

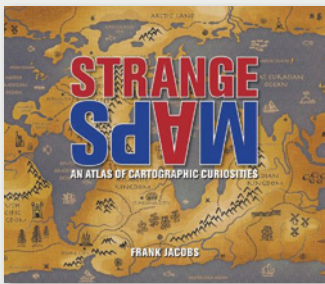
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## STRANGE MAPS: AN ATLAS OF CARTOGRAPHIC CURIOSITIES



By Frank Jacobs.

2009 Studio (Penguin Group);  
New York, New York.  
244 pages, 138 maps.  
\$30.00 US, softcover.  
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*Strange Maps: An Atlas of Cartographic Curiosities* is the print version of a selection of maps collected by Frank Jacobs and posted on his *Strange Maps* blog (<http://bigthink.com/blogs/strange-maps>). The blog has approximately 500 maps with corresponding descriptions and comments, of which 138 have been selected and published in the atlas.

Unlike traditional geographic and thematic atlases, *Strange Maps* is comprised of unordinary, remarkable, and eccentric maps that span several centuries, continents, and themes. Accompanying every map is a carefully written description of not only the map itself, but a thorough discussion of the map's purpose, the atlas author's interpretation of it, and his remarks on any historical, political, literary and/or geographical influences and contributions that the map may have had in its creation. It is clear that the author has researched many aspects of the maps, providing between one to two pages of insightful descriptions for each of the "cartographic curiosities."

The author describes his anthology of maps as an *anti-atlas*, where the maps are clearly not to be used for navigational purposes. It quickly becomes obvious that

this atlas is a collection of rare maps that fall under their own category of "light-hearted and strange"; it is filled with cartographic misconceptions, fictitious creations, artistic renditions, humorous works, propaganda, and bias.

The atlas is divided into 18 thematic sections: Cartographic Misconceptions, Literary Creations, Artography, Zoomorphic Maps, (Political) Parody, Maps as Propaganda, Obscure Proposals, Ephemeral States, Strange Borders, Exclaves and Enclaves, A Matter of Perspective, Iconic Manhattan, Linguistic Cartography, Based on the Underground, Fantastic Maps, Cartographs and other Data Maps, Maps from Outer Space, and Whatchamacallit. There are between four and 11 maps for each category, almost all available in color. Essentially every second page features a map, with its description available either on the same or the opposite page, depending on the map size. Examples of some of the types of maps found in this atlas include:

**Literary Creations:** Many literary works include maps of fictitious places and settings. Frank Jacobs included a few of these maps; for instance, Thomas More's fictional island of Utopia, situated in the Americas, and The Land of Oz from L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Frank Jacobs' descriptions of the literary maps include a summary of the story, description of the details seen on the maps, and a discussion of why the cartographer/artist may have drawn things the way he did.

**Artography:** Looking at maps from an artistic point of view, and not a cartographic one, the author included a selection of maps that are both visually appealing and graphical in nature. One example is "Drawn from Memory: United Shapes of America," by the artist Kim Dingle. This is a compilation of maps of the US drawn by children. Every map is different, and when compiled together, the canvas looks like a herd of abstract cows. Another unique one is "Now this is World Music: Harmonious World Beat," a map of the world's continents created solely with notes, ties, bars and staves of that continent's traditional sheet music. This map can actually be played.

**Ephemeral States:** Frank Jacobs was able to locate maps of countries that existed at some point in time, but are no longer present. One particular map shows Carpatho-Ukraine which existed for only 24 hours before being seized by Hungary. The day earlier it had been part of Czechoslovakia.

**Iconic Manhattan:** A selection of maps of New York clearly show it as the center of the universe. One interesting work is a wordmap, using poetry to create the neighborhoods of Manhattan. The actual text corresponds to the localities it describes, including in all over 100 places on Manhattan Island.

There are of course many other maps displayed in the atlas, including coincidental geographic boundaries created with food or clouds, upside-down maps, plans for states that never left the drawing board, cartograms, maps of outer space, and much more. Since many of these maps have been created to tell a story, Frank Jacobs' interpretation of the maps, based on researched facts and supplemented by trivia and at times humor, helps the reader discover the cartographic and thematic value in an otherwise questionable composition.

The atlas is comprised mainly of European, American, and world-level geographic areas. It appears as though the maps selected for the atlas were not picked to represent any specific region of the world, but rather chosen for their interesting and unique themes. That being said, however, there are dozens of American maps included, making it the country with the largest representation in the atlas.

The map designs and styles vary quite a bit from one map to another, with some composed of simple sketches and scribbles, and others being carefully illustrated with icons, images, and photographs. Some maps were printed as large as the atlas pages, about 12 inches in height and width, whereas others were smaller than 4.5 inches.

The size of some of the maps is perhaps one area of weakness in this atlas. Because it is an atlas (even if it is an anti-atlas), one might expect the maps should be given more coverage than the text describing it. There are several maps that look like thumbnails compared to the amount of writing that surrounds them. Perhaps the selection criterion for the atlas should have included map size. The placement of the maps on the pages could have been better thought out as well. Several maps were printed right into the binding edge at the center of the page spread, making them difficult to read, appreciate and comprehend.

Although this atlas really isn't about cartography, but rather the underlying themes of the maps, many purchasers of this atlas will in fact be cartographers, map collectors, artists, and the like. Readers interested in learning more about these maps that are not published in any other atlas may, therefore, be a bit disappointed to discover that the author has left out a few valuable details in the maps' descriptions. How large are the maps in reality? What are their dimensions? Are they really the size of thumbnails, or are some of them the scope of murals? Physical map details add an important element to map appreciation, and, for this atlas, transfer something illusory into a physical reality. These maps actually exist.

Along the lines of the maps' existence, another essential detail that is missing in the map descriptions, quite ironically, is the maps' location. With few exceptions, the author does not reveal where the maps have been published, and where they may be found. With so many

extraordinary maps, such as those painted on canvas, one may well question where the originals are, and whether prints have been made. Is the collection of "strange" maps also a collection of "rare" maps? Are the maps available as single-sheet paper prints, or only in electronic format? Were they self-published by unknown cartographers who have the only copy on their computer drive? Are they available in books of poetry, such as the Manhattan word map? Are they valuable, famous, out of print? Answers to these questions would help bring the maps to life.

One of the risks of creating a publication from material that is freely available online is that readers may opt for the freely accessible online version. As mentioned earlier, the contents of the atlas are also available on Frank Jacobs' blog, and in fact he has hundreds of additional maps comparably "strange." The blog, however, serves the beneficial purpose of giving a taste of the type of maps that can be expected in this unique atlas. In today's digital age, very little isn't available online, and if it wasn't for the creation of the blog and the contributions from the blog's followers, this atlas certainly wouldn't contain the carefully selected maps that it does.

Frank Jacobs' atlas of cartographic curiosities is one of the more unique atlases available. With topics that span a broad theme base, the atlas is certainly much more than a cartographic compilation. The themes selected for the atlas blend geography and society, creating a collection of cartographic works that have been merged with history, art, music, politics, literature, science fiction, and much else besides. What readers will discover is that the atlas demonstrates society's love for maps and geography and the realization that a map really can be created by anybody, and about anything, as long as it tells a story. *Strange Maps*, simply put, is a compilation of stories.