



1,001 Novels

A Library of America

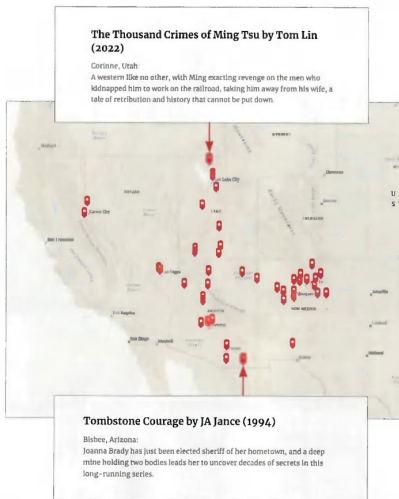
Author: Susan Straight

Medium: ArcGIS StoryMaps

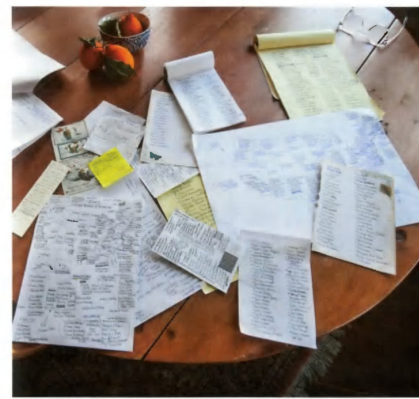
Story behind the story: Susan Straight, a novelist based in Riverside, California, grew up with an unusual dual obsession: books and geography. She credits her mother, an immigrant from Switzerland, for her love of books. Her passion for geography came from her stepfather. "We'd go camping in a little trailer. We always had Auto Club maps and a road atlas. I was always obsessed with maps."

Why it's special: During the pandemic, Susan began to collect and compile novels by location, listing titles on scraps of paper. Christian Harder, an editor at Esri Press and a neighbor of Susan's, connected her with the ArcGIS StoryMaps team at Esri, and thus began a collaboration that resulted in an online compendium of 1,001 book covers and précis, organized by geography, that was ultimately published by the *Los Angeles Times*.

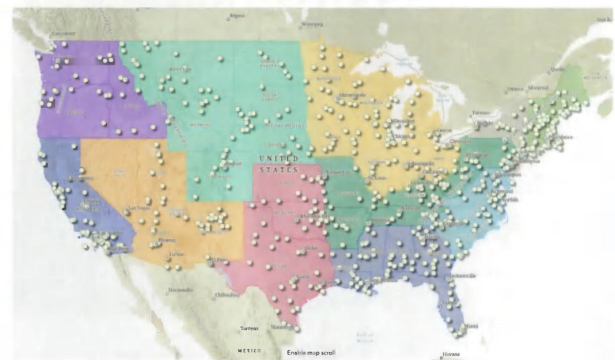
The author: Susan Straight has published 10 books, including *Mecca*, a finalist for the Kirkus Prize in 2022, and *In the Country of Women*, a memoir of migration, books, and family. She was born in Riverside, where she is Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing at UC Riverside.



Above: Two books featured in the story's Enchanted Deserts & Coyote Canyons section.
Left: Susan Straight.



Susan's handwritten book lists, before her effort went digital.



Below: An interactive map featuring all 1,001 volumes (not shown: Alaska and Hawaii).

An example spread from the book. The link icon can be seen on the top of the lefthand page.

“Why Maps Matter” is a question that I hope we all, as cartographers, have asked ourselves to some extent or another, and it is the title of Chapter 2. To Carroll, maps add dimensions to stories that other communication media, such as text, photos, and videos, simply cannot provide, because maps are written in the visual language of location. In addition to identifying location, they also reveal patterns (past, present, and future) and show interrelationships—referring back to geographer Waldo Tobler’s First Law of Geography: “Everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things” (34; Tobler 1970). In this chapter, Carroll discusses the three primary elements—text, images, and maps—of a StoryMap, their purposes, similarities, differences, and strengths, and how they can be combined to inform the reader about the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the story. He then goes on to remark on how StoryMaps have the ability to incorporate another, fourth, element: that of sound.

Chapter 3, “Maps and Minds,” illustrates how closely memories are tied to a sense of place. Many of us, Carroll

included, utilize something known as a mental map—a map-like mental image composed of locational memories and other knowledge—when we think about past events. Much of this chapter is focused on reviewing some of the research literature related to spatial thinking and the brain, but there are also some interesting insights and conclusions that can help guide map-based storytelling; especially useful when that storytelling is geared towards a general audience.

The fourth chapter, “From Analog to Digital” starts with a historical overview of mapmaking at National Geographic. This ranges from the period of maps made using hand-scribed linework and glued labels, through the adoption of interactive computerized prepress systems from the Scitex corporation and the introduction of Esri’s Unix workstation-based GIS, ARC/INFO to, ultimately, desktop graphics software such as Adobe’s Illustrator and Photoshop. Having established this context, the author compares what he sees as the key similarities and differences in physical and web map storytelling. Physical maps have the advantage of simultaneously showing both

fine detail and a synoptic overview, while computer-based maps can accommodate changes in screen form factors, can afford various forms of navigation, and can support the potential for multi-zoom-level data. Printed maps exist as physical artifacts that can be collected in libraries—where they can be preserved and conserved, or hidden away to be lost or rediscovered. Digital maps can be delivered to a user (almost) anywhere almost instantly, but are subject to file-format obsolescence or data corruption. Digital maps can be animated, corrected, or updated, where paper maps generally cannot. While the light emitted from a display screen can shorten the user’s attention span, and the mapmaker’s usable color choices are at the mercy of both ambient light and the vagaries of the digital display’s capabilities and settings, a physical map is limited by factors like the durability of its substrate and the lightfastness of its ink.

The journey referred to in the next chapter, “The Journey to Storytelling,” is that of Carroll’s extensive career in maps; an arc that runs from his early days as an art director at the National Geographic Society and his introduction to cartography, through a decade as its Chief Cartographer—an achievement many cartographers would consider a pinnacle—through the early years of his alliance with Esri. Over the course of this journey, his concept of storytelling—combining interactive maps, text, and images—grew and evolved. His narrative highlights several of his early multimedia experiments, and the many different formats each new prototype took. His path culminated in an easy-to-use, web-based app that allowed users to author, publish, and disseminate easy-to-access web maps—maps that told stories the way Allen Carroll had, over the years, come to understand as the best way to reach people. Essentially, this is the story of the conception, refinement, and continuing evolution of what we now know as ArcGIS StoryMaps.

Chapter 6, “Maps in Dramatic Roles,” outlines how maps, even single static visuals, can play an important narrative role in multimedia storytelling. Panning, scrolling, and utilizing pop-ups can allow maps to provide additional information whether they hold a starring or a supporting role. Carroll details how maps can be used to locate, compare, interpret, provide context, and illustrate any narrative, regardless of the choice of style. This chapter ends with a brief “Mapmaker’s Mantra” that provides guidance to anyone making maps: “Be honest and accurate. Be

transparent and accountable. Minimize harm and seek to provide value. Be Humble and courageous” (139).

The “[Nine Steps to Great Storytelling](#)” that are laid out in Chapter 7 encompass the elements Carroll and his team recommend everyone should consider when building out an effective story. This chapter is an invaluable learning resource for anyone interested in storytelling; both new and veteran users of ArcGIS StoryMaps, and, for that matter, anyone else making maps.

Chapter 8, “Plan, Produce, Polish, Publish,” lays out the StoryMap creation process in detail. This step-by-step guide from story idea to publication is a companion to Esri’s [online tutorial](#), providing guidance, advice, and templates that allow the user to be creative and flexible.

In a sense, *Telling Stories with Maps* tells two stories: that of Carroll’s own introduction to, and evolution in, cartography, and that of the use and usability of ArcGIS StoryMaps. The two are bound together so tightly, however, that one cannot simply say that one part of the book deals with the “Lifetime” and the other with the “Lessons” (from the book’s subtitle: “Lessons from a Lifetime. . .”). The first five chapters of the book lean very heavily on Carroll’s career narrative, and while it is an interesting read that provides helpful context and insights into his thinking on what eventually became ArcGIS StoryMaps, some readers may find that story to be less relevant than the lessons.

From a visual standpoint, the *Telling Stories with Maps* companion [website](#) is a powerful extension to the book, providing, as it does, links to the online collection of featured StoryMaps. While the screen captures in the book provide some clues as to the content of each story example, they cannot come close to replacing the interactive storytelling experience. There are a lot of featured StoryMaps, their bolded titles peppering the text, each followed by a link symbol indicating that it is included in the companion website. In addition, each chapter concludes with an “Exemplary Stories” section, with even more StoryMap links. I, myself, feel that there are too many showcased stories, and that the sheer number of examples significantly detracts from the flow of the narrative. It is interesting to note that the author does highlight how printed maps are still powerful tools, even as his discussion concentrates on the opportunities afforded by interactive, computer-based solutions.

There are a great many takeaways a reader can gain from this book. It provides useful guidance for a first-time user of ArcGIS StoryMaps—outlining the importance of storytelling, demonstrating different ways to utilize maps in conjunction with images and text, and offering practical tips for using Esri’s storytelling platform—but its readership should not be limited to beginners. Although it contains a lot of step-by-step instruction, it does not claim to be an instruction manual, and anyone interested in any method of storytelling can benefit from, and be inspired by, its content. Carroll has an impressive history in cartography and his writing clearly demonstrates his strong desire to share his insights with the community.

As with many Esri Press publications, the quality of the printing and layout does leave something to be desired. The design is less than cohesive: there is no clear structure, and the placement of illustrations and graphics seems

almost haphazard, curiously contrary to Carroll’s own storytelling advice. While the cover illustration certainly draws the eye, it is unclear how it relates to the focus of the book and, frankly, appears more suited to a kids’ book. These drawbacks aside, Allen Carroll’s *Telling Stories with Maps: Lessons from a Lifetime of Creating Place-Based Narratives* can be looked on as a useful addition to your library, and maybe even an opportunity to grow and expand your storytelling horizons.

REFERENCE

Tobler, W. R. 1970. “A Computer Movie Simulating Urban Growth in the Detroit Region.” *Economic Geography* 46: 234–240. <https://doi.org/10.2307/143141>.

