

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Ralph Gardner Jr: The Novel In Performance

By RALPH GARDNER JR • JUL 21, 2018

[Midday Magazine](#)



Performance artist Tim Youd at Thomas Cole National Historic Site
RALPH GARDNER JR.

I was unaware that when Hunter Thompson was a young writer he typed out “The Great Gatsby” and “The Sun Also Rises” to deconstruct how F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway achieved their effects and created their masterpieces.

That wasn’t the primary motivation that found Tim Youd sitting on the porch of the Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, NY, last week pounding out James Salter’s “Light Years” on an IBM Correcting Selectric III typewriter -- similar to the machine Salter used to write the novel in the first place.

However, Mr. Youd isn’t a budding novelist. He’s a performance artist and he’s been traveling the Hudson Valley since April when he retyped Mary McCarthy’s “The Group” at various locations on the campus of Vassar College. Ms. McCarthy attended the school before achieving fame and fortune with her novel that follows eight fictional Vassar women after they graduate in 1933.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Mr. Youd has retyped approximately sixty works of literature as part of a project to retype one hundred novels in settings connected to the author and the work. All while employing the same model typewriters.

The link between the Thomas Cole National Historical Site and Salter, the American novelist and short story writer who died in 2015, sounded somewhat tenuous. Except that both the artist's home and "Light Years" are set against the backdrop of the Hudson Valley, and both artists, one in the early 19th Century, the other in the late 20th century, lamented the destruction of nature in the name of human progress. In the case of "Light Years" it's a marriage that gets destroyed.

(As I watched Mr. Youd sitting in the shade of the house pounding away with the Catskill Mountains serving as backdrop I wondered how I could land a similarly sweet gig.)

Other works Mr. Youd has or is planning to retype in the Hudson Valley include John Cheever's "Falconer" in a decommissioned guard tower at Sing Sing, and William Kennedy's "Ironweed" in the streets and cafés of Hudson, NY, at the Albany Institute of History and Art, and, next week, at the Art Omi Sculpture Fields in Ghent, NY.

Mr. Youd doesn't diligently record every sentence, paragraph, comma and period that the author wrote. Indeed, he didn't employ the IBM Selectric's correcting feature a single time.

Rather, he was typing out the novel in a continuing stream of words, uninterrupted by spaces, and on a single piece of paper backed up by a second sheet.

The result is a ragged, ink-saturated artifact that in some strange, tactile way captures both the majesty, the effort and the more than occasional heartbreak of literature in particular and the creative process in general.

Beyond that I'm not willing to go in pretending to understand what Mr. Youd is up to. And frankly, that's not why I showed up at the Thomas Cole site to talk to him.

I was more interested to learn what he'd learned about writing from having retyped sixty novels and counting. By the way, they also include Patricia Highsmith's

"Those Who Walk Away." It's set in Venice and Mr. Youd typed, or should we say, performed it on a boat landing overlooking the Grand Canal.

Then there was Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451". He undertook that work of dystopian science fiction at the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library in Indianapolis as part of Banned Books Week. And he typed the novel on the same desk that Bradbury had used.

"It's the only piece where there isn't a finished diptych," the artist said. He was referring to the original and undersheets. They'll be as part of an exhibition of diptychs and drawings related to the Hudson Valley Cycle. It opens in mid-September at Vassar's Frances

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Lehman Loeb Art Center. “When it was done,” he added, “I put it on the ground, doused it with lighter fluid and it burned.”

In the novel books are outlawed, Fahrenheit 451 referring to the temperature at which paper burns.

In any case, Mr. Youd said the project has made him a better, more astute reader. He doesn't just retype the novels. He researches the life of the novelist and reads the work beforehand.

The project may have also made him a better writer, he believes, and provoked him to try his own novel. It's set in L.A., where he and his family live, amid a population that inhabit RV's near his studio, neither homeless nor quite established.

However, having typed sixty novels and counting he's gained an appreciation for perhaps the key element for achieving success as a writer. It's less talent or inspiration than stamina. The determination to shoulder through the self-doubt day after day, year after year.

“My own writing has improved significantly,” he told me. “Not just the result but the willingness to be consistent about it.”

“Out of this hundred novels,” he went on, “I have to write at least one.”

Ralph Gardner, Jr. is a journalist who divides his time between New York City and Columbia County.