

CRISTIN TIERNEY

# Country Roads

## 100 Novels

Ecstatic reading with artist Tim Youd

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*Visiting artist Tim Youd explores Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men" inside the Louisiana State Capitol.*

I heard the artist before I saw him: he and I were introduced by the hypnotic chorus of typewriter keys ricocheting off the State Capitol ceiling four stories above. When I turned the corner from the elevators, I found Tim Youd typing another man's words. On his left, he had propped open *All the King's Men*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by former poet laureate Robert Penn Warren, and he appeared to trust his fingers in their *pas de chat* across the keyboard of the 1930s-era Remington portable. The glaze

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stiffening Youd's eyes as he leaned toward the text made quick sense to this reader. He was lost in a good book.

"You're half out of your body," he explained later in our conversation. "You're not really there physically. You're kind of somewhere else, straddling this world and the imaginary world. To me, it seems pretty close to what must be a religious ecstasy."

For three years now, Youd has been traveling the world as part of his 100 Novels Project. He arrives in a city (his Louisiana residency began in New Orleans last October) and installs himself with a typewriter and an acclaimed novel in a public place of relevance to the text or its author. Then he begins to type. Word for word, line for line, Youd copies the novel onto a sheet of paper. And when his ink hits the lower margin ... well, he starts over again at the top of the same sheet.

Youd is a visual artist ("and a closet writer," he confided) who first conceived of this work with an image: that of a book's rectangle of words typed upon the rectangular canvas of a blank page—a bramble of text wreathed by white margins. He had wrestled with text and literature before in his art; with this new fixation, he aimed "to get all the words on one page and heighten that formal quality."

"Once I had that notion, I then had to answer a series of questions for myself," said Youd. "*How will I put it on the page? Will I write it out longhand?* I decided it'd be better if I typed it, to echo the typeset nature of a book." His next rule limited Youd to the make and model of typewriter that the author of each book had originally used.

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Youd gestured to the Remington in front of him. “I learned from Robert Penn Warren’s daughter, Rosanna Warren, a writer herself in Chicago, that he gave her the typewriter he used to write *All the King’s Men* when she was a child. She used it to write a family newspaper, and she remembered it being a Remington portable.”

The first book Youd typed out, stationed in his Los Angeles studio, was Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. “I didn’t know yet that it would become this performance,” he said. “I didn’t know I’d be doing a hundred books. But what I did know is that when Thompson decided he wanted to be a writer, he typed out both *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* in their entirety. Not on one page, of course, but he did it to learn how to write.”

In May 2013, Youd took his project on the road. On the sidewalk, to be precise. Around the corner from Henry Miller’s boyhood home in Brooklyn, Youd sat with an Underwood Standard and clacked his way through *Tropic of Capricorn*. “When I did that first public performance, I had a sign on the table that said *This is what I’m doing, but I’m not going to stop and talk to anybody, because I’m doing this performance*. But within an hour or two, I took it down. I felt the energy around me of people wanting to ask me questions.” That summer he patronized the downtown Los Angeles parking lot of the Terminal Annex Post Office, where Charles Bukowski sorted mail for twelve years before publishing his first novel ... *Post Office*.

Youd is no extrovert, but he’s found rewards in the public aspect of his project. “Writing a novel is a very solitary thing, even more solitary than making visual art,” said Youd. “Reading is often solitary, too, but not always. Beyond that, though, are the conversations that happen around books. It’s very social. People love to talk about

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books; it's why you have book clubs. So there's this continuum on which my project slides, depending on where I am and who's around, who's interacting or not with me.”

He's learned from these exchanges, and his own understanding of the project, as a meditative exploration of literature, sharpens with each articulation. His loose Catholic upbringing highlights parallels for Youd between his devotional reading (paired with deliberate contexts and details) and a balance he sees in the Church. “You've got the pure intellectual constructs, with the Body, the Word, the Trinity,” said Youd, “but you've got the fetishization of the physical too. Saints' knuckles in the walls, the shroud with Jesus' face on it. These two things exist very uneasily, but exist nonetheless together in the Catholic Church.”

Last October the New Orleans Museum of Art invited Youd to Louisiana, where he has since typed his way through four books by splitting time between the second floor gallery at NOMA (the drifting echo of his typewriter draws visitors from the ground-floor atrium) and more personalized locations: John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* (Olivetti Studio 44; Faulkner House Books in the French Quarter), Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (Royal Empress; beneath the branches of the Miss Jane Oak in Pointe Coupee Parish), Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (Smith Corona Silent; Prytania Theater), and James Wilcox's *Modern Baptists* (Brother portable, Independence/Amite City area).

*All the King's Men*, the fictionalized account of Huey Long's political ascension, is the forty-fourth novel that Youd has explored in this manner (and the fifth in his Louisiana series). In his first days at the Capitol, where he's stationed just inside the

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front door, Youd witnessed the inauguration of a new governor and a visit from President Obama. “It adds a richness, emotionally,” said Youd, of the literary locations. “Like when I’m sitting at William Faulkner’s house in Oxford, Mississippi, typing out *The Sound and the Fury*. These spaces have history.”

The tangible result of his performance is a diptych. (His finished novels are hanging in a concurrent exhibit at NOMA until January 30.) On the left is Youd’s bottom sheet, with faint but distinct impressions of his keystrokes. The right half is the text-soaked page; the longer the book, the more Youd’s ink has distressed the formal rectangle.

Each book on Youd’s list is one he’s read before—some favorites have eluded him, like Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, when he can’t confirm the author’s typewriter—but he’s thrilled to revisit the texts. His time with Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* in December strikes Youd especially. “Percy defers plot a lot,” said Youd. “He brings you up to it and then he digresses. He’s got all these great techniques and strategies that make the book very rich. But it’s not easy. That’s the kind of book that I love, because when you go back into it, it yields you more the second time and the third time.”

Youd aims to finish typing (and reading) all 464 pages of *All the King’s Men* by the end of January. He’s off to Georgia next, where he’ll sit a while with Flannery O’Connor.

*Youd will be typing in the front hall of the State Capitol until January 28. Follow the 100 Novels Project and view Youd’s finished works at [timyoud.com](http://timyoud.com).*