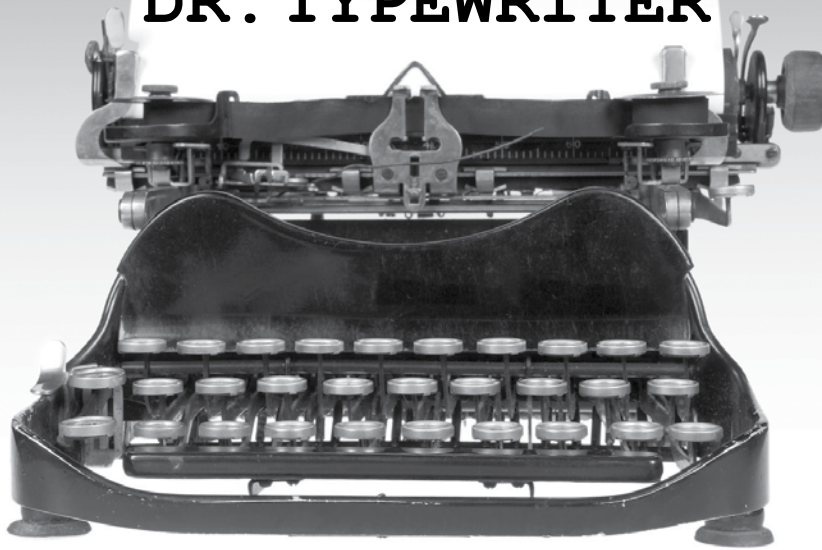


DR. TYPEWRITER



by David Morrison

In a recent issue, Vancouver Island University's student newspaper *The Navigator* ran an article entitled *The Final, Sad Death of the Typewriter*. Lamenting the closure of Godrej & Boyce in Mumbai, India – the world's last manufacturers of manual typewriters (Brother® still produces electric models) – the piece opened thus: *"Regardless of whatever small amount of life force it had previously clung to, the typewriter is now dead."* The report went on to deem the typewriter as now *"nothing but an antique - something you might have crammed away in a basement or attic, which your kids will wonder about if you ever decide to drag it out again."* Well, try telling this to 15-year old Nanaimo resident, Dirk Plante.

Around three years ago, shortly after they had immigrated here from the Netherlands, my wife and I befriended an extraordinary, highly creative family. Both parents and their three sons fascinate us individually but Dirk, the eldest son, is particularly interesting to me. He seems atypical of his age, in many ways a boy out of time. There is much about the modern world that leaves him cold, his opinions on various matters frequently echoing my own.

Dirk is not on Facebook or Twitter. He does not own a cell phone. He claims no need of an iPad, iPod or i-Whatever. "I might be interested if they weren't so much of an addiction," he says. "This is such a beautiful place, with the mountains and forests, but I see so many people staring at their little screens all the time, obsessed by them, missing so much great stuff around them."

What does interest this young man, however, is the beauty found in contraptions of yesteryear. He likes Bakelite telephones, 8-Track cartridge players and so forth, but above all he is utterly in thrall to old typewriters. So much so, that in his short time here he has already amassed a collection of some fifty-five, the earliest model from 1909. (Three of these were acquired on the day I interviewed him for this profile, so it is reasonable to expect that figure has since risen.)

Dirk's love of typewriters developed in Holland, when in possession of his grandfather's 1936 Olympia Elite. "It's a beautiful machine, and I was obsessed with it," he admits. When starting a new life in Canada, it was not long before his interest was rekindled. "I went to the recycling shop and saw this old Underwood sitting on the shelf. It was totally destroyed! The keys were stuck, it was dusty; I couldn't even tell the real colour. I left it there, but had this feeling I wanted to repair something, to make something look nice, so I thought about that typewriter. I couldn't get to the shop because of school, but mom went and said it wasn't there anymore. Later, at the SOS Thrift Store in Parksville, I found a typewriter and got very excited, so bought it for \$2.99! A few weeks later I went to the recycling store again and found an electric machine and a small portable one, then just got into the rhythm of buying typewriters when I found good ones at good prices."

Why typewriters? What is it about this kind of machine that so captivates Dirk? Does it stem from a mechanical perspective, or somewhere else entirely? Knowing Dirk

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and his artistic family as I do, I was not surprised to learn that the physical aesthetics of the creative process lie at the heart of his attraction to typewriters.

“First, I like the sound of the keys,” he explains. “Every person I talk to about typewriters, they compare it to a computer, because they are both used to type. But with a typewriter you must put so much effort into writing, and I appreciate that. You are using your strength to type; you can feel the key hitting the paper, and the energy of the spring tension. You have to handle the machine, but with a computer you move the mouse a bit and click the buttons, and that’s it. It’s more fun and more rewarding, as you see the mechanism move and hear the bell of the return carriage. You see where the letters come from, how they are made.”



Dirk “Dr. Typewriter” Plante • David Morrison photo

Dirk owns a wardrobe full of typewriters, stored for convenience – “We need a bigger house!” he quips - and a rack where a selection of his favourites are displayed. But they are not there simply to be admired. “I like to use them, but I also like to keep them in good shape, so maybe only write a page or two a week on some,” says the young curator of his personal typewriter museum. “I would rather see them being used than getting dusty on my shelf, as it was what they were made for!”

To this end, thinking it sad that so few people seem to exchange letters anymore, Dirk types, on average, around forty letters a month, every month, to friends and relatives in Holland and Canada. He also produces lengthy, highly detailed stories, particularly detective/crime thrillers inspired by such as Hercules Poirot, the Midsomer Murders and his hero, Columbo. Tellingly, Dirk enjoys this genre of movie because in them, “people are thinking, piecing together puzzles in their heads to make it all fit.”

The attention to detail in Dirk’s letters and stories is indicative of the level of patience he exhibits when cleaning, as he terms them, ‘junked up’ typewriters. “I’m not an expert in repairing them,” he states, “but I can clean them pretty good, to be honest. Sometimes I can do it in hours, but sometimes I’m busy for a week on them.” And considering the age and condition of some typewriters he picks up, sometimes he has to be, but then his hobby/passion has also led him to unearth some real beauties, true antiques. “Not that the model is rare,” he continues, “but my No. 3 Underwood is in really good condition, which makes it rare because some machines are in such a mess.” While Dirk fully expects to find decades-old typewriters in poor shape, one thing that does upset him is when the keys have been removed. “I’m very disturbed by the fact that people chop off the keys of typewriters for jewellery, like bracelets and rings,” he says, frowning.

Despite Dirk’s distaste for the negative aspects of social networking and the like, he does run a YouTube channel under the moniker Dr. Typewriter. (“The name isn’t perfect, as I’m not a doctor,” he informs me, dryly.) Here, alongside fun clips and collected typewriter-related footage, he posts homemade film ‘tours’ of his typewriters. They are fascinating, especially because real skills in storyboarding and scripting are clearly evident. Filmmaking is something that interests Dirk a great deal and is already being entertained as a potential career path.

So, that’s my young friend Dirk for you, but you can call him Dr. Typewriter if you wish. He won’t mind. And all he asks is that the next time you tippity-tap on a computer keyboard, you spare a thought for its ‘dead’ predecessor. “I want to make sure they are not forgotten,” appeals Dirk. “They are still useful, you know?”

*For more information, please visit
www.youtube.com/user/DrTypewriter*