



## Good on Paper

*Rachel Cantor*

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Is a new life possible? Because Shira Greene's life hasn't quite turned out as planned. She's a single mom living with her daughter and her gay friend, Ahmad. Her PhD on Dante's *Vita Nuova* hasn't gotten her a job, and her career as a translator hasn't exactly taken off either.

But then she gets a call from a Nobel Prize-winning Italian poet who insists she's the only one who can translate his newest book.

Stunned, Shira realizes that—just like that—her life can change. She sees a new beginning beckoning: academic glory, demand for her translations, and even love (her good luck has made her feel more open to the entreaties of a neighborhood indie bookstore owner).

There's only one problem: It all hinges on the translation, and as Shira starts working on the exquisitely intricate passages of the poet's book, she realizes that it may in fact be, well ... impossible to translate.

A deft, funny, and big-hearted novel about second chances, *Good on Paper* is a grand novel of family, friendship, and possibility.

## Good on Paper Details

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Author : Rachel Cantor

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## From Reader Review Good on Paper for online ebook

### Suze Lavender says

Shira is working as a temp, but while she has excellent translating and literary skills she goes from job to job and is now stuffing envelopes. She loves her daughter Andi very much. They're living with Ahmad, who's Shira's gay friend. He isn't Andi's real father, but he's her dad in any other way. They're a family. When Shira gets a request to translate a manuscript for the famous poet Romei she decides to take the job. It's difficult and Shira doesn't know if the work can really be translated. The harder she works the more her private life seems to be falling apart. She might have found love, but she can't act on it. The translation is giving her sleepless nights and Ahmad and Andi are ganging up on her. Will she be able to finish the manuscript and get her life back on track?

Good on Paper is a wonderful book, a story that I will remember for a very long time. I loved the Dante references. Shira's opinions about his work are fantastic. Romei is fascinating and I loved his character, the famous poet who received a Nobel prize and who's never actually present at all, but plays a crucial part in the story. Shira is intelligent and talented, but emotionally she's a bit of a mess. She's funny and I love the way Rachel Cantor portrayed her. Reading about her put a smile on my face over and over again.

If you've studied literature or are a translator you will especially love this book. There are so many great references, interesting remarks and clever thoughts in this story. I enjoyed it so much. Shira has a messy life and her inner thoughts plus the way she phrases things when she talks are brilliant. I can't praise this novel enough. It's one of those fantastic treasures that you only come across every now and then.

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### Book Riot Community says

As soon as I heard about this book, I knew I had to read it. In a previous life, I was a Spanish and French tutor, and spent a lot of time thinking about relationships between languages. I've also dabbled in translation and still dream of translating books. So a book whose main character is a literary translator was always going to be a winner for me. I didn't expect to laugh as much as I did in the first third or so, though, and I certainly didn't foresee where the plot was going. Kudos to Rachel Cantor for weaving Dante and his literature as well as existential thoughts about language into a very believable character's psyche and into the storyline of a quirky, unexpected, enjoyable, thoughtful, smart, educational novel. —Claire Handscombe

from The Best Books We Read In February: <http://bookriot.com/2016/03/01/riot-reviews-best-books-february/>

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### Robert Blumenthal says

This book was hard for me to become completely absorbed, for it was a bit cryptic and scattered for a while. In fact, there is a moment well into the story where there is a "big reveal" of which I was not sure what it was. Later it became quite clear to me that what I had suspected it was it actually was. However, the book is clever and quite funny with wonderful characters.

It is about a young Jewish woman who was abandoned by her mother and somewhat neglected by her father. She has a child out of wedlock, the wonderful Andi, and lives with a gay Pakistani man in Manhattan. She works odd temp jobs until she is given the opportunity to translate the latest work of a Nobel Prize winning Romanian Italian poet.

There is much reference to Dante's love poems to his beloved Beatrice, which can be a bit tedious. And, as mentioned before, the story can be a bit difficult to follow at times. However, if one perseveres, there are some wonderful surprises and lovely moving moments to come, and the structure ends up being quite clever, intelligent and impressive.

I ended up finding this novel to be both delightful, charming and quite moving. It deals with the lead characters inability to commit to others and how this project helps her to see what is holding her back. There is also a lovely relationship between her and her daughter, which is told with much humor and pathos. Although somewhat of a struggle, this novel ended up being a real gem for me.

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### **Margot says**

Story within a story, with literary criticism woven into the fiction narrative. In a compelling way! What!?!

And translation, and abandonment issues, and poetry!

A tiny taste:

"I had already read all the pages Romei had sent me, I'd read them carefully more than once. It was time to "trot" the work, I'd retype the original, leaving five or six spaces between each line, then handwrite a quick 'literal' translation above each line, adding towers of alternative translations above problem words, which is to say most words. I'd use different colored highlighters to note difficult phrases or lines I didn't fully understand. If its rhythm was complex, I might scan the work, or might note its rhyme pattern. On the back, I'd make notes about possible approaches, which elements seemed most important, what the author was getting at; I'd also start a *leitwort* lexicon, for key words that appeared several times. I'd end up with an indecipherable page, full of color, ornament, and scrawl, which I'd then throw away so I could get down to the real business of translation, trusting that everything I'd noted had sunk into my cells, available when I needed it." (107)

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### **Jessica Woodbury says**

This is a novel of contrasts. On the one hand, the plot is awfully neurotic, it can almost feel like chick lit. (The title certainly made me expect that kind of book.) Shira, faced with the prospect of single motherhood, moves in with her gay best friend to join her in co-parenting. Years of this arrangement and she's one of those people who only exists in fiction: a Manhattanite who holds no regular job, works as a temp, and sometimes publishes a story in a small literary journal.

On the other hand, this is a novel full of intelligent characters and serious thought. It is a book where one character says to another, "Nice chiasmus." It is about poetry and language in large part. And in that way, the

title really doesn't do it justice.

But even though you'd think these two things wouldn't mesh well together, they do. Somehow Cantor mostly pulls off this tightrope walk. (There's a period near the end where Shira makes decisions so obviously irrational that you assume they are simply the author trying to create conflict.)

Shira is asked by an internationally famous Italian poet to translate his new work. The central mystery of the book is why he chose her and what his poem is about. I figured it out halfway through, I suspect I caught on a bit earlier than I was supposed to, but it's also not a book that hits you on the head with a hammer or talks down to you about its plot twists. I appreciate that. I also appreciate the presence of a child who is neither too perfect nor too annoying.

Despite its occasional flaws, it's mostly a joy to read. I read it on an airplane, which is a huge compliment.

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### **Alena says**

I tried and failed to get engaged in this one. Maybe one too many literary references in the first 50 pages

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### **Chris Roberts says**

This roiling wreck of a work is so contrived you, not me,

can picture the author on her laptop: veins swollen into rivers bulging

on her forehead, typing in the fetal position and looking at the screen

with one, sweat encrusted eye...then...rolling off her chair and

screaming out - I must have NYC, yes NYC all the non-stop time -

and one wants to shake this pathetic, bare ebb of a woman, tell her forcefully - To write urban is to be  
urbane, to holler - You know

nothing of streets and human swine, you have lived a K-Mart life

protected under the suburban sun and moon, you are a platypus!! and

yes too, the city is thievery, it is a slow motion shoplifting spree

of sorts that reads like a twelve-year-old's fantasy, but it works

not, Rachel Cantor's a predictable, outlier Bot.

\* They made me this way.

### Rebecca says

**(2.5)** I'm going to chalk this one up to blurb inflation. The writing is lively and the plot well crafted, with quirky postmodern touches, but the novel as a whole did not live up to my absurdly high expectations: it's really nothing like A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, and the main character isn't even a freelance writer. (Perhaps that last bit was my mistake.)

It's 1999 and Shira Greene is a failed translator from the Italian, now working as a temp in New York City and raising her daughter Andi with the help of her gay, Pakistani co-parent, Ahmad. One day she gets a call from Romei, a Nobel Prize-winning Italian poet who wants her to translate his new work, a postmodern version of Dante's *Vita Nuova* that focuses on his relationship with his ill wife – and eventually starts to comment on Shira's own life in surprising ways.

Andi is a really sweet character – she cries “Topeka!” instead of “Eureka!” when making a discovery, for instance. The shifts in her relationship with her single mother are probably the best thing about the book:

I'd made a vow when Andi was born: she'd be the center and the circumference of my life, its organizing principle and its limit. I would never abandon her, not in thought, word, or deed. I'd be everything my mother wasn't.

But Shira and Ahmad both have loads of unnecessary backstory about their unhappy marriages and other previous relationships. Plus the way Cantor ‘solves’ the mystery of Shira's missing mother seemed rather forced to me. I also never bought her romance with Benny the rabbi, and I wondered why the setting was near-historical rather than contemporary.

I expect the book has a lot of clever connections with Dante, maybe with the part and chapter titles in particular. Something about the literary ambition (e.g. no speech marks) never clicked with me, though. As Jessica has noted, this is a lot more like women's fiction than it has been marketed. Fix that blurb, people!

**Related reading:** *In a Dark Wood* by Joseph Luzzi channels Dante in his true story of his wife's death.

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### Laura Jean says

I loved this book. I found it quite clever. The story within a story as well as the things I learned about the art of translation as Shira described Romei's work were fascinating. The comparisons and contrasts between Dante's and Romei's New Life were so enlightening. And the story of love and hurt...fear and trust was beautiful and satisfying

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### Robert Wechsler says

I gave *Good on Paper* half a novel to win me over with its combination of talk about literature and literary translation (it helped that a friend of mine recently translated the most important work in the novel, Dante's *Vita nuova*) and the story of an underachieving woman with a chance to get things together at last. The two problems for me were (1) the narrator's overwhelming cleverness and (2) the problem inherent in extended literary fiction these days: the insistence on taking the form of a mystery novel, holding the reader's interest with secrets that will be divulged and mysteries that will or will not be solved (dead bodies or not).

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### **Sonnet Fitzgerald says**

As someone who used to do actual translation of medieval Spanish texts and who now regularly ghostwrites for ESL authors, I had a vested interest in this book. But the intensity of the descriptions of translation are overdone, even for me. This book is stuffed full of academic literary critique, by 20 pages in I was skimming through those long-winded sections. And literary critique is what I love and do for a living!

Far too clever by half.

There are some good points, chief among them the wonderful characters. They're vibrant and alive, I could see all of them clearly. I loved the relationship between the main character and her best friend (maybe because I am a single woman and my best friend is also a gay man who helps raise my daughters?) The emotional interactions were delightful and I have a hundred clients that are endearingly frustrating in the same little ways Romei is. There's a hint of mystery in the book, and the story itself is not bad at all. It's just too muddled up with theory and interpretation.

3/5

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### **Margitte says**

You can either read the blurb (not included here), or [Publishersweekly.com](http://Publishersweekly.com) 's summary of the book:

*Shira Greene is working as an office temp and living with her daughter, Andi, and Ahmad, her best friend, when she gets a life-changing telegram: Romei, the mysterious winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, wants her to translate his latest, a work of poetry and prose based on Dante's *La Vita Nuova* (literally "new life"), the same work that Shira was translating when she abandoned her Ph.D. At first, Shira thinks that someone is playing a joke, but she's happy to have a second chance at her career; she even begins to imagine love with the eccentric part-time rabbi and owner of the neighborhood bookstore that publishes *Gilgul*, the literary journal where one of Rachel's stories caught Romei's eye. Cantor's follow-up to 2014's 'A Highly Unlikely Scenario' (which PW starred) starts light and shimmers with humorous touches, but as Romei's faxed pages begin arriving, Shira panics, fearing the work is not only untranslatable but designed to break her. Translation is a metaphor through which Cantor uses her considerable powers with language to refract larger questions about family bonds, storytelling, and letting go of fantasies of new life and waking up to the life that is yours.*

Stevie Davies, in the [UK Independent review](http://UK Independent review), describes the character Shira as *an irritating narrator, her*

*verbal tics sashaying between airheaded whimsy and postmodern persiflage*

Annalisa Quinn, in her *npr.org review*, describes the style of the narration as *a wonderfully exuberant mixing of registers: scholarly to colloquial to campishly zany and back.*

Catherine O'Flynn, in her *The Guardian* called the novel *a multilayered tale of linguistic trickery*

I initially pushed this book aside, after trying to get into it a couple of months ago. The absence of inverted commas, quotation marks, to differentiate between speech and narration, was annoying, especially when it was late at night and concentration not particularly high on the agenda after very busy days. And then to be also confronted with a Dante in a postmodern setting, required just too much brain cells to work. Seriously.

However, the book kept pulling me back. Then it got pushed aside again for a few days, and then the pulling begun again. Eventually I gave up the avoidance game. The *subliterate cretin* in me, as J.K. Rowling, in her book *The Silkworm* so lovingly describe her readers who express their opinion in online blogs, got the better of me.

This academic novel blissfully adds the *multi* prefix to -racial, -cultural, -religious and -language in the same way as Amy Bloom in her novel, *Lucky Us*.

*Two weddings, he said, shaking his head, and I noticed he was dressed more formally than usual: black jacket, black tie, tzitzit swinging under a shiny black vest. Interfaith, he said. A beautiful thing, but the prep! First the Sufi girl and Reconstructionist boy in Central Park, then the Humanistic Jew, whatever that means, and the Christian Scientist ...*

*In the library with Colonel Mustard?*

*The Masonic Temple on Amsterdam.*

*Poor sweetie! Have you eaten?*

I found that exciting. A blended New York family, made up of friends, like in *Lucky Us* become the relayers of past events and future expectations.

To 'translate' a dissertation on Danté's *Vita Nuova* into a story with heart was a little ambitious, however, with a few word-trickery here and there, it became a mystery story-within-a-story. At times, the dissertation came through, too often in fact, and the show-don't-tell principle took a sad respite from the text.

The author constantly explains her own characters in the novel through her characters! Confusing? Absolutely. To me at least.

*The names of Esther's Midrash friends! Peshat, Remez, Drash, and Sod? Those are the four levels of biblical hermeneutics: the literal, allegorical, moral, and symbolic. There's a Hebrew acrostic that refers to these four levels—Pardes, or Eden. He's trying to help us understand how to read his work!*

Not only does the author embed Danté's imagery of feathers, flying, wings, and birds into her own characters, she also uses references from religious texts to enhance the story and her characters further:

*I don't think that's it. Look, in "Confessions," you compare yourself to Salomé, dancing to get the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Salomé is a cynical figure, love doesn't figure into her story at all. The Shulamite, on the other hand, is innocent. Her love is erotic but pure. And reciprocated. Romei is asking you to re-vision your past, to see yourself not as Salomé but as*

*the Shulamite. Reject the calculating, Salomé part of yourself, identify with that innocent part, the part that loves easily, that feels herself loved. You loved that boy in “Confessions,” right?*

The lecturing of the reader became really too obvious. Not good. Not good at all. Was it really a novel, or only a disguise to word-dumping?

Shari's life becomes a translation in itself, while she is trying to figure out the word-play in Romei's story. *Translation is a kind of betrayal because pure fidelity to a text is impossible. But it also requires, and generates, a rare kind of intimacy. Like sex done right, I've always thought. The translator makes a holy commitment to understand, to listen with all possible intensity, to step backward, ever backward, through the labyrinth of an author's ideas and devices, uncovering his decisions and triumphs, line by line, until she arrives, finally, at the moment of creation."*

And somewhere in the epilogue, Shari finally reached out to a person in her past(which I cannot mention here, since it will spoil the cerebral literary-mystery element of the book) with these words:

*Through events remarkable and unexpected, I have learned something of that story. I offer it to you here—the beginning, as I understand it; the middle, as I've lived it. The ending remains to be seen—I hope we can write it together.*

This was a daunting read, no pleasure to be found anywhere in the experience, since it requires some concentration. A knowledge of Dante's poems might also come in handy. I did not have it, but it nevertheless provided the substance to this dissertation-cum-literary-novel idea.

Not a relaxing read at all. But an interesting, endearing one, academic play aside. Most importantly, it challenged me! I lost. But what the heck, I enjoyed it in the end.

PS: Tobias Carroll's interview with the author on *Electric Lit* is worth a read. Thanks, Rebecca Foster!

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### **Morgan Schulman says**

If you're into academia, it might be more of a four for you. As someone a bit burnt out on that sphere, I'd say it was as 2.5 plus an extra half star for taking me back to pre-Bloomberg New York.

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### **Alie says**

I would have enjoyed the book more if the plot was anything like the blurb on the jacket. I was expecting a novel about a women's journey to reconcile her past secrets with her present aspirations. The only problem is the protagonist doesn't have any aspirations beyond being beloved by all with little to no work involved. Shira lives rent and expenses free in her male friend's apartment while he cares for her child. This allows her the free time to go get coffee which is described many times in painfully long detail. My biggest problem with Shira was her conflicting bitterness and naïve nature. Shira is bitter due to her many tragedies in life which are never actually described. She was abandoned by mother and had great love at 15 which didn't work out. These tragedies are her main motivating factors for her lack of direction and her fear of life. However they are never fleshed out enough to feel motivational. Shira is naïve in that she doesn't realize other characters in the book may have backstories and histories that motivate their own actions. This may be

in the fault of the writer. All of the secondary characters are only developed as they relate to the main protagonist. The exception to the lack of motivation of secondary characters is the mysterious author who contacts her to translate his book. Unfortunately I guessed his motivation on page 50 of 200. The resulting plot of the book is very heavy on philosophy and that works of Dante. Luckily the main character finds a man to fall in love with so all is well in the end. The recommendation of Cosmo on the front cover should have warned me of the shallow nature of the main character.

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### **Annette says**

Three and one half stars.

Very interesting book about a translator. This is the second book I've read recently where the protagonist translates books or text for authors.

This story is twisted and takes you down a few rabbit holes as it slowly untangles the web of connections between, Shira- her present and her complex relationships.

The theme of forgiveness, love and sacrifice are woven in her earlier translation of Dante and the present translation of an epic poem by a mysterious poet who seems to pull Shira into his love story of Romei and Esther.

I figured out the connection about a third of the way through the book, and I admit that Shira frustrated me at times-but the story keeps your attention and explores what love and forgiveness look like in the real world.

Interesting read.

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