

Where We Are

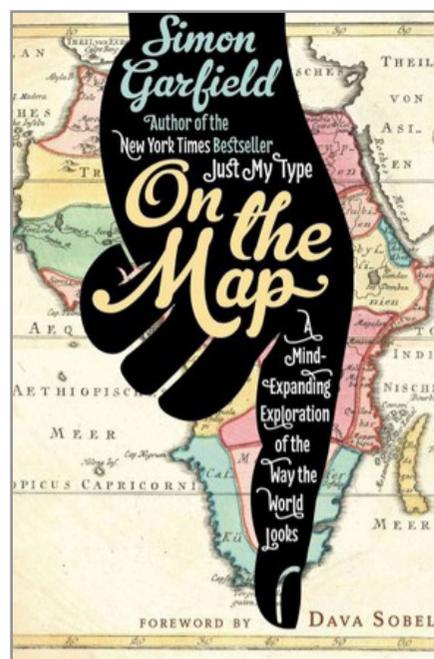
## ON THE MAP:

A MIND-EXPANDING EXPLORATION  
OF THE WAY THE WORLD LOOKS

REVIEWED BY DANIEL ROSENBERG

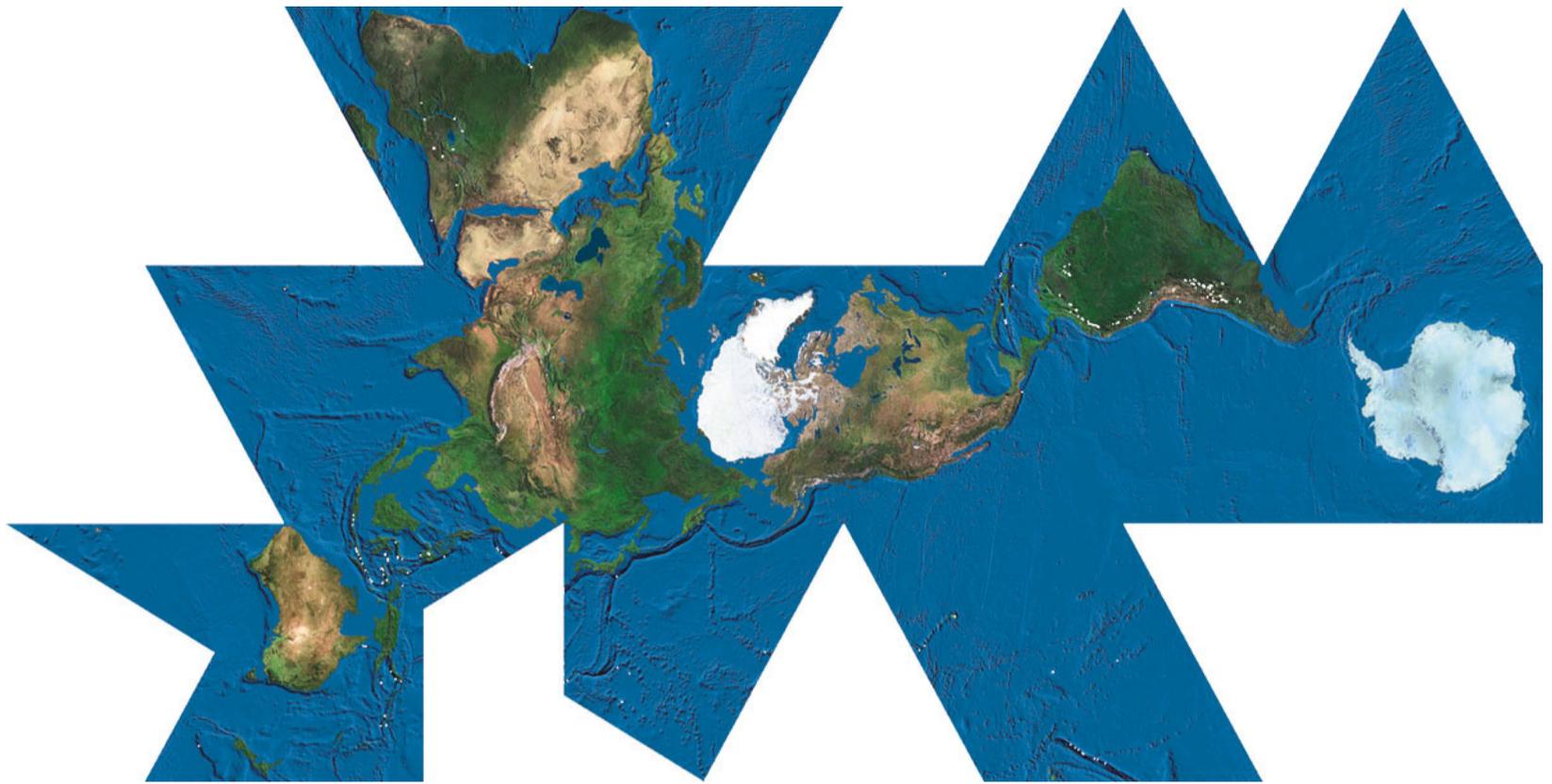
OUR INFORMATION AGE IS ALSO AN AGE of location. It seems that every day the news media reveal a new exploit made possible by geolocation systems, whether a dramatic snow rescue or a precision bombing. A recent exposé by the German Green Party politician Malte Spitz showed that his phone provider, Deutsche Telekom, was not only *able* to track his location minute to minute, but was doing so systematically. It was not only *able* to identify him, store his information, and make it available for analysis—it was doing all of this as a matter of course. Deutsche Telekom was following him automatically on the principle that the personally identifiable information might somehow be useful. The German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* assembled data released under court order and put it online as an interactive map showing Spitz's movements in astonishingly fine detail.

To understand the world we now live



By Simon Garfield  
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in, we need to understand maps. So when a journalist with the dexterity and breadth of Simon Garfield takes on the long history of maps, it is happy news. We are, as Garfield puts it, “on the map,” whether we like it or not. And the map we are on is new. It is simultaneously everywhere and right here, centered on us, articulating itself in every direction from our current position (“me-mapping,” to use Garfield’s phrase). With GPS in our cars and Google Earth on our phones, we consult maps more often than ever before. In some ways, this cartographic explosion is opening up our ways of seeing; in others, it is inuring us to the processes by which maps are created and to the structures they impose. Technology allows us to feel that we choose our



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Unsatisfied with traditional flat world maps that distort landmasses and show some as artificially isolated from one another, Buckminster Fuller created a truer-to-scale “Dymaxion Map.” Life magazine unveiled it in 1943, providing readers with a pullout map and instructions to fold it into a 3D structure at home.

geographies, but we can’t really do so unless we have some understanding of which projections we are using, how we got them, and what alternatives we might consider.

*On the Map* wears its substance lightly. It tells a big story, but it is also an omnibus of little stories from the history of cartography, composed of short chapters on key artifacts—such as the 1507 Waldseemüller Map, the first to employ the name “America”—and curious examples—for instance, an 1812 electoral map from which we got the term “gerrymander,” a portmanteau of “Gerry,” from the name of the Massachusetts governor at the time, Elbridge Gerry, and “salamander,” for the shape of the

new districts crafted by Gerry’s allies in the state senate.

If you love cartography, it won’t take any work to convince you of the virtues of *On the Map*. More likely, you’ll be foisting it on friends who are not yet cartophiles, since Garfield has the goods to lure them into the fold. He presents his work as another in the popular object-that-changed-the-world genre, of which his own *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color That Changed the World* is a fine example. But that characterization isn’t quite right, since there’s no single object at the heart of the book, but rather a vocabulary for seeing. *On the Map*, like Garfield’s recent book *Just My Type: A*

*Book About Fonts*, is good for dipping into, but it also merits being read cover to cover.

From Ptolemy to Mercator to the satellite navigation provider TomTom, Garfield shows how maps have both reflected and shaped ways of understanding the world. And the *world* is really at the heart of the project. Little maps matter: John Snow's 1854 map of the London cholera epidemic demonstrating that the disease was waterborne, Hollywood star maps, and sensational maps from the tabloid press, such as the 1817 "Map of the roads, near to the spot Where Mary Ashford was Murdered." But the book is tied together by the history of the world map. Each one of these *mappae mundi* shows us the world as it has been imagined.

## Great maps that put in question our expectations look weird.

Among the contemporary examples Garfield gives is a map consisting of nothing more than simple arcs connecting the geographic positions of Facebook friends around the world projected on a plain, dark background. Remarkably, this network of lines, with no landmasses or

cities drawn in, creates a detailed and faithful map of much of the world, with fine physical contours and densities in the cities, just as one might expect to see in a satellite view. At the same time, this map produces telling distortions, including the omission of entire regions where Facebook is prohibited or unpopular. The Facebook map demonstrates the ubiquity of electronic social networking in everyday life, as well as its balkanizing effects. It also says something about how we see maps, embodying a fantasy of a map that "writes itself," that requires no art, only data. Great maps that put in question our expectations look weird. Take, for example, the Dymaxion Map of Buckminster Fuller, which projects the world onto the surfaces of an icosahedron (a 20-sided three-dimensional polyhedron) that may be unfolded in many directions. The Facebook diagram, plotted onto some recent Mercator projection, perhaps a Google map, looks like the world inscribing itself by itself.

Garfield doesn't take himself too seriously. That's mostly an advantage, and *On the Map* is a real pleasure to read. Yet in some ways, it doesn't push its own best points. At a deep level, it is not a book about maps but about knowledge systems, of which maps are one example. And it is intellectually strongest when it pursues this

intuition. In places where it vaults from one interesting map to another, it occasionally loses its thread. Scholars will want more detailed notes, longer accounts of key artifacts (Harry Beck's iconic 1933 London Underground map, for example), and a bit less on the extraordinary and the curious. Maps in this account are often the first, biggest, or smallest of one type or another. General readers will wish for color images of the amazing artifacts depicted here, or—better yet—an exhibition. These quibbles aside, readers interested in history, technology, and ideas who liked the more chrono-

logically local accounts in Dava Sobel's *Longitude* (1995), Simon Winchester's *The Map That Changed the World* (2001), and Steven Johnson's *The Ghost Map* (2006) will enjoy this voyage through two millennia of cartographic history very much, too. ■

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