

Sheet by Sheet

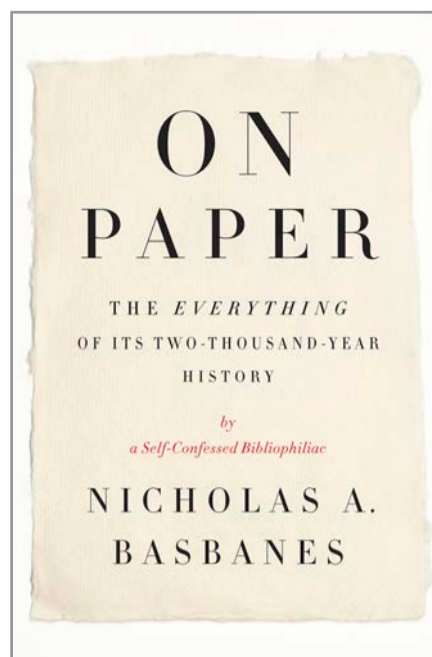
ON PAPER:

THE EVERYTHING OF ITS TWO-THOUSAND-YEAR HISTORY

REVIEWED BY **CHRISTINE ROSEN**

WE ARE SURROUNDED BY TECHNOLOGIES we take for granted, perhaps none so much as paper. Despite our increasing devotion to our smartphones and hyperbolic talk about a coming “paperless” society, the idea of going a day without a ream of paper in the office copy machine would alarm most people accustomed to using it. Because so many of paper’s duties are humble or mundane—facilitator of personal hygiene, bureaucracy, and currency exchange, to name but a few—it is easy to overlook the central role it plays in our lives. Yet, as Nicholas Basbanes reminds us in his wide-ranging new study, *On Paper*, it is precisely this versatility and ubiquity that make paper worthy of respect, even in a digital age.

Basbanes identifies himself as a “bibliophile.” His interest in paper grew out of a career exploring the culture of books in books of his own, including *Patience and Fortitude* (2001),



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about book preservationists, and the supremely entertaining *A Gentle Madness* (1995), about extreme book collectors and other bibliomanes. *On Paper* represents a new contribution to an ongoing dialogue about the future of reading and print. In recent years, writers such as American journalist Nicholas Carr have plumbed our collective cultural anxiety about the fate of the book, and of literacy itself. Recent studies such as English novelist Philip Hensher’s ode to the lost art of handwriting betray a broader concern for the material culture of reading, writing, and publishing. The British writer Ian Sansom subtitled his own recent study of paper *An Elegy*.

Basbanes is more optimistic about



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Still rolling: Paper is a surprisingly durable material.

the future of paper, in part because he has so thoroughly explored its past. “In contrast to the explosive manner in which the Internet has galloped its way from continent to continent over just a few recent decades,” he writes, “paper took root methodically, one country at a time. Yet, as ‘paradigm shifts’ go, it was monumental, offering a medium of cultural transmission that was supple, convenient, inexpensive, highly mobile, simple to make . . . and suited to hundreds of other applications, writing being just the most far-reaching.”

As Basbanes demonstrates, this humble technology played a key role in many crucial historical moments: Gutenberg’s printing press was remarkable, but it was nothing without paper on which to print. Paper was a key component of the first hot-air balloon, developed in 18th-century France, a great advance in the technology of flight. It has figured prominently in rebellions and political scandals over the centuries: Taxation of official paper documents in the American colonies by means of the Stamp Act of 1765 helped foment revolutionary

war with Britain. The Zimmermann Telegram, the coded message the German government sent to its ambassador in Mexico in 1917 authorizing him to promise U.S. territory to Mexico if it entered World War I on the German side, helped goad America into entering the war after the British deciphered it. Today, with the U.S. government pulping about one hundred million top-secret documents every year, our country's most sensitive records are being recycled into pizza boxes and egg cartons.

To give readers a sense of paper's past significance and continued popularity, Basbanes travels to China and Japan to witness the ancient art of papermaking. He describes how the Chinese invented paper two millennia ago, after which the innovation spread east to Korea and Japan, and west through Central Asia and, eventually, Europe. Early paper, made by combining the inner bark of trees with scraps of cloth, hemp, and fishing nets that were soaked, beaten into pulp, then stretched and dried across a bamboo frame, was a vast improvement on the clay tablets and papyrus scrolls used in previous eras. Buddhist monks intent on disseminating their sacred sutras were some of paper's most enthusiastic early purveyors. By the 17th century, papermaking was becoming industrial-

ized; demand was high, fueled in part by the rise of newspapers. Among his polymathic pursuits, Benjamin Franklin was a paper merchant in the American colonies.

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Basbanes also considers basic human conveniences, such as facial tissue and toilet paper. Many of these products are manufactured by the U.S. megacorporation Kimberly-Clark, whose philosophy of paper use is summed up by one of the company's slogans, "One and done." Evidently, Americans have long had the odd distinction of being far more enthusiastic users of toilet tissue than people in other countries. Basbanes notes, "The legendary World War II correspondent Ernie Pyle reported how a chaplain who had gone through the pockets of 10 Americans killed in battle had found more packets of toilet paper than of any other item." He cites another historian who claims that the British army supplied

its soldiers with three sheets a day, while the Americans required a whopping twenty-two and a half. Today we remain enthusiastic consumers of toilet paper, but, in response to pressure from environmentalists, Kimberly-Clark increasingly relies on recycled materials to satisfy our habits.

Perhaps the most valuable form of paper, today as in the past, is money. Basbanes visits the Crane paper factory in Dalton, Massachusetts, which counts the U.S. Treasury as one of its largest clients. One Crane executive couldn't resist boasting to Basbanes that although the British five-pound note features fancy watermarking and illustrations, it only lasts an average of 12 months in circulation. By comparison, the American dollar enjoys a more robust three-and-a-half-year life.

Basbanes also examines the importance of paper for documenting identity and nationality, citing Czeslaw Milosz's observation in *The Captive Mind*: "The emperors of today have drawn conclusions from this simple truth: Whatever does not exist on paper, does not exist at all." Ownership of a passport has often been a matter of life and death, particularly during wartime, and Basbanes offers glimpses of the thriving black market in forged documents that has

facilitated both crime and espionage.

As critical as certain pieces of government-issued paper can be, there's an awful lot of it that simply ends up in a file or a box somewhere, filed by bureaucratic record-keepers. After considering the Sisyphean task of archiving and storing federal government records, Basbanes approvingly cites Balzac's characterization of bureaucracy as a "giant power set in motion by dwarfs." Paper might seem ephemeral, but on a bureaucratic scale, it can pose an insurmountable challenge to render unreadable—as the East German secret police discovered when they attempted to destroy Stasi files in 1989 as the Berlin Wall fell.

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Finally, Basbanes explores paper's invaluable role as a medium for creative work. Without access to paper, Leonardo da Vinci would not have been able to brainstorm his way through all those notebooks. Basbanes also offers a glimpse of a heterodox group of paper obsessives—the document chasers, antiquarian book collectors, philatelists, and others consumed by passion for particular kinds of paper. After showing Basbanes a draft copy of the Munich Agreement, annotated by both Hitler and Chamberlain, one renowned collector enthused, “When you ask me about the power of a piece of paper, I say the power of the document you are now holding in your hands is staggering. This is the document that starts World War II.”

Readers searching for an overarching theme beyond paper's extraordinary history and utility will be disappointed by *On Paper*. The book is more a loose collection of essays on the many uses of paper than a chronological history. And parts of it, such as Basbanes's descriptions of particular papermaking techniques or the corporate histories of paper companies, suffer from a surfeit of detail. Although he promises an exploration of “the *idea* of paper,” he doesn't quite deliver one. His explorations of the creation, culture, and endurance of

paper are worthy subjects in their own right, however, and Basbanes is an excellent guide to them.

In the book's final chapters, Basbanes reflects on the paper that swirled around Lower Manhattan in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. In a few short hours, business documents, notes, cards, and other everyday paper ephemera were transformed into a horrifying kind of debris—singed, bloodstained reminders of the people who had perished. That so many pieces of paper survived while the steel-and-glass buildings that had housed them collapsed seemed surreal to those who witnessed that day. Today, we understand those papers not merely as material objects, but as symbols of loss and survival in which we invest great meaning. As Basbanes's book shows, paper, that most remarkable technology, has always been the most effective medium for capturing what is both practical and passionate about being human. ■

CHRISTINE ROSEN is a Future Tense Fellow at the New America Foundation and senior editor of *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society*. Her newest book, *The Extinction of Experience*, will be published in 2014.