



## THE WRITER'S MAP: AN ATLAS OF IMAGINARY LANDS

Edited by Huw Lewis-Jones

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IT DESERVES SAYING up front: *this is a beautiful book*. If you run a map library, you should have it in your collection; if you read fiction and are interested in maps, you will find a lot in it to explore. That said, many *Cartographic Perspectives* readers used to reading and thinking about factual maps—maps which describe our real world and which often carry serious consequences in their use—may find this book odd and even slightly disturbing. I often found myself feeling like something was missing, and although in the end I think that the feeling was misguided, I did find the experience interesting in ways I don't believe the editor and authors intended.

This volume consists of twenty-five lavishly illustrated essays written by a variety of hands: the editor, notable fiction writers, creators of maps based on fictional worlds, and readers of maps. Originally published in Great Britain by Thames and Hudson, *The Writer's Map* has a strong Anglo-centric bias: while it does include examples of maps for fiction from outside of the United Kingdom, it keeps returning to its point of origin. The focus is on well-known writers, the likes of J.R.R. Tolkien, J.K. Rowling, Arthur Ransome, Phillip Pullman and A.A. Milne; the often excellent maps that illustrate second-tier (or third-tier) fantasy novels are not discussed, and neither are maps for computer or tabletop roleplaying games.

There are three essays written or co-written by the editor, Huw Lewis-Jones. The first two, which open the volume ("The Little Things: Mapping Memories" and "In

Fabled Lands: Literary Geographies"), provide overviews of the experience of maps, and of the history of authors using maps in their work, while the third ("Exploring Unknowns: Terra Incognita") surveys the power of imprecision and incompleteness—exploring the role these elements play in imaginative mapping where, unlike in our modern factual maps, they are not always considered a defect. All three essays suffer from the same problem as the book overall: they have a subject—maps—but struggle to say anything really interesting about them. In tackling an over-broad subject, these essays don't cohere into an argument and so offer little of use.

By contrast, the remainder of the essays gain a great deal by being unapologetically, and often eccentrically, personal. In "Foreign Fantasy," Lev Grossman, author of *The Magicians* (2009) and its sequels, explores how in his youthful, imaginative play of Dungeons and Dragons, mapmaking became part of his storytelling. Daniel Reeve, the artist who produced calligraphy and maps for Peter Jackson's Tolkien-based movies, describes in "Uncharted Territory: A Middle-Earth Mapmaker" how his pen-and-ink career and fascination with Tolkien got him that job. "Mischief Managed" is graphic designer Miraphora Mina's dive into her translation of Harry Potter's Marauder's Map from text on a page (Rowling 1999) into a three-dimensional movie prop (Curaón 2004). Cressida Cowell's "First Steps: Our Neverlands" essay tells about how the germ for her series of novels that began with *How to Train Your Dragon* (2003) was a sketched map of the



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islands where the stories take place. In the essay “No Boy Scout: With Swallows and Amazons,” Roland Chambers narrates his step-by-step metamorphosis into someone who thinks “more and more carefully about what maps are” (190). From a beginning of not liking maps at all, he began to see something of their power in writing about the work of Arthur Ransome (who knew a thing or two about maps), and learned even more when he was persuaded (twice) to himself make some maps for his friend (and fellow *Writer’s Map* contributor) Lev Grossman (2009; 2011). Brian Selznick, author of *The Marvels* (2015), discusses the visual relationship between anatomy and geography (“Landscape of the Body: Interior Journeys”). The graphic novelist Isabel Greenberg writes about how incompleteness and error are central to how she approaches maps as an opening to invention. Her essay, “The Cycle of Stories: Early Earth and Faerie,” makes an interesting counterpoint to the editor’s similarly themed “Exploring Unknowns: Terra Incognita.”

The Grossman-Chambers connection is not the only one in the book. Writers and the maps in their books influence other writers and their maps in complex ways, and several books and authors (Tolkien most notably) appear in multiple essays. The resulting tangle might be annoying—especially if one wanted to use this book as a reference—but there’s an index to keep one from getting completely lost. In the end, it’s fascinating to see how the whole world of fictional maps is itself a kind of interconnected ecosystem—one full of admiring imitation and borrowing. I note how similar this is to my experience in factual cartography, where we often look to both historic and contemporary maps for general inspiration and specific style points. Many of my favorite recent maps—both fictional and factual—are explicitly exercises in reproducing old map styles using modern technologies.

As a group, the essays are uneven in tone, execution, and interest, but all have a common underlying theme: *I love maps*. This may seem like a commonplace starting point, but it’s rare to see a book about maps that so effectively sticks to that theme of love. So often, moral responsibility and the weight of the things mapping has enabled—war, mineral extraction, colonial domination, vast transportation networks, and the power of the nation state—creeps into and dominates any discussion of maps, however celebratory the author may want to make it. This is because so many maps, being fact-centered in design and attitude, are tightly interwoven with our world and physical acts within

it. Thus, power exerted by and through maps has been a central pillar of cartographic critique for at least the last quarter century.

This book, however, does not have that issue—it is a lovefest straight through, although the individual results are, as I said, variable. Some essays feel indulgent, and others wander, but many of them are profoundly revealing of the ways that maps can enlighten and encourage the work of writing fiction, and particularly of fantasy fiction. Each illuminates a corner of the craft of creating a believable fictional world, but because the authors use and interact with maps in such a wide range of ways, the book fails to gel except on the one common theme that *maps are fun*.

By turning back, as many of the authors do, to childhoods spent exploring maps, this basic fact that *it’s fun to look at maps* comes up over and over. It’s a kind of play to let oneself wander into exotic places, to follow the route of explorers and adventurers, and just to see the world in miniature. Maps are like dollhouses or model railroads or the paintings of Pieter Breughel: we can play *let’s imagine* games of all kinds as we wander with our eyes and trace shapes with our fingers. This imaginative play reflects back on the way that the serious work of the cartographer’s craft is also, in part, a guilty pleasure. To divide up the world, to sort it into categories and regions, is also a kind of play. It’s all consequential and all very serious—as cartographic criticism has tried to tell us for decades—but maps are not just tools but also toys. While the projection of power is an important part of why maps are important, the reason we *like* them has as much to do with the simple fact that it’s fun to play with the world on a piece of paper or on a screen.

What’s a little odd for a factual cartographer to see, though, is that many of what are widely considered the essential tools and ideas of our trade—projection, accuracy, comprehensiveness, currency, and so on—become peripheral stylistic points to most of the works here. Odd, perhaps, and yet the maps here work; they are effective and informative illustrations to the texts they accompany. How then can a map be both a good map and disregard those qualities by which we judge our own work? The book leaves me wondering how many of the criteria by which we critique our maps and those of others have to do with the world we live in, and how many truly have to do with the practical craft of making map graphics.

As an amusement park full of different rides and riders, *The Writer's Map: An Atlas of Imaginary Lands* offers a great variety of experiences, but ultimately, and despite the editor's best efforts, it fails to explicitly provide the kind of convincing thread one might expect from a book about maps and literature. When one comes down to brass tacks, it is the illustrations that carry at least half of the weight of the book: reproductions of published maps with which many readers will be familiar, shown alongside manuscript and draft versions, and historical maps that the authors and creators recall working from as inspiration. The selection is—as is the whole book—drawn more from love than from any didactic plan, and can thus seem bewilderingly scattered. To those used to viewing cartography through a historical structure, or to discussing it according to theory and plan, *The Writer's Map* can be disorienting—but there is another important message in its personally-oriented structure: *come in, play, and have fun!*

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