



The Writer and Technology

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MY FRIEND THE UFOLOGIST was the first to get a personal computer. The print was crude and much inferior to that of my old manual. I scoffed. 'It's the way of the future,' said the UFOlogist. 'Progress.'

My first computer was an Amstrad. No hard drive, everything was saved on discs. We got off to a bad start. It wouldn't turn on. Was I sure I'd put the plug on correctly? I took it back and got one that did work. I named it Bob, after the song that begins with Dylan asking the sound engineer, 'Is it rollin', Bob?' I was never sure either. All was well for a while, until, suddenly, everything I'd been working on vanished. I was told the problem was A, and then that it was B, and finally C. It turned out to be none of the above; the discs themselves were all faulty. My friend the anarchist poet said he had no sympathy for anyone who used a computer. You plant the dragon seed, you reap the dragon harvest. The company never apologised either.

I moved to Brooklyn for a bit. In Britain the Amstrad was called a word processor. I bought a word processor. It wasn't a computer. It was a typewriter with a screen. I hated it, and it hated me. I had a deadline that couldn't be changed. Something went horribly wrong and I couldn't print out. Desperate, I ended up in the store where I'd bought it, using one of their floor models to print my book. Customers kept asking me for advice. 'Don't buy one of these.'

My friend the scientist said, 'You don't want a word processor, you want a real computer.' He took me to a real computer store to buy a real computer.



State of the art. Hard drive and everything. When I brought it home there was hilarity from my loved ones. ‘Are you mad? You’re a writer not a mathematician. What do you need with that?’ I named it Sitting Bull.

I’ve lost count of how many computers I’ve had. Another Amstrad, a series of laptops, two mini-Macs. I began my writing life on my mother’s old office Remington and followed that with a series of portable manual typewriters – including the intrepid, pre-War Erika – eventually buying a secondhand office electric. None of those machines did anything but type. The only sounds they made were the comforting clackclackclacking that filled the nights. Sometimes the keys jammed; you regularly needed to change the ribbon. The machine I use now lets me edit and revise, copy and paste. I can write to and see people on it, listen to music, watch a film and find out just about anything I want to know. Instead of having to clean the oven or water the plants when I’m stuck and think my brain may implode, I can play solitaire. But there are no small problems. When the computer freezes my world freezes with it.

That, I believe, is called progress.