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'Paper: An Elegy,' by Ian Sansom



Courtesy Of The Author

Ian Sansom

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Paper

An Elegy

By Ian Sansom

(William Morrow; 230 pages; \$24.99)

You can download "Paper: An Elegy" to your Kindle. But Ian Sansom's stylishly quirky history reminds us that some paper goods remain impossible to digitize. Cigarette manufacturers still need paper. So does anyone making a lamp shade or the label on which a bar code is printed. Even travelers who check in with an electronic ticket still vomit into a paper bag and repair the damage with a wet wipe (invented in 1915, Sansom's dogged sleuthing reveals). The paper handkerchiefs carried by 17th century Japanese travelers were such novelties in Europe that collectors fought over used specimens.

One could add that even the two months of the year when e-readers, hardbacks and paperbacks sell most briskly are kicked off with a paper shredder; Sansom's book came out too soon to mention New York's 2012 Thanksgiving parade, where spectators piecing together confetti discovered that they were recycled from confidential police records.

Difficult as it is for us to imagine a post-paper world, classical civilizations managed just fine without it. Clay or wax tablets, stone, papyrus, parchment: All of these seemed adequate to write on until a material that miraculously combined durability with portability and affordability came along. Stone lasts but can't be carried; papyrus is light but brittle and vulnerable to weather; parchment is as expensive as the animals that are skinned to make it.

Invented in China around A.D. 100 and brought to Europe via Muslim Spain just over a millennium later, paper soon generated as much buzz as any e-ink technology today. The newfangled material offered a fourth benefit on top of price, weight and longevity: Where papyrus and parchment could be scraped clean and reused, paper's absorption of ink made it unerasable. The disadvantage of being less recyclable was outweighed by the advantage of being less vulnerable to forgery. Our Etch A Sketch-like e-readers may bear more resemblance to medieval palimpsests than to the substance invoked in Amazon's Paperwhite branding.

Like e-readers, paper also aroused controversy. What provokes nostalgia today was once seen as an

enemy to tradition: 13th century sheep and cattle breeders had lobbied for a papal decree invalidating documents on paper. That it offered a cut-rate substitute for parchment doesn't mean that paper wasn't expensive in absolute terms. Though one Bible no longer required herds of sheep to be slaughtered, until two centuries ago, paper remained the single biggest cost in most book production. Our now-dying custom of starting a business letter halfway down the page comes from a time when wasting an expensive sheet marked respect, the epistolary equivalent of a potlatch.

One factor driving up prices was the raw materials. Where Asian paper incorporated mulberry bark, Europeans made it from linen rags. In England, the expense of old clothes was compounded by paper taxes, which served both to finance wars and to limit the circulation of news. What open source and creative commons are today, campaigns against "taxes on knowledge" were for Victorian radicals.

Only in the second half of the 19th century did the lifting of those duties combine with steam technology and plant-based raw materials (like the eucalyptus, pine and beech that went into the pages of "Paper: An Elegy") to make paper cheap enough to be disposable. As paper bags and toilet paper came onto the market, old newspapers were suddenly redundant.

Sansom's title may call out Sven Birkerts' "Gutenberg Elegies," but his tone is briskly witty where Birkerts' was ponderously wistful. Neither Sansom's sharp eye for surprising examples nor his offbeat first-person charm should obscure the depth or breadth of his research. Though the whimsy occasionally wears thin (do we really need a paragraph on a paper-boat newsletter titled "The world's leading journal of cellulose-based naval architecture"?), "Paper" deserves to be placed on the same shelf (or drive) as Nicholson Baker's 2001 "Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper."

Baker's description of scientists analyzing the sperm of rats exposed to chemicals used to de-acidify wood-pulp paper gets a run for its money in Sansom's even farther-fetched factoids. Who knew that Pius VII was crowned pope with the aid of a papier-mache tiara, that Louis XI traveled with his own wallpaper or that Matisse's doctor prescribed him dark glasses to wear while cutting out collages?

A celebration of the age of paper

PAPER

AN ELEGY

Ephemeral and Everlasting!

IMPORTANT NOTICE!

Paper is the technology through which and with which we have made sense of the world. The making of paper and the manifold uses of paper have made our civilisation what it is.

Ian Sansom

'First of all, respect your paper!'

J.M.W. Turner's advice to Mary Lloyd, recollected by her in 1880, quoted in *Turner Studies*, vol. 4 no. 1 (1984)

Including not only — and obviously — books, letters and diaries, but also account ledgers and ballot papers, handbills and handbills, handbags and drawings, bank cheques and ledgers, banners and banners, best men, birth certificates, death certificates, baptism and baptism papers, board games, bookends, business cards, various and packaging, menus, bills of fare and cash register receipts, charts (nautical, medical, educational and otherwise), cigarette papers, clothes (including suits, hats, skirts, overalls, kimonos, overalls and coveralls), coffee, colouring books, confetti, coupons, construction and tracing paper, cover boards, envelopes, skirts and gowns (medical, industrial and culinary), fireworks, flypapers and official forms of all kinds, funerals, greeting cards, postcards, lines, carpets, lanterns and lampshades, library cards, identity cards and passports, magazines, catalogues, newspapers, maps and globes, paper bags, paper cups, paper dolls, paper flowers, paper money, paper pipes, postmen, photographs, playing cards, postage stamps, Post-it notes, poems, prescriptions, postcards, report cards and registers, newspapers, thin books, stationery, stickers, streamers, tags, labels and tickets, tea bags, telephone directories, wallpaper, wrapping paper, etc., etc., etc.

Paper: An Elegy, by Ian Sansom

Baker's mission was urgently practical: to stop libraries from discarding the newspapers they digitized. Sansom's is more meditative: to open our eyes to a substance that we risk taking for granted, as a fish ignores the sea in which it swims. The moment seems right for this consciousness raising. Sansom dreams of an e-reader that smells like paper, but an approximation already exists in the form of scratch-and-sniff stickers made to be affixed to the Kindle.

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