



Paper: Paging Through History

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From the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Cod* and *Salt*, a definitive history of paper and the astonishing ways it has shaped today's world.

Paper is one of the simplest and most essential pieces of human technology. For the past two millennia, the ability to produce it in ever more efficient ways has supported the proliferation of literacy, media, religion, education, commerce, and art; it has formed the foundation of civilizations, promoting revolutions and restoring stability. One has only to look at history's greatest press run, which produced 6.5 billion copies of *Máo zhuxí yulu, Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung (Zedong)*—which doesn't include editions in 37 foreign languages and in braille—to appreciate the range and influence of a single publication, in paper. Or take the fact that one of history's most revered artists, Leonardo da Vinci, left behind only 15 paintings but 4,000 works on paper. And though the colonies were at the time calling for a boycott of all British goods, the one exception they made speaks to the essentiality of the material; they penned the Declaration of Independence on British paper.

Now, amid discussion of “going paperless”—and as speculation about the effects of a digitally dependent society grows rampant—we've come to a world-historic juncture. Thousands of years ago, Socrates and Plato warned that written language would be the end of “true knowledge,” replacing the need to exercise memory and think through complex questions. Similar arguments were made about the switch from handwritten to printed books, and today about the role of computer technology. By tracing paper's evolution from antiquity to the present, with an emphasis on the contributions made in Asia and the Middle East, Mark Kurlansky challenges common assumptions about technology's influence, affirming that paper is here to stay. *Paper* will be the commodity history that guides us forward in the twenty-first century and illuminates our times.

Paper: Paging Through History Details

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Patty says

I'm very into microhistories – books focused on a specific topic or single event – and Kurlansky is one of the best known authors of them, with his book *Salt* probably the best-known microhistory of them all. In this book, he takes on paper, which he defines very narrowly: "a very thin layer of randomly woven fibers", which excludes papyrus, parchment, vellum, and other materials that I'd thought were basically the same thing. Now I know better! And then of course there are all the paper-adjacent developments to cover: written language itself, numbers, printing, books, art (from watercolors to woodblocks to lithographs to photography), ink, newspapers, and even the American Revolution (after all, The Stamp Act was pretty important!). Kurlansky covers paper from prehistory through the Industrial Revolution right up to the modern day, where a trend for hand-made paper is pushing back against the last few centuries of machine-made.

Unfortunately I didn't think this book was quite as fun as the previous books by Kurlansky I've read. Still, it was interesting, and I particularly liked Kurlansky's repeated arguments against technological determinism – the idea that new technologies change society. Instead, as Kurlansky clearly shows, society changes first, and new technologies develop in response. At a time when people can't stop decrying the terrifying oncoming consequences of texting or email or facebook, it's nice to be reminded that people have been prophesying the exact same doom since the dawn of history.

I read this as an ARC via NetGalley.

Margaret Sankey says

Like Kurlansky's other books on a commodity, this ends up being a full spectrum tour of human communications, religion, art and commerce, centered around the material culture of paper. There is nothing new here, but with a global sweep, Kurlansky explains how, depending on your material (mulberry bark, cotton, wood pulp, papyrus) and your purpose (shoji screens, scrolls, sketchpad, bureaucratic forms), you get different ends, with artifact lives of their own.

Bob says

I had very high hopes for Paper, but Kurlansky's book never fulfilled them. The book could never make up its mind whether it was about the manufacturing of paper or what paper is used for. Kurlansky fashions himself an expert on the history of technology, but seems to sell Asia short.

This is the second book I've read on the history of paper. I read Ian Sansom's book on it in 2013. That wasn't all that interesting either. I think I'm officially retired from the history of paper reading department.

Holly Woodward says

This book was a great read, subtly conveying the ways paper is interwoven with history, both material and intellectual. In one particularly interesting section, Kurlansky traces the ways the American Revolution was bound up with the history of printing in the colonies.

I loved the author's book, *Salt*, and this new work rivals its brilliance.

Karen says

getting real tired of white men writing about book history and sounding condescendingly incredulous that chinese people were making paper before they had a name for cellulose. idk maybe I'll pick it up another time.

Debbie says

This book was received as part of the Goodreads Firstreads giveaway.

I have long been intrigued by Mark Kurlansky's approach to history - tracing a single item's impact on the history of the world. Paper was my first chance to read one of his works and I was very impressed. Kurlansky starts with cave painting and traces paper's and the world's history all the way through to the present day. Throughout the book he shows how the creation of paper and corresponding developments such as paper mills, books and printing presses were the result of the needs of the people not preceded by these technological innovations. The book provides not only a fascinating look at paper but the history and historical events surrounding it. I especially enjoyed the last part where Kurlansky looks at the revival of hand made paper and crafts along with alternatives to wood based paper.

Steven says

Yet another one of those "biography of things" books that I adore, written by the guy who can be argued started this whole genre.

In addition to paper, this book is just as much about the evolution of writing, the early book industry (or *incunabula*, one of my favorite words from library school) and printing in general. I liked the earlier parts of the book that dealt with the topic from a historic view. The later chapters felt a bit unnecessary and seemed somehow separate. Kurlansky seems to have just visited some modern paper mills and people who make paper by hand around the world -- notably Japan and the Basque region in Europe. It's full of statistics and details about industrial age printing equipment. There are plenty of illustrations throughout the book of paper artifacts, but I would have appreciated some illustrations of the paper-making process and associated tools, considering so much of the book was devoted to this topic.

I will note, however that the paper on which this book was printed seemed above average in quality, which was quite pleasing.

Matt says

Those who have been following my reviews of late will know that I have been drawn to Mark Kurlansky's work on the history of certain edible items. In these pieces, the author depicts the evolution and exponential uses for the products throughout the centuries. Here, with the history of paper before me, some may feel that things will take a significant turn towards the mundane. Just how interesting can paper be and how can someone extol its virtues for hundreds of pages? I, too, was somewhat a skeptic, but also highly curious to see if it could be done in an entertaining and educational manner. Kurlansky posits early in the book that it is not paper, per se, that is examined here, but the evolution of human's communication utilising paper as its conduit. Still not sold? Well, Kurlansky explores some of the early forms of written communication—from the development of ancient Chinese through intricate and interconnected symbols through the development of the Roman alphabet—and how such thoughts were placed on objects for long-term reference. Moses and those Ten Commandments were only a primitive means by which of moving from oral tradition to the document form that allowed many to view and potentially understand what had been said. Stone, clay, bark, and even animal skin seemed to be the early forms of documentation material, but paper was also being used to adequately hold words or symbols for longer periods of time. Kurlansky explores varieties of paper and their acidic levels, which also played a key role in durability, both in the short term and throughout history, as well as the varied types of plant life that could be used to create paper. From there, it was the evolution of documentation that fills the biography's pages. Handwritten accounts served for a time, but when Gutenberg and others were able to create or hone printing presses, mass communication became possible. Interestingly enough, Kurlansky argues that history takes not the inventor of a concept but he/she who is able to find the best way to apply it to society and deifies them. That intellect has helped label concepts throughout history, pushing false praise on a number of people. As paper was less costly and easier to mass produce, it was also highly effective in the art world. No longer did an artist need to worry about waste, as they could sketch out an idea or a concept before putting it to canvass. Paper also ushered in the era of drawing and rough drafts, which proved highly useful for the likes of Michelangelo. Kurlansky also explores some of the details around paper's use as a political weapon, helping to fuel many a revolution through political tracts and pamphlets. There is extensive discussion of the American and French Revolutions, spread to the masses by the printed material made available. During the latter portion of the book, Kurlansky explores the economic ramifications of paper making around the world, particularly paper mills and the environmental impact. The reader can see the financial side of paper and how something as simple as a sheet used for writing can be such a lucrative industry, particularly for some Asian countries, who have taken on the recycling process and redistribution of paper back into the market. For a topic that may seem rather drab, Kurlansky creates quite an interesting biography that weaves the history of paper through the ages, permitting the reader to learn a little more about the building blocks of their favourite book. Unless we're talking about e-books, but that's for another discussion. Highly recommended for anyone with an interest in biographies, particularly of a unique nature.

As with many of his past biographies, Kurlansky is able to pull the reader in from the beginning, laying the groundwork for what is to be an interesting piece of writing. At no time do things go 'flat' or lose their lustre, for Kurlansky has been able to distill all the information gathered and present it in a masterful manner, with just enough intrigue to keep the reader wanting to know more. Some may say that paper cannot be exciting, no matter how delightful the narrative, but I would disagree. Kurlansky takes hold of this topic and provides the reader with much to ponder. His ongoing theme that paper is not only so versatile but has come

into its own through a variety of cultural and historical evolutions rings true. The reader is able to explore paper (and its predecessors) around the world and see how each region of the world added its own spin. Technology proved to be highly influenced by paper, something that Kurlansky also argues effectively. As the reader will notice, it was paper that brought about much of the advancements in printing and communication technology. Revolutions depended not only on overthrowing governments and monarchies, but on having the paper to rile up the masses. I had never thought of things from this perspective, but Kurlansky has a tendency of opening my mind and leaving me in awe. With jam-packed chapters that offer historical and cultural perspectives, the reader is able to see paper advancements from around the world, and the eventual connection of all these cultures into modern paper making and forms of technology that rely on this somewhat simple and forgotten cog in the larger wheel. Kurlansky breathes life into a topic that might not otherwise be of much interest, but does so in such a way that the reader cannot help but care. With easy to understand descriptions and a flowing narrative, Kurlansky shows yet again that he has a handle on the nuances of unique biographical tomes.

Kudos, Mr, Kurlansky, for another winner in my eyes. I have marvelled at all you have to say about these topics and this one was another winner for me. Keep up the excellent writing and I hope to find more of your biographies soon.

Love/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at:
<http://pecheyponderings.wordpress.com/>

A Book for All Seasons, a different sort of Book Challenge: <https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/...>

Diane says

This was a fascinating book on the history of paper. I especially enjoyed the discussion on technology, and how it's a common myth that "technology changes society." Instead, Kurlansky argues that society is what changes, and technology is developed to meet the new needs of the people.

Besides the interesting look at the various ways that different cultures throughout history have created unique ways of creating paper and recording documents, this book also includes details on the history of writing and printing, which I really enjoyed.

This was my first Kurlansky book, but I liked this one so much that I plan on reading more of his works. Highly recommended.

Linda says

I had read Mark Kurlansky's book on oysters (The Big Oyster) and learned more than I had ever realized about oysters and enjoyed it even though I never eat oysters. When I saw this book on paper I knew I would enjoy reading it as well because I do love paper -- love to use it, love to buy it and often talk myself out of acquiring even more of it! This book did not disappoint me although all of his books require you to make an investment of time because they are quite detailed. Kurlansky's premise is that the invention and use of paper was technology and as with all technology, people are often torn between embracing what is new and bemoaning the way things used to be (which meant oral traditions and the use of human memory over the aid

of reading and writing). What he emphasizes throughout the book however is that technology does not drive change but human behavior drives the need for technologies to be invented. When people needed help in business dealings the invention of numbers and writing and means to record that writing drove the invention of the alphabet and numbers (both Roman and the more useful India/Arabic numerals). The author also emphasizes that new technologies do not obliterate older technologies. They often continue to exist side by side even if the newer one often seems to become more popular. As a librarian who is often asked if there will still be books now that e-books are becoming used more and more, I often say that hardback books were still around after paperbacks started being printed. It just offers a choice and that is a theme that is documented throughout this book. Although papyrus is not used any more parchment is still used for certain - usually important - documents and books. When machine paper making finally took off in the 19th century it did not mean that all hand made paper vanished. It just bumped up handmade paper to a different use, like parchment, for a customer with certain needs such as calligraphers and artists (and yes, the product becomes more expensive).

When Mark Kurlansky writes on a topic, he uses that topic to range far and wide over human history. In this book you get a history of literacy throughout the world as well as detailed descriptions of what being literate meant, how it was achieved and how paper was involved with it all. It makes you appreciate something we all take for granted.

Becky Laswell says

unlikely to finish. first chapter has errors, wild opinions, and generalizations

Marks54 says

There is a genre of books that some have called commodity histories. These are focused histories of specific products (Cotton) or products (the screwdriver). I generally find these books fascinating and the trivia one gets from them is more than enough to show off to colleagues or stop conversations at parties in their tracks. It is sort of a guilty pleasure. I have a book on the history of the elevator waiting in my queue.

Mark Kurlansky is a free ranging journalist who is a master of the commodity biography. I first read his book on salt (the rock you can eat) and followed up with Cod, which I use as a justification to sampling fish and chips entrees whenever we go to England. His current book is a history of paper, and it does not disappoint. I would be very surprised if most readers failed to learn something from this book, which covers thousands of years of paper history all over the world. My favorite takeaway was learning about the role of rags in paper manufacture and why ragpickers were so commented upon in the 19th century. Kurlansky appears to have done his homework by showing the general processes by which paper has been made, the history of manufacture, and the modern consolidation and automation in the global paper business, coupled with the role of environmental concerns as a spur to industry consolidation, since big firms can meet environmental regulations while smaller individuals and shops cannot afford to comply.

The general criticism of a book like this is that there is not enough on the product itself to justify a book so it is necessary to link the product to broader historical developments and then fill out the book talking about those developments. There is certainly some of that here, for example in the discussion of paper and printing in the rise of the Reformation in Europe. I used to be sympathetic to such a complaint, but I am less so now, especially after reading Kurlansky. He makes the argument that the key story is one of technological change

and that such a story inherently involves the product, the ways by which it is made, and the ways in which it is used (and eventually substituted for or replaced). While paper has developed for some purposes, its availability has provided more choices as people seek to solve their problems. This is not a matter of who invented paper or what events did paper produce. Rather, paper is part of the flow of inventions, problems, and solutions that happen over time in history. The innovation process is inherently endogenous. While that perspective does not lead to easy pat answers, it has here produced a satisfying book about paper.

Kurlansky also does a good job at describing how the industry has evolved since the industrial revolution. Given the long history of paper mills, one would expect that scale would be of huge importance in the industry - and it is. Given the widespread knowledge of manufacturing processes and the worldwide demand, it is also likely that scale alone will not necessarily guarantee success, unless the industry becomes fully consolidated. Moreover, it is clear that finding high margin niche paper products is also critical for success. Finally, the role of the government in responding to environmental concerns and working with producers has played a role in consolidating the industry and enabling the large firms to prosper while not engaging in open war on the environment.

This is an interesting and well done book, comparable with the other Kurlansky books I have read.

Dee says

Really enjoyed this one. It's a nice marriage of big thematic stuff (in this case, looking at the relationship of society and technology) with lots of lovely intriguing detail (about paper-making, about related processes, about the things people do and why and how). The style was easy and intelligent without being opaque. Somewhat Eurocentric in structure, but doing its best to de-Euro-fy the relevant history.

E. Kahn says

Interesting and quite well-written, but contains some odd inaccuracies unrelated to the main topic of the book.

"European languages had no word for zero. In fact, most European languages only had words for "one," "two," and "many." You could have one potato or two potatoes or many potatoes, but if you had many potatoes, there was no number for that."

For context, this is about the times of Pope Sylvester II, whom the author consistently (and oddly) refers to as Gerbert, and while this may have been true at some point in prehistory, Proto-Indo-European (the language from which the overwhelming majority of European languages are derived) did indeed have the words necessary to count at least into the thousands, from which its medieval descendants got them.

Jonathan says

Disclosure: I received a review copy of this book from NetGalley.

Some may consider it ironic that one would read a book about paper on an eBook reader. And it would

probably be better not to, as studies tend to indicate that reading from a paper book results in more retention of information. But nevertheless I shall endeavor to review this book: *Paper: Paging Through History* by Mark Kurlansky.

Kurlansky is probably best known for his books *Salt* and *Cod*, other sweeping histories of commodities, as well as books on such topics as the Basque people and the year 1968. He is a very skilled writer, and makes his topics interesting and amusing. *Paper* is no exception.

This is a book I would describe as a "grand history" of paper. Kurlansky examines paper as a technology, as a commodity, as a phenomenon, as an instrument for social forces to use, as a window into the lives of those involved with its development and production. But, with a wider view, he uses paper as a model to argue in opposition to technological determinism.

In the modern western world, technology has taken on a fetishistic quality. We view it not only as a means to an end, but also as the end itself. We assume that technology guides society: for instance, the rise of micro computing and the beginning of the digital age is often said to have changed society. What Kurlansky argues is that technology does not change society, but it merely is created to fill a want or a need within an already changing society; i.e.: cell phones and social networking didn't make us want to be connected to everyone 24/7, they merely filled the pre-existing want or need. Paper, Kurlansky argues, did not change societies which used it but rather was a tool for the already changing society to develop and use.

Chapter 1 of *Paper* begins the journey through time with a discussion of the origins of language, spoken and later written. Early writing materials were stone, clay, papyrus, wax tablets, parchment and vellum, fabrics...not paper. Paper, like many other things, originates in China. At some point in the late centuries before the Common Era, the Chinese developed paper. How it came to be is a mystery. Kurlansky then charts the movement of paper from China across the old world, through the Middle East, to Europe.

But paper didn't catch on in Europe, Kurlansky tells us, until an increased demand for books made it a desirable commodity. This is similar to the development of movable type printing, which Kurlansky also discusses. From the printing press, Kurlansky briefly transitions to the new world, where the Aztecs already possess a highly literate society with their own paper. After the conquest of the new world, we are treated to the Protestant Reformation, which furthered the importance of paper as a tool for mass media.

Through all this time, paper was made of rags: in many cases linen. It is back in the new world that wood paper really takes off in the 1860s. And that brings us to the modern day, where we've moved wood paper to a level of craftsmanship that rag paper had reached two hundred years ago. (Cellulose is cellulose, but wood pulp treatments were once highly acidic; which has doomed 150 years of books and records to inevitable self-destruction without chemical intervention.) And to the most modern use of paper as a medium for propaganda...and for prophesying doom over the emergence of digital communications. It might still be ironic to read this book on a digital device.

Paper is an outstanding book: Kurlansky is an engaging writer. There are issues I can point to: he might overestimate levels of literacy in medieval Europe, he has listed objects that this reviewer had never heard of...and which Google hasn't either, and he proclaims "rules" of technology which may or may not be valid. Given any errors or faulty pronouncements, the book is a good read and I would not hesitate to recommend it.
