

## THE BRAINIAC OF JEOPARDY LOVES MAPS

Jennings, Ken. *Maphead: Charting the Wide, Weird World of Geography Wonks*. New York: Scribner, 2011. 288 pages, illus. ISBN 978-1439167175. \$ 25.00

*Reviewed by Leigh Lockwood*

You must be a map wonk if you...

- Know what a Bilby tower is.
- Duplicated Eratosthenes' methodology for calculating the circumference of the earth.
- Bought surveying equipment to learn the techniques.
- Will read "*Maphead*, ...."

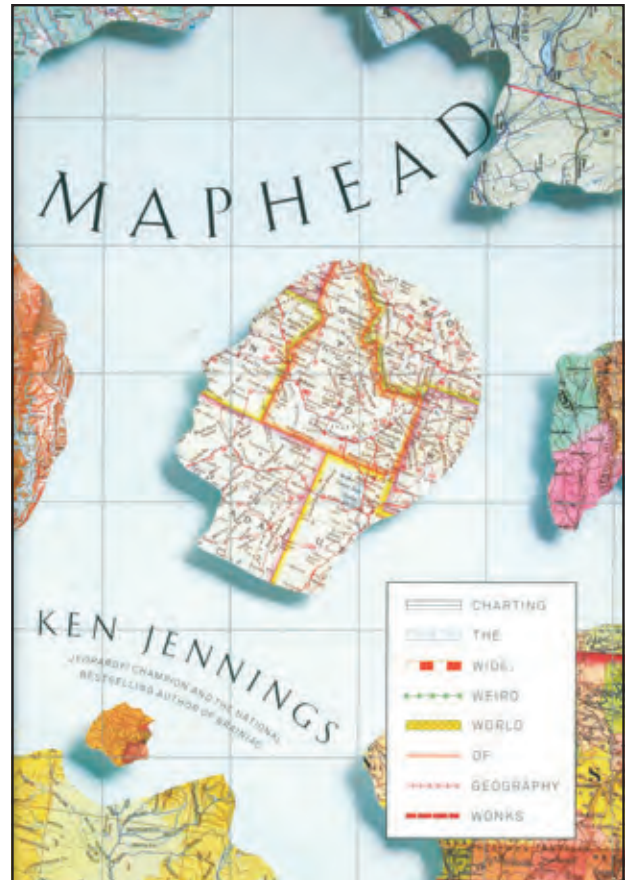
Mr. Jennings' autobiography revolves around his love of geography, travel, maps, and curiosity about anything spatial. If you read it, I expect you will say as I did, "Is that so?" and "I always wondered about that." and "Go figure." I was predisposed to review the book very favorably because like Ken, I trace my love of maps to one atlas. In his case a Hammond fortunately surviving storage in his parents' garage, and in mine a Rand McNally *Goode's* given to me by my wife on our first Christmas together.

Ken writes in a charming and personal style—sort of a wide eyed wonder about his and others' fascination with maps and geography—good naturedly poking fun at himself and others along his meandering way. And what a pleasant journey it is. I even liked his smile-producing, corny asides liberally sprinkled through the text.

Lest you think this is a lightweight volume, keep in mind that in addition to dozens of footnotes Ken makes 243 references to sources. Sources vary as widely as Federation of American Scientists to National Park Service. References are exhaustively researched and credited as we would expect from someone whose familiarity with facts made him a Jeopardy 74-time champion [Jeopardy is a long-playing American TV quiz show featuring trivia in history, literature, the arts, pop culture, science, sports, geography, wordplay, and more.] and contender to battle IBM's Jeopardy computer.

Lest you think this is a dry tome, in Chapter 4 (page 67, for those of you who need to go directly there) Ken describes ribald, blush-producing place names such as.... Oh, well. *The Portolan* is a family publication so you'll need to buy the book. He reports that the USGS has re-named certain un-PC places but "The board's goal is typical historical correctness, whether that aligns with political correctness or not." Who knew? This is just one example of hundreds of insights that I found so interesting.

How can one not be charmed by Ken's description, "So I haul out a road atlas one Friday night (weekends can get



pretty wild in the Jennings house!)...." or "Mappetite" describes "...many people's hunger for maps ...."

Speaking of interesting, my directionally-challenged wife Carol Ann (who can take a nicely folded AAA map and refold it into the shape and size of a tennis ball to be stored under the car seat) is loving the book. This is most notably remarkable as when she looks at a road map in the car there is only a one in four chance she will have North at the top. Yet she is reading *Maphead*, frequently chuckling, and I had to wrestle her to get the book back for this review. But why is her bookmark at page 67?

Ken is a braver man than I. He describes how he will give his wife "a second chance" at becoming spatially aware by drilling her on getting around Washington D. C. After only an hour of drilling resulting in successful navigation, Ken relates: "Aha, I was right!" she gloats, newly

empowered. "It makes me think my sense of direction isn't actually all that bad. If I cared enough to actually work on it a little." (Ken continues) I imagine that, like the Grinch's heart, her hippocampus has grown three sizes this day." Yes, Ken discusses the hippocampus in such a way that he does not lose his audience.

I confess my hippocampus must be shrinking due to use of the GPS in my car ("...hippocampus, a sea horse-shaped structure in the brain's temporal lobe, is the center of navigational function. In fact, the cabbies' hippocampi continued to grow the longer they spent on the job. Apparently size matters."). I was driving on back roads through central New Jersey a few weeks ago, blindly led by the GPS, when I suddenly realized I had no idea if I was headed north or south (except by looking at the sun), nor did I have instinctive reckoning of the relative positions of my departure point and destination. Until very recently all this was second nature. Shortly thereafter I removed the GPS from my dashboard, no doubt caused by *Maphead* reminding my subconscious that my hippocampus was wanting for exercise.

Among Ken's commentary, he sprinkles his books with thoughts like, "There must be something innate about maps, about this one specific way of picturing our world and our relation to it, that charms us, calls to us, won't let us look anywhere else in the room if there's a map on the wall." How often does he talk about me in his book?

Sometimes I feel our interest in cartography is a limited field. It uplifted me to read his description of his visit to the Library of Congress with its "... 8,500 cases, five drawers per case, two entire football fields just for maps... five and a half million maps ... and still adding between sixty and eighty thousand new maps every year... They come from everywhere. The library has offices in Cairo, Islamabad, Jakarta, Nairobi, New Delhi, and Rio..." A little later Ken describes the warring factions of Argentinian and Chilean delegations in the LOC Map Room, each requesting the same maps, never acknowledging the enemy across the room, each using the same resources attempting to rationalize their position to settle a geographic dispute.

Yes, I did read beyond page 67. I read about the mapping of India (40,000 triangles), map thefts, and dozens of other fascinating stories I enjoyed even if I had previously been aware of them. Ken brings fresh perspective and insights to every story.

There were several new stories I found delightful. Ken's description of the National Geographic Bee with its

attendant complexity, relentless pressure, made my pulse rate rise. His sensitive analysis kept me rapt, and his report of the final rounds was enthralling. He describes an eleven year old boy missing a question and leaving the contest and states, "This boy isn't much older than my own son, so his heartbreak is almost intolerably hard for me to watch."

Who knew about the Travelers' Century Club (membership limited to those who have visited one hundred or more countries), the Highpointers Club (dedicated to visiting the highest point in the 50 states), or collectors with goals such as eating at the most McDonalds (the record seems to be 12,000) or visiting every Starbucks (8,500)?

GPS be darned, I love my *Rand McNally Road Atlas* and every year buy one for each car. Ken describes the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, a forty year old contest in which participants travel a circuitous course across America never leaving their respective kitchens or dens, the entire journey made on maps. I imagined myself squinting at the atlas, finger tracing a route. Well, that was until Ken described the arcane directions provided by the contest creator.

Suffice it to say, Ken goes on to describe vividly geocaching, Google Maps and technology, confluence hunting (try to figure that one out without Ken's book), and much, much more. Buy the book, read it, and pass it along to the non-map reader in your family.

As a reviewer, sadly I have to find fault so here is my best shot: Ken does not mention our very own Washington Map Society, *the Portolan*, the Ristow Prize, and all the wonderful work carried out by our editor and many volunteers that keep our Society vibrant. I'll hope for mention in the revised edition, but in the meantime I will re-read the first edition.

P.S. Jennings dedicates the book to his parents "...And for the kid with the map." That's us. Thanks Ken!

P.S. I answered yes to the four questions at the beginning, so I proudly add my name to the Map Wonk population.

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—Map Wonk Leigh Lockwood studies the NYC subway map on the inside of the car even though he has seen it hundreds of times before. He looks so much like a New Yorker he is frequently asked for directions, "Walk twelve blocks uptown which at a quick walk should take you twelve minutes, plus street crossing time." Leigh loves GPS, but when the fuse blows and the system goes down he is always prepared with the latest *Rand McNally Road Atlas* in the seat pocket behind him. 