



Will Higgins Sept. 21, 2014



Tim Youd, performance artist, types an entire work of literature on one sheet of paper.

All this week, Banned Books Week, a man will camp out in the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library, in the large picture window that fronts the sidewalk, and type.

He is the performance artist Tim Youd, who specializes in typing works of literature. Entire books. Word for word. On a typewriter.

Youd lives in Los Angeles. He is 47. He has typed books by some of the 20th century's greatest writers — Faulkner, Raymond Chandler, Tom Wolfe, including Wolfe's "The Right Stuff," all 456 pages. This week Youd will type Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451," which is about censorship and book burning, a fitting way to mark Banned Books Week.

Banned Books Week is a nationwide promotion of the American Library Association, a consortium of librarians who favor free speech. It starts Sunday.

Promoting free speech was important to Kurt Vonnegut, whose "Slaughterhouse-Five," considered his masterpiece, is one of the most roughed-up books in history. In 1974 a school board in North Dakota ordered 36 copies of it burned, tossed right into the school's coal-fired incinerator. There has been trouble on and off for the book ever since.

The Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library will mark Banned Book Week with talks by writers and scholars and a performance by a band named after one of Vonnegut's recurring characters, the fictional science fiction writer Kilgore Trout. But the centerpiece of the commemoration (or the strangest piece, anyway) is the window-dwelling.

This is the third year the library has put a man in its front window 24/7. Youd will eat, sleep and work in the space.

"I think someone will come and do yoga with me a couple times," he said, "which will be good." (Youd can leave to go to the bathroom.)

The stunt's marathon-ish aspect conjures old-time entertainment like pole-sitting. In the 1920s, during Vonnegut's childhood, people sometimes sat on small platforms atop flagpoles — for days, even weeks. The records they set seemed important and thrilling in those simpler yet wilder times.

The library's director, Julia Whitehead, said she and Corey Dalton, a library volunteer, came up with the window-sitting idea in 2012 after hearing of a fundraising gimmick that 20 years earlier had worked for the Athenaeum, the 1890s building and cultural landmark Downtown.

In the early 1990s, David Willkie, the grandson of the 1940 Republican presidential nominee, lived on the Athenaeum's crumbling roof, in a metal garden shed, for 60 days. He

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drew attention and money, including \$600,000 from the Lilly Endowment. The Athenaeum, designed, coincidentally, by Kurt Vonnegut's architect grandfather, got a new roof.

Dalton, an editor of children's magazines, became the first window-sitter in the Vonnegut library. The writer Hugh Vandivier did it last year.

Youd types with just three fingers — he hunts and pecks. He types five or six pages in an hour. He does his work in locations that are relevant. He typed "The Right Stuff" in Lancaster, Calif., at the Museum of Art and History because Lancaster is around the corner from Edwards Air Force Base, where a lot of the book's action takes place. He did two Chandler novels in San Diego at the Museum of Contemporary Art because Chandler lived nearby.

Youd types the works on one sheet of paper. He tapes another sheet to the back of the first sheet. His end product is one piece of paper that is heavily inked and the other piece that is not as heavily inked. Neither side of the diptych is legible.

Youd sometimes gets good money for them — about \$7,000 for Chandler's "The Long Goodbye," he said. The Bradbury, however, won't be for sale because at week's end Youd plans to burn the finished product, publicly, for effect.

Some sentences stick out in Youd's mind as particularly good, like: "Dead men are heavier than broken hearts," from Chandler's "The Big Sleep," and, from "Farewell, My Lovely": "'Hold on to your chair and don't step on no snakes,' she said, 'I got me an idea.'"

Youd is on a mission to type 100 novels. "I'm not saying the greatest 100 novels," he said, "but novels that appeal to me."

In each case he uses the same model of typewriter the actual author used, which means of course he types only works that were written on typewriters (so Shakespeare is out, as are newer writers who work on computers).

He got the idea from the "gonzo" journalist Hunter S. Thompson, who as a young man typed passages from Fitzgerald, Hemingway and other great writers. "I just wanted to feel what it feels like to write that well," Thompson had explained.

In an homage to Thompson, the first book Youd typed was Thompson's "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas."

Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five," about the author's experience as a prisoner of the Germans during World War II in the city of Dresden as the allies firebombed the city, has, by the American Library Association's count, been banned or restricted more than a dozen times, including the mass burning in 1974.

The novel was monkeyed with as recently as 2011, yanked from a high school library in Republic, Mo. School officials there found 21 words that were disturbing, including "balls," "wang," "bastards" and 15 F-bombs.