just sorry for me." I said, "Don't be an ass. Of course I want you to be here. Come on." And I had made dinner for us, and all, and we had a pretty, pretty pleasant meal. But then, he started talking. And he started telling how his ... these publishers in New York were, were tormenting him, and people were stealing his material.

**Sanford:** On Christmas Eve, 1968, Apollo 8 arrived in orbit around the moon, sending back pictures of the Earth from another world, for the first time in history. And during that fateful year, Richard Nixon was elected President. The country was at war in Vietnam. The summer of love had given way to a summer of rage. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis; Bobby Kennedy, in Los Angeles, and the Beatles released the White Album. And during that cold, rainy holiday, John Kennedy Toole was a hungry ghost, sinking deeper into despair. The result of his perception of himself as a failure, an artist deemed unnecessary and unworthy of publication, a man burdened by unceasing family obligations and conflicts.

**Betune:** I, I always think of New Orleans as kind of depressing at Christmas time because it's gray, and it's cold. It's not the most pleasant time of year to be here, and in '68, I can imagine in that household, that he was probably more isolated with family, family events going. There wasn't ... there wouldn't have been other people around for him to have a great deal of social contact with, so he was pretty much stuck with them.

**Sanford:** His home life, lack of resources, and his father's pitiful decline weighed on him; his failure to publish his cherished work, a constant haunting.

**Bethune:** I think he just felt he had to get away, get away from her, and get away from his father whom he loved, but at this point, the father that he knew was not the father who was there in that household.

**Holditch:** The whole pressure of his life just weighed too heavily on him.

**Sanford:** On the afternoon of Nixon's inauguration, January 20, 1969, after a terrible fight with Thelma, Ken withdrew \$1,500 from the Whitney Bank, got in his car, and headed for the truth of things, California and beyond.

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**Holditch:** He had always been a slave to his obligations and his duties. And suddenly, he just walks out of his job, walks away from the home, drives away, as it would, and leaves it all, all behind.

**Fletcher:** I think he probably did go to, uh, visit Patricia and Milton Rickels in Lafayette.

**Rickels:** And if he did come, he would have seen half a dozen cars parked in our driveway, and he wouldn't have come in. He'd of just turned around.

**Fletcher:** I think that, uh, he may have been making what could be thought of as his farewell tour. He was going to places that had some meaning for him. I don't know what, what drew him to California, and San Simeon.

**Sanford:** He was heading west because that's what America did. He was roading with Kerouac, riding with Captain American, looking for Marilyn Monroe.

**MacLauchlin:** He also had a friend in California, and they had some exchange. There was one letter where Ken wrote to him, and this friend wrote back and said, "Thank you for writing me. The bottom of the bay looked so tempting. You saved my life."

**Fletcher:** What route he took, who knows? You know, what he was thinking, what he did, we'll never know.

**Sanford:** And no matter the route, think about it. Sixty-six days on the road, lots of hamburgers, a stream of roadside motels. By now, he must have realized that everything had gone too far, and that even though he was driving in circles, he was traveling closer to the point of no return.

**Fletcher:** He was escaping from things, and while he had money, and his car, and places to go, it was a way of putting off the decision he perhaps had already made.

**MacLauchlin:** People go on journeys when they're looking for something, not when they have found something.

**Sanford:** He left very little evidence behind, but there were a few receipts that indicated his journey. After he wandered back east, took him to Milledgeville, Georgia, and the ancestral home of Flannery O' Connor, Andalusia.

**Thelma Toole:** He loved Flannery O' Connor. That was to be his dissertation. He was working on it when he died, and uh.

**Holditch:** Did he visit her in Milledgeville?

**Thelma Toole:** He did. We saw the stub in his pocked. He was gone two months and six days. I died.

- MacLauchlin:** So there wasn't, uh, an approach here to reconnect, um, with these two ... um, female figures, at least. We have Marilyn Monroe on one side of this, of the country. We've got Flannery O' Connor on the other side of the country.
- Holditch:** He obviously must have thought he was going to find something on that trip, that he didn't find.
- Fletcher:** He was undoubtedly already thinking about suicide. Maybe it was a time when he was sort of trying to screw up his courage to do what he had decided to do.
- Holditch:** I envisioned that trip, as I say, as a journey to try to find an answer. What am I going to do?
- Sanford:** There was no letter home, no phone call in the night, and as the weeks moved one, Thelma searched frantically for him.
- Rickels:** And she said, "Please. I'm begging you, as a mother," you know, "Please. I won't even insist on speaking to him. Just tell me that he's there and that he's all right," because she [00:38:00] was full of guilt feeling, you know, about it, the way they had parted. And ... and it is ... that's why she thought he wouldn't want to speak to her, you know, but all I had to do was just tell her he was here, and he was okay. But I couldn't. And so she never again would speak to me. If she saw me, which we saw each other on different occasions, she'd just turn her back and wouldn't say a word, you know. If I said, "Good evening, Mrs. Toole," she'd just, "Hmm."
- MacLauchlin:** When you're far away from home, even when things were bad, it doesn't seem that bad. You start remembering the best parts of it. But one could imagine, on the way back, some of those same feelings may have returned to him. Um, those same feelings that were there when he left that January 20<sup>th</sup>, two months prior.
- Holditch:** You asked the question about why did he stop in Biloxi and commit suicide? Maybe he intended to come all the way home. I mean you wouldn't ... you would think that he would just go ahead and commit suicide wherever he was, but instead, he heads back home, and maybe when he gets to Biloxi, he just thinks that I just cannot face it all again.
- MacLauchlin:** Here, he'd been on his journey. He seems to be heading back to New Orleans.
- Sanford:** It was March 26, 1969. The Gulf Coast was in full-bloom. By the time he reached his old haunt, Biloxi, his dilemma must have been clear. He had wiped away his career. He feared for the welfare of Thelma and John, and what his absence must have meant for them. The weight of the accrued and dignities was far

beyond his capacity. He had reached his end, the omega point, the culmination of whom he was, what he knew, and who he [00:40:00] aspired to be. And so, he designed the solution. He took control of his pain. After a short while, the car, out of gas, sat silently in the woods he had shown David Kubach years earlier.

**Dispatcher:** Code six, 105 North Avenue, 52.

**Sanford:** The Biloxi Police Department responded to the report of a man found dead in his car, a green garden hose running from the tailpipe into the cabin. And by some accounts, there were papers stacked on the front seat, and amalgam of hand-written notes, and typed manuscripts, a final note to Thelma, maybe the seeds of a third novel.

**Holditch:** He left a, a note in the car, a letter to his parents, and I asked her what it said. And she said, "Oh it was just, just terrible, terrible things," and she burned it.

**Sanford:** I'm fascinated by the notion that those papers were stored in the basement of the Biloxi Police Department, and washed away six months later during Hurricane Camille. I'm intrigued by the idea that a third novel resides in the Gulf, waiting to be cosmically reformed somehow, because to me, that's a metaphor for Ken's story, that by virtue of his intelligence, and his mother's chronic propulsion, he was always outside of everyone else, and finally, outside himself. In the end, he just couldn't get his theology and geometry right.

**Kubach:** That could be a novel by John Toole, who gets a novel published, he earns a Pulitzer Prize, you know, after he's kind of departed the earth.

**Fletcher:** He wanted to be writer. He wanted to be a famous writer. It's great shame that he never lived to know that he became one.

**Kubach:** Maybe if he would have come from somewhere else. New Orleans is so civilized. There's sometimes in a ... there's no escape from over-civilization it seems like sometimes.

**Rickels:** One time, I was in New Orleans, and it was after his death, you know. And I, I shared a cab with these two young women, and they told me they were students at St. Mary's Dominican. And I said, "Did you know Professor Toole?" And they both burst into tears. They said, "Oh, we loved him so much." I said, "I did, too."

## Act III

**Kubach:** **POEM – The Shortest Day of the Year**

“The day the warden came to take our dog  
who’d broken loose and run to some deer,  
I got a message from down south,  
written in a card with a picture on the front,  
of flowers in a morning or an evening light.  
The colors were so pale and soft,  
I thought maybe I’m being invited to a wedding,  
but we’d been out of touch.  
He could be married, announcing a child.  
My friend is dead.  
I can’t keep a dog alive.”

**Bethune:** It isn’t the artist that was killed. It was the man, just the man, the son who just couldn’t take it anymore.

**MacLauchlin:** The story of his life is so indelibly linked to the publication of the book, in a way that it’s almost impossible to separate the two.

**Sanford:** Only three people attended Ken’s funeral on Elysian Fields in New Orleans, Thelma, John, and his childhood nanny. The rest of the family felt he had shamed them. After all, suicide was immortal sin, lapsed Catholic or not. It was a lonely end to an atrophied life, a life in which Ken had been denied everything, his own family, intimate relationships, recognition of his work, and in the end, even his death was excruciatingly awkward.

**Thelma Toole:** It took me two years to recover from it.

**Holditch:** After he died, of course, she went into a very deep decline, and she had no idea that this was going to happen. She had no idea why it had happened.

**Fletcher:** There had been another suicide in the family. She was very reluctant, at first, to try to get the book published, because she realized that this would remind people that he had died of suicide, and as you said, it taints the whole family.

**Sanford:** Then, one day, years after Ken’s death, Thelma experience a moment of clarity.

**Thelma Toole:** I used to pass in my son’s room, and on a ... a cedar armoire there was the box with the manuscript.



- Bethune:** It was just as if she had forgotten all about that book. I know he's a failure, like every other male around me has been a failure. And I think she just didn't realize the box was there with all of the papers in it, until one day it was discovered, and thought, maybe I could do something with this. Maybe I can get it published.
- Holditch:** So when she got her hands on that manuscript, this became her life work, to get this book published.
- Sanford:** Thelma circulated the one battered, dog-eared, and stained copy of the manuscript, typos, handwritten notes, and all, to publisher after publisher.
- Thelma Toole:** It would come back, the only copy I had, and I don't type, battered, dirty. I'd send it off First-Class. It would come back full of freight, you know, bulk mail, whatever they call it. And each time it came back, I died a little, because I believed in it.
- Fletcher:** I think she had sent it to 12 different publishers that had come back. And then one day, she read in the, uh, paper that Walker Percy was teaching at Loyola, so uh, she put on a nice hat, and her white gloves, and a dress with lots of lace, and she persuaded her poor brother, Arthur, to drive her uptown to, uh, Loyola.
- Sanford:** Where they ambushed Professor Percy, and took advantage of his natural, southern, good manners.
- Fletcher:** Walter thought she was a little nuts, and he, of course he was right about that. But then, since he was a gentleman, he began reading the book and discovered to his astonishment that, uh, he agreed with her, that it was a book of genius.
- Holditch:** He was teaching a course at Loyola in writing the novel, and uh, I happened to be taking the, the course. And he came to class one day, one night, and told us that he had this amazing novel that this woman had sent, and that uh, had, had pushed on him, he said. And he read us two chapters, and we all thought it was just brilliant. Walker Percy arranged with the New Orleans Review, to publish two chapters of the novel before it ever came out, before it was ever even accepted by LSU.
- Rickels:** And when it came, I opened it first, and I read this, this, this story, which uh, it was actually a piece from Confederacy of Dunces. And, as I started reading, I thought, oh, my God. I said, "Milton. This is making of Bob Byrne, and if he sees it, well he's going to be so upset." And Milton said, "Well would he read it?" I said, "If it's called the New Orleans magazine, he won't because, you know, he's like a professional New Orleanian," like never learned to drive in his life, and all those famous New Orleans things.

- Holditch:** Walker, himself, was of course a devout Roman Catholic convert, and uh, he ... his work reflects that, that religious view of life. And um, he recognized the, the religious, spiritual quality behind A Confederacy of Dunces, that a lot of people don't see.
- Fletcher:** Thelma's, uh, attempt to get the novel published, to have it, was uh, I'm sure she saw it as a vindication of herself, as a validation of herself, and uh, she was always talking about, you know, carrying the light for her son, but of, uh, course, uh, she considered her son an extension of herself. And uh, she was, uh, uh, she was enjoying the glory that, uh, she got from seeing the book published.
- Bethune:** The book reflected her more than anything else, her talent. The son kind of gets lost. He's maybe the inspiration, but she really is the one that produced the book.
- Sanford:** The inclusion of the book in the spring 1980 Louisiana State University press catalog resulted in surprising interest. And on April 13, 1981, the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction.
- Thelma Toole:** The Pulitzer Prize was not given for the comedy. The Pulitzer Prize was given for my son's erudition, his scholarly genius.
- Sanford:** And since then, A Confederacy of Dunces has been translated into 37 languages.
- MacLauchlin:** It's the only book that I found, that it doesn't matter how many times I read it, it ... I laugh. I laugh, even.
- Fletcher:** So he obviously, you know, touches some cords in people, uh, that transcend simply the local color aspect of it. [00:50:00]
- Thelma Toole:** There's the, uh, English, uh, uh, penguin, the class of it.
- Holditch:** That's a very attractive cover.
- Thelma Toole:** The class of the English, the French imbeciles. (Laughter) Idioten is the German, the Deutsch. Look at the German. I received that two days ago, three days ago. Look at Holland. Idioten. Isn't that wonderful for the Deutsch and the Germans to love a sophisticated, Bourbon Street [inaudible?]
- Sanford:** The success of A Confederacy of Dunces propelled Thelma into the spotlight.

- Thelma Toole:** SINGING – “Daddy. I want some Cartier pearls; have now being with British Earls. Daddy, you ought to get the best of me. Daddy, you must get the best of me.” (Laughs)
- Sanford:** She gave readings, attended conferences, and even landed on national television.
- Fletcher:** The interview with Tom Snyder was amazing. Tom Snyder didn’t know what to make of her.
- MacLauchlin:** She sort of lived through him, when he was alive, and now that he was dead, she was, she was living for him.
- Sanford:** Thelma entertained her audience with a manicured version of the facts, and after the lights went down, we were left with more questions than answers.
- Fletcher:** Why didn’t he persevere? Why didn’t he have some of Thelma’s determination? You know? Why did he, uh, uh, why did he accept Gottlieb’s judgment? Why didn’t he send the, the manuscript somewhere else? It was a wonderful piece of work, and he knew that, and he had had some reinforcement from people who had read it. And why didn’t he, uh, you know, take Gottlieb’s encouragement? And uh, why did he just give up? I’m sure he would have loved nothing better than to have been a great success as a writer, and ... gone to New York, and led the literary life, and uh, all of this didn’t happen.
- Sanford:** John Kennedy Toole was an artist born into his subject. He and New Orleans were woven together by a gravity based in time, and one that celebrated a specific space, of places enigmatic as Ignatius Reilly.
- Fletcher:** His great gift was understanding New Orleans and being able to, to translate it, turn it into literature. That was his great, great gift.
- Sanford:** The quite desperation, that was Ken’s life, leaves me aching. It rose and fell without much notice from anyone else. He had a way of slipping between things, of remaining invisible while walking through the world. This place is a haven for artists like that.
- Holditch:** As many people as I, as I knew, who knew him well, and I interviewed them. I, I ... there was still a, you know, there was still a big blank.
- Sanford:** And it occurs, to me, that New Orleans may never have seen herself without the reverse distortion of a mirror, were it not for Ken, the magician who reflected things as they are.

## John Kennedy Toole: the omega point 2013

**MacLauchlin:** It's a story that rings true, I think, to any human heart that will listen to it. It's hard to not feel something when, when you enjoy the novel so much, and then hear about his end, something that can give so much humor, and give that conflicted emotion of, why did he do that? Why did it have to end like that?

**Thelma Toole:** This experience has been most rewarding because it honored my son, and gave me an opportunity to walk in the world for him, as I have been doing since he left this world. Now, two of you, I gather all the stuff for him.

**Sanford:** And so the story of John Kennedy Toole, perhaps the greatest New Orleans writer ever, ends the way all stories end here, quietly disappearing into the Mississippi River mist, leaving us to find our way out of the dilemma of being alive. The older I get, the more I realize that living here isn't a conscious choice anyway. It's the first joyful step on an elegantly worn staircase to oblivion.