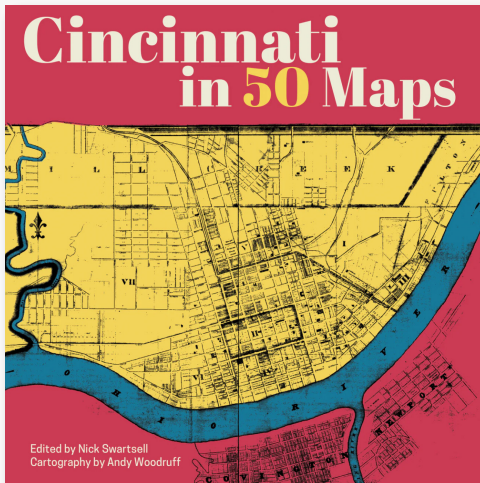




CINCINNATI IN 50 MAPS

Edited by Nick Swartsell; Cartography by Andy Woodruff

Belt Publishing, 2025

126 pages, more than 50 maps

Hardcover: \$30.00, ISBN 978-1-540270-01-6

Review by: Andrew Tyrrell (he/him), South Arrow Maps

I CAME TO *Cincinnati in 50 Maps* having never visited the city and knowing almost nothing about it. Before opening this book, I wouldn't have been able to confidently point to its location on a map of the USA, nor spell it with the correct number of Ns in the correct places. But I'm a cartographer and I love maps and atlases, and I hoped that by reading *Cincinnati in 50 Maps* I would be able to get to know the city a bit. On that count, the book delivers.

The book announces its character, before you even reach the contents page, with a pair of quotations: "Cincinnati presents an odd spectacle," and a declaration that everyone who wasn't perfect but wasn't terrible in this life should get to "spend eternity in a medium place—like Cincinnati." The first is from Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in *Democracy in America* (1835), and the second was spoken by Eleanor Shellstrop, lead character in the 2016–2020 sitcom *The Good Place*. It is an apt and self-aware framing, because this book is itself something of an odd spectacle, and—as I will come to—it isn't perfect, but it isn't terrible.

The "Introduction" depicts Cincinnati as a "living, breathing organism," and suggests that "maps can show us the beast's skin . . . and the bone structure of its topography" (9). The analogy is extended to imagine the maps throughout the book as the baby photos and medical charts of this creature, showing us how it used to look and offering insight into its inner workings. With this in mind, I hoped the book would be a carefully curated, pictorial biography of the city, leading me through its gestation, infancy,

development, and maturity in a logical order. That is the standard the book explicitly sets for itself, and it is the standard against which I found myself measuring it.

The material is organized into five sections that move, broadly, from the deep past to the present day, with a few stretches into the future. The first, "Mapping the Past," guides the reader through the geological and anthropological history of the city. The second, "The Shape of Cincinnati," covers the geography of the modern city, including its borders, neighborhoods, topography, and streets (and avenues, and roads, and parkways). The third, "Communities and Culture," covers demographics, sport, and two "world famous in Cincinnati" meat dishes: chili and goetta. Section four, "Getting Around," covers transport, including traffic congestion, current and potential future mass transit, and crossings of the Ohio river into Kentucky (and exactly where Ohio ends and Kentucky begins). The fifth, "Health and Environment," visualizes statistics including life expectancy, pollution, tree canopy, and food access.

Each map is presented on one half of a double-page spread, with accompanying text on the facing page. Both elements vary in how much of the page they occupy: texts range from short single paragraphs to full, multi-paragraph pages. Most maps are full-bleed, while some have a margin and others just the shape of the city boundary. To test how the book works, I read it three times: first from start to finish, considering text and map together; then



© by the author(s). This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

reading only the text, with the maps covered; and finally looking only at the maps, with the text covered. Each reading made sense, and each time I was able to learn about Cincinnati, which is a testament to both the editor and the cartographer.

That the maps reward attention on their own is one of the book's real strengths. Almost all of them are modern creations by the cartographer, and, while they vary widely in their color choices, they share enough of a consistency of style to clearly show that they all belong together in the same book. The majority depict the city's waterways, roads, buildings, and rail lines in solid colors, limited to a maximum of five or six colors per map, giving the maps a minimalist simplicity that lets the story they tell be told clearly. Where necessary, bold callouts identify specific features on the map, so that the legends stay minimal. Sometimes the legend alone does the work: "The Missing Pieces" (51) has the best one in the book—just "Cincinnati" and four differently colored items of "Not Cincinnati" for the four municipal islands of Norwood, St. Bernard, Elmwood Place, and Edgemont. No other detail is needed on the map. In a break from solid colors, "Highs and Lows: Cincinnati's Topography" (55), uses hypsometric tints and hillshading to depict the terrain, supplemented only by a blue Ohio River, a white dashed city boundary, callouts to the high and low elevation points, and numbered markers for select viewpoints around Cincinnati's central basin. It is a departure from the style of the bulk of the maps, but it tells its story with great effect and is one of my favorites in the book.

Small multiples are used to particularly good effect. Section Two, "The Shape of Cincinnati," has several chapters built from them. The four maps of "Streets, Avenues, Roads, and Parkways" (58) are so simple they require no labels, yet tell a convincing story alongside the accompanying text. The thirty-five maps of "Cincinnati's Many Downtowns" (47) artfully highlight how many neighborhood cores are spread across the city, and could well be printed and sold as a souvenir poster anywhere in the city. Further into the book we find choropleth, dot density, and heat maps for demographic data—such as population density, political lean, racial makeup, and commuting patterns—and the full-bleed maps show that the stories they tell are not confined to within the city boundary.

While the maps certainly capture attention, the book does not quite become the curated biography its introduction

alludes to. The sections themselves are sensibly sequenced, but within each one there is no real order to the maps. Sometimes this is actively counter-intuitive: "The Transit System That Could Have Been" (97) comes two maps before "Cincinnati's Transit Network" (101). More troubling for me, as a newcomer to the city, the book repeatedly refers to places it has not yet identified. The very first chapter, "Ancient Waterways" (13), references Mill Creek Valley and St. Bernard, yet neither is on the accompanying map. Only eight maps later does Mill Creek make its cartographic debut, and not until "The Missing Pieces" map (51), halfway through Section 2, do we learn where St. Bernard is—and that it is not actually part of Cincinnati at all! The same disconnect surfaces at the level of the individual spread. "A Visionary Parks Plan" (22) discusses and depicts urban planner George Kessler's 1907 plan for interconnected parks, and the visually appealing map specifically labels six parks and green spaces, yet, none of these places are named in the text. On the other hand, the text states "You can see some of Kessler's vision . . . including Central Parkway," (23) but, I unfortunately can't, because Central Parkway is not identified on the map. Sadly, the symbiotic relationship between map and text I expected is not present in most of the spreads, although "Paper Streets in the Real World" (61) shows how well it works when it clicks. It provides an interesting read about streets that appear in city records yet don't exist on the ground, paired with a pleasingly simple map in which the paper streets are highlighted and the places named in the text are directly labeled. I only wish more spreads managed the same, though this one has its own flaw that I'll address later.

A related gap is one of content rather than sequence. The book opens with a land acknowledgment listing the Indigenous peoples upon whose land Greater Cincinnati now stands, yet no map in the atlas so much as mentions any of them. The single map concerned with Indigenous history, "Cincinnati's Indigenous Earthworks" (14), refers only to the peoples of the early and Middle Woodland periods. For a book that reaches back to "Mapping the Past," this is a conspicuous absence, and one the land acknowledgment rather highlights than resolves.

The remaining shortcomings are cartographic quibbles—minor, but worth naming, since small fixes would sharpen the whole. No map feels unfinished, but a few could use refinement. The inset on "Cycling in Cincy" (89) is a larger-scale window on a smaller-scale full-bleed page; the two share a legend and the same bike-infrastructure

data, but the colors, line weights, and data are inconsistent between them. The legend for “Cincinnati’s Transit Network” (101) defines current Metro bus routes as a blue line and planned bus rapid transit as the same blue with a dark center, but on the map only the planned routes are blue (and at that scale the center line is too thin to see), while the current routes are gray. On a handful of maps the street and neighborhood labels clash or merge with the data behind them. Adjusting their placement, adding halos or knockout masks, or simply removing them would improve legibility. It appears that some maps weren’t designed to be printed full-bleed, since several labels are cut off at the edge of the page. Two choices puzzled me for other reasons: the proportional pie charts of “Tree Canopy” (115) draw the eye, but their story would be told more easily by simply mapping the tree canopy cover itself, and the legend for the population density map “Where We Live” (65) tops out at an infinity symbol, which is an alarming concept!

The text layout design is almost entirely consistent. Each section opens with a heading page: section number, name, and contents framed in a box over a full-bleed extract of a historical map of the city, all in monochrome reddish-pink. Each spread sets black text on a white background, with only the map title, initial drop cap, and page number in that same reddish-pink. I say “almost entirely consistent” because two of the fifty-three chapters unnecessarily break the mold. “City of Walls” (56) renders its title and page numbers as a spray-painted stencil on a light gray brick background filling the whole spread, leading one to expect maps and descriptions of graffiti or public art. Sadly not; the text merely describes retaining walls across the city, and the map only differentiates city-owned from privately-owned ones. It feels as though the designers tried to spruce up an otherwise uninteresting subject with a texture and a different title font. Just two pages further on, “Paper Streets in the Real World” (61)—good as it is—applies a folded-paper texture across both pages, behind the text but on top of the map. It took me too long to work out that the faint gray lines crisscrossing the map were paper

folds rather than unidentified data. On a minor typographic note: the fully-justified text setting means almost every chapter carries words hyphenated across a line break; a design decision which, while rarely off-putting, does produce the amusing occurrence of “almost-contin-u-ous” [sic] (68).

So who is this book for? On the strength of my own experience, I’d say it is likely better suited to readers who already have some connection to Cincinnati—people living there who want to learn about and see more of their city, or people with roots there who want a book to remind them of home. Because each spread can be viewed stand-alone, this is more of a coffee-table book to dip in and out of than start-to-finish bedtime reading. As someone unfamiliar with the city and its geography, I found it wasn’t the ideal place to start, precisely because the somewhat chaotic order of its chapters doesn’t guide you through. And yet I did come away knowing the shape of the city, its neighborhoods and rivers and hills, its history and its present state. There is also more here than the title lets on: across fifty-three chapters there are, depending on how you count, anywhere from fifty-five to over seventy maps. If you count each panel of a small multiple as its own map, the total climbs past one hundred twenty—far more, in other words, than just *Cincinnati in 50 Maps*.

In the end, for all the ambition of its opening analogy, the finished book feels less like the curated biography it promises to be and more like a collection of Polaroids and newspaper clippings that have been hastily put together without pausing to check whether one or two important photos might still be lying on the floor. The final product does serve its purpose of telling the stories of the city, but it would have benefited from more time and care spent curating it. None of that undoes what the editor and cartographer have built: an inviting, handsome, and quietly informative portrait of a city, and a good advertisement for the series it belongs to. This book is an odd spectacle. It isn’t perfect, but it isn’t terrible—and not only can I now find Cincinnati on a map, I can spell it, too.

