

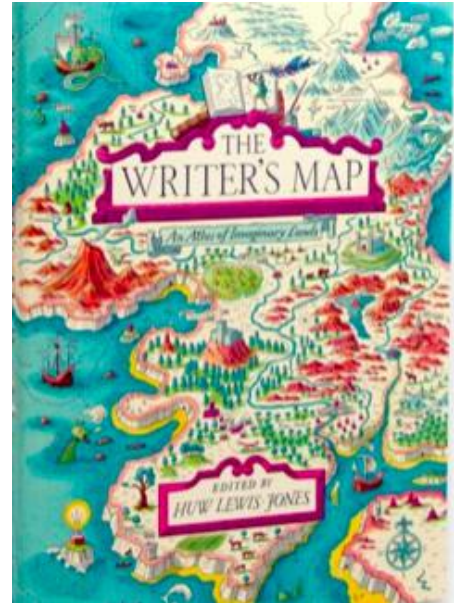
Huw Lewis-Jones (ed.)

## The Writers Map: An Atlas of Imaginary Lands

Contributors: Philip Pullman, Brian Sibley, Cressida Cowell, Robert Macfarlane, Frances Hardinge, Joanne Harris, David Mitchell, Kiran Millwood Hargrave, Piers Torday, Helen Moss, Abi Elphinstone, Miraphora Mina, Daniel Reeve, Reif Larsen, Russ Nicholson, Isabel Greenberg, Roland Chambers, Coralie Bickford-Smith, Peter Firmin, Lev Grossman, Sandi Toksvig, Brian Selznick, Chris Riddell

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The first thing to say about this book is that it is beautifully produced. The copious maps are in gorgeous full colour, often in double page spreads, the text is well designed, and the book is a pleasure to hold and to read. It is in every sense of the word an art book, which lives up to the high standards which Thames and Hudson have set for themselves. It will appeal to bibliophiles as much as cartomanes – and this reviewer is both.

It is physically a large book, doing full justice for once to the maps, and its scope is ambitious. It covers many aspects of literary cartography, with a focus on imaginative fiction. It contains essays by a stellar cast of writers, including Robert MacFarlane, David Mitchell, Reif Larsen, and Philip Pullman. The general quality of the writing matches that of the artwork. It does for fiction writing what Karen O'Rourke's book *Walking and Mapping* (2013) has done for visual artists.

As such, this 'Atlas of Imagined Lands' provides an ideal supplement to *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, edited by Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi (second edition 1999), which is more comprehensive but less detailed. Strangely there is no reference to this latter work in an otherwise useful Further Reading guide.



So what's not to like? It depends on what you think an atlas is and should do. Most people would say that an atlas is a compilation of maps organised around specific themes. And by that criterion this one is a resounding success. However, as a contribution to literary cartography – an inter-discipline combines the critical methods of cartographic and literary analysis - this reviewer could not help but feel that the whole was somewhat less than the sum of its many fascinating parts.

The editor, Huw Lewis-Jones, is an explorer and expedition guide, and one-time curator at the Scott Polar Research Institute and National Maritime Museum. As he explains in an introductory essay, he was fascinated by maps, both functional and imaginative, from an early age. This interest has carried over into his adult professional life, and he is someone who relies both on scientific cartography and on his own navigational skills, his ability to 'read the landscape', in his expeditions across inhospitable and sometimes uncharted terrain. Like many of his contributors, he is acutely aware of the non-correspondence between map and territory, and sensitive to the fact that physical and cultural geographies, while they may intersect, have their own, relatively autonomous modes of operation and meaning. It is indeed these very tensions that have opened up a space for science/fantasy fiction and given maps such an important narrative role in the unfolding of their plots.

This idea was first developed by Peter Turchi in *Maps of the Imagination* (2007), his seminal study of the writer as cartographer. Prior to this, critical cartographers had employed techniques of deconstruction, derived from post-structuralist theory to a reading of maps as quasi- texts, but tended to overlook the graphic or info-graphic dimension which does so much to naturalise their mimetic function.

Perhaps the most important contribution to establishing the conceptual foundations of literary cartography have come from a semiologist turned geographer, Franco Moretti. In his magisterial *Atlas of the European Novel* (1998), Moretti explores both geography within the text and the geometries of soft power which operate outside the text to shape the spatial distribution of different literary genres. He looks at how spatial relations, especially relations of structural inequality based on class and region, are depicted (for example in the novels of Dickens). He considers the amount of English romantic fiction or sea stories which has been translated, or made available via circulating libraries to a wider public in other European countries. Moretti's methods of mapping patterns of literary production and consumption are controversial. The correlations he makes have been queried by statisticians, just as his attempt to quantify his results have been ridiculed by literary critics used to treating each authored work as a singularity and hence unique. Nevertheless, taking a leaf or two out of Moretti's atlas, with a little more theorising and a little less rhapsodising over maps, might have given this volume a bit more of a cutting edge. Moretti's omission from the Further Reading list is symptomatic in this regard.

As it is, the generally a-theoretical – and in some cases anti-theoretical - stance of the contributors means that many of the analogies which they draw between map making and storytelling are commonsensical, if not clichéd, and do little to illuminate either. It could be argued, for example, that while the neuroscience of navigation and narration indicates their similarity as cognitive functions, the actual social processes of mental mapping and storytelling draw on quite distinct cultural repertoires which are only combined in site specific memoryscapes. This is something that scenographers, (i.e. those who produce site-specific fictions) have recently begun to exploit to great effect. Again, this new development in literary cartography is conspicuous by its absence.

Despite these caveats, this is an atlas well worth having. It more than just another coffee table book, more like a bedside companion. You can dip into it and be sure to find something of interest on almost every page - and the maps alone are worth the price.