

## Book reviews

Reviewer [George Simons](#), SIETAR member

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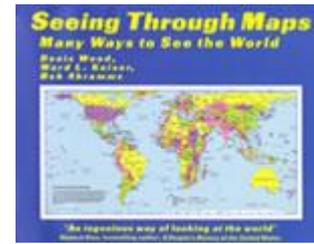
Author Denis Wood, Ward L. Kaiser and Bob Abramms

Title Seeing through Maps: Many Ways to See the World

Publisher [Odt Inc](#)

Details Second Edition, 2006. Odt Inc., Amherst, MA. ISBN 1-931-05720-6. \$24.95

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Participants in the 2005 SIETAR Europa/France Congress may remember finding in their congress bag a copy of the startling, wall-sized World Population Map that pictured countries by the size of their population.

This “different” map is a good place to start a discussion of what maps are and what they actually do. Probably the best source of information and background for that discussion is found in the second edition of *Seeing Through Maps*. According to the authors’ powerful new concluding chapter, “Are maps TALK instead of pictures?” a lot of what we have been brought up to understand about maps can be certainly misleading if not, in many cases simply false. Maps are someone’s way of telling us something they would like us to see and act on. They bear messages of every kind from how to travel from here to there, to imperialistic propaganda and political gerrymandering. They may be attempts at honesty or patent fraud. Whatever its appearance, every map is essentially a message from the mapmaker to its users.

But let’s start at the beginning—with the book’s title. “Seeing through maps” can be understood as if maps were instruments that help us see something we cannot otherwise see. While this is true there is equally the fact that if we can learn to “see through” maps to the assumptions and purposes for which they were made, we can see through a lot of false assumptions about our world. This book has a single simple purpose, to broaden our awareness of the world we live in, to take what maps can teach us, but to see the various interests and functions for which maps are created that may not be either obvious or in line with the values we profess. It leads us to question and challenge our limited images of the world we live in.

The authors suggest that picking up a pencil and drawing a map of the world as we think of it will quickly reveal not just what we are familiar with and what is fuzzy in our minds, but what we find important and what we ignore, what we emphasize and diminish. Our values and what we know about the world become obvious. While this may be a bit embarrassing, especially if we are bashful about our ability to draw, it is essentially not different from what any mapmaker does—says what he or she knows about the world and values and wants to say about it or thinks it should be. It is a message from the mapmaker or the person who

commissioned the mapmaker to create this particular projection of the world or a particular territory.

In this slim volume the authors examine the history of maps, explore purpose of maps and their effectiveness at conveying this purpose. They take an unvarnished look at the motivation and purposes of the various versions of the world we have acquired by looking at the maps that have been placed before us in our education about the world. We look at the assumptions about what is big and small, up and down, occident and orient and realize that to get a picture of the world takes lots of maps, lots of careful judgment and lots of self-knowledge and awareness of cultural assumptions of what the world is and what it looks like.

One learns a lot of hard facts about maps, the many kinds of maps, the various kinds of projections and the advantages and disadvantages of each, the choices the mapmaker faces in attempting a map.

This is an unsettling book, a challenging book, for many a distressing book. In a sense it is obscene, in the sense that all good art and discourse is obscene, in ripping away the veils of our innocence in order to enable us to see things that we have not seen before and in ways we have not seen before. It dares us to look when we would rather shield our eyes.

The book deserves many audiences, interculturalists who seek to stimulate awareness, educators who look for honesty and balance in the geography of the minds they seek to influence, the curious reader in search of new levels of self- and world-understanding.