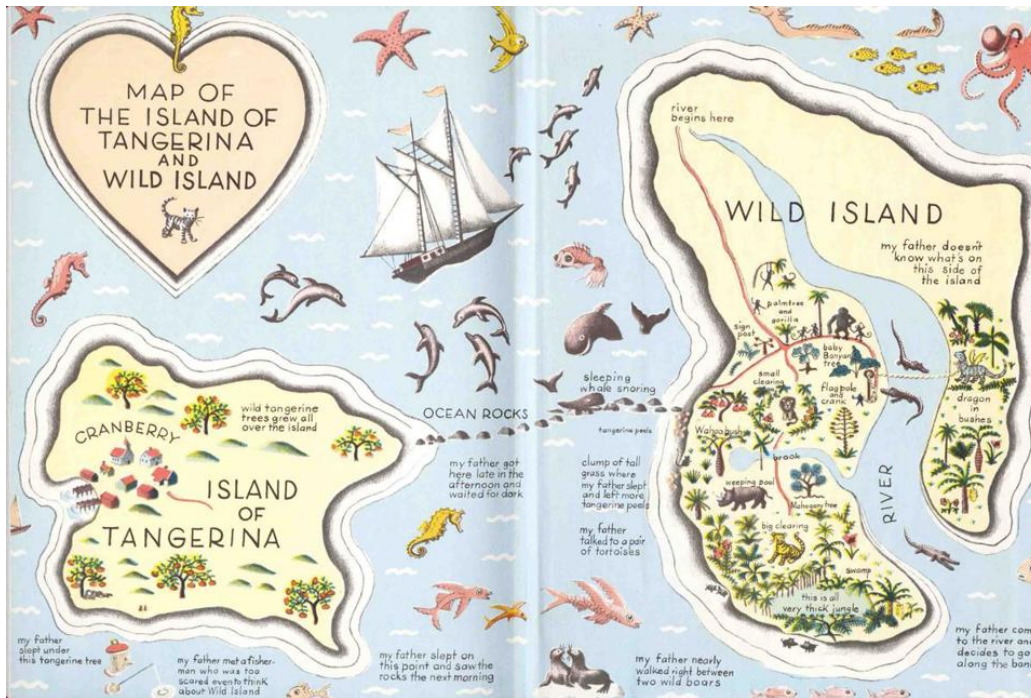


Two shows look at maps both real and imagined

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Boston Public Library

Look again at the subtitle of “Literary Landscapes: Maps From Fiction.” A nifty joke hides in plain sight. The show runs through Oct. 25 at the Boston Public Library’s Leventhal Map Center.

The maps on display are almost all of imaginary places. (The one exception renders the various Western European belligerents in World War I as animals.) Now, maps are almost always of real places, right? The joke has to do with the collision between imaginary and real that maps represent.

Whether the places are real or imaginary, every map is itself a kind of fiction. Those lines and color shadings and cross-hatchings and numerals and words are as “real” as the sentences in a novel or characters in a cartoon are. Yet we so value the utility of a map — or at least those of us do who have a tendency to get lost — that we accord its geographic representations the same validity as the road we’re driving on or the destination we’re heading toward.

Or we did until recently. An American Automobile Association road map, in an age of Google Earth (“Hey, let’s see what the place actually looks like!”) and Google directions (just follow the instructions rather than see them cartographically), can seem as practical as a Renaissance atlas adorned with “Terra incognita” and “There be monsters.”

This distinction between three-dimensional reality and its two-dimensional rendering can be taken too far, of course. The beneficent practicality of maps — not to mention compasses, sextants, astrolabes, chronometers — is very much on display in “Finding Our Way: An Exploration of Human Navigation,” which has been mounted by Harvard’s Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments. The exhibition runs through Dec. 11 in Room 251 on the second floor of the university’s Science Center.

The show has been curated by Harvard physics professor John Huth, the author of “The Lost Art of Finding Our Way.” Huth explains in a video what inspired the exhibition. Several years ago he went kayaking off Cape Cod. Before a fog bank rolled in, he noticed two college-age women also taking out sea kayaks. Knowing the waters and certain simple navigational procedures, he had no problem making it back to shore through the fog. Not knowing either, the young women drowned.

So navigation can *really* matter. These centuries-old instruments have an almost-sculptural beauty, but their functionality shouldn’t be forgotten: Along with wooden hulls and decks, they were all that stood between sailors and a watery death.

“Finding Our Way” includes charts and maps. They range from the practical (an 18th-century mariner’s guide to Boston Harbor) to the fanciful. Or fanciful to modern-day eyes. The “Dudley World Atlas,” from 1661, is a mighty and magnificent thing: a book big enough

(almost) to register on a topographical map. It was state of the art for its time, as was Athanasius Kircher's "World Map," from 1665. Now? Now they could almost sneak into "Literary Landscapes," so comparatively unreal do they seem.

"Unreal" is a relative thing, to be sure, as the BPL show happily reminds us. The London and southern England found in Holling C. Holling's "Sherlock Holmes Mystery Map" are as real as an order of fish and chips, but the events recorded on it aren't. (Note Holling's use of a pair of magnifying glasses for what we would now call, in an age of dynamic cartography, zooming in.) Everett Henry charts the course of the Pequod, from "Moby-Dick." Yup, there's Nantucket, there's the Cape of Good Hope, there's the South Pacific — all as real as Captain Ahab and murderous white whales are not. Is hell real? Soon enough we'll all find out; in the meantime, we can marvel at the cyclone-shaped representation of Dante's seven circles in a 1568 edition of his "Divine Comedy."

Unreal is not the same thing as unalive. The 100-Acre Wood of the Winnie-the-Pooh books are more familiar to some than their own backyards, in no small part thanks to the enchanting watercolors Ernest H. Shepard drew on its maps. What places are more vivid in the minds of readers than Middle-earth, Oz, Narnia, Neverland, H.P. Lovecraft's Dreamlands, or George R.R. Martin's "Song of Ice and Fire" lands? They're all here. Perhaps that famous line from "Field of Dreams" — "If you build it, he will come" — has a corollary. If you map it, they will believe — or believe even more. Fantasy may not require cartography. Surely, though, the one benefits from the other no less than martinis do olives.

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