Typing writers: an endangered species (but not yet extinct)

Typewriters may be headed the way of the quill – and ribbons and parts hard to find – but there’s a surprisingly long list of famous authors who refuse to switch to computers, Robert Messenger writes

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until he died last month, American author John Updike continued to use his sleek black lacquered 76-year-old Olivetti M1 portable typewriter.

“We’re growing old and erratic together,” Updike said in an interview he gave towards the end of his life. He told Douglas Belkin of The Boston Globe: “The spaghetti is fractious, and the carriage return is a little wobbly. If it breaks down for good, I don’t think I’ll bother to fix it.”

Updike never had to make that call. His typewriter, built in Italy in 1932, the year he was born, outlived him. Like so many other classic typewriters of the era, it was made to last.

What happened with Updike and his typewriter will be a continuing thing. The ranks of living 20th-century typewriter owners will, of course, diminish. Given the expanding trade for them among a growing worldwide army of collectors, the number of old typewriters will not.

Gonzor writer Hunter S. Thompson occasionally took his IBM Selectric out into the Colorado snow and shot it. Someday the typewriter will arrive, but on February 20 three years ago, Thompson shot himself. Gone, but not forgotten. Theblk ink Updike died, and the death of the Temporary School of Thought gave a “24-hour performance” in London by buying Thompson’s Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas on an Olivetti Valentine, which apparently handled its considerable word count with aplomb.

One-finger typist David Sedaris, satirist and son of an IBM typewriter salesman, says he detests computers because they are “undemocratic” in not wanting to share the world with typewriter writers. He claims typewriters are headed the way of the quill. Yet, so long as authors such as Sedaris and another IBM Selectric devotee David Mamet, continue to speak out about their virtues, typewriters will refuse to fade quietly away.

The deaths of Updike and Donald Westlake in the past six weeks may have seen two more from the surprisingly long list of famous writers who, even at the onset of the 21st century, still used manual typewriters. But they were far from the last of a dying breed.

Sedaris took himself out in the last last year, finally defeated by the 9/11 inconvenience of trying to get a typewriter through airport security. His problem preoccupied subscribers to the on-line Yahoo! typewriter forum run by US guru Steve Wershler- Henry, a.k.a. Will Davis (The Portable Typewriter Reference Site) for weeks on end.

Before succumbing, Sedaris had said, “When forced to leave my house for an extended period of time, I take my typewriter with me, and together we endure the wretchedness of passing through the X-ray scanner. The laptops roll merrily down the belt, while I’m instructed to stand aside and open my bag. To me it seems like a normal enough thing to be carrying, but the typewriter’s declining popularity arouses suspicion and I wind up eliciting the sort of reaction one might expect when traveling a cannon. It’s a typewriter,” he said, “you use it when you write angry letters to airport authorities.”

Sedaris claims the goal of computers is to place typewriters “beside the feather quill and chisel; in the museum of antiquated writing instruments”

These words inspired similar complaints of the typewriter with the quill from Australian author Morris Lurie. Lurie lauded the soothing qualities of his “hospital green” Hermes 3000, and said he kept an Olivetti in the hallway cupboard “in case of emergencies.”

American writer Larry McMurtry bemoans experiencing the same difficulties as Sedaris when travelling with his typewriter. “It’s not so portable anymore,” he told USA Today recently. “It’s tough to get through airports. They think it’s a bomb.”

Lurie reported that the Olivetti in his home in Austin did duty as a “landline” typewriter. He needed a replacement, so he bought a Swiss-made Hermes “a noble instrument of European genius.”

The late Donald Westlake, like McMurtry, owned five models of the same typewriter. In Westlake’s case, they were Smith-Corona Silent-Supers, and he bought more than once so that, if he needed to replace a part, he could “cannibalise” one of the others.

Ottor Penzler, a long-time friend of Westlake’s, a fellow crime writer and the owner of the Mysterious Bookshop in TriBeCa in Lower Manhattan, said Westlake “lived in fear that he wouldn’t have his little portable typewriter.” Westlake said he hated sitting at his desk thinking and composing while having “something hum at me”

New York writers who need help in cannibalising typewriters to keep one going can still get repairs done at Onter’s at 393 Amsterdam Avenue on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Mamet, another Selectric user Philip Roth, and Tom Wolfe go there. Wolfe is a typewriter traditionalist. “I have a typewriter touch, not a computer touch,” he says. “I have a very fast typewriter, a 1966 Underwood – like a 1958 Thunderbird. [But] it’s very hard to find parts.”

Sitting in a small shed at the back of his home on Martha’s Vineyard, David McCullough, author of Truman, John Adams and 1776, doesn’t seem to need spare parts. He sometimes has no electricity and never fears having “sitting the view at 11. McCullough pulls from the carriage of his 69-year-old Royal KMM standard desktop typewriter – about four a day during prime writing season – have become the most widely read non-fiction of the age and have made McCullough the central figure in a renaissance of popular history.

McCullough bought the second-hand Royal in 1965 in White Plains, New York. “I don’t remember what I paid for it,” he says. “Not very much. [But] I have written everything I have ever published since 1965, which is virtually everything I have written, on that typewriter. And there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“I’m told by my children and my more advanced friends that I could go so much faster if I used a word processor and I tell them, ‘I know that. I don’t want to go faster. If anything, I’d like to go slower. I don’t think all that fast.’ And that’s what is going on, it is thinking.”

“People say to me, ‘Don’t you realise if you use a computer, you can move a paragraph from the bottom of the page to the top of the page, you can get rid of a line?’ I say, ‘I can get a paragraph from the bottom of the page to the top of the page I just draw a ring around it and put an arrow.”

“But nobody asks me, how much of my time do I spend thinking? And the thinking is in many ways the most important part of it. It isn’t just gathering all the material, taking all the notes. It’s sitting down and really looking at what you’ve accumulated, thinking about it, thinking about how to put it into the English language in a way that will have some compelling quality. And I feel very strongly that one ought to try when writing history to reach toward the ultimate of literature.”

In suggesting his old Royal might be writing his books for him, McCullough raises a subject that could fill a book on its own. Indeed, it already has. In 2005 Darren Wershler-Henry wrote the intriguing The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting. In it, much is made of novelist Paul Auster’s description of his Olympia SM9 as a “fragile sentient hand.”

Like McCullough, all of Auster’s published work has been written on a typewriter. Like Sedaris, Auster fears the typewriter is an endangered species.

Unlike any other author, however, Auster has devoted one of his books to this typewriter: The Story of My Typewriter, brilliantly illustrated by Sam Messer.

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— David McCullough

Auster says he is convinced typewriters have souls and therefore can be possessed. Wershler-Henry, however, points out that “Despite any wishes to the contrary, a typewritten text must be mediated through a computer at some point if it is going to appear in a professionally published book.”

McCullough’s typewritten manuscripts are transferred to computer disks by an assistant on the Massachusetts mainline. Thus the creative process of some of the great works in American letters has come full circle.

The history of typewritten manuscripts dates back to Mark Twain, who in his unpublished autobiographical essay of 1904 rightly claimed he was the “first person in the world to apply the type machine to literature.” It is a popular misconception of Twain’s own doing, however, that he was the first author to typewrite a book and that the first

John Updike: grew old with his Olivetti.

David Sedaris: worn down by security.

Hunter S. Thompson: sights on the Selectric.

Morris Lurie: has an emergency unit tabbed.

Paul Auster and his Olympia SM9, as depicted by Sam Messer in The Story of My Typewriter.
When the Americans displaced the British in the Middle East after the British-Saudi dispute had ended in 1914, they seemed to promise a new era. The United States would sort out the conflict between the Arab states and Israel, and help bring prosperity and peace to all in the region. President Kissinger tried to convince himself to these tasks, certainly difficult but surely not beyond the reach of a personalist US President. All is going to seem a matter of conscience. It is the most dismal chronicle of incompetence, ignorance, ineffective-ness, indecision and inefficiency, unimaginable, and one that, in the light of recent events, must be very vivid in the mind of the new leader of the US.

In the rush to get books on to the President’s bedside table, Patrick Tyler’s account of how Obama’s predecessors and their advisers not only missed their chances but made things worse by an increasing partiality for Israel, a vendetta with Iran and a barged invasion of Iraq lesser evil to be on the top of the pile. It is an anthology of cautionary tales for a new President – a compendium of how not to do it, and, if only obliquely, a guide to how to do better in the future. If Obama ends his first term without registering some considerable success in the Middle East, the last chance for a moderate order in that region may pass. It falls to him, in other words, to turn round the long record of American failure.

Success may in many areas come from doing less, from setting more modest aims, and from abandoning the attempt to control the affairs of others. But, if more modesty is the general prescription, the exception is the Israeli-Palestinian impasse, where both sides need American mediation and where one side, Israel, needs to face the reality that it cannot indefinitely dominate its neighbours by drawing on American weaponry and resources.

The great virtue of Tyler’s book is that it is so relentlessly personal. It may be criticised by some for the limited attention it pays to underlying causes, such as America’s determination to secure oil resources and the constraints of the Cold War, or to cultural factors, such as the West’s early infatuation with Israeli victory successes and, more recently, the Christian right’s beliefs about the end of the world. But Tyler is a reporter, not an academic. He is interested in moments – moments when confused and angry leaders and their counsellors swear at one another, weep, get drunk or tell outrageous lies.

Moments such as the one where William Sullivan, the American ambassador to Iran, irritated by Zbigniew Brezinski’s pursuit of the chimera of a long-term military coup to save the Shah’s regime, told him there was not the faintest chance of such a thing, adding hopefully, “Do you want me to translate it into Polish?” Moments such as the one where Bill Clinton, still just President, rang Colin Powell, the incoming secretary of state in George W. Bush’s new administration, to tell him that Yasser Arafat was a “goddamn liar” who had destroyed the chances of peace.

The blame for the failure at Camp David, as Tyler writes, belonged to Ehud Barak and Clinton rather than to Arafat but the “institutive achievement that might have balanced the Lewinsky scandal, a self-righteous and self-deceiving Clinton was intent on ‘poisoning the well’.”

Or moments such as the one where Henry Kissinger, entrusted with a message from Nixon to Brezhnev calling for joint superpower action to end the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and then proceeded to a just settlement of the question, simply decided, in mid-flight to Moscow, not to deliver it. Nixon’s message, Tyler writes, “threw off the record Kissinger was seeking to create: that he and Nixon had run the Soviets into the ground and they had protected Israel.”

The truth was that the Russian leaders had reacted cautiously and moderately when war broke out, and that Nixon himself had a statesmanlike grasp of what was necessary. But a joint US-Russian initiative “would have thrust Kissinger into the thankless and perilous task of appeasing two blocs.” So he simply dumped the message.

He later encouraged Israel to violate the ceasefire that was supposed to end hostilities so that it could better its military position. With these acts of disobedience – acts that were not from 1967, Tyler says, arguably unconstitutional – Kissinger closed off the possibility that the 1973 war could have been ended on terms which would have left Israel in a less powerful position, making it more amenable to making a push for settlement by the Americans and the Russians.

The book is studded with such choice anecdotes, some of them the product of Tyler’s research into recently declassified material, some of them culled from his brief, and competence, in encouraging the Israelis to invade Lebanon in 1982. But he also quite tried to rescind the positive response he had given to Ariel Sharon’s plan for invasion, he did not warn a dreamy President Reagan of the war that was almost certainly coming, and offered no plans to head it off. Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger simply disobeyed Reagan’s orders when he disapproved of them. James Baker was one of the few presidential advisers over the years who got things right, notably when he put an unprecedented financial squeeze on the Israeli government.

But Tyler right, in his highest words for presidents. He lets Eisenhower off lightly, praising him for facing down the British over Suez but failing to mark his card for joining the British in the 1953 coup against Mossadegh, an act that had grave long-term consequences. His catalogue of blame begins with Lyndon Johnson for failing to demand both that Israel return the territories it conquered in the six-day war and cease development of nuclear weapons. Those decisions were momentous, because they allowed Israel to lock itself into a position in which military domination of the region was the governing principle of policy, and they made the US a party to that domination.

Nixon gets some points from Tyler for trying in the end to follow a dangerous path, but his same instincts were under- mined by Watergate and by Kissinger’s manoeuvres. Jimmy Carter secured a peace between Israel and Egypt, but it was one that was exploited by Israeli goals and, and his advisers, who failed around helplessly as the Shah’s regime went down.

Reagan backed Iran against Iraq to the point of providing target data for Saddam’s chemical strikes on Iranian troops and, verging between extreme bellicosity and extreme timidity, muddied disastrously in Lebanon. Tyler is hard of all on Clinton, who he sees, “‘the beneficiary of a great convergence: the end of the Cold War, the advent of Yitzhak Rabin’s premiership and the PLO’s decision to recognise the Jewish state’.” But Clinton let himself be manipulated by Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, then made a last-minute and ill-prepared attempt to pull off a settlement. When it failed he blamed everybody but himself. On top of that, says Tyler, he dallied and prevaricated over the Balkans.

His last chapter, on George W. Bush’s time in office, is unexpectedly brief. But it completes a formidable charge sheet against the occupants of the White House over the past half century that is, in its page-by-page human detail, as gripping as it is depressing and he and his advisers, who flailed around helplessly as the Shah’s regime went down.

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The picture Tyler paints is of distracted presidents pushed this way and that by advisers who were often ignorant or willful and sometimes both. Tyler is forthright in a way American journalists usually are not. He characterises L. Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority in post-invasion Iraq, in one line as “an excessively self-confident Washington bureaucrat” and similarly dismisses John M. Deutch, appointed by Clinton “not bad as an ‘arrogant and vain Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist’”. This may sometimes be unfair, but it is a refreshing change from the formalistic even-handedness that marks some American writing on foreign policy.

Among senior advisers, Kissinger emerges in Tyler’s account as a typically reckless and mendacious, along with Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney under George W. Bush. But the list does not stop there. Walt Rostow gave Lyndon Johnson completely wrong-headed advice. Alexander Haig went beyond his