

CRISTIN TIERNEY

The New York Times

GRACE NOTES

Typing a Novel About Vassar, Word for Word, as Art



The conceptual artist Tim Youd is retyping Mary McCarthy’s novel “The Group” on the campus of her alma mater, using a typewriter like hers. Credit Mariana Vincenti for The New York Times

By James Barron

April 29, 2018

POUGHKEEPSIE, N.Y. — Like a writer, Tim Youd got distracted. He did not notice that the paper was in wrong until he had typed “Herconfidencefledasshe.”

A writer would have put spaces between the words, but Mr. Youd is not a writer. He is a performance artist who retypes famous novels, word for word, with no spaces — lineafterlineafterline,likethis. And he does so on old typewriters like the ones the

CRISTIN TIERNEY

authors themselves used. Mr. Youd, 50, has retyped 55 novels so far. He is aiming for 100.

Mr. Youd has typed “A Farewell to Arms” in Piggott, Ark., where Ernest Hemingway wrote much of it, and “The Sound and the Fury” in William Faulkner’s hometown, Oxford, Miss. He has typed Jack Kerouac’s “Big Sur” in — where else? — Big Sur, Calif.

His 56th novel brought him here, to the campus of Vassar College. Last week he began typing “The Group,” the 1963 best seller about eight classmates from Vassar. It made Mary McCarthy, Vassar class of 1933, famous and also rich. Looking back on the 50th anniversary of its publication, Vanity Fair magazine described “The Group” as “shocking, titillating and acid-laced” and said, “Everyone loved Chapter Two.”

Ah, Chapter Two. It described, in considerable detail, the first time one of the eight had sex.

Vassar is different from what it was in McCarthy’s day — among other things, Vassar has admitted men since 1969. But Mr. Youd decided that “The Group” was just the thing to type on the Vassar campus, and not just for its references to campus landmarks. Or its potential as a history lesson for undergraduates of the laptop-and-cellphone age who have never touched a carriage-return lever or heard the bell ring close to the end of a line.

“Every novel has its flaws,” he said. “This one, the difficulty is who’s who. That many characters is a lot to stage-manage.” McCarthy, he said, “does try, and usually succeeds.”

Unlike a writer turning out double-spaced page after double-spaced page, Mr. Youd was typing a single single-spaced sheet of paper. That one page will contain the entire novel. By the time he reaches Page 487 and the last two words of “The Group” — “New York” — the page will be an inky, illegible mess.

“I’m coming at this from the perspective of the visual artist who’s interested in how text and literature manifest themselves in a visual way,” he said.

He is a two-finger typist — “me and Raymond Chandler,” he said with a chuckle — but said he did not know how many words per minute he could bang out. “I’m more like a pages-per-hour guy,” he said. “I generally have to get 25 pages done in a day.” Five pages an hour is a good pace, he said.

He does not work in a writer’s garret. On good days last week, he set himself up under a London plane tree that was already a campus landmark in McCarthy’s day. His desk was a folding table that he hauled around the campus on a hand truck.

Mr. Youd is not like a pianist who tosses off a few scales first thing in the morning: He does not bother with warm-up exercises before he sits down at the typewriter. Practice sentences about crazy brown foxes jumping over lazy dogs are not for him. “I just dive

right into it,” he said. “If I’ve just ingested the coffee for the morning and I’m not firing on all cylinders, I’m prone to a few extra typos.”



Mr. Youd is hard at work on his 56th novel. He is aiming for 100. Credit Mariana Vincenti for The New York Times

The typewriter this day was a Remington portable from the late 1920s or early 1930s that he said was just like the machine McCarthy owned when she wrote “The Group.” He bought it on eBay.

“It’s very primitive,” he said. “It’s a pretty unsubstantial machine, compared to where typewriters got to.”

He said he had read “The Group” before he typed the first word — which, for the record, was “It,” with a capital I — and he admitted to making mistakes as he went along. “Yeah, probably one a line,” he said. “I just keep chugging along. I’m earnestly attempting to retype every word, but it’s an exercise in good reading, not good typing.”

“The Group” is not easy going for a typist. The characters’ names are tricky: There are Lakey, Pokey and Dottie, to name only three. There are typo-prone words like “Fujiyama” on Page 29, “querulous grackle” on Page 34 and “steatopygy” on Page 24, which, two lines later, McCarthy explains is “excessive development of the rump.”

Mr. Youd has typed on authors’ actual typewriters. In London to retype John Kingsley Orton’s plays, he did a page on Orton’s own machine. But he said he would not do a whole novel on a machine that had belonged to an author.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

“I’m jamming a beat-up page through there,” he said. “When it gets all gunked up, I make a mess out of the typewriter.”

This is why he has backup typewriters. “I always have two of the same make and model,” he said, adding that when nothing is available on eBay, “I have a couple of guys out there in the typewriter-collecting world, and I turn to them.”

The first novel he retyped was “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” by Hunter S. Thompson. “The reason why I chose him was he typed out ‘The Sun Also Rises’ and ‘The Great Gatsby’ to learn how to write fiction early in his writing career,” he said.

Mr. Youd smiled as he typed along. Undergraduates passed by. Some seemed to think the museum piece was the typist, not the typewriter. “This is weird and random, even for Vassar,” said Natalie Silverman, a sophomore from Atherton, Calif. “They have art installations, but usually it’s statues or pictures to look at — never a human being sitting there.”

Jennifer Novak, a junior from Sunnyside, Queens, said she had seen manual typewriters in a museum, “but never out like this.”

“It’s kind of mesmerizing,” she said.

Neither of them had read “The Group.” But Colby Byrne, a senior from Ridgewood, N.J., said he had and had appreciated the references to “places I knew.”

“It wasn’t life-changing,” he said, “but it was fun.”