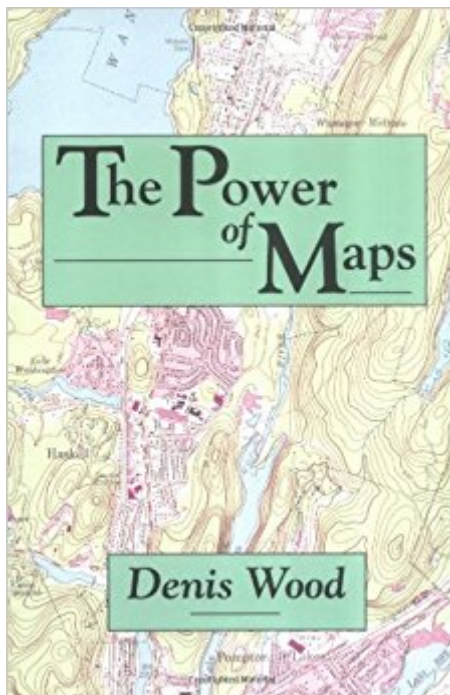


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# The Power Of Maps



## Synopsis

This volume ventures into terrain where even the most sophisticated map fails to lead--through the mapmaker's bias. Denis Wood shows how maps are not impartial reference objects, but rather instruments of communication, persuasion, and power. Like paintings, they express a point of view. By connecting us to a reality that could not exist in the absence of maps--a world of property lines and voting rights, taxation districts and enterprise zones--they embody and project the interests of their creators. Sampling the scope of maps available today, illustrations include Peter Gould's AIDS map, Tom Van Sant's map of the earth, U.S. Geological Survey maps, and a child's drawing of the world. THE POWER OF MAPS was published in conjunction with an exhibition at the Cooper Hewitt Museum, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book accompanies an exhibit called "The Power of Maps," which is being held at New York City's Cooper Hewitt Museum from October 1992 to March 1993. For those not fortunate enough to see the exhibit, the book stands by itself. It aims to show that every cartographer has an agenda of some kind and to assist the map user in figuring out that agenda. The writing is entertaining but a bit wordy and irritatingly full of ellipses. In addition, though cocurator Wood's thinking is often quite good, the reader must still beware of flights of fancy, as when he gives a facetious reason for why United States Geological Survey maps don't have full legends on each. For general collections and collections on cartography.- Mary L. Larsgaard, Univ. of California-Santa Barbara Map & Imagery

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"If compelled to cite only a single book on cartography to stock a desert-island shelf or to assign to the eager novice, this is the automatic choice....Although I have been drawing and poring over maps, as well as reading about them, since childhood, I received more revelations about their essential nature and larger meanings from this one powerful, disturbing, totally convincing essay than from all the other books, articles, and lectures on the subject I have ever encountered."

--Wilbur Zelinsky, The Pennsylvania State University "Combining both topical issues relevant to lay readers and serious scholarship, Denis Wood's *The Power of Maps* will provoke, amuse, tweak, and inform anyone who has had occasion to use, or merely peruse, a map--which is to say, everyone. It is a relentless entertainment--relentlessly challenging to traditional assumptions about cartography, relentlessly witty as it deconstructs (read: demolishes) the pretense of neutral, 'scientific' map-making, and relentlessly contrary in reminding us that maps reflect social choices and serve particular political interests." --Stephen S. Hall, author of *Mapping the Next*

*Millennium*"Perhaps the simplest thing to say is that there is nothing quite like it! There are, of course, countless conventional accounts of cartography -- usually a combination of the history of cartography and a catalogue of its technical achievements-- but these are usually Whiggish tales which celebrate the progressive advance of cartography towards 'Truth.' Apart from a short discussion of so-called 'propaganda maps' (which is there simply to mark a departure from the norm, so to speak, an anomaly) these books rarely offer any sustained discussion of what one might call the cultural and political implications of maps and mapping. With the current explosion of interest in cultural politics and social theory, both inside and outside human geography, there is an obvious need for a discussion which resists those conventions. I can think of only Mark Monmonier's *HOW TO LIE WITH MAPS* -- which from all accounts has done extremely well, but is narrower in scope than Wood's text -- and the late Brian Harley's marvelous essays on deconstruction and mapping -- which may well be too abstract for many readers. In any event, I have no doubt that Denis Wood's book will be a major contribution to this emerging discussion of the power and politics of maps and mapping: it is written in a clear and accessible style but none the less deals with some of the most complex issues in contemporary debates over power, knowledge and spatiality. It is immensely engaging: the examples and illustrations are to the point and by no means obvious, and the issues that are raised extend far beyond the confines of any purely academic discipline. This is one of those rare books that will prompt its readers to re-think some of

their most taken-for-granted assumptions and the ways in which those conventions bear on their everyday lives."-- Derek Gregory, The University of British Columbia Â "Denis Wood's book *The Power of Maps* sheds a brilliant new light on our customary experience of maps....You will never look at any map the same way again." (The Christian Science Monitor 1992-10-18)"....The last word on maps." (The Trenton Times 1992-10-18)"He has some important, indeed compelling, things to say about maps...Wood not only incorporates a great store of historical detail into his essays, he sees maps as peculiar historical texts, as repositories of layers of knowledge and labor that can be revealed if we know how to read" them....I highly recommend this unconventional book to historians of science of any period." (Isis 1992-10-18)

The author includes way too many personal anecdotes and not enough factual content. The author enjoys recounting trivial personal stories that have a quasi-related relevance. It's not what I expected at all.

I read Wood's *The Power of Maps* a few years ago, and I've just come back to it. It is not light reading (although it's well written and a pleasure to read), and it isn't just about cartography. It is about the ways in which we use symbols to reflect our world's biases, power structures, hopes, fears and more. Maps are forms of cultural language, and Wood does not shrink from pulling the curtain away from the fact that they are also often arbitrary, manipulative, and simply wrong. At the same time, he celebrates them, and he encourages readers to come to maps with their critical antennae raised. So, maps can tell us much more about our world than most people realize. This is real scholarship, and it is intellectually rigorous, but it is also accessible, relevant and rich in content. It's a wonderful book.

Ranging from strident politics to Eco-like semiotics, this book considers the map in all its forms, intents and uses. The text is a little too preachy for much of the book, but the quality of some of the ideas and the enthusiasm with which Wood presents them makes this bearable. Wood's basic point is that maps are human constructs that come with points of view. As such, questions about the qualities of a map can't be answered without also asking what the map was constructed for. With examples ranging from the Peters Projection controversies, to election gerrymandering, to natural resource utilization, he shows how all maps are designed to both include and to exclude, and how they embody a representation of the world in the best tradition of Eco's "signs". A great book, slightly marred by the writing style.

I bought Wood's more recent book on maps (*Seeing Through Maps: Many Ways to See the World*) through , and was somewhat disappointed (see my review there). So, this time around, I decided to get this book from my public library (yay for public libraries!). Boy am I glad I did! (Because I would have kicked myself if I had paid money for this one.) It appears that this book was later condensed to provide much of the material for "*Seeing Through Maps...*". I can agree with most of what other reviewers have said about this book: The Ferris-Bueller moments (what an apt description!) caused by excessive use of ellipsis, the use of drawings by a three-year-old (literally) on many pages, the post-modernist over-intellectualized ramblings that tend to detract from what are perfectly valid and interesting points: the people in power really *do* draw the maps, and maps *do* give some people power (and take it away from others) by manipulating our conception of the world. It's too bad that someone didn't reign the author in, in both of those books. He's really his own worst enemy. The writing is rambling and repetitive: you find yourself muttering "OK! OK! I *get* it! Can we move ON please!". With apologies to Blaise Pascal, it seems if the author had had more time, he could have written a shorter book. I think it's really a shame that both books lack even a single colour plate, since maps possess beauty in addition to power, but perhaps it was appropriate to de-emphasize the beauty and focus on the power for the purposes of this book. Prospective readers should know that the "power" referred to in the title is of an ethereal, intellectual kind, that is perceived in the mind, not in the eyes.

My reactions on TRYING to read this book went from confused to disappointed to very annoyed. This book was my sole reading material on a camping trip, and if it hadn't been a gift from a friend, I would have used it, page by page, to add heat to the campfire. "*The Power of Maps*" consists of phony intellectual rambling, the point of which seems to be that powerful people use maps to their benefit. The exact point (or points?), however, is difficult to determine because the book is so hard to read. The author takes extremely trivial, shallow observations and builds them up into what appears to be an erudite scholarly work. In fact, it is pseudo-intellectual writing, composed of convoluted sentences, extremely obscure words, and citations which include *Life* magazine, the North Carolina Highway Map, and "*The Little Engine That Could*". For instance, the basis for one lengthy passage is the observation that the NC Highway Map does not note in the legend that blue denotes water! In the course of this rambling text, the author verbally attacks cartographers as somehow responsible for a number of ills in society. Now that I have gotten over my disappointment in having no worthwhile reading material for my vacation and my annoyance at this book's shallow

treatment of a subject I dearly love, my feelings have returned to confusion. I am confused as to why someone would take the trouble to write this book, and why someone else would think it is worthwhile to publish it.

This is a truly powerful and tremendously insightful discourse on the often "unseen" political uses to which maps can be put. It offers a rich and persuasively argued theoretical framework which goes well beyond its examples in its potential usefulness. Chapter Five "The Interest Lies in Signs and Myths" in particular is a tremendously thought-provoking and insightful analysis of maps and their legends and symbols as signs, signifiers and what they sometimes subconsciously signify to the consumer. A brilliant theoretical emendation of Roland Barthes' exposition of signs (Barthes' 1972 Mythologies). If you are willing to think along with the author this books may fundamentally change your perspective on a wide range of topics including nationalism, science and inter-state crises and conflicts over territory.

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