

Man retyping Kennedy's 'Ironweed'

By Paul Grondahl

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Performance artist Tim Youd has traveled from Los Angeles to try to get inside the literary mind of William Kennedy, line by line, word by word, keystroke by keystroke.

Youd has brought to Kennedy's hometown a 1930s vintage L.C. Smith & Corona upright typewriter, the same model Kennedy used to type his 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "Ironweed."

For six days, beginning on July 15, working in roughly three-hour sessions, Youd (pronounced yude) will retype the entire 227-page novel and, for good measure, he'll also retype Kennedy's script for the film version of "Ironweed."

"I've been a big fan of Kennedy's for years," Youd said. He has never met the author, but he's an admirer of his Albany Cycle and by retyping "Ironweed" he expects to come to a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of the author's lyrical prose and the novel's complex internal architecture and literary themes.

Youd will sit at a table in the lobby of the Albany Institute of History & Art in downtown Albany, framed by a poster-sized image of Kennedy as a young newspaperman perched over the keyboard of the L.C. Smith & Corona he used to write his first five novels, beginning with "The Ink Truck" in 1969. Youd will also move out to the sidewalk along Washington Avenue when the weather is nice.

The typing feat Youd plans for Albany is part of his 100 Novels Project. He picks novels he likes and chooses a location important to the author. "Ironweed" will be No. 58. He



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figured it would take him 10 years to reach his goal, but he's been at it for seven years already and knows it will take about 15 years to finish.

The project is a conversation starter. It is not every day a passerby comes upon a fellow in a public space, seated at a typewriter, intensely focused on a book open beside him, pounding away at the keys. He gets a lot of double-takes and odd looks. Many stop to ask him what he's doing and pause to watch. He's happy to explain it.

He feeds in two sheets of paper and types in a torrent of letters, without any spaces and without any breaks between sentences. He runs the top sheet repeatedly through the typewriter and it becomes saturated with a mass of ink, while the under sheet gets embossed with indentations. When the entire novel has been retyped, the two sheets are mounted side-by-side as a diptych, a relic of the performance. The entire novel is present on the two sheets of paper, but it is illegible.

Youd is a two-finger, hunt-and-peck typist. He averages about five pages an hour. He's in no rush. "When it's going well and I'm really into the book, I have this out-of-body experience," he said. "I try not to pass through that state because I don't want it to become just mechanical. It's a fight every day to get into the optimal mental space. Some of it has to do with the book itself and it often is influenced by my own physical and mental state."

He has been a voracious reader since he was young, but the 100 Novels Project is forcing him to slow down, to read more deeply, and with purpose. "It has become very clear to me that the heart of it is a striving to be a very good and devoted reader," he said. He is also using the early morning hours at his hotel to work on his own first novel. He feels the art project has made him a better reader and also improved his writing skills.

Youd, 51, a father of five, grew up in Worcester, Mass., earned a bachelor's degree in economics from Holy Cross and worked for an investment bank on Wall Street. He wasn't happy with the work, left to try his luck in Hollywood and found minor success as a film producer in L.A. He was in his 30s when he started taking art classes. "My visual art was obsessed with how text and literature manifests itself visually," he said. That led to the 100 Novels project.

The first novel he retyped was "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" by Hunter S. Thompson. He had read that Thompson typed out "The Sun Also Rises" and "The Great Gatsby" as an exercise to help him learn how to write fiction after working as a journalist.

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He retyped "The Sound and the Fury" in William Faulkner's hometown, Oxford, Miss. and "A Farewell to Arms" in Piggott, Ark., where Ernest Hemingway wrote a large part of that novel. He went to Big Sur, Calif., to retype Jack Kerouac's "Big Sur."

You'd's wife and five kids will join him in the Hudson Valley for part of his stint in the region, which coincides with an exhibition of diptychs and drawings at the Loeb Art Center at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie. "Tim Youd: The Hudson Valley Retyped" runs through Oct. 14. He has already retyped "The Group" by Mary McCarthy, a Vassar graduate, at the college's Art Center. He retyped Carson McCullers' "The Member of the Wedding" at the author's house in Nyack, Rockland County, and John Cheever's "The Falconer" at Cheever's home in Ossining, Westchester County.

"We are excited that Tim will be retyping 'Ironweed' at the Albany Institute. Bill has such a fan base here, we expect a lot of interest and plenty of people stopping by," said Aine Leader-Nagy, director of community engagement at the Albany Institute. No admission will be charged to see Youd in action. There will be a reception on the evening of July 19, with a tasting by Albany Distilling Co., maker of Ironweed whiskey.

Youd is looking forward to meeting Kennedy, who plans to stop by to meet the performance artist.

The author was at a rare loss for words when asked for his reaction to the project.

"I don't really know what to say," he said. "I'll have to see it."

Image: Tim Youd retyping John Cheever's Falconer in a decommissioned guard tower at Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, N.Y. Photo by John Muggenborg.