

White Magic: The Age of Paper

By Lothar Müller

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White Magic: The Age of Paper By Lothar Müller

Paper is older than the printing press, and even in its unprinted state it was the great network medium behind the emergence of modern civilization. In the shape of bills, banknotes and accounting books it was indispensible to the economy. As forms and files it was essential to bureaucracy. As letters it became the setting for the invention of the modern soul, and as newsprint it became a stage for politics.

In this brilliant new book Lothar Müller describes how paper made its way from China through the Arab world to Europe, where it permeated everyday life in a variety of formats from the thirteenth century onwards, and how the paper technology revolution of the nineteenth century paved the way for the creation of the modern daily press. His key witnesses are the works of Rabelais and Grimmelshausen, Balzac and Herman Melville, James Joyce and Paul Valéry.

Müller writes not only about books, however: he also writes about pamphlets, playing cards, papercutting and legal pads. We think we understand the ?Gutenberg era?, but we can understand it better when we explore the world that underpinned it: the paper age.

Today, with the proliferation of digital devices, paper may seem to be a residue of the past, but Müller shows that the humble technology of paper is in many ways the most fundamental medium of the modern world.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Balanced and intelligent... Even those who are happy with e-books will be grateful to Muller's publishers for printing White Magic on good, thick, creamy paper and including, at the end, a dozen blank pages, all of which I have covered with untidy, handwritten notes, to make this mechanical mass-produced artifact intimately my own."
New York Review of Books

"A richly sprawling history"
Times Literary Supplement

"A panoramic literary-historical work reminiscent of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*"
The Washington Post

"What a great read! It is a book to warm up the brain on a day of mental fog."
Inside Higher Education

"Most of this erudite, engaging work is concerned with the rise of paper and its dominance as civilisation's archive and its role as a "metaphorical resource": the origin of phrases such as "a blank page". As well as being a historical account of the way paper came to permeate every aspect of life, Muller mines European literature for the role paper has played in the stories we tell ourselves."
Sydney Morning Herald

"Lothar Müller… tells an alternative history of paper. He argues, convincingly, that paper has been, and continues to be, integral to our civilisation and the modern world. Through a carefully structured sequence of illuminating vignettes, he brings together fascinating facts from across the globe and the centuries to reveal the long-running and fundamental impact of paper on human life, work and culture."
Times Higher Education

"Müller's work leaves the reader admiring something that feels magical."
Publishers Weekly

"...the tale that Lothar Müller spins in White Magic: The Age of Paper is one that brings paper—as both physical material and a playing field on which the human imagination can run wild—to vivid life. Incorporating a wealth of historical detail, technical information, and critical analysis, Müller makes his account lively and compelling, giving paper a personality and substance that is on par with any words that may appear on it. In his book, paper is not just the silent partner of the printing press. Instead, it is an extremely versatile substance—one whose uses and forms shape human thought and behavior in many ways."
The Nomadic Press

"As paper increasingly fades into history, the story of its role and evolution is at risk of being lost, erasing the roadmap that brought us to the digital era. Lothar Müller's White Magic: The Age of Paper goes a long way to averting that fate, going back in time to record and describe in intricate detail how paper came to be, and what it came to be."

South China Morning Post

"Consistently readable and highly entertaining, this witty and learned book deftly decouples paper's history from the story of printing to tell new and surprising tales about a medium that continues to pervade our daily life. You'll never look at a blank page in quite the same way again."
Catherine Robson, New York University

"This is an absorbing history of paper, fascinating in its detail and magisterial in its scope. Muller writes with the authority of a scholar and the imagination of a poet, filling his book with curious but essential facts and astute perceptions. It is a delight to read."
Jeremy Adler, King’s College London

"Müller’s history of paper is original, engaging and breathtakingly erudite. It explores paper in its materiality, but also as a source of inspiration which has shaped the history of knowledge and creativity. In tracing paper’s vital role in the development of human civilisation, the author also argues for its continued importance in the digital age."
Carolin Duttlinger, Wadham College, Oxford

"Lothar Müller set out dazzling new insights into the creation of our world, building on Harold Innis’ work on the long and complex emergence of paper. Unique in his White Magic is his subtle blending of cultural and media history with sociological understanding and literary reflexion."
Philippe Despoix, Center of Intermedial Research in Arts, Literatures and Technologies, Université de Montréal

About the Author
Lothar Müller is editor of the features section of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He taught general and comparative literature at Berlin Free University and, since 2010, he has been an Honorary Professor at the Humboldt University in Berlin. In 2013 he was awarded the Berlin Prize for Literary Criticism.

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