

Just the type

Janine Vangool's lavish history on the classic writing instrument will have pining for the click-clacks of yore

By David Hayes, The Globe and Mail Book Review, December 12, 2015

The Typewriter: A Graphic History of the Beloved Machine

by Janine Vangool

UPPERCASE, 396 pages

On Christmas morning in 1928, in a modest home in St. Catharines, Ont., my mother, then 11, discovered a black case with a bow on top. Inside was a brand-new Remington No. 2 portable typewriter, its metal painted a gleaming two-tone colour that the company called "light and dark orchid." My mother had always loved watching her father typing on his big, black Underwood and it's possible that he, in turn, had seen the Remington ads that read: "Here is just the right present for son or daughter..."

Four decades later, I learned to type on that Remington No. 2 and today it sits on display under a glass-topped coffee table in my living room. Part of my life-long fascination with typewriters.

A few years ago I discovered a kindred spirit. Janine Vangool is the Calgary-based publisher, editor and designer of UPPERCASE, a quarterly magazine dedicated to design, typography, illustration and craft. She's also a typewriter fanatic. For years as a child in Saskatoon she'd asked Santa for a typewriter, without luck. Later, when she visited the office where her mother worked as an executive secretary, she would spend all her time typing on an IBM Selectric. She founded UPPERCASE in 2009 and today, in her studio, she has on display five Royal Quiet DeLuxe portables (circa mid-fifties) in pink, turquoise, red, teal and grey, a beautiful framed print of a 1947 Hermès typewriter ad (by legendary Swiss poster designer Herbert Leupin) and assorted other typewriter memorabilia. For a while she tried to curb her obsession but then, around the time she founded the magazine, an idea formed that would allow her to continue collecting without guilt.

This fall, she produced what will probably be the crowning achievement of her obsession: an oversize, 336-page, beautifully bound and curated book called *The Typewriter: A Graphic History of the Beloved Machine*. Financed largely by a crowdfunding campaign, it has a thick cover stock, a beautiful dark linen cover wrap, a two-toned headband and the title in gold foil stamping on the spine. Inside, there is surprise tucked into the pages: a reproduction of one of Vangool's typewriter artifacts (an amusing 1981 booklet called "How to be a Super-Secretary"). The book is filled with images of typewriter advertising, greeting cards, photos from popular culture and typed letters. One from Mark Twain in 1874 reads "I AM TRYING TO GET THE HANG OF THIS NEW F FANGLED WRITING MACHINE..."

The book begins with a short introduction about the origin of the "type-writer" (as it was commonly spelled before the early 20th century, referring to the person

operating the machine as well as the machine itself). Although many inventors preceded him, the person called the "father" of the typewriter is Christopher Latham Sholes, who patented the first commercially successful model in 1868, which sat on a small table and had a foot treadle like a sewing machine. Seen as relieving people of the tyranny of the pen, it was as important in its day as the steam engine or printing press. (Even though Sholes himself disowned his invention and speculated that it might end up a short-lived fad.)

Vangool has organized the book by decades, from the 1900s to the 1980s (when IBM introduced a personal computer, the Apple Macintosh appeared and, by 1990, IBM ceased making typewriters, as did many other manufacturers). But it won't satisfy those seeking a narrative history of the typewriter; it's organized more like an inspiration board, with entertaining bits and pieces of historical imagery laid out in a visual extravaganza. Not to say that it's unfocused. Flipping through the pages, it's clear what has been chosen reflects Vangool's proclivities. As a graphic designer, she loves images of design or typographical interest. As a magazine publisher, she loves the way ad copywriting about typewriters reflects changes to society and, in particular, the way the ads and other memorabilia reflect gradually changing attitudes toward women.

In early typewriting schools, male and female students were about equal but, by 1910, 81 per cent of typists were women and ads were directed at them, as consumers (of portable typewriters, often claiming to save the embarrassment of poor handwriting) and as influencers in the workplace (in 1924, one Royal Typewriter ad read: "No one can judge typewriters quite as well as the girls who use them day after day"). Ribbons were often sold in beautiful art deco tins that looked like they contained beauty products and one trend in marketing is illustrated by an ad – that might a few decades later be for a feminine hygiene product – that quotes a "doctor" claiming the ease of a good typewriter is the "secret of 5 o'clock freshness." In ad after ad, women are depicted looking winsome with their typewriters, often with male bosses watching, if not aggressively wooing them. In one ad, a woman tilts her head coquettishly and says to her boss, "Give me an Underwood and I'll give you a better typing job."

Over the years, the "sexy secretary" became a fixation, found in ads, postcards, pin-up girl photos and erotica. In the caption for a 1907 postcard showing a businessman with his arm around his female typist, Vangool writes that it "depicts an ordinary office scene – however even the most modest of typists was expected to present themselves as pretty and receptive to romantic advances." Not exactly emancipation, but the typewriter unquestionably got women out of the home and into the workplace.

By the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the pages explode with style and colour. After the austerity of the Second World War, industrial designers went crazy with rainbow-coloured finishes and streamlined, space-age designs. An ad for Royal Quiet DeLuxe (Vangool's favourite typewriter) reads: "Perhaps you're a bit frivolous? Ah, love that pink..." "Have you a high IQ? Yellow's for you..." Ads for electric typewriters promise ease and efficiency. "Like to feel like an honest-to-gosh Office Princess... want the

boss to play Prince Charming every day? Then beg, bother or bewitch him into getting you the all-new Underwood Electric Typewriter... it makes you both look good."

In his 2005 book, *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting*, Canadian writer and cultural critic Darren Wershler-Henry talks about the lingering appeal of typewriters in popular culture. "...the typewriter has become the symbol of a non-existent sepia-toned era when people typed passionately late into the night under the flickering light of a single naked bulb, sleeves rolled up, suspenders hanging down, lighting each new cigarette off the smouldering butt of the last, occasionally taking a pull from the bottle of bourbon in the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet."

Yes, true, although typewriters are closer to the boundary separating nostalgia from utility than most long-discarded products of the 20th century. There remains a direct connection to typewriters. On our computers, equipped with keyboards still using the roughly 140-year-old QWERTY arrangement of keys, we put words on what looks like a glowing facsimile of a page. It's a quieter, more versatile and efficient version of a typewriter. Another measure of the connection are apps that give our computers the onscreen appearance and sound of a manual typewriter (the tapping of keys, the bell at the end of a line). Not to mention authors, such as Tom Wolfe, Don DeLillo, Danielle Steel, Will Self, Cormac McCarthy and P. J. O'Rourke, who still believe typewriters are the most direct way to get thoughts onto a page.

David Hayes is a Toronto writer.