THE LITERARY
Life

Tracking Down Typewriters

THOSE TRUSTY TOOLS OF DAYS GONE BY

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ANNE Sexton was my first.

I found a black-and-white photo of the poet, taken in her home office during the 1960s. Sitting at her desk, she wore Laura Petrie–style pants and a crisp, white blouse. Her head was propped in her cupped hand, the customary cigarette balanced between her fingers. Her seductive half smile could take any man down. Beside her on the desk, between a coffee cup and an open book, was her typewriter. Her instrument.

It was a squat, compact thing with keys in a contrasting color to its body. A close look at the rectangular logo on the hood identified it as a Royal. But which model? The Royal company produced so many styles. Which Royal typewriter did Anne Sexton use to translate her genius to the printed page? Suddenly I had to know. I was bitten.

I Googled Royal typewriters from that era and compared them with the one in the photo like a forensic expert and quickly narrowed it down to a line of Quiet DeLuxes that came in a variety of colors. I found only two that had that unique Royal logo, one in beige and one in robin's egg blue. I could have stopped there and picked one—Sexton looked more like the blue type, and did the color really matter?—but I dug deeper. Did the same typewriter in the photo still exist?

I sought out Sexton's biographer, Diane Middlebrook, tracking down her e-mail address at Stanford University. My request was apologetic: "Don't mean to bother you.… I know this may sound strange…" Her reply was encouraging, and although her research didn't reveal any details about the typewriter, she directed me to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, which houses Sexton's letters and memorabilia. And her typewriter.

The nice woman at the Ransom Center e-mailed me everything I needed: serial number, make, model, and most important, the color—beige. She even attached an image of it.

Armed with this data, my search for a replica of Anne Sexton's typewriter began. My best bet was eBay, which I checked every day, even when I should have been working. It took several months, but one finally popped up. It had a

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Patricia Highsmith in 1977 and (*right*) Anne Sexton in 1961.

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few scratches but was in decent shape, so I bought it for ten dollars. I was the only bidder.

It arrived in a tweedlike cardboard case, customary for 1960s Royals, drowning in a box of Styrofoam peanuts. When I popped the latches it breathed out a pleasant smell like the back room of a used-book store. It was heavy—how did people travel with these things?—and, to me, stunning.

I massaged its sticky joints with oil and removed dust with Q-tips dipped in alcohol. I lightly buffed the roller with fine sandpaper, and wiped the plastic keys smooth of smudges. I polished the return lever to its original shine. I replaced the dried-out ribbons (cost: twenty-four dollars for a pack of three, found at www.mytypewriter.com). They were tricky to install and stained my fingers. It made me appreciate all those secretaries who could switch out their ribbons, barely slowing their steady clack-clack pace.

Sexton's typewriter holds a place of honor on my office bookshelf. I propped her photo next to it, and even though I don't smoke, it gives me the urge to light up whenever I use it.

After my experience with the Sexton typewriter, I began to research the typewriters of other favorite authors. Which machine did Hemingway use to type *The Old Man and the Sea*? What about Faulkner, Steinbeck, Kerouac? From a single question about a photograph, I had developed a consuming, if quirky, hobby.

My collection is small, but growing. I now own replicas of the Remington Deluxe Noiseless on display at Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's screened front porch at Cross Creek, Florida; Flannery O'Connor's 1930s Royal Standard; Faulkner's famed Underwood Universal; Hemingway's 1940 Royal Arrow; and the tiny, folding Corona No. 3 favored by both Ernie Pyle and Isak Dinesen. I use at least one of them almost every day and show them off to curious visitors. They connect me to writing from a long-gone era.

When I first began collecting, I focused only on my favorite writers. Now I try to match up other acclaimed writers with their machines. I have only one rule: I need a photo of the author using a certain typewriter or other verifiable proof that he or she used a particular machine.

My fixation with detail and accuracy has no doubt rubbed some unfortunate curators the wrong way. The librarian at the Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville hates me, I'm sure. The Royal that Flannery O'Connor took with her to the Iowa Writers' Workshop for graduate school, and probably used to write early drafts of her first novel, *Wise Blood*, is housed there. He sent me a newspaper story about O'Connor that included a picture of the typewriter. No good. I called him back.

"What's the serial number?"

"Where's that?"

I told him to slide the return lever and look for the letters and numbers imprinted on a silver bar. He said he had to walk upstairs and check. Did I mind holding?

"It begins with a *P*," he said, which helped me narrow down the right time period.

"Are the keys black or white?"

"I think they're black. What does that matter?" he asked. It matters a lot. The Royals from that era can have either, I explained.

"Are the ribbon spools covered or exposed?"

"I think they're covered."

"I need to know. Some were covered and others weren't. Do you mind checking?"

"Hang on a sec.…"

I cruise eBay and scope Goodwill stores and neighborhood yard sales for the next great find. I keep an ongoing file of writers and their machines so I know what to grab when it appears: Pearl S. Buck and the 1930s Royal Standard (with white keys) she used to write *The Good Earth*, Jack Kerouac's road-weary Underwood Standard S, George Orwell's Remington No. 2, Patricia Highsmith's Olympia, Margaret Mitchell's Remington No. 3 (which her husband bought secondhand and she relied on to type *Gone With the Wind* and countless pieces of correspondence with fans).

I have my work cut out for me with Hemingway, since he used many typewriters: a gigantic Royal No. 10 desktop with glass side panels from his early Key West days, an Underwood Noiseless that helped him finish *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and file dispatches from hotel rooms while he was a World War II correspondent, and black matte Royals from the early 1940s—especially the Quiet DeLuxe and Arrow—he favored while at Finca Vigía in Cuba.

So far I have only his Arrow. There's

a picture of Hemingway in his bedroom standing at this machine, as was his custom, typing away, bathed in the afternoon light. Maybe it was an early draft of *Islands in the Stream* or a letter to Scribner's questioning a recent royalty payment.

The Arrow is one of my favorites, and I use it almost every day. I love its deep, muffled sound and the way the glass keys feel under my fingertips. I type addresses on envelopes, school excuses for my daughter, and other correspondence. I also reserve the Arrow for first drafts of my short stories.

The mechanics are far from perfect, though. The Shift key sticks sometimes, so it's hard to type capital letters and symbols. The lowercase *L* stands in for the number one. And this model has no tabulator key so I have to space, space, space, space, space to indent a paragraph. But the extra work makes me a more conscientious writer.

I write journalism with my iBook, but fiction and personal writing (including this essay) with Faulkner's Underwood. Laptops are ideal for when I research and write at the same time, or when I work on several stories at once, going back and forth among windows. But for everything else, I seek a departure from my primary world. It's a different type of writing, so I need a different tool.

I indulge in the ritual: Roll in the paper—click, click, click—pull the lever as the bell dictates. Watch the letters and words emerge with each return.

Typewriters make me a more focused and disciplined writer. They don't forgive. It's like firing a gun with every stroke. You can't retract the bullet. If you misspell, the typewriter won't correct it for you. You have to plow on. With a typewriter, you can track your progress like a worn path. This is where I've been. This is what I've learned.

With my laptop, I often feel more solitary, whereas there's a kinship with my typewriter. My manual is a dedicated writing coach who coaxes me along: "Let's get busy. Let's see what we can do today." There have been times when I turn to my typewriter, twist in a blank sheet, and just type: gibberish, the weather, or passages I copy from a favorite novel, just to get the muscles stretched out and blow on the coals.

Sometimes when I'm on a roll, and the clicking reaches a steady rhythm, like a train in the open country, I can't grab the return lever fast enough. The sound fuels me to keep going. When I finish a page and pull it out, I hold something real. And this, too, fuels my progress by giving me a tangible sense of accomplishment. It's not just words on a screen. Scrolling on a laptop to see how many pages I have is not the same as thumbing through the growing stack in a folder, that rising mountain of words, a sign of my efforts.

There are those who see typewriting as archaic, like chiseling on a stone tablet. You can produce so much more, so much faster with a computer, they say. But look at the volume of work created by the literary giants—or basically anyone who wrote from the 1920s to the 1980s—all without the luxury of the Save command.

Typewriting authors may be an endangered species, but they still exist. David McCullough, the noted historian and Pulitzer Prize winner, has written everything he's ever published since 1965 on his sixty-nine-year-old Royal KMM standard desktop. Larry McMurtry thanked his Swiss-made Hermes while accepting the 2006 Golden Globe Award for the screenplay of *Brokeback Mountain*. Tom Wolfe still uses his 1966 Underwood. Are these old-schoolers too stubborn to switch to twenty-first-century technology? Maybe, or perhaps they simply write better without it.

A FEW months ago, I wandered into a neighborhood yard sale. A tiny woman in a floppy straw hat was selling items from her recently deceased mother's home. After digging through the wooden crates of books on Florida gardening and cookbooks, I asked offhandedly if she had any typewriters. She led me to a worn, black case sitting in the grass and opened it. I immediately recognized a 1950s-era Smith-Corona, mocha brown with dark green keys, the white letters covered with grime. I played with the keys, listened to the bell, punched the space bar with my thumb. I tried to think if any writer I knew of used this model, so I could add it to the family.

"It belonged to my mother," she said. "She wrote her life story on it. I have the manuscript in a box."

She told me her mother was a veterinarian who had migrated to the United States from Latvia in Eastern Europe and opened a practice with her husband. Theirs was one of the first veterinarian practices employed by Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. She pointed to a special accent key her mother had added so she could write in her native language. "It makes it one of a kind," the daughter said.

I paid the thirty dollars without any haggling. After all, I recognized the object's value immediately. Like the others in my collection, it had been the trusty instrument of someone who had a story to tell, letter by letter, page by page, to the very end.

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