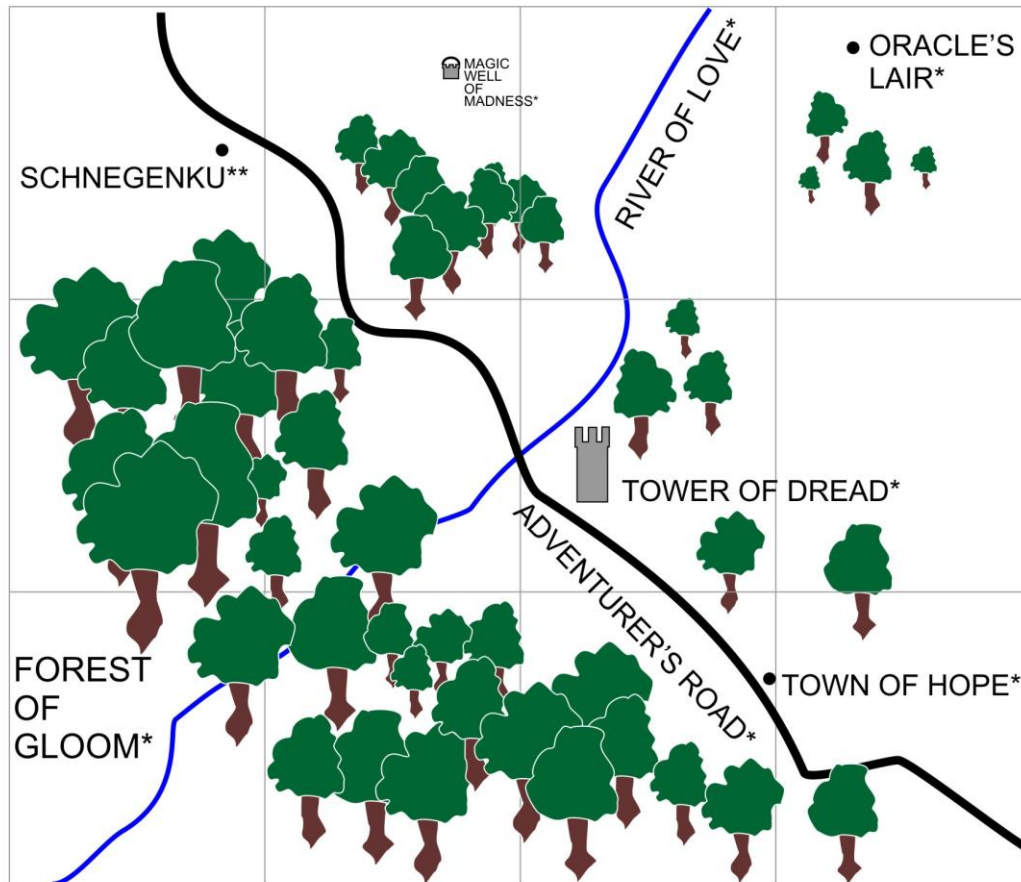


MAPS



*THE CARTOGRAPHER ASSUMES NO LIABILITY FOR FATALITIES DERIVING FROM THE INABILITIES OF THE ADVENTURERS TO READ THE MAP, THE TRANSLATOR'S FALSIFICATION OF HIS RESUME, POPULATION SHIFT, ACTS OF GOD, GODS, AND/OR GODDESSES, STRAY MONSTERS, POLITICAL BOUNDARY CHANGES, OR JUST PLAIN ADVENTURER STUPIDITY.
** ROUGHLY TRANSLATED AS, "PERFECTLY ORDINARY AND BORING TOWN". (PLEASE REFERENCE ABOVE NOTE BEFORE VISITING)

not just for directions anymore

How to use maps to make your fiction writing "pop"!

Leona Wisoker

MAPS: NOT JUST FOR DIRECTIONS ANY MORE

How to use maps to make your fiction writing "pop"!

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A map, by any other name . . .

In today's hi-tech world, we take our access to maps for granted; whether GPS, MapQuest, or a Rand McNally, directions are only a moment away. But writers can't afford to take anything for granted: GPS has only been commercially available for under ten years, MapQuest for less than fifteen, and Rand McNally's first real "road map", aimed at drivers, didn't hit the shelves until the early 1900s.

So here's the real story about how to use maps to get your fiction writing going in the right direction.

Which way do we go?

It's tempting to allow fantasy characters to have a handy map in their backpack. But depending on the setting, large-scale, detailed road maps might not actually exist. In a typical medieval-European setting, the most common model, ordinary people didn't know the first thing about the lands beyond the horizon, and travelers certainly didn't carry maps; they had – if they could read – an itinerary: a written set of directions, not a drawing. If they couldn't read, they traveled with a guide or a group that knew where they were going; think of – better yet, go read – Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales".

If your characters are traveling with a group, what stories are they telling each other about their destinations - or their origins?

Large area maps, up until the late 1500s, could be huge and unwieldy, the sort spread across a big war table. It wasn't until the late 1500s that map "atlases" – compilations of smaller sheets – became available; and it wasn't until the printing press made mass reproductions relatively cheap that carrying detailed maps around became practical for ordinary people.

How large are the maps your characters possess, and what are they drawn on (i.e., parchment, vellum, animal skin, wood)?

Detailed studies of geographic areas were originally commissioned, not for the sake of travelers, but mainly for bureaucratic reasons: to resolve boundary arguments and define taxable areas, or for a "land grab" by explorers looking to gain territory for their country. And of course the military found it advisable to have scouts map surrounding areas; but those maps absolutely did not get copied and sold to the public. So if your characters are walking around with a map in their pocket, you need to know where it came from and why it was drawn in the first place.

Who paid for the creation of the map your characters are looking at, and why?

INSPIRED YET? Here's a spot for notes:

It all comes down to the money.

Nobody drew up maps just for fun; cartography has always been expensive in materials and learning requirements. Especially in medieval times, the more accurate the map, the more learned in mathematics, languages, astronomy, and science the cartographer had to be – and the more they needed a sponsor.

Who sponsors cartographers in your story?

The theft of maps has long been a perennial problem; a map of Columbus's discoveries was promptly smuggled out of Portugal into the hands of Duke Ferrara of Italy, ruining Portugal's "edge" – exclusive knowledge of the explorations. In recent years, more spectacular thefts have hit the news, such as those of E. Forbes Smiley III, a map dealer arrested in 2005, who admitted to slicing 97 rare maps out of library atlases and reselling them to collectors and other dealers.

How did your characters get their maps – honestly or dishonestly?

Write down your answers here:

Maps can be wrong!

We trust maps implicitly, and so did early travelers; but world maps back in the stone ages before satellite imaging came along (okay, maybe a little further back than that!) could be dangerously inaccurate. Even Columbus may have used maps of badly distorted landmasses in his westward, spice-seeking ventures. Deliberately, to convince sponsors to hand over the funding? Accidentally, with full faith in his choices? The argument continues to this day.

What would a distorted map do to your travelers?

Most rulers during Columbus' time were content with arguing over pieces of their known world, not searching out new corners to explore. It took a massive effort – and arguably more than a little chicanery – for Columbus to gain support for his journeys. If your characters are planning to stray significantly off the map, it might not be as easy as hoisting a backpack and loading a horse to set off into the sunset.

How wrong, overall, are the maps in your fantasy universe, and what influences are driving the explorers to trust them?

More space for your ideas:

Here there be Monsters!

Maps don't have to just be drawings. They can include a wealth of notes on not only the geography, but the inhabitants, beliefs, and events of an area. Maps can be used as propaganda as much as visual aids: whether showing a famous battle or deriding the residents of a certain town as barbaric heathens, a cartographer's creation might well be the closest thing to a newspaper that exists in your world.

How do people in your fantasy universe get their understanding of the lands around them?

Maps can entertain as well as inform, and accuracy has, historically, often been discarded in order to please the cartographer's audience or sponsor. Maps can convey legends and myths, or even spread a sensationalist rumor; twelfth century maps purporting to show the location of Prester John are a prime example of all three. Prester John is described, in "The Mapmakers" by John Noble Wilford, as "[a] Christian monarch of unimagined wealth and power. . . . [he] would come to the aid of western Christendom in its struggles with the Mongols and Saracens."

What myths are commonly represented as fact on the maps of your world?

It can be fun to add a little extra color to your world by describing the lusciously illustrated maps the wealthy are sure to possess. For example, look up the Guardaroba Nuova of Cosimo I de Medici, which still stands, although unfinished, as a testament to the rich imagination of the cartographer Egnazio Danti and the artist Giorgio Vasari. An entire room of cabinets, each door painted with a superb map designed to complement the contents of the cabinets, centered around a large globe of the world; the cost of the venture must have been staggering, the effect on viewers incalculable. The room was intended as a relatively public forum, to display the wealth and power of Cosimo I to his people. Danti created a more linear, religiously slanted, but still stunning arrangement for the Papal Court of Gregory XIII Boncompagni.

What do maps commissioned by prominent religious figures in your world look like?

Maps are more than pretty pictures.

Above all, avoid treating maps as simply navigational aids; they were, and remain to this day, items of tremendous political, religious, and financial power which generally require employing hundreds of workers. The evolution of maps has been a vital influence on the development of our world, and if your characters plan to do any traveling at all, even a brief look into the history of cartography can yield a wealth of background color, detail, and plot ideas.

"Follow the money" is an old but still useful adage; I submit that for writers, "follow the map" is just as useful when building a fictional world, whether fantasy or science-fiction.

What will maps look like in the future? What would the map of an alien culture look like? If the alien species in question only sees in the blue spectrum, or through thermal imaging, what would that do to their mapping development?

The right details can make or break your story, and how you handle maps, whatever the genre, can do the same.

I hope this inspires you into a more considered look at the way you use maps in your writing, but be careful . . . as Bilbo said (if I may misquote him slightly):

"It's a dangerous business, going out your door . . . if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to."

Maps are just as perilous, and lead in as many strange and exciting directions as Tolkien's roads; after all, the entire Fellowship of the Ring saga started with Bilbo looking at a map. What might they do for your world . . . **and your writing?**

For Further Research

I admit I have drawn a wide brush over a large stretch of history, and focused exclusively - perhaps unfairly - on European models, in order to highlight ideas more than details.

For those interested in more chronologically accurate accounts of cartographic history, or in exploring alternate cultural versions, I suggest beginning with:

Odden's Bookmarks (<http://oddens.geog.uu.nl/index.php>)

The amazingly helpful and detailed cartographic section of [Henry-Davis.com](http://www.henry-davis.com) (<http://www.henry-davis.com/MAPS>).

I am also deeply indebted to the wonderful folks at the [MapHist mailing list](http://www.maphist.nl) (<http://www.maphist.nl/index.html>) for all their help.

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(DLC also features links to more terrific writing/creativity resources, and an invitation to join what is rapidly becoming a global support group for creative types!)

Leona's blog, "The Writing of a Wisoker on the Loose", may be found at:

<http://leonawisoker.wordpress.com>

If you enjoyed this ebook, if it helped you, if you have a question,
comment, or complaint, **please email Leona** at:

leona@leonawisoker.com

Better yet – PASS IT ON!