

From Pencil on Paper to Laptop and Beyond

I came into my love for writing at an exciting time. Let me explain.

Back in 1980, when I was a freshman in high school, I began to write my first novel (The Yuletide Spirit – as yet, still unpublished). At that time PC's were still pretty much unheard of by regular folk and I didn't have access to a typewriter, so the best option for me was to fill in the blank pages of a blue-covered, 8-1/2" x 5-1/2", college-lined notebook with a #2 pencil, both, of which, I found in the junk drawer in our kitchen. (I wasn't confident enough yet to brandish a pen).

It was an arduous process. Not familiar with using an outline to plot chapters and such, I often had to carefully tear pages out and place them back in the notebook where they rightly belonged in the story. Then there was the problem of keeping the size of my writing consistent because when my hand and fingers got tired, my neat handwriting became almost illegible, oversized, undersized and sometimes it even unconsciously changed to cursive writing. Some nights I would look back at what I'd written after a day of sweat and wordsmithing and need a translator to help me decipher it. And often, I'd erase and rewrite a certain paragraph so many times I would rip through the paper with the eraser. More than once I'd get so into what I was writing that I broke the tip of the pencil. Add to that the weird, fleshy, painful growth that always appeared on the third knuckle of my middle finger when I wrote too much (it's called the "Writer's Bump"), and you have the perfect antidote to writing a novel. All of this is not good for the peaceful flow of writing a story and if the writer isn't careful, it shows up on the page. But I stumbled along despite these setbacks, day after day, and finally finished the first draft of the story a year later.

Then, one day in 1982, a neighbor threw out his old Smith-Corona manual typewriter. I saw it in the garbage can lying on top of bags of trash and yard waste (this was back when you could combine the two). It shone like a giant gray, smoothed water stone in the morning sunshine; all of its corners rounded, the case aerodynamically retro. From the aged, scratched and dented look of it I guessed it was an old relic from the 1960's, probably from before I was born. It seemed as if the miles and years had conspired against it – and won. But I didn't care. Without hesitation, I salvaged it from the uncaring grips and bleak fate of the garbage men and ran it inside to my basement office. As I sat at my desk, in front of that used and abused, ugly beast, I felt like a real, honest-to-God writer. All the great writers of the twentieth century used typewriters, didn't

they? Well, here I was, the latest in a long line of Fitzgeralds, Hemingways and Asimovs – finally! I was ready to claim my author birthright!

Turns out there was a reason my neighbor threw the typewriter out. It didn't take me long to figure out that the typebars for the "Period" and the letter "K" were missing, so I had to physically write them in with a black-inked pen afterwards. The "Comma" typebar was permanently adjusted so that it fell in the middle, vertically, of a line instead of at the bottom. The button that reversed the ribbon spool was broken so I had to take my fingertip, press down on the left-side spool and turn it counterclockwise, thereby rewinding an ink ribbon that probably left its last strong impressions on the page during the Johnson administration - sometimes letters decided to appear, sometimes they were mere, faded ghosts of themselves. And don't even get me started on the fricking feed roller!

Anyway, I fiddled with that machine until 1986 when my wife at the time, in a wonderfully selfless act of love and pity, secretly got all my friends together to chip in for an electric typewriter on my twentieth birthday. It was an Olivetti and it was a beautiful thing. The color of desert sand, it hummed like a vibrator when I turned it on and had all these extra options on it, most of which I never used (kind of like my GMC Envoy). As long as it had all its typebars and a full ribbon of ink, I was in Heaven!

Then, in 1990, my best friend, Larry, bought himself a Commodore 64 for the insanely low price of \$199. I saw this thing and nearly dropped a stink brick in my underwear. Believe it or not, Commodore 64 was the best-selling PC in the 1980's, selling over 17 million units starting in 1982, and I could see why. It had a keyboard, a Taxan monitor and a 5-1/4" floppy disk drive (remember those?) where, if I remember correctly, the 64 bit hard drive resided. Not a lot of memory, I grant you, but the best part was that it came with a neat and simple little piece of software called "Word Writer." This revolutionized the quality and quantity of my stories exponentially! I could edit a line of text on the screen, I could copy and paste and move entire paragraphs to different pages, insert line breaks or whole chapters, anything I wanted to do to a story I could do in seconds with no stress whatsoever. Then I could print the story out on one of those inexpensive, primitive but effective dot matrix printers. Saving the story to a floppy disk was a life-altering (for a writer) event. Instead of having to make photocopies of the original story on the school library photocopier at 5 cents a copy, I could simply access the floppy disk, open the Word Writer document up and print it again. Amazing!

Some time in the late 1990's, I purchased my first Macintosh and discovered "Microsoft Word," to me, the end-all and be-all of all word processing programs. This software could do everything the Commodore 64 could do – and more! It could spellcheck, it could change fonts to bold face, italicize; it could color fonts, underline and resize them to any size. It could adjust page and gutter sizes and on and on. What a miracle!

And what does the future have in store for writers? Well, we've already seen the advent of a handful of programs that can take what you say "aloud" and transfer it to the page. Though this may be a neat novelty for some, to me, nothing can replace the intimacy and the feeling of satisfaction I get as I physically type down my thoughts and massage them into life. And where could we go from there? Machines capable of reading your thoughts and putting them down on paper? Or machines completely kicking the middleman out and writing stories on their own? No. Not for me.

I often wonder if, say, Hemingway were alive today...would all this technology have improved his writing? Probably not, but it sure as hell would have made everything easier for him and maybe the world could have squeezed a few extra short stories or novels out of him.

Think about that!

Thanks for your time,
GC Rosenquist