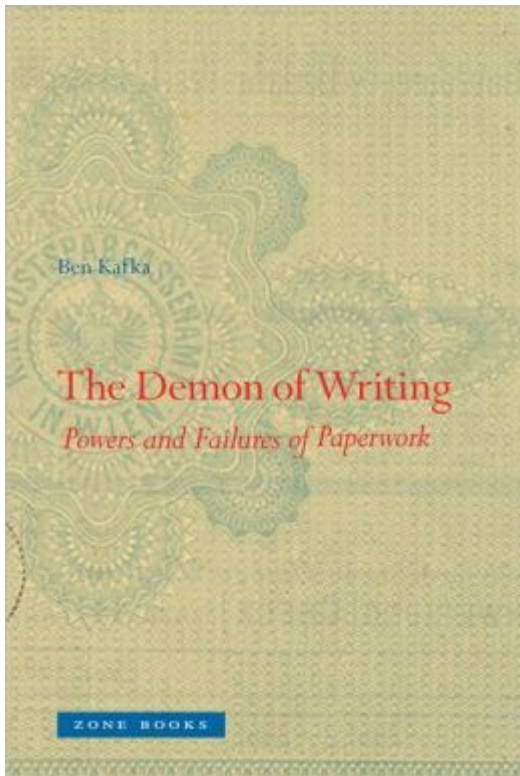




The Demon of Writing

written by Allegra
September, 2013



[Ben Kafka](#), *The Demon of Writing: The Powers and Failures of Paperwork*.
Brussels, Zone Books, 2012.

Although out already last year, this book – authored by someone who apparently bares no relation to the ‘other’ Kafka – was just brought to our attention by the recommendation of a friend – and there is no greater rave than word of mouth by people whose judgment we trust! By reading on, you’ll find both book description, endorsement and more critical reviews.



Overview

Since the middle of the eighteenth century, political thinkers of all kinds—radical and reactionary, professional and amateur—have been complaining about “bureaucracy.” But what, exactly, are they complaining about?

In *The Demon of Writing*, Ben Kafka offers a critical history and theory of one of the most ubiquitous, least understood forms of media: paperwork. States rely on records to tax and spend, protect and serve, discipline and punish. But time and again, this paperwork proves to be unreliable. Examining episodes that range from the story of a clerk who lost his job and then his mind in the French Revolution to an account of Roland Barthes’s brief stint as a university administrator, Kafka reveals the powers, the failures, and even the pleasures of paperwork. Many of its complexities, he argues, have been obscured by the comic-paranoid style that characterizes much of our criticism of bureaucracy. Kafka proposes a new theory of what Karl Marx called the “bureaucratic medium.” Moving from Marx to Freud, he argues that this theory of paperwork must include both a theory of praxis and of parapraxis.

About the Author

Ben Kafka is an Assistant Professor of Media History and Theory at New York University and a candidate at the Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research (IPTAR), a component society of the International Psychoanalytical Association. He works with adult and adolescent patients through the IPTAR Clinical Center and the NYC Free Clinic.



Reviews

“Kafka’s book is a keen, vivacious examination of the frustrating ‘unpredictability’ of paperwork as a cultural institution.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“[Kafka] pursues an argument that leads from paper to paperwork, “the psychic life of paperwork,” the concepts of major thinkers...it is provocative, original, and a very good read.”—Robert Darnton, *The New York Review of Books*

“Ben Kafka does the important job of reminding us that paperwork is part of the great human traditions, not only of communication and information, but also of revolution, existential philosophy, and for some, religion.”—*The New Republic*

“Kafka examines the meaning and implications of this new regime, intertwining threads of historical narrative, psychoanalytic theory, and intriguing anecdotes into a thoroughly absorbing read.”—**Peter Lopatin**, *The Weekly Standard*

Endorsements

“This remarkable book teaches everyone who has gone blind on paperwork to see modern life anew: forms and reports, the stultifying preserve of bureaucrats, emerge as the foundations (and sometimes undoing) of state power. With elegance and poise, Ben Kafka blends the erudition of a masterful historian of the French Revolution with the rigors of a materialist who knows concepts depend on their circulation and the sophistication of a psychoanalyst who understands the psychic implications of worldly transformation. Through the utopia of the ‘paperless office’, Kafka gives the clerks who destroy and fulfill our dreams their due, and a neglected form of modern writing the centrality it demands. And make sure to have a pair of scissors on hand!”

—**Samuel Moyn**, author of *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*



“Ben Kafka’s *The Demon of Writing* is an unexpected pleasure. The wit and intelligence that shine through the notorious recalcitrance and tedium of paperwork make it a joy to read. The real surprise, however, is the reach of the Kafka’s project, the amount this history of a few episodes in the life of paper and ink, files and forms, has to teach us about the proximity of our expectations and frustrations with the modern bureaucratic state. It will be of particular interest to scholars interested in the contradictions of the revolutionary experience, but it will be equally rewarding to everyone who has dreamed of working in an office that works.”

—**James Swenson**, author of *On Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Considered as One of the First Authors of the Revolution*

“Kafka draws on methods and theories most often found in psychoanalysis, political theory, and histories of the book to craft a marvelously engaging and wonderfully witty study of papers, paperwork, and bureaucracy. At the center of this tremendously clever and pathos-laden interpretation is the crucial insight that paperwork, even when it works, fails us. We never get what we want.”

—**Rebecca Spang**, author of *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*

Online Reviews

*[The New York Times by Jennifer Schuesser](#) (16 December 2012)

*On Blog [‘Popmatters’ by Subashini Navaratnam](#)

*In [New Republic by Jacob Soll](#) (20 January 2013)

* In [Slate Magazine by Troy Patterson](#) (2 November 2012)