Mapping useless, irresistible nostalgia

By John Murawski
STAFF WRITER

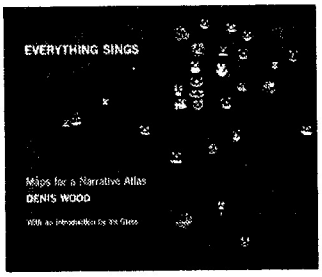
This collection of whimsical maps explores a tired old Raleigh neighborhood from the inside out – as a joyous jumble of colors, sounds, smells and ordinary wonders known to every child who ever played outdoors.

Raleigh author Denis Wood's unorthodox mapping approach evokes a Norman Rockwell innocence about his beloved Boylan Heights, the historic Raleigh neighborhood that was Wood's home for what seems like the happiest two decades of his life.

Shade trees, starry summer nights, out-of-view alleyways and light flow patterns are just some of the idiosyncratic patterns Wood captures in map format to convey a sense of place three decades ago, before urban gentrification turned Boylan Heights into a preserve of downtown lawyers, lobbyists and politicians.

The striking feature of these maps is their utter uselessness. What they map is, for lack of a better word, nostalgia. Readers quickly get hip to the fact that, with one exception, Wood's maps purposefully don't show streets. Instead, they focus on the background details that we block out as mere static: road signs, power lines, yard fences, wind chimes, sidewalk graffiti, jack-'o'lanterns.

Collectively, these postcard-like graphics convey what Boylan Heights must have felt like in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Wood, then a young professor at N.C. State University, and his landscape architecture students set out to map the unmappable.



NONFICTION

Everything Sings: Maps for a Narrative Atlas
Denis Wood

Siglio Press, 114 pages

"Everything Sings" comes out of the counter-cartography movement Wood helped launch with his first book, "The Power of Maps," in which he argued that maps inherently promote hidden agendas through their selection and omission of detail. Woods contends it's as enlightening to map all the stuff of life that serious mapmakers deem trivial and irrelevant.

One of the leading mapping theorists of his generation, Wood's radical revisionism goes back to the 1960s. He was then a graduate student disillusioned with the use of the mapmaker's art as a tool to abet the U.S. military in bombing missions during the Vietnam War.

His subversive analysis of maps is akin to post-modern literary criticism, a Talmudic quest to tease out coded messages from official texts. Wood's scholarly acclaim led to invitations to curate prestigious exhibits around the country, culminating with the Smithsonian Institution in Washington.

It's nearly impossible to separate Wood's idyllic reminiscences of Boylan Heights from the personal events that cost him his academic post, his marriage and put him behind bars for two years in the 1990s.

In 1996, Wood was convicted of crimes against nature and taking indecent liberties with a minor for his several-year sexual relationship with a teenager.

His Boylan Heights maps, an N.C. State class project, had been boxed up and nearly forgotten, then sparked renewed interest in 1998 after they were featured on public radio's "This American Life" program. Wood offers these neighborhood maps to the public in "Everything Sings," along with fresh historical notes. An introduction by the program's host, Ira Glass, rebukes conventional maps as "dull salary men" compared to Wood's novelistic approach to map-making.

Wood writes that his old neighborhood could have easily yielded scores of other maps that he and his students just never got around to making. At the time, the teacher and students were having so much fun mapping the stars, maples and whatnot, that it didn't occur to them they were writing a book.

Particularly clever are what I think of as the differential equations maps, which track physical movement over time. Several follow the flow of humanity in and out of Boylan Heights – Lester the paperboy, Tommy the mailman, school bus number 104 – all making their daily rounds, connecting us to some grand human tapestry.