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# Tap, Tap, Click

**I HAD AN OLD  
TYPEWRITER AND  
A BIG IDEA.  
—J. K. ROWLING**

**By Barbara DeMarco-Barrett**

It began the way most addictions begin. You tell yourself you're going to smoke just one cigarette a day and pretty soon you're up to a pack. You're just going to buy a couple of lottery tickets and before you know it you're betting on horses. That's how it was with typewriters and me.

I had one typewriter—a 1950s Hermes 2000, green with pillowy keys—that I acquired on Freecycle.org. The next was a Smith Corona Coronet electric from the late '60s found at a flea market for \$75. Now my collection hovers around 20 (I peaked at 28, sold seven, and gave one to Dorland Mountain Arts Colony). That may sound like a lot of typewriters, but compared to some of my collector friends who have 50 and up, it's nothing. Tom Hanks has 250 typewriters, as does Richard Polt, the author of *The Typewriter Revolution: A Typist's Companion for the 21st Century*. Herman Smith, who holds a yearly get-together for typewriter enthusiasts at his home outside of Morgantown, West Virginia, has 800.

You either love using typewriters or you think people who use them are certifiable. But over the past 15 years there's been a steady resurgence of typewriter love among writers, which may be a

reaction to how tech-mad the world has become. Like yoga, meditation or contemplative chewing, typewriters slow you down and help you focus. If I hit a snag while I'm writing on the computer, it's all too easy to jump on the internet. Writing on the typewriter, I'm less likely to become distracted.

Tom Furrier, a typewriter repairman for 38 years and for 28 of them the owner of Cambridge Typewriter Co. in Arlington, Massachusetts, says, "Younger people claim the number one reason they like typewriters is that they can type with no distractions. Many baby boomers come in and say that after using a computer for 25 years, they are sick of it and want a typewriter again. This past Christmas we sold more typewriters than any other year."

Author David McCullough, who's written all of his books on an old standard Royal, said it's been suggested he'd get more done if he moved to a computer, but if anything, he'd rather go slower.



Illustration by Ariel Davis

J. K. Rowling wrote the first two of her Harry Potter books by hand and typed them on a 10-year-old typewriter. One can't help but wonder how different those novels might be if they had been written on a computer.

In 2009, Cormac McCarthy's well-used Olivetti Lettera 32 manual typewriter, which he bought in 1963 and on which he has typed all his novels, sold at a Christie's auction for \$245,500. Rather than transition to digital, McCarthy found a replacement: the same typewriter for less than \$20.

I understand the Olivetti love: I have two. If one breaks, I have a backup. The Olivetti is snappy, responsive, and it's Italian, like me.

But deals on typewriters like the Olivetti have been getting harder to find since the documentary *California Typewriter*, released last year and a must-see for anyone even remotely interested in the typewriter. In it, Tom Hanks, Sam Shepard, John Mayer, David McCullough and others praise the typewriter. Prices have risen in response, especially for the Smith Corona Silent manual that Hanks said is his all-round favorite typewriter.

Another factor in the typewriter revival is surely tech's relentless assault on privacy. Every keystroke we make on the computer can be captured. The typewriter lets us create documents without a digital footprint. Russia's Federal Guard Services is on it, having spent 486,000 rubles, or \$9,000 U.S. dollars, on electric typewriters a few years back.

"I am not going to make a prediction about typewriters as a fashion trend, which will ebb and flow," says Richard Polt, "but the fundamentals for appreciating non-digital tools are going to be in place as long as our digital civilization continues on its course...The need for privacy, self-sufficiency, focus and durability will be felt even more acutely by those who are unwilling to comply with what the dominant culture dictates. Typewriters and other 'analog' devices speak to that need. So there will be typewriter users in 2100, I'm sure."

Beyond privacy concerns and rebellion against the digital regime, writers are taking to

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typewriters because of the machine's physicality. You hit the keys, make a percussive sound, ink flies onto the page, and at the end of your writing time, you've not only created a document but your hands feel it. Your shoulders feel it. You've used your brain *and* your body.

And there's no delete key. You can always X over your prose—though this can quickly seem ridiculous to a computer-oriented brain. The bonus of not having a delete key is you learn to withhold judgment until you have a first draft—a hard thing for writers to do, though that's how I wrote the article you're reading: I typed a draft on my green, red and white 1960 Smith Corona Electra 12, transcribed it word-for-word onto my MacBook Air and began to edit.

Few typewriter-obsessed writers are falling for the new typewriters, both manuals and electrics, made in China. Instead we prowl eBay, Craigslist, ShopGoodwill.com, flea markets, Facebook Marketplace and estate sales for models from the '30s through the late '60s and

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early '70s. Manual typewriters tend to be much more popular than electrics and have the added benefit that all you hear is the sound of keys hitting the paper. Electrics come with a humming soundtrack, which bothers some writers, though I'm fond of my old electric, which sounds like a loud purring cat.

A good many writers, notable and obscure, never stopped using typewriters, including Don DeLillo; Larry McMurtry, who thanked his Hermes 3000 at the 2006 Golden Globe Awards; and Paul Auster, who wrote a book about his Olympia SM9, *The Story of My Typewriter*.

Writers who are blocked credit typewriters for unblocking them. When Toby Goode, a former Disney copywriter, saw me post photos of my typewriter acquisitions on Instagram she

thought I was crazy, but when I gave her a Smith Corona electric to try out, she understood.

"Writing on this machine," she says, "draws words from me in a way that feels like an almost out-of-body experience. The sound reminds me that I'm snapping out letters that create words that might tell a story. The physical effort alone validates for me that I am writing, come what may."

A friend I met online in the Antique Typewriter Collectors Facebook group, Shanyn Fiske, PhD, the author of *Heretical Hellenism* and an associate professor of English at Rutgers University, said in the midst of a personal crisis and a dry spell writing, a friend gave her a typewriter. She stayed up all night writing. "The tactility of the machine gives me an intimacy with my words and thoughts. It helps me duck past the inner critic." She's since accumulated more than 200 typewriters.

Two years ago, Glen Crookston of Houston, a writer and a bank executive, had medical issues and needed a 10-week stretch to convalesce. He started writing again—on typewriters—and began collecting machines from the mid '30s to the early '60s. His collection now hovers around 100.

"I use an Olympia SG1 every day," he says. "It's the pinnacle of standard typewriter perfection. As for portables, I believe the late 1950s Torpedo 18b is perfect. I've never encountered a faster, more precise or tactually pleasant machine."

During his recovery, Crookston also expanded his fountain pen collection. Whereas he uses typewriters for his creative writing, he uses a fountain pen to write in his journal. Every day after his radiation treatment or a checkup, he'd stop by Dromgoole's Fine Writing in Houston to pick out another pen for himself. He collected 39, costing from just under \$100 to \$1,000.

"I have a fondness for Parkers and Sheaffers from the '30s to the '50s," he says, "and I also like modern European and Japanese brands." For paper, it has to be "smoothly laid with dense fiber that doesn't blotch, but not so dense that the ink can't find purchase."

I love writing on a yellow legal pad or Apica notebook with my Waterman fountain pen filled

with turquoise ink, and you might reasonably expect that the average typewriter devotee would share a soft spot for a fountain pen, or a freshly sharpened no. 2 pencil.

Jennifer Egan writes full first drafts of her novels and short stories on legal pads, then types them onto the computer.

Memoirist Abigail Thomas loves writing by hand in an unlined Moleskine notebook with “a pen with black ink and a point like a hypodermic needle, because I love the physical sensation of it dragging words across the thick paper. When I have something, I type it on the computer.” She then prints everything out and edits on hard copy.

Lynell George, a Los Angeles-based journalist formerly with the *Los Angeles Times*, won a 2018 Grammy for Best Album Notes for *Live at the Whiskey A Go Go: The Complete Recordings by Otis Redding*. The project began, as all her projects begin, with plain sketch pads and Rhodia top-bound spiral notebooks—“the surface of the paper is smooth to the touch”—and fountain pens, namely Lamys, a Scheaffer, and a Noodler flex nib.

“The pens and paper slow me down, in a good way,” she says. “They force me to engage with the thought and go deeper. When the piece feels solidly like a piece—tone and a sense of structure—I’ll go to the computer.”

Memoirist Erika Schickel says everything begins with a spiral notebook from the supermarket. “I have passionate dogma concerning cheap notebooks. And I simply adore Uniball Air. I also love those smooth Rhodia surfaces.”

Costa Rica-based nonfiction writer Sarah Corbett Morgan says a case of writer’s block caused her to start writing longhand. She likes to start out in a Top Flight Composition Notebook, handwriting with a fountain pen and black ink. When she uses pencils, they have to be Twist erase mechanical pencils by Pentel and a box of replaceable erasers.

“Writing longhand opens up areas of the brain that a keyboard just doesn’t,” she says.

While suspense writer T. Jefferson Parker has written most of his dozen-plus novels on

computers, he wrote his first novel, *Laguna Heat*, on a typewriter, and the entire first draft of *Summer of Fear* longhand. “It was a personal book that dealt with the death of my wife, Cat, so writing it longhand with pencils on paper seemed more personal than using a computer. It also slows your mind down a little and makes you write more deliberately.”

The fountain pen industry and its fans aren’t going anywhere. But the typewriter-obsessed worry about who will repair the machines when those who fix typewriters—many are older men—close shop. There is hope: since *California Typewriter* came out, shops around the country have seen record sales—including California Typewriter (the Berkeley store featured in the documentary) and Cambridge Typewriter shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts—and several new shops have opened, including Philly Typewriter, the only showroom and repair shop in Philadelphia.

As for antique parts, thanks to 3-D printing by New Jersey-based Pete Volz, just about any plastic or rubber part can be recreated. Customers find him on the Antique Typewriter Collectors group on Facebook.

For those who would rather not buy a typewriter but want to simulate the sound, check out Tom Hanks’s typewriter app: Hanx Writer. There are QWERTY keyboards that attach to your iPad that simulate the typing experience. There’s also a USB device you can install in your typewriter that will record keystrokes and save your writing electronically. But don’t delude yourself. As Polt says in *The Typewriter Revolution*, “the soul of a typewriter is housed in its very physical body, which leaves physical marks on physical paper.” Amen to that. **AG**

**Barbara DeMarco-Barrett** is a writer in Southern California. She is the host of *Writers on Writing* on KUCI-FM and teaches at *Gotham Writer’s Workshop*. Her work appears in *USA Noir: Best of the Akashic Noir Series* and her book, *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman’s Guide to Igniting the Writer Within* is in its 11th printing.