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# Typewriters and the art of self-sufficiency

By **Kathleen Rooney**

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A fan of writing on typewriters finds a kindred spirit in Richard Polt's "Typewriter Revolution"

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**I**t's possible to spend a fair length of time doing something intuitively, just because you can sense somehow that that thing is good and right and beneficial for you; then there is an added pleasure that can be gotten after someone else comes along and articulates — using clear language and beautifully reasoned arguments — what you had so far only felt on instinct.

This unexpected but entirely welcome articulation is what typewriter expert and philosophy professor Richard Polt's new book, "The Typewriter Revolution: A Typist's Companion for the 21st Century," came along this fall and did for me and my roughly four-years-and-counting intuitive love of writing on typewriters.

In fact, I could easily have written this essay on a typewriter — I own a dozen — but I didn't. For one thing, the machine that I most want to use needs a new ribbon that it won't receive for a few days, but more on that in a moment. For another, I prefer to use my 12-and-counting typewriters for poetry and correspondence, not longish prose. For that, I favor my laptop, which suits both my style of composition, and editors who might not be thrilled if, instead of emailing my drafts, I sent typed paper copies by mail.

Polt's book is lovely and large-format with pictures interspersed among the text, which is itself delightfully hybrid: part history, part philosophy, and part user's manual, complete with labeled images of typewriters and how to use and repair them. Although he's modest about it, over the past two decades Polt has become perhaps the most famous American participant in the Typosphere, "a zone between the typewriter and the computer" consisting of "typewriter blogs, typewriters that can communicate with computers, and other ways in which text and ideas can be exchanged between the digital and typewritten worlds." I interviewed him in 2014 at the International Typewriter Collectors

Convention, and since then I've been looking forward to this book.

*Article continues below* ↓

It does not disappoint and offers a look at everything from typewritten street poetry and stories (including *Poems While You Wait*, the Chicago-based collective of which I'm a founder) to the practice of typecasting (typing something on a typewriter, then broadcasting it on the Internet).

Although Polt could have had no way of arranging this, his book arrived at a weirdly sad and serendipitous time: the week in late September when my last living grandparent, my Grandma Marge Rooney, my Dad's mom, was dying at the age of 93 in Nebraska, where she'd lived her entire life. Thus, the typewriter on which I'd most like to be typing this essay, if I could, is her old black Corona, which she inherited from my Great Grandmother Mabel Rooney, and which I, in turn, inherited when I went out to the tiny town of Hubbard — population 230; sans Marge, 229 — the weekend of Oct. 2.

Going upstairs in her old house with my younger sister Beth and her daughter, Rose, my 4-year-old niece, was a dim and dusty archaeological expedition. We braved the attic — with its sloping ceilings and the shaggy wood-and-carpet-smell that I might never smell again — with a flashlight my Aunt Rosemary gave us, digging in the cavernous closet that had been shared by the seven kids that Marge and my Grandpa Tom raised. We rummaged past old clothes, luggage with her initials, trunks full of the thousand-piece jigsaw puzzles she so enjoyed, past board games and handbags until I saw it: the huge black case with its small silver lock. We dislodged the container, hoping the machine would be in there, and it was: round keys, every letter still working, three ancient sheets of paper there, too: drafts by my Uncle Tim, youngest of the seven, writing to older siblings who had moved away.

Polt's book opens with a serious-but-un-self-serious manifesto about typewriting, which situates it as a practice for those who "choose the real over representation, the physical over the digital, the durable over the unsustainable, the self-sufficient over the efficient." This list itemizes the many reasons why I — and many others — love typewriters, even now in 2015, but it also works as a description of my Grandma Marge.

Her old typewriter, since she got it from her mother-in-law, my Great-Grandmother Mabel, is a Corona from before they became Smith Corona. The Standard Typewriter Company renamed itself the Corona Typewriter Company after the success of their Corona model in 1914, then Smith Corona was created when L.C. Smith & Bros joined Corona in 1926.

When I wrote to ask my dad about it, he said of my great-grandmother: "She was born in 1892. Mabel

was shortened from Mary Bell. She was 6 feet tall. She graduated from the Normal School in Jackson, Neb., and taught me in kindergarten, first and second grade. Normal School was two years of training after High School. Her first assignment was a one-room schoolhouse south and west of Hubbard, Neb. The school was called the 'Bell School' because of the impressive bell in the tower." I liked learning that Mabel, whom I never knew, went through a name recombination, too, not unlike her typewriter brand.

When I wrote Polt to tell him how much I admired his book, I mentioned this machine. He replied, "I'm glad that you inherited your grandma's Corona — I feel very superstitious about the way typewriters absorb some of their user's personality. I think they provide powerful connections." I agree. That connection to places, times, and people of the past attracts me to typewriters. Only one of my 11 other machines comes from someone I knew, the very first one I got being a Smith-Corona given to me by my friend and fellow Poems While You Waiter, the poet Eric Plattner. But each machine possesses a feeling — a presence, a benevolent haunting — that you don't get with digital technology, where everything is disposable, meant to be deposed by the newest and the next.

That's what Polt's book helped me realize: I love typewriters not because I romanticize the past, but because I acknowledge that there might be better ways to do things than we are encouraged to do them now. Writing on typewriters is not efficient, but as Polt points out, perhaps that should not be the sole calculation. Rather, "(s)ome things we do aren't means to an end, but an end in themselves. Attending a concert, playing ball with friends, enjoying a glass of wine, reading fiction — we don't do these things for the results (...) These activities are neither efficient nor inefficient; they're self-sufficient."

As her obituary said, so many things that my Grandma Marge loved were not efficient: "playing cards, quilting and embroidering, and making cookies for the neighborhood kids." Neither are so many of the things I love, including, now, writing poems on her old typewriter. Self-sufficient things can slow a person down — make them notice, focus, practice (Tim's drafts) and pay attention more.

Whatever we're doing here on earth, it isn't a race because only death awaits us at the end, and typing on a typewriter, a gorgeous, hard-to-break, analog machine — or some other activity like that — is all part of the prize, the real prize, that is being alive.

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## **"The Typewriter Revolution"**

By Richard Polt, Countryman, 384 pages, \$26.99