

# THE FUTURE OF PAPER by Rivka Galchen

---

**T**he avian flu morphs yet again. (Those flu viruses are so adept at evolving.) The pigs had the flu, as did the chickens, the Canadians, the zebra mussels, the horseshoe crabs, maybe even the honeybees (we still don't know as the paperwork hasn't been filed yet). Then the flu spread from live cranes to folded paper cranes, and from there to Laffy Taffy wrappers (some argue that the flu hit the candy wrappers before the cranes, that there was a mix-up in paper/crane taxonomy), and then back to the paper cranes more virulently. But somehow no one was too worried, not then; maybe everyone was even secretly pleased because paper cranes have long seemed hackneyed and sentimental...

From there, the virus morphed to infect broadsheets and then pamphlets and then magazines and then books. (Yes, debate exists there too, about the order, about who infected whom, but I for one suspect that the tuberculosis hit all paper at once, that we only learned about the origami and the candy wrappers first because we lived more closely with them than with our books and magazines.)

But once the paper started coughing, sputtering blood, acquiring jaundice, etc . . . once that happened—truth be told, we hadn't even liked paper that much

before—we realized that, like the passenger pigeon and the woolly mammoth and electric blue, we were going to miss paper when it was gone. The dying look so good. Doc Holliday is a heartthrob. It was good for books to suddenly seem more like Doc Holliday and less like a well-intentioned middle school teacher in a beige vest. We had all been happily neglecting the books; then they became, in their death throes, as Hollywood-compelling, as gala event-able, as, say, AIDS research, or the environment. Which isn't to say we were able to do much, but we sure did document—in digital media—ourselves not doing it.

In Brooklyn, a paper-making collective was formed. A neglected commercial space for the collective was renovated with great flair and through the sweat of women with really cute bangs. However, the original Save Paper mission became overshadowed by the collective's far more successful sideline of selling homemade organic yogurt and handmade patches created by prisoners whose only thread was harvested from striped gym socks. The Imperiled Pulp campaign increased awareness, though perhaps at a price to the polar bears, who, for a key spell, were forgotten. And so sad that the vaccines failed! Though young people made pocket money in the clinical trials. Suddenly chapbooks—fleeting as rice paper in humidity—were all the rage. The admirable Paper Chase retrospective film festival had a misguided curatorial vision. And then

there was the rematerialization movement. All those ludicrous late letter presses. Rematerialization—that word, I thought at first it must refer to the finding of bodies for ghosts. Because as for me: I didn't care about paper. I didn't even care about words. I cared about so much, although to the exclusion of so much more. They say there are now more people living than have ever died. It was only inasmuch as paper was becoming a legion of ghosts that I could find it in my heart to take an interest in it, accustomed as I'd grown to taking interest exclusively in the gone.

*Rivka Galchen lived in Norman, Oklahoma from 1982 to 1994, where her father, Tzvi Gal-Chen, was a professor of meteorology at the University of Oklahoma, and her mother was a computer programmer at the National Severe Storms Laboratory. She is the author of Atmospheric Disturbances (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2008), and her writings have appeared in The New Yorker & Harpers Magazine.*

This article will be featured in *The Late American Novel: Writers on the Future of Books*, edited by Jeff Martin and C. Max Magee