In a history of paper that encompasses two millennia, you're as likely to bump into a covert CIA operative as a traditional Japanese papermaker.
As a writer of general nonfiction, I am a great believer in making lavish use of what the Russian storyteller Anton Chekhov called the “telling detail,” and have found the use of pertinent anecdotes especially useful in providing a solid framework for whatever it is I am trying to accomplish. With respect to structure, my books typically get their spark from a powerful image that shapes the project visually, then pushes the narrative along in unexpected ways.

For *A Gentle Madness*, it was a drive through the frozen cornfields of Iowa in the company of a notorious book thief that framed the opening of the prologue, and established a quirky kind of tempo I was able to sustain in a wide-ranging examination of bibliomania through history.

My second book, *Patience & Fortitude*, combined two scenes from my research to bracket the opening sequences, the first featuring a cameo appearance of the famed “picture man” of the twentieth century, Otto Bettmann, ninety-two years old when I met him in 1995, and playing a Bach minuet on his organ, his passion for the composer driven by a conviction “that this man was sent here to make a little order out of chaos.” Bettmann seemed an ideal figure to articulate the conjoining themes of the book.

Dr. Bettmann was followed by James P. Feeney Jr., a circulation librarian at the Boston Athenæum, on the day I discovered some desperately needed books that had remained untouched in a basement storeroom for eighty-four years until I checked them out. Feeney insisted my discovery of the obscure items was not a matter of blind luck, however, but something on the order of bibliophilic providence not uncommon at the two-century-old library. “We got them for you, Mr. Basbanes,” he said in a wonderful South Boston accent, a comment I found especially relevant since one of my goals was to consider the manifold role of libraries over time and into the future.

Now, with the release of my new book, *On Paper: The EVERYTHING of Its Two Thousand Year History* (Alfred A. Knopf), I have continued the pattern, but this time with something of a twist. Rather than using the most powerful image I encountered over the eight-year gestation of the project as a literary springboard, I decided instead to feature it in a climactic chapter I chose to call “Elegy in Fragments.”

The fragments in question refer to sheets and shards of paper, countless numbers of them as they filled an azure sky over lower Manhattan on the morning of September 11, 2001. I can’t say I knew instantly that the frightful sight of the Twin Towers releasing geysers of office documents...
into the air as they thundered to the ground would be the stimulus for writing a cultural history of paper and papermaking, but the memory of what I saw along with millions of other horrified witnesses on that day had seared itself indelibly in my consciousness, and when I did begin thinking about such a book the following year, that thought was there front and center, and played a pivotal role in the work that developed.

Readers of my books might wonder why I chose this time around to steer my efforts in a somewhat different direction, not only my stylistic approach, but even more significantly, in my choice of subject matter. As I explain in the prologue to *On Paper*, having devoted a good deal of my professional life to the study of books in every conceivable context, it seemed appropriate that I do something with the stuff of transmission itself, which for more than five hundred years in the West—and even longer in Asia and the Middle East—has been paper. Giving added credence to such a project was the unending talk at the dawn of the twenty-first century about the imminence of electronic books displacing the conventional codex, and bold predictions of a paperless society.

So an inquiry into the physical nature of books provided the initial motivation, and in the end I did devote several chapters to the role paper has played in the creation, transmission, and preservation of culture. But once I started to delve into the broader aspects of the topic, I became increasingly engaged by the concept of paper, not just the product, but the idea of paper, and how it became so intertwined in our lives over the past two thousand years, and so ubiquitous. Just as compelling for me were questions of where paper was invented, how it made its way about the world, and how indispensable it became everywhere it went, not just for books and writing, but for every other conceivable function it has served.

The first section includes a highly selective overview of papermaking’s domino-like spread from country to country, but something I did not want to do, I must stress, was to write a conventional history of the nuts and bolts of its migration; for that, I recommend Dard Hunter’s *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft* (Knopf, 1943), an immediate classic when first released, and indispensable still today—and a focus in and of itself in a chapter titled “In the Mold.”

By taking a selective approach to the history, I was able to concentrate more broadly on the invention’s cultural and social applications. My chapter on the adoption of paper in the New World, for instance, pays special attention to the Stamp Act of 1765, which historians agree was the beginning of the run-up to the Battles of Lexington and Concord, and was all about taxing the many ways colonists had come to rely on paper documents in their daily lives.

Elsewhere, I tell how the refusal in 1857 of Hindu and Muslim mercenary soldiers employed by the British East India Company to bite open paper cartridges greased with animal fat ignited a bloody insurrection known variously today as the Sepoy Mutiny and the First War of Indian Independence. In a section about bureaucratic paperwork, I discuss how the Nuremberg Trials of 1945–46 were prosecuted almost entirely on the strength of damning docu-
ments meticulously kept by Nazi officials, and I argue that the release in 1971 of the Pentagon Papers led directly to what became the Watergate Scandal and the resignation of a president of the United States.

As a material object, paper has little monetary value, the only manufactured product, I contend, that is coveted entirely by virtue of what has been written, drawn, or printed on its surface—or by what I call its intellectual construct. In the “Face Value” chapter—the working premise there tests the cliché that some things are not worth the paper they’re printed on—I begin with worthless German marks printed by the millions during the darkest years of the Weimar Republic. At the other extreme of that spectrum is the Dunlap copy of the first printing of the Declaration of Independence, worth easily $10 million today if any of the twenty-six known copies were to somehow appear on the market, and that wouldn’t even come close to being a record; the most money paid for a single piece of paper to date was $47.9 million in 2009 for “Head of a Muse,” a drawing made between 1508 and 1511 by the Italian master of the Renaissance known as Raphael.

Ephemeral objects printed on low-quality newsprint have had their moments, too, with the exceedingly scarce Honus Wagner T206 baseball card of 1910 being the prime example, selling for $2.3 million in 2007. Not especially shabby, either, is the $2.16 million realized in 2011 for a copy of the first comic book to feature Superman, more than twenty-one million times its original newsstand price of ten cents when first issued in 1938.

Beyond the consideration of collectability and value, sketches, photographs, architectural drawings, engineering plans, blueprints, artists’ notebooks, musical scores, postage stamps, and the like have required a ready availability of paper. In the realm of pure utility, modern hygienic tissue paper has even been used as a weapon of war, most notably by the German General Staff, in a stunning variety of languages, and with the exceedingly scarce toilet paper shortage made clear when it set off a buying frenzy of such consequence that it occasioned front-page coverage in the New York Times.

Paper has even been used as a weapon of war, most directly as the aforementioned cartridge casings for muskets and rifles, but also as a tool in what are known as psychological operations, or PSYOPS. In a World War I memoir, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the defeated chief of the German General Staff, decried the use by Allied forces of “a weapon which had never been employed on such a scale and so ruthlessly in the past,” a “shower of pamphlets,” as he described them—or propaganda leaflets—that convinced his men on the front lines that there was no point in continuing the struggle.

During World War II, both sides deployed leaflets by the millions, and given the multi-national demographics of the conflict, in a stunning variety of languages, and with messages aimed directly at the men on the front lines. Not everyone was impressed with the results, however. “My personal view is that the only thing achieved was largely to supply the continent’s requirements of toilet paper for the five long years of the war,” Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris, marshal of the Royal Air Force, groused in a memoir of his wartime experiences, making no bones about his preference for conducting massive nighttime bombing raids.

The very first person I talked with for this book, MacArthur Fellow Timothy D. Barrett, an international authority on hand papermaking, set a very high standard, prompting me to take the weeklong course on papermaking he teaches at Rare Book School with John Bidwell of the Morgan Library (see my “Gently Mad” column in the September/October 2007 issue of FB&C). Once committed to an “everything” approach, I sought out people in an ever-widening variety of fields, and traveled to such places as China (see FB&C, March/April 2008), Japan, the National Security Agency (NSA), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and commercial paper mills in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania—wherever the paper trail took me.

Uncommonly satisfying was the interview I had very early in my research with a former technical services specialist for the CIA named Antonio “Tony” Mendez, who described for me how the creation of paper “legends” and “pocket litter” had been key to his work, and how the success of one clandestine operation in particular had hinged on forged documents. Several years after we met in his home, that mission—to whisk six American diplomats out of Tehran by commercial air during the Iran Hostage Crisis—was the subject of Argo, winner of an Academy Award for best film earlier this year.

Through it all, I created a small cabinet of curiosities that I daresay is unique in the world. Among the high spots: a $100 trillion currency note issued in Zimbabwe that I got online for next to nothing; a strip of honest-to-goodness Ephemeral objects printed on low-quality newsprint

**Nicholas A. Basbanes** is the author, most recently, of On Paper: THE EVERYTHING OF ITS TWO THOUSAND YEAR HISTORY (Knopf, 2013). His other books include About the Author, Editions & Impressions, A World of Letters, A Gentle Madness, Every Book Its Reader, Patience & Fortitude; Among the Gently Mad, and A Splendor of Letters.