

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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Artist types, retypes novels onto single sheet in homage to the writing process

By Susan Larson Special to The Advocate NOV 28, 2015



Photo provided by Tim Youd -- Tim Youd at work

Every book — whether you hold it in your hands on paper or e-reader — begins with a writer alone in a room, writing.

Performance artist Tim Youd pays homage to that process in a project called 100 Novels in 10 Years, by retyping 100 novels, each on one page, working in a place that is important to the book.

He begins the five-book Louisiana part of his journey Friday, Oct. 2, at the New Orleans Museum of Art, when he rolls a crisp new sheet of paper into an Olivetti Studio 44 and begins typing “A Confederacy of Dunces,” by John Kennedy Toole.

“I’m always thinking about the rectangle of black in a rectangle of white,” Youd said. “I wanted to mirror that on a page, reflect the typeface and typesetting of a page in a book, squashing the book together. And I thought I’d do that by using the same make and model typewriter that the author used.”

As Youd types, he reads the book aloud, another way of encountering the text.

“Part of the quest is to come to terms with it as deeply as I can, to be as good a reader as I can be,” he said. “Part of what interests me is bringing my best to bear. Not just about whether the novel holds up as I get deeper into it, but I want to come away as a better reader, a better thinker, a better person.”

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You'd's quixotic endeavor has taken him to England, where he typed Virginia Woolf's novel "Orlando" in Sussex and "To the Lighthouse" in St. Ives, Cornwall. He's also typed Raymond Chandler's novels in Los Angeles.

In Louisiana, NOMA will be his home base, though he will be typing parts of the five books elsewhere: "A Confederacy of Dunces" will be partly typed at Faulkner House Books, "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" at the "Miss Jane Oak" in Point Coupee Parish, "The Moviegoer" at the Prytania Theatre, "Modern Baptists" in Independence, Louisiana, and "All the King's Men" at the State Capitol in Baton Rouge. (See complete schedule below)

Katie Pfohl, curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at NOMA, is excited by the range of You'd's project.

"For me, as a curator, one of the things that's very important is that the people we bring to the city want to engage with the city; they really want to be here," she said. "It's exciting to bring an artist who wants to work in bookstores and theaters."

For Pfohl, who moved to New Orleans two months ago, reading these books herself was an important personal way to engage with the city.

"As a relative newcomer myself, thinking about this project, exploring these locations in the city, changed the way I've experienced New Orleans," she said. "There's such a legacy of literary history here. So many authors spent time here."

A considerable amount of time and research goes into You'd's preparations. " 'A Confederacy of Dunces' was on my list from the get-go," he said. Toole's biographer, Cory MacLauchlin, helped him with the typewriter information. Then MacLauchlin facilitated an introduction to one of Walker Percy's daughters, which led You'd to the moss-green Smith Corona portable on which he'll type "The Moviegoer."

When You'd types Ernest Gaines' "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," he'll be using a Royal Empress typewriter; for Jim Wilcox's "Modern Baptists," he is having a Brother portable tuned up.

Robert Penn Warren's daughter, Rosanna Warren, vividly remembered the Remington portable her father used for "All the King's Men." As a child, she once wrote a family newspaper — the Family Racket — on that machine; later, she used it to compose her first novel.

As Pfohl says, You'd's work expands from the specifics of place to more general philosophical concerns. "We're at such a moment in history, thinking about our relationship to books and reading and letters," she said.

You'd's work takes readers back to a pure moment of encountering the text.

"He's set a high bar for the books he's willing to spend time with. We really tried to have a diversity of locations, authors and time periods. Part of it is devotional," Pfohl said. "But he really loves literature."

As for talking while typing, You'd says, "I welcome the interaction. Books are funny things. It's a solitary undertaking to write them and for the most part a solitary undertaking to read them. But they inspire conversation."

And no, he doesn't stop for mistakes. He reads — and types — on.

Susan Larson is the host of WWNO's The Reading Life and the author of The Booklover's Guide to New Orleans.