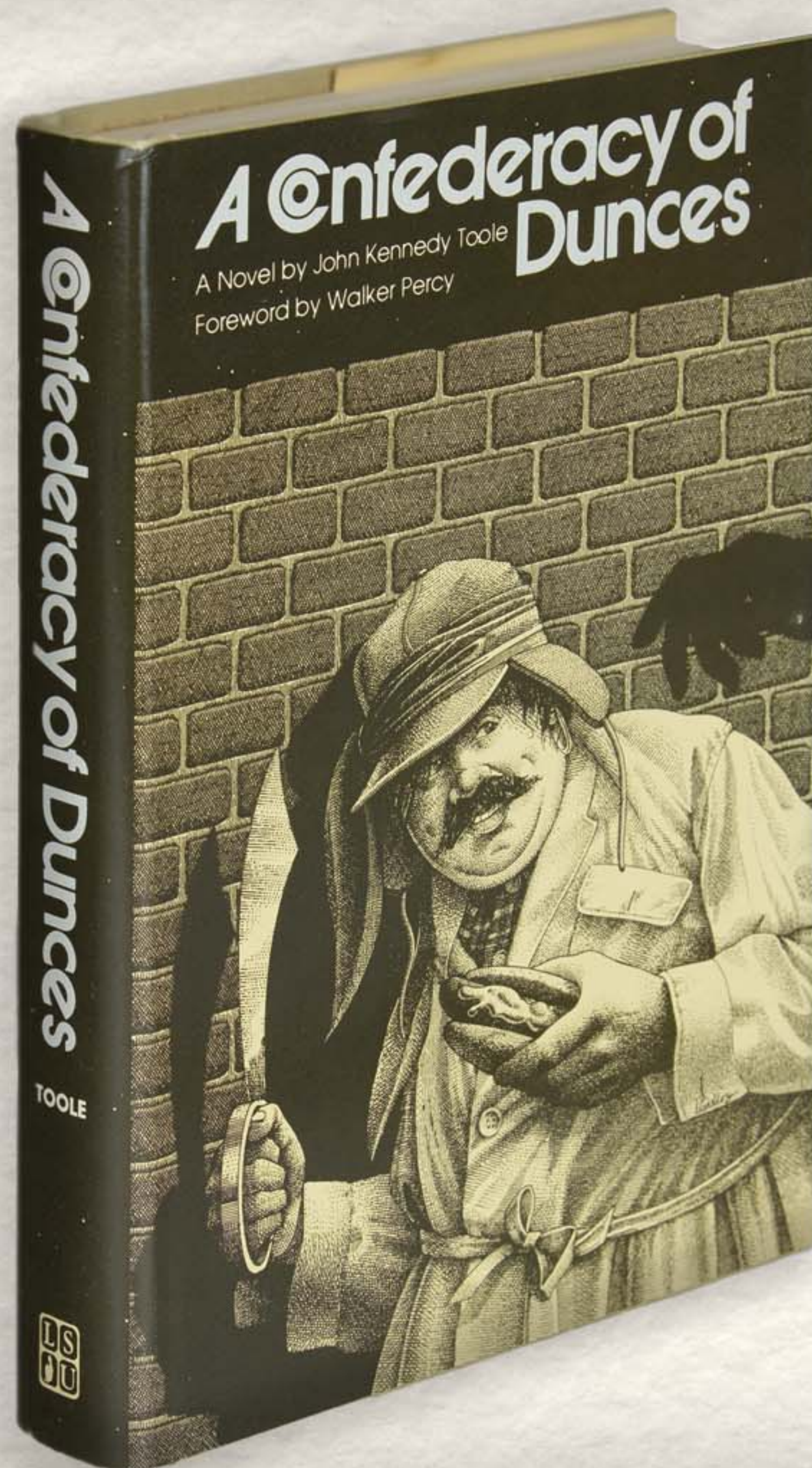


thelma



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I read A Confederacy of Dunces when it was published in 1980. I was in college, eager to direct off-beat films, and I found John Kennedy Toole's loopy, irreverent characters irresistible. As a burgeoning director, I carried a torch for Dunces, fantasizing that I would bring this **comic masterpiece** to the screen. I was hardly alone. The writers, directors, and actors who endeavored to adapt it are a veritable Who's Who of show business luminaries.

What I didn't realize is that the **most amazing story** is how this iconic book got published in the first place.

The hero of the story — pardon me, heroine — is a wonderfully eccentric and hilariously haughty New Orleanian named Thelma Ducoing, the mother of novelist John Kennedy Toole. She believed her boy Ken — that's what his folks called him — was a literary genius, and she had **grand expectations** for him. Thelma's fantasies about Ken's success invariably featured Thelma in a co-starring role; after all, you can be a terrific parent and a complete narcissist at the same time.

Ken never met those lofty expectations. Not while he was alive. The process of writing A Confederacy of Dunces sent Ken into a dark spiral. If his prose was laugh-out-loud funny, Ken's state of mind was **grim and paranoid**. Finally, at the age of 32, he died by his own hand.

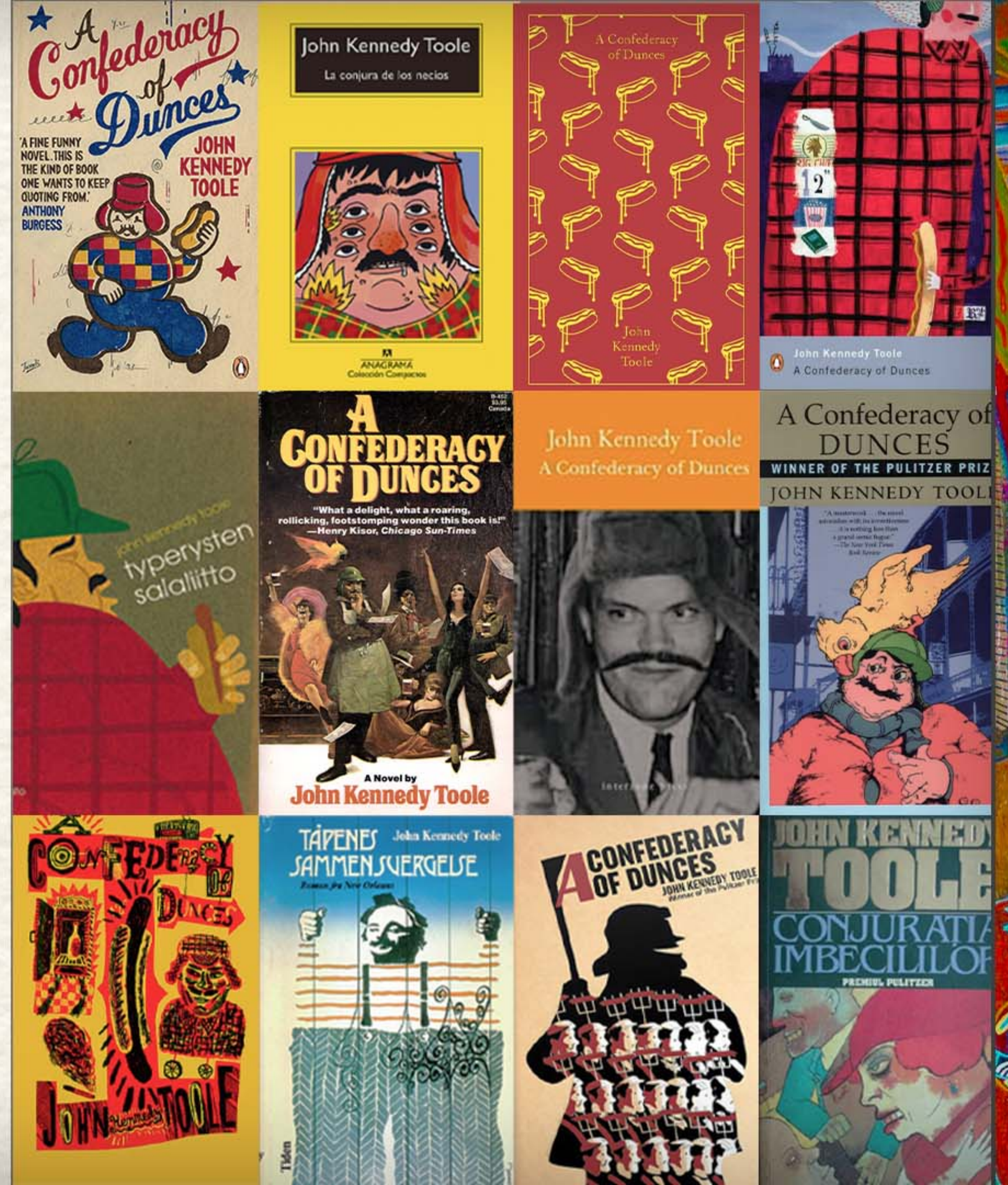
But he left behind the completed manuscript.

Thelma made it **her life's mission** to find a home for her son's book, but her over-the-top style put off just about everyone in the publishing business. When all hope seemed lost, she stalked famed author Walker Percy and pretty much browbeat him into taking a look at the manuscript.

He read a few pages. He read a few more. And he fell in love with the book. Percy became the novel's champion, and in 1980 it was published to great acclaim (as Thelma knew it would be). One year later, it won the **Pulitzer Prize for Fiction**, and is now considered a canonical work of modern American literature.

Andrew Farotte's screenplay for *Thelma* is by turns hysterical and tragic, and I feel that it perfectly plays to **my directorial sweet spot**. In my career, I've become adept at taking comedic scenes and grounding them in reality, while taking weighty, dramatic scenes and finding the humor that's no doubt hiding between the lines.

The film I want to make **works on three levels**. First, it's a story of a singularly complicated mother-son relationship. Ken's high-handed mother was a piece of work, but she also was his chief inspiration. Second, it's a story about the creative process, specifically how Ken Toole absorbed the colorful sights and sounds of his hometown to produce a masterwork. Third, and most important, it's a story of true tenacity, as we follow the unbreakable Thelma Ducoing as she overcomes impossible odds to bring her son's work to light.



Lewis Pullman

John Kennedy Toole
as John Kennedy Toole



Kathy Bates
Thelma Duvring Toole
as Thelma Toole



John Malkovich

Walker Percy
as Walker Percy



Stephen Root
John Toole
as John Dewey Toole



Tim Blake Nelson
Arthur J. Ducoing
as Arthur Ducoing



AnnaSophia Robb

Patricia Rickels
as Patricia Rickels



Cameron Britton

Robert Byrne
as Bobby Byrne



KATHY BATES

Celebrated actor Kathy Bates is a multi-award winner for her work on the stage and screen. She is known for her portrayals of strong women who are unafraid to challenge societal norms. With a career spanning over five decades, Bates is beloved for her Oscar-winning performance as an obsessed fan in *Misery* as well as her Emmy-winning roles in *Two and a Half Men* and *American Horror Story*. Her many acting accolades include three Academy Award nominations, fourteen Emmy Award nominations, and a Tony Award nomination for her searing performance in Marsha Norman's *Night Mother*, which prompted the New York Times to dub her "one of America's finest stage actresses." Bates is also well known for her passionate advocacy on behalf of men and women who suffer from chronic lymphatic disease.





LEWIS PULLMAN

Up-and-coming star Lewis Pullman caught the attention of audiences in *Bad Times at the El Royale*, creating the role of Miles Miller, the heroin-addicted proprietor of the titular dive. He later made a splash in the George Clooney-produced *Catch-22*, playing a squadron leader with the absurd name of Major Major Major. This summer, Lewis co-stars in *Top Gun: Maverick*, the long-awaited reboot of the beloved blockbuster. Pullman also stars in Amazon's mystery series *Outer Range*, and he has the leading role in a new adaptation of Stephen King's thriller *Salem's Lot*.

JOHN MALKOVICH

Acting legend and bonafide Renaissance Man John Malkovich has appeared in over 90 films. He is a founding member of the ground-breaking Steppenwolf Theater company, starring in the original production of Sam Shephard's *True West*, for which he won the Obie in 1983. His numerous acting honors include Academy Award nominations for *Places in the Heart* and *In The Line of Fire*. He produced such films as *The Accidental Tourist* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. In addition to his film, television, and theater work, Malkovich has created a fashion company called Mr. Mudd. Recently, Malkovich worked with director Ken Kwapis on Season Two of the Netflix comedy *Space Force*.





STEPHEN ROOT

Best known for portraying “Milton” in the cult classic comedy *Office Space*, veteran character actor Stephen Root has been an ever-present, indelible performer for decades. A dynamic and versatile chameleon, Root’s work is featured in such Academy Award-nominated films as *Selma*, *J. Edgar*, *Macbeth* and *No Country For Old Men*. Root made his initial splash in television playing eccentric boss “Jimmy James” on NBC’s *NewsRadio* and voicing befuddled fan-favorite “Bill Dauterive” for 13 seasons of Fox’s *King Of The Hill*. Since then, Root’s credits run the gamut from scene-stealing comedic work on CBS’s *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Good Wife* to meatier dramatic roles on FX’s *Fargo* and HBO’s celebrated series *The Newsroom* and *Perry Mason*. Most recently, Root received an Emmy nomination for his much-lauded turn as Bill Hader’s gleefully amoral and sadistic handler on HBO’s *Barry*.

TIM BLAKE NELSON

Tim Blake Nelson's distinct and iconic performances on both stage and screen have dazzled audiences for over thirty years. Tim has starred in such contemporary classics as Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, Guillermo Del Toro's *Nightmare Alley*, Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, and the Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* which earned Tim a Grammy Award for his rendition of "In The Jailhouse Now". Other notable and diverse performances include Tim's Critic's Choice-nominated role as "Looking Glass" in HBO's *Watchmen* and his recent star turn as the titular *Old Henry* in Patsy Poncioli's 2021 feature. Tim is also a writer, director, and producer in his own right with a host of celebrated films and plays to his credit.





ANNASOPHIA ROBB

The incredibly versatile AnnaSophia Robb has given critically lauded performances in such feature films as *The Way, Way Back*, co-starring Steve Carell and Toni Colette, and *Soul Surfer*, in which she portrayed Bethany Hamilton, the competitive surfer who survived a horrific shark attack. Her work has graced everything from the fantasy *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* to the mob boss bio-pic *Lansky*. Her most recent feature is the high-velocity thriller *Rebel Ridge*, in which she stars opposite Aaron Pierre. Her television work is no less diverse. AnnaSophia starred in two of Hulu's most acclaimed limited series, *The Act* and *Little Fires Everywhere*. Among her many television roles was the ambitious district attorney in the Peacock limited series *Dr. Death* and young Carrie Bradshaw in CW's *The Carrie Diaries*.

CAMERON BRITTON

Rising star Cameron Britton delivered a breakout performance in Netflix's *Mindhunter*, portraying the hyper-intelligent serial killer Ed Kemper. The work earned him phenomenal reviews and an Emmy Nomination. He memorably played Olympic security guard and accused bomber Richard Jewel in the Spectrum/Lionsgate series *Manhunt: Deadly Games*. Cameron stars in Netflix's popular *The Umbrella Academy* and has a recurring role in the critical acclaimed HBO series *Barry*. Most recently, Cameron starred opposite Kristen Bell in the Netflix limited series *The Women In The House Across The Street From The Girl In The Window*, and he will be seen opposite Tom Hanks in the Sony feature *A Man Called Otto*, scheduled for release this Christmas.



ANDREW FAROTTE, WRITER

Andrew's screenplay *Francis & The Godfather* was included on the 2015 Black List and is currently in pre-production with Barry Levinson directing. He penned original screenplays for Echo Lake Entertainment and Filmula Entertainment, as well as a TV pilot for Double E Pictures and Freedom Road. He recently scripted a feature based on the life of public relations pioneer Edward Bernays for Rubicon Entertainment and producer Andrew Garfield. Farotte's thriller *Active Shooter* is also in pre-production with Royal Viking producing and Michael Caton-Jones set to direct.



KEN KWAPIS, DIRECTOR

Ken Kwapis is an award-winning director of motion pictures and television. He has directed eleven feature films, among them *A Walk In The Woods*, based on Bill Bryson's celebrated memoir; the smash hit *He's Just Not That Into You*, inspired by the New York Times bestselling advice book; and the beloved coming-of-age drama *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*.

Kwapis helped launch nine television series, including the groundbreaking HBO comedy *The Larry Sanders Show*, Fox's Emmy Award-winning *The Bernie Mac Show*, and NBC's *The Office*, a series that has become a pop culture juggernaut. Most recently, he directed the entire second season of Netflix's *Space Force*, which has won critical accolades. In addition to his film and television work, Kwapis is the author of the memoir But What I Really Want To Do is Direct, published by St. Martin's Press.



THELMA DUCOING TOOLE

Thelma Ducoing was destined for great things... at least, that's what she believed.

1901. Born poor in New Orleans, Thelma was ignored as a child, but found herself in the Arts. A love for music and theatre led her to pursue acting. She dreamed of one day treading the boards at NOLA's grand Saenger Theatre to acclaim and standing ovations. After shows, Thelma knew the city's most eligible bachelors would woo her at exclusive supper and jazz clubs. There, as an indisputable member of high society, Thelma would graciously sing alongside Louis Armstrong, who would be unable to resist a chance to perform with the incomparable Thelma Ducoing!

But that's not what happened.

Thelma didn't claw her way out of obscurity into the limelight. Instead, she married John Dewey Toole, an honest if unambitious car mechanic, and settled in for fifty years of "suffocating mediocrity." Irascible and sharp-tongued, Thelma became bitter over fate's failings, driving herself and her husband to the edge of madness. Doomed forever to secondhand cocktail dresses, she shook her fists at the Almighty!

And then, a miracle.

In 1937, Thelma unexpectedly gave birth to her only child, John Kennedy Toole. Ken was preternaturally gifted with Thelma's wit and sophistication. And he had his whole life before him. Under her firm guiding hand, Thelma knew Ken could

avoid the mistakes she made and take her with him to the promised land.

Ken would become Thelma's last chance for glory. And God help him should he fail.



JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE

John Kennedy Toole couldn't live his own life, so he lived through his characters.

A Confederacy Of Dunces is commonly regarded as a scathing satire about an eccentric ne-er-do-well terrorizing his sainted mother and her friends. However, those closest to Toole viewed the novel as a thinly-veiled roman-à-clef featuring a brilliant, free-thinking young man smothered by his coarse



and feckless mother, a young man driven by unreasonable expectations to rash behavior, kicking desperately for release!

Like most children raised in a loveless marriage, Ken took it upon himself to amuse his unhappy parents. The boy performed spot-on impersonations of many colorful New Orleans locals, a knack which delighted his mother, Thelma. The two shared an affinity for observation and language, and Ken relished being his mother's source of joy and pride.

But that role came with great responsibility, and pressure that would become unbearable.

When in college Ken focused his gifts on writing, he knew anything less than international acclaim would fail to meet Thelma's standards.

It wasn't until he accepted a teaching position at Southwestern Louisiana Institute that Ken found something all his own. Her name was Patricia Rickels and she loved Ken unconditionally. Thelma, however, vehemently disapproved of Patricia and sabotaged the relationship, leaving Ken unmoored.

In 1963, Ken moved back in with Thelma and completed a first draft of Dunces. The next six years would be spent rewriting draft after draft, Ken's editor insisting his life's ambition "simply didn't add up," a sentiment which would ultimately cost Ken his self-worth and sanity.

WALKER PERCY

Walker Percy suffers no fools. He has no pity for those who blame their shortcomings on personal hardship. That's what happens when both your parents commit suicide in your early teens. You learn fast the only weapons in the face of existential despair are truth and fortitude.

And you can sniff out a fraud like a fart in an elevator.

Here's how much Percy cares about literature: After raising himself and earning an M.D. from Columbia University, he was stricken with tuberculosis and confined to a sanitarium. There, he took in the great works of Faulkner, Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Kierkegaard among others, and was crestfallen to learn that science could not effectively explain the mysteries of human existence.

That would not do for Walker Percy. He would abandon a lucrative and enviable career as a medical doctor in a quest for literary self-expression and revelation, no matter the costs.

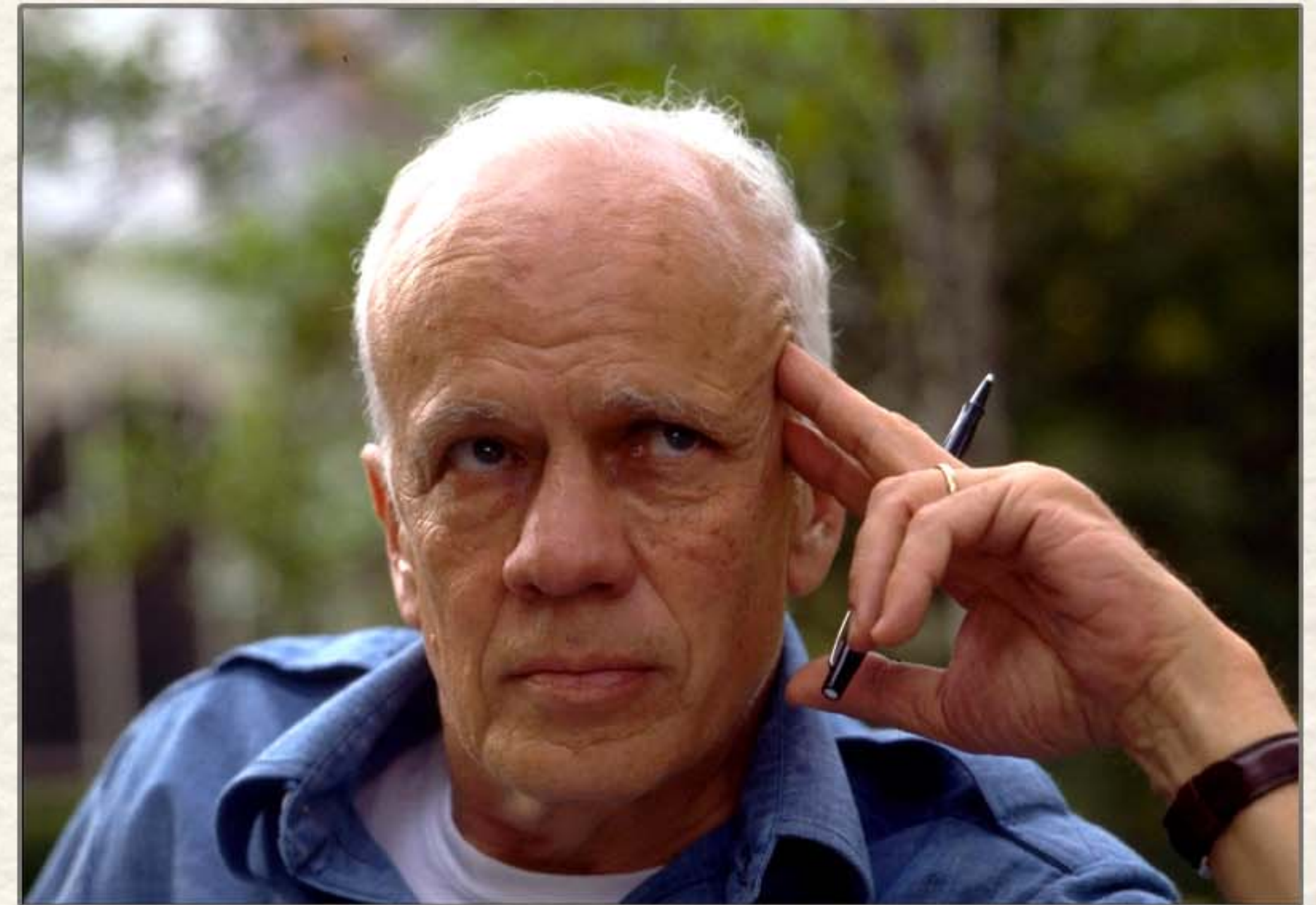
Again, truth and fortitude.

Percy went on to become the esteemed, award-winning author of countless novels and essays featuring New Orleans culture, as well as a celebrated and beloved teacher at Loyola University. It was there that he first encountered Thelma Ducoing Toole.

In considering whether to help Thelma, Percy puts the

scheming battle-axe through a wringer. Although a soft-spoken man of grand eloquence, he proves every bit Thelma's equal when it comes to probing repartee and drawing uncomfortable conclusions.

They go 12 rounds, and in the end, Percy is won over only by Ken's talent, in which he identifies remarkable truth and fortitude. The same qualities Percy ultimately acknowledges in Thelma.



JOHN DEWEY TOOLE

John Dewey Toole's madness was a merciful escape. *Why?*

He was married to Thelma.

Born 1898 into a large Irish-American family eager to assimilate, John loved all Americana, particularly baseball and auto-



mobiles (passions he shared with his son). He was defined by a natural inquisitiveness and an engineer's mind, but said traits faded with age and complacency. John was quite happy being a mediocre car salesman and the preferred local mechanic.

Nevertheless, he was a devoted and supportive father, the only shelter his boy Ken had from a domineering mother intent on minimizing John's influence on the boy's upbringing. Ken was John's only joy and Thelma's systematic annihilation of the father/son bond broke something within John that became irreparable. When a man's world so outgrows him, that man is tempted to shrink his world drastically into something less painful. This was John's mistake.

We meet him in his early 70s having suffered decades of Thelma's verbal abuse, an unending tirade over his lack of ambition and poor financial acumen. Saddled with a costly mortgage and the debt of Thelma's desperate need to put on airs, John comes alive but for those rare fleeting glimpses of Ken's brilliance. All John's misery is worth it to witness his boy in manhood.

But then the boy dies.

Ken's suicide catalyzes the emotional debilitation and paranoia of John's final years — a decade spent detached from reality, often in a state of undress, consumed with the disassembly and repair of old locks — sadly the only thing left for John to fix in the end.

ARTHUR DUCOING

Thelma's younger brother and the family's only son, Arthur was doted on obsessively by his parents, much to the chagrin of his older siblings. He was that sort of kid who got a new sailor suit every year while his sisters wore hand-me-down rags. Although a middling student, Arthur consistently received high marks for "sharing, kindness, and school spirit". His parents feigned pride because they didn't want to admit they backed the wrong horse, but the die was cast...

Arthur was the kid assigned to play Right Field who kicked dandelions through the whole game.

The problem isn't that Arthur's dumb, it's that he takes everything at face value. He sees no irony in paintings of dogs playing poker. He's a sweet man and loyal to a fault. Naturally, women find him simple, flaccid, and clingy. Thus, pushing 60, Arthur has accepted his fate as a lifelong bachelor.

Thelma thinks Arthur's a world-class idiot.

She relishes belittling her brother's unnoteworthy career as clerk for the Standard Fruit Company and manipulates him shamelessly. Arthur takes the abuse with a smile on his face because the beauty of this man is he can see right to the core of someone like Thelma and appreciate her hidden pain, passion, and nobility.

And when Arthur recognizes virtue, he is content to serve in the shadows without accolades or self-regard. He manages

his sister's finances and healthcare along with being her personal chauffeur all while asking nothing in return. Even more, Arthur brings out the best in Thelma; he is the Commandant of her conscience and our film's moral center.



PATRICIA RICKELS

Patricia Rickels has the stars in her eyes and too much on her plate.

She arrived at Southern Louisiana Institute in 1957 having already survived one failed marriage. While simultaneously teaching English fulltime and earning a Ph.D., Patricia became engaged to Milton Rickels, also divorced and the single father of a 4-year-old boy, Gordon. The demands of being a new wife and Instant Mom™ were exacerbated mere months later when



Milton was partially paralyzed following a bout with polio. A heavy load for a woman all of 25.

When Ken first encounters Patricia two years later, she has managed to keep her head above the fray. An indomitable debater, Patricia has proven her grit to SLI's male faculty by outwitting every one of them on all manner of academia. "She can somehow both charm yet savage an opponent in a single bound," the men are fond of bragging. Nevertheless, Patricia's onslaughts are a poor substitute for the uncompromising, white-hot passion she covets and finds in the Romantic poetry she teaches.

Like Ken, Patricia bears her responsibilities with grace while being fully aware of an unstoked fire within her. The two lovers meet like a key in a lock, each filling a precise void in the other.

Patricia desperately needs the physical touch and strength her ailing husband can't provide, and Ken finds in Patricia the unchecked warmth and acceptance lacking in Thelma. Milton accepts the unorthodox relationship, all three connected by a deep respect and gratitude.

But Patricia knows they are playing with fire.

Above all else, she is a protector of those in crisis. Patricia alone sees the existential threat in Ken's transactional quid-pro-quo with Thelma. As Ken's insidious mental illness becomes ever more acute, Patricia will be his only lifeline to a brighter, more hopeful future.

BOBBY BYRNE

Robert Anthony Byrne is the marrow in Ignatius J. Reilly's bones.

An erudite professor of Medievalism at Southwestern Louisiana State, Byrne first encountered John Kennedy Toole in the late 1950s and would serve as the key inspiration for Toole's central character in *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

Like Ignatius Reilly, Byrne is an anachronism, obsessed with the philosophies and cultural phenomena of centuries long past, ever decrying the ills of modern society. Unlike Ignatius, Byrne is capable of empathy and benevolence, although he finds both disdainful. There is a level of self-awareness Byrne struggles to bury on a daily basis.

Gluttonous, unfashionable, surly, and stuck up, Byrne doesn't fit in, nor does he care to – ironically, this is the wellspring of his charm. He argues his positions with such bombastic ferocity that horrified others merely laugh in response; he is Shakespeare's classic fool who knows everything but is tragically unheeded and obsolete because, after all, he is the fool.

Amongst friends, Byrne was famed for being a bad driver and spouting such quack observations as "The best English in the world is spoken between St. Charles Avenue and Magazine Street." Little is known of Byrne's upbringing, but he was a life-long aficionado of all things New Orleans and achieved considerable success as an academic.

Perhaps the one thing he has never been smug about is his affection for and admiration of Ken Toole. Theirs was a meeting of dry wits and a rivalry of masterful sarcasm.



THEME & TONE

Thelma is a love story between a mother and son. But it's a very unconventional love story.

Is Thelma a good mother? Well, she nurtures Ken's talent and encourages his creativity. She's certainly his fiercest defender. Think of Sandra Bullock's no-nonsense mother in ***The Blind Side***, who takes anyone to task on her son's behalf. Likewise, Thelma will happily give you an earful if you suggest that her boy is anything less than God's gift to literature. Like Scarlett Johansson in ***Jojo Rabbit***, who inspires her son to stand up for what's right, Thelma galvanizes Ken to shoot for the moon, to cultivate his own singular voice.

But Thelma's love for her son is complicated. That's putting it mildly. Think of the self-absorbed mother Mary Tyler Moore plays in ***Ordinary People***, unable to get out of her own damn way and care for her fragile son. Or Rose in the musical ***Gypsy***, hellbent on living vicariously through her daughters, chasing stardom not for them but for herself. Like Rose, Thelma fully expects to ride on Ken's coattails as he ascends the ladder of literary celebrity.

As an audience, we cut Thelma a lot of slack because of her determination to publish Ken's work. But does she do it out of love? Or guilt over his suicide? The script poses no easy answer, but one thing's for sure: Thelma shares the same DNA as indomitable female characters like Judi Dench in ***Philomena*** or Julia Roberts in ***Erin Brockovich***. Both of them exemplify perseverance in the face of impossible odds. And those two films



also feature something that ***Thelma*** has in abundance: a great mix of comedy and drama.

There are so many examples in Andrew Farotte's screenplay of scenes that begin comedically, then turn on a dime and leave you gasping or in tears. When Thelma attempts to pass her son off as a mutilated Vietnam War veteran, we laugh at her brazen and clumsy lies. But when the head of Liberty Press denounces her for desecrating the memory of fallen soldiers, the effect is chilling.

As a director, I love walking this particular tightrope, balancing comedy and tragedy, veering from hilarity to heartbreak without making a misstep.

Counter clockwise, from the left: *Gypsy* (1962), *Ordinary People* (1980), *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *Philomena* (2013), *Jojo Rabbit* (2019)



VISUAL STYLE

The visual style of *Thelma* will strengthen the emotional content of the story in a number of ways. First and foremost, I want to visually track the love story between Thelma and Ken. At first they are a real duo, sharing the same quirks, the same sense of humor, and the same off-beat outlook on life. **Framing them together** as often as possible will accentuate that bond, as if they are the leads in a “buddy picture.” When Patricia enters the story, Thelma feels threatened and the **staging will isolate** her from Ken. As Thelma grows more domineering and judgmental, she will rarely share the frame with her son, and **hand-held camerawork** will underscore the instability of their relationship.

Second, I want to vividly trace Ken’s arc from a fledgling artist with wild creative energy to a lost soul, a failure to himself and to his mother. **Wide angle lenses** and a spirited **Steadicam** will open up the world to young Ken. For instance, the D.H. Holmes department store will become a wonderland for Ken’s fertile imagination. Whether holding forth at a faculty party or entertaining his fellow soldiers with an impeccable Jackie Kennedy impersonation, **camera movement** will reinforce the sense of Ken coming into his own, enjoying the heady days of young adulthood, with all creative cylinders firing. **Dynamic montages** will highlight the initial burst of energy as Ken begins his masterpiece. Typewriter banging, cigarettes aglow, ashtrays overflowing, clocks ticking away the wee hours — Ken at the keys will have the pace and drive of an action scene. Later, as his

mental health deteriorates, increasingly **long lenses** will separate Ken from the world. His bedroom will seem to close in on him — perhaps literally. **Erratic camera movement** will reflect his growing paranoia. In his final scenes with Patricia, the staging and framing will disconnect them, closing off her love.

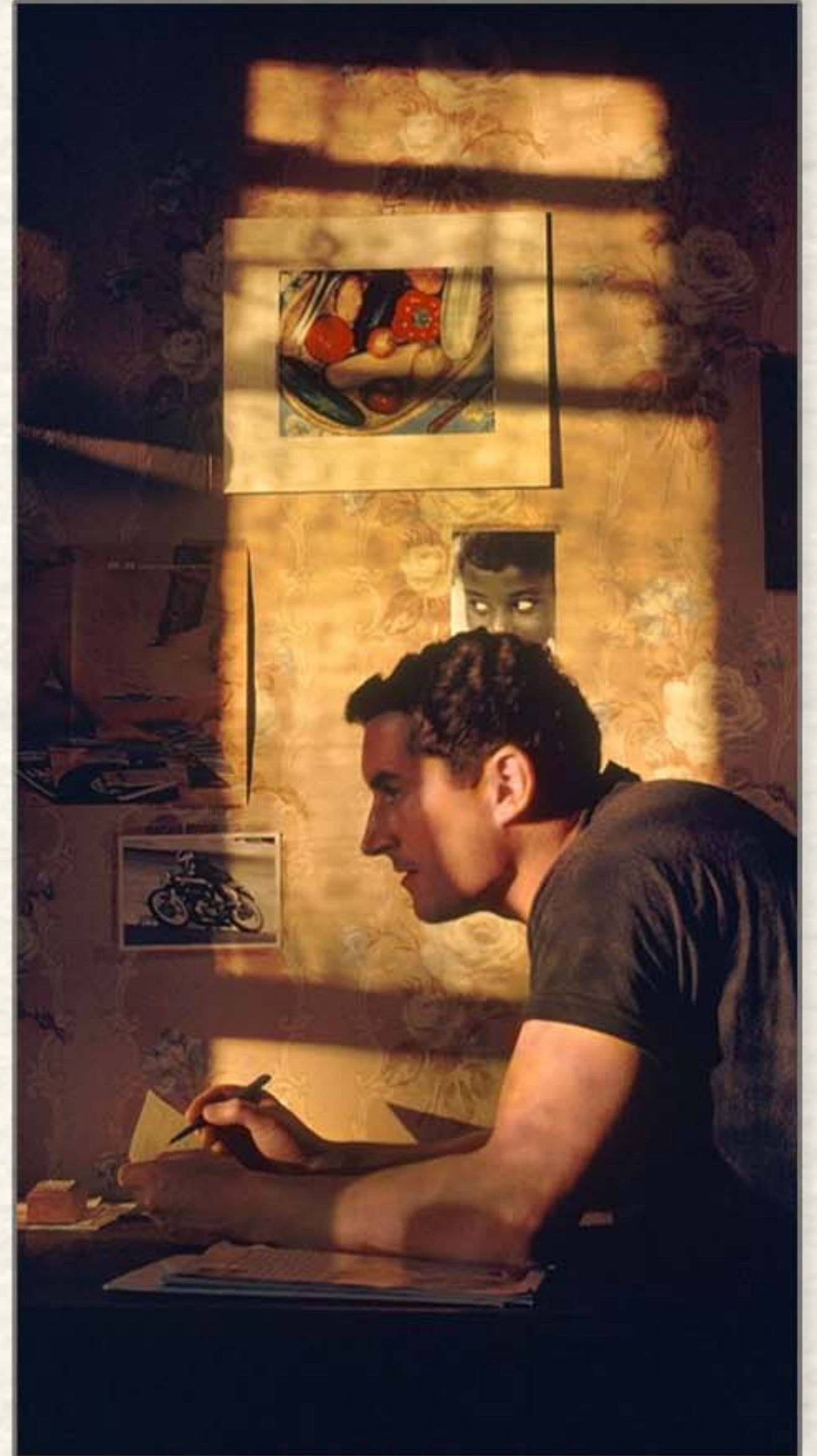
Third, Thelma’s quest to publish her late son’s book is a fantastic opportunity for expressive imagery. Thelma is a veritable bull in a china shop, and **hand-held camerawork** will energize her outrageous meetings with publishers, all of whom she offends with her high-handed manner. She may be arrogant, but Thelma is also the underdog, and I want to use camera angles — **high angles**, specifically — to accent her status as an outsider. Next to Thelma, everyone in the publishing world should appear to be six feet tall. On the flip side, **energetic camera movement** will support Thelma’s invincible spirit. **Tracking parallel** with the diminutive Thelma as she barrels across New Orleans, we will clearly feel that this is *The Little Woman That Could*.

In addition to cinematography, production design will bring Ken and Thelma’s world to life. Thelma’s home will be **colorful and vibrant**, crammed with memorabilia from her days as an aspiring thespian, an altar to the grand life she always felt denied. Ken’s bedroom will be both his sanctuary and his prison cell — it will morph from **a space of limitless possibilities** to a hovel in which all hope seems lost. And it will finally transform into a museum, meticulously curated by Thelma after Ken’s death.

THELMA'S HOUSE



KEN WRITES HIS MASTERPIECE



N'AWLINS



SOUND & MUSIC

Thelma offers an incredible opportunity for sound design. What I want to create is a sonic environment that's not only rich and varied — an aural gumbo, if you will — but one that's character-specific. Ken Toole had an uncanny ear and was able to parrot every New Orleans dialect. And there are quite a few, as you might expect from a city famous for the diversity of its immigrant population. At one time Africans, Native Americans, French, and Spanish rubbed elbows here, in one of the biggest port cities in the South.



There's Cajun English, Cajun French, and Louisiana Creole — that's the language developed for communication between 17th Century French settlers and enslaved Africans. The most important English dialect is simply called "Yat," derived from the phrase "Where y'at?" A New Orleanian who speaks Yat is also called a Yat. Ken Toole does a flawless impersonation of a Yat in the scene at the D.H. Holmes department store. Here's a little Yat tutorial for y'all: [YOUTUBE CLIP](#).

I'm excited to use New Orleans music to tell our story. *Thelma* was a pretty swell piano player, and I want a soundtrack that puts the piano front and center. The good news is that Ken's contemporaries included many New Orleans keyboard masters — Professor Longhair, Fats Domino, Champion Jack Dupree, Sugar Boy Crawford, James Booker, Allen Toussaint, and Dr. John.

There's a popular misconception that New Orleans music is mainly about partying, about letting the good times roll. You wouldn't know that from Dr. John's spooky "Gris-Gris Gumbo Ya Ya" ([YOUTUBE LINK](#)), or James Booker's desolate "Black Night" ([YOUTUBE LINK](#)), perfect tunes to accompany Ken's descent into madness. Then there's Allen Toussaint's plaintive "Ruler of My Heart," a 1963 hit for Irma Thomas that I can easily imagine on the turntable while lovelorn Ken and Patricia sway ([YOUTUBE LINK](#)). Finally, Professor Longhair's "Big Chief" is a propulsive, perpetual motion machine, an ideal theme for the unstoppable *Thelma* as she barnstorms the publishing world ([YOUTUBE CLIP](#)).

To whom it may concern at Harper Collins:

My son has written a novel of profound importance. A searing account of Crescent City diversity, detailing the misadventures of a fretful matriarch and her vanguard Christ-child, tethered by love and buffoonery. It is a perfect alchemy of the tragic and the absurd. Lear meets Falstaff, Kurtz meets Caulfield. As with the pyramids, the book will usher a new era. A literary monolith, and I say that as his mother and harshest critic. Alas, an untimely death will keep Ken from ever seeing his brilliance recognized. Suicide, the writer's curse. But consider the company he is in; Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath. Bingo! Don't let him die in vain. Imagine your own sainted mother clutching your icy hands, from which sprung genius. Competition to birth this staggering work is already at a peak, to your benefit, as it's certain to return your foundering outfit to its former glory. A prompt reply of no more than two weeks is expected (I can only dam the tidal wave of inquiry for so long).

A mother in arms,
Thlema Ducoing Toole