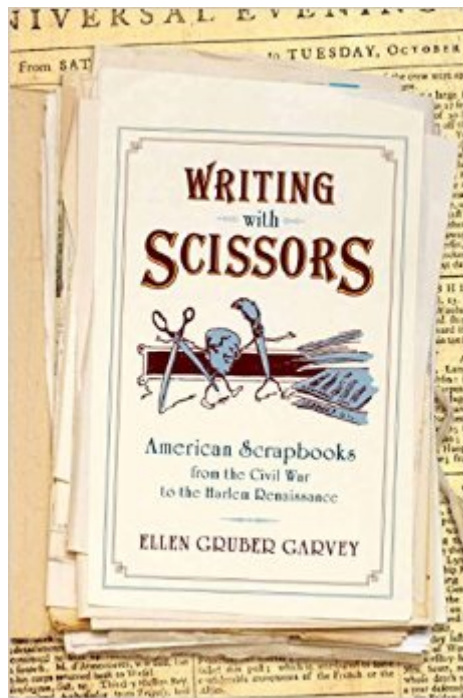


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# Writing With Scissors: American Scrapbooks From The Civil War To The Harlem Renaissance



## Synopsis

Men and women 150 years ago grappled with information overload by making scrapbooks—the ancestors of Google and blogging. From Abraham Lincoln to Susan B. Anthony, African American janitors to farmwomen, abolitionists to Confederates, people cut out and pasted down their reading. *Writing with Scissors* opens a new window into the feelings and thoughts of ordinary and extraordinary Americans. Like us, nineteenth-century readers spoke back to the media, and treasured what mattered to them. In this groundbreaking book, Ellen Gruber Garvey reveals a previously unexplored layer of American popular culture, where the proliferating cheap press touched the lives of activists and mourning parents, and all who yearned for a place in history. Scrapbook makers documented their feelings about momentous public events such as living through the Civil War, mediated through the newspapers. African Americans and women's rights activists collected, concentrated, and critiqued accounts from a press that they did not control to create "unwritten histories" in books they wrote with scissors. Whether scrapbook makers pasted their clippings into blank books, sermon collections, or the pre-gummed scrapbook that Mark Twain invented, they claimed ownership of their reading. They created their own democratic archives. *Writing with Scissors* argues that people have long had a strong personal relationship to media. Like newspaper editors who enthusiastically "scissorized" and reprinted attractive items from other newspapers, scrapbook makers passed their reading along to family and community. This book explains how their scrapbooks underlie our present-day ways of thinking about information, news, and what we do with it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

It's amazing that this part of American history has not been more thoroughly plumbed. Seeing history through the window of the personal archive of a scrapbook makes the events even more poignant. Both the famous and the common folks indulged in this pastime and we are the richer for knowing what they valued and why. Written in an accessible narrative, full of current references to remind us of how timely this topic is, I couldn't put it down until I was done!

Ellen Gruber Garvey's 'Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance' is a thoroughly researched book on the scrapbook phenomenon that was invented by ordinary Americans. During the Civil War people in the south had a shortage of most things, including paper. An old ledger would suffice as they cut and pasted news articles, poems, or pictures to fill the pages. In the north people did the same and homespun history books were created. African Americans were in on the hobby too and Garvey tells of scrapbook museums in peoples' homes. Since types of paper and paste in the scrapbooks are hard for archives to keep, Garvey's book is a wonderful treasure to find and read.

I can't recommend this book highly enough. The only thing that could improve it, but then it would be mammoth in size and cost, is if it were as big as a coffee table book and had room for numerous full color illustrations. I have found something thought provoking and revealing on every page. The book is extremely well written, turning what might be a (to some) dry subject, early form of scrapbooks, into a literal page turner. I am an anthropologist with a glancing interest in US history and in women's work, forms of social communication, and pastiche. This book touches on all these issues--it explores and explicates a little understood part of our history as a people: the attempt by both men and women to organize their national and personal experience by clipping and arranging ephemera. Many things that you might find yourself doing, in your ordinary life, go back to this period: collecting and displaying playbills? Making collages out of your child's activities, gluing and scrapbooking tickets and candywrappers from important trips? If you read and bookmark blogs, or

use Evernote to keep track of your recipes or readings, you are engaged in the same activity. I happen to be reading both Proust and Walter Benjamin at the moment, as part of a project which I thought was like keeping a "commonplace book" but because I am also reading *Writing with Scissors* I see that I am also engaged in a process that is more like early American Scrapbooking. I highly recommend this book to people who are interested in US history, sociology of knowledge, anthropology, women's studies, library science and scrapbooking and commonplace books generally (oh, also, history of copywrite, the idea of the author, education and home economics). I find it pretty much touches on everything I'm interested in.

Because I've been trying to better understand my great-great grandfather from perusing two surviving scrapbooks, I have a high personal interest in nineteenth century scrapbooks. So I was really pleased to get my hands on *Writing with Scissors*, and even more so to read it. I now know the key role scrapbooks played as a means to share passions and interests, much the way Facebook functions today. Thankfully, 140 years later I can get a fairly rich snapshot of my ancestor through those pages. (I doubt my descendants will be able to say the same of Facebook 140 years from now). I am awed by the breadth of the research and the depth of Garvey's analysis. Particularly important, I think, is her groundbreaking research and insightful thinking about the important role of scrapbooks in the lives of African Americans. *Writing with Scissors* describes how scrapbooks filled a void as an accessible and authentic medium for the chronicling of black people's lives. I highly recommend the book!

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