

## TECHNOLOGY

# Pulp, pilcrows and interrobangs

Andrew Robinson savours a pair of lively studies on paper and punctuation.

“The paperless society is about as plausible as the paperless bathroom”, wrote Jesse Shera, a pioneer of information technology in libraries, in 1982. Nicholas Basbanes approvingly quotes this remark near the end of *On Paper*. His edifying, if bloated, history of paper — from manuscripts, books, newspapers, passports and currency notes to stationery and origami, packaging, cigarettes and toilet paper — has also convinced me that, despite digitization, Shera was right. The stuff is convenient, portable and cheap: *On Paper* has been published, after all, as both an e-book and a deckle-edged hardback.

Typography, of course, enables most paper-based and digital communication. In *Shady Characters*, Keith Houston celebrates the origins and development of typographical symbols, particularly the punctuation marks that give shape, rhythm and sense to the written sentence. These books offer much insight into the centuries of invention that have gone into creating the norms with which we unthinkingly consume and communicate vast amounts of information.

Basbanes begins with a visit to the paper makers of remote, mountainous, southwestern China, whose ranks are rapidly thinning. Tradition has it that a Chinese court eunuch, Cai Lun, invented papermaking in AD 105, but the process — pulping the cellulose fibres of rags — was probably pioneered several centuries earlier. (The Egyptian manufacture of papyrus long predates paper, but involves lamination rather than pulping. Confusingly, the word ‘paper’ is derived from the Latin *papyrus*.) The technology then travelled eastwards to Korea and Japan, and westwards along the Silk Road through Central Asia, via the Arabs, to Europe. In both directions, Buddhist monks were the first to use the material to record sacred texts. The world’s earliest complete survival of a dated printed book is the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra*, published in 868, discovered a century ago in a cave at Dunhuang, western China, on the Silk Road. It is now in the British Library in London.

One country after another adopted paper, from Spain in 1056 and Germany in 1391 (not long before Johannes Gutenberg began printing) to North America in 1690 and Australia in 1818. From the mid-nineteenth century, paper made from wood pulp became a reality and, in 1873, *The New York Times* led the conversion of nearly every US newspaper from rag paper to wood-pulp newsprint.



## On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History

NICHOLAS A. BASBANES  
Knopf: 2013.

## Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols and Other Typographical Marks

KEITH HOUSTON  
W. W. Norton: 2013.

With the rise of mass literacy at the end of the Victorian era, “pulp fiction” soon followed.

As Basbanes discusses, paper also became physically useful in wars. Gun cartridges were made of paper from the fourteenth century; the word ‘cartridge’ is probably derived from *cartouche*, which means ‘roll of paper’ in French. In the Second World War, the Japanese even made paper-balloon bombs of about 10 metres in diameter, each constructed from 600 sheets of handmade mulberry paper (*kozo*) glued together and filled with hydrogen gas. From late 1944 until April 1945, some 9,000 were launched across the Pacific on the jet streams. An estimated 1,000 reached the United States, but the sole casualties were a woman and five children in Oregon.

The intimate relationship between paper and script, and its dominance as a mode of communication — at least until the past 15 years or so — underpin *On Paper*. Basbanes memorably describes, for instance, the blizzard of office paper that emanated from New York’s Twin Towers during the 11 September

2001 attacks. A blood-stained sheet of common bond found at ground level was scrawled with the words: “84th floor west office 12 people trapped”. Ten years later, DNA testing of the blood identified the writer. His widow tells Basbanes that this sheet “belongs to my daughters. It’s their legacy from their father.”

Enlivening and amplifying our communiqués are the signs and symbols that typography blogger Houston unravels in his first book, *Shady Characters*. The e-mail staple @ merits an entire chapter; Houston also examines the dagger (†), the ampersand (&), the hyphen and quotation marks, as well as more obscure signs such as the pilcrow (¶) and the pictographic ‘manicule’ (a small hand with a pointing finger, once common as a textual highlighter but later relegated to the likes of Monty Python sketches). He even delves into the ‘interrobang’, a fusion of the question and exclamation marks invented by an advertising executive, Martin Specker, in the 1960s — which never really caught on.

Houston’s title refers to the mystery of how these “typographic conundrums” — as he calls them — have been endowed with so much meaning. Consider the hash sign, now much used in Twitter ‘hashtags’. It can denote a number (#5), weight (5#) or checkmate in chess; indicate a place to insert a space in proofreading; stand in for the sharp symbol in musical notation; or indicate, in many computer-programming languages, that the rest of the line is a comment and not a part of the program. The sign probably arose from the English abbreviation of the Latin word *libra*, or ‘scales’, as ‘lb’ (meaning a pound in weight). Scribes initially wrote ‘lb’ with a horizontal stroke through the two ascenders to indicate that it was a contraction; hasty writing eventually transformed that into the hash sign. An example of such a scribble by Isaac Newton is one of the book’s many intriguing illustrations.

Houston brings considerable wit and occasional erudition to the 5,000-year-old enigma of how we attempt to communicate our thoughts through visible signs. Like Basbanes’ doughty history, *Shady Characters* might make you look at books, or even this journal — in print or online — in an entirely new way. ■

Andrew Robinson is author of *The Story of Writing: Alphabets, Hieroglyphs and Pictograms*.  
andrew.robinson33@virgin.net