

My Life in Paper: Adventures in Ephemera

Beth Kephart

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Beth Kephart's memoir-in-essays contemplates paper in its many forms, including its emotional, historical, and tangible impacts.

With cohesive eloquence, the book details how paper defines mundane aspects of everyday life: it is there in birth and death certificates, deeds, mortgages, maps, money, and instruction manuals. Manila folders house confidential information about individual students, employees, and medical patients. And receipts verify tax deductions and proof of purchase, while paper ballots can change the course of an election.

On a recreational or interactive level, Kephart notes, paper is at the base of vacation postcards, birthday greetings, gift wrap, scrapbooks, and jigsaw puzzles. Sewing patterns help design homemade fashion statements; sheet music allows the work of composers to be shared. Family recipes are written onto index cards and passed down through generations.

Evocative and informative, the book contains numerous paper-related historical facts, such as that inventor Margaret E. Knight patented a machine to mass produce paper bags in 1871. And when Benjamin Franklin focused his pragmatic genius on America's new paper currency, he devised "some ingenious dollar-printing tricks" to thwart colonial counterfeiting.

Throughout the book, Kephart recounts the life and work of paper scholar and papermaker Dard Hunter (1883-1966). There are also poignant and intriguing recollections of Kephart's parents, her husband, and her architect great-uncle, who studied in Paris "then brought his beaux arts vision" back to Jazz Age New York.

While contemporary shifts toward a paperless, digitized society have decreased ecological waste and the need for physical storage, they also heighten the book's observations of a not-so-distant past filled with printed photographs, palpable books, and packets of love letters. From the compact beauty of a wasp's nest to a paper doily's snowflake intricacy, *My Life in Paper* reveals both personal and universal papery magic.

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