Tim Youd has embarked on a demanding yet satisfying project: to retype 100 books on the same model typewriters used by the original authors. But instead of going through reams of paper, he decided to type the books in their entirety on a single page.

He holds up an opened copy of "Mr. Bridge" by Evan S. Connell. It is the novel he’s currently retyping. Youd uses the book to explain how he came up with the idea. “It’s a rectangle and a smaller rectangle and a smaller rectangle,” he says, motioning to the book as a whole and then to its two halves. “Thinking about that quality was something I wanted to explore, and how I could heighten it led me to the idea that I should put all those words on one page.”

Depending on the length of the book he's retyping, his finished products come out in varying degrees of disarray and, perhaps, weight. Most of them rip somewhere on the page from the continuous pounding of the type hammer. Those that depict more lengthy novels display gaping holes. Youd places a secondary page behind the
original one for support, and in the end, he mounts the two pages side-by-side so that they resemble the familiar rectangular shape of a book.

"Slapstick" by Kurt Vonnegut, 288 pages.  
"The Right Stuff" by Tom Wolfe, 352 pgs.

Courtesy of Tim Youd.

Youd says the project became more tangible when he thought of using the same model typewriter that the original author used to write a given book. He took it a step further by deciding to type in a place related to the author’s life or novel’s setting.

For the two novels by Connell that he’s retyping, that meant traveling to Kansas City. Youd is retyping the second of the Connell novels, “Mr. Bridge,” in the downtown Kansas City Library. Connell originally wrote the book in Kansas City, and the area functions as the novel's setting as well.

Kindergarten Story Time takes a break to learn about typewriters.
Once Youd begins retyping a book, he becomes immersed in recreating it on that single piece of paper. When browsing the bookshelves on the floor below, I heard the recognizable click-click-click of his typewriter, and it sounded in a near-constant rhythm. He works seven days a week in what I gather to be a hypnotic-like state, typing each and every word of novels filled with so many.

“Before Hunter S. Thompson’s first book … he typed out in its entirety Hemingway’s 'The Sun Also Rises' and Fitzgerald’s 'Gatsby.' He was trying to in a brute force way learn the rhythms of these authors, of works he admired,” Youd says. “It becomes for me a devotional act of a very close reading to the point almost of absurdity. It’s reading to the point of rewriting to get it as deeply as you can.”

By Youd’s estimation, it will take him about seven or eight more years to retype all 100 books. “Mr. Bridge” is his 31st.

Youd does not seem daunted by the scope of the project, despite its likely toll on his posture and ink-stained fingers. Instead he describes the significance of reading and its role in his life. It becomes apparent, then, that this project is in a way his own unique contribution to literature.

“Reading has been there for me throughout my life. … It’s been a sort of refuge in times I’ve been less than happy and a source of inspiration when things are going well. It’s not an accident that it’s been the subject of my visual art going on fifteen
years now. So I think why this project works for me is because I’m getting to do on some level the most satisfying thing in the world, which is to read a book.”

The project does, however, have its downside. When he’s on the road, he’s away from his wife and five children.

“I have a 13-year-old son. Right before this trip, he and I watched the first half of The Shining. And he’s asked me a couple times since I’ve been gone if we can watch the second half right away when I get back.”

Until then chances are high that he'll be typing in the library.

Max Londberg