

Reviews of Books & Atlases

CHILDREN MAP THE WORLD: SELECTIONS FROM THE BARBARA PETCHENIK CHILDREN'S WORLD MAP COMPETITION, VOLUME 2 / Ed. Temenoujka Bandrova, Jesus Reyes Nunez, Milan Konecny, and Jeet Atwal. Redlands, CA: ESRI Press, 2009. Pp. 144; illus. (col.). ISBN-13 9781589482463 (paper), US\$29.95.

Here's a book – offered up as a wonderful gift (clap your hands in grateful astonishment!) – that's an insult to so many people on so many different levels it's hard to keep them straight. First and foremost, it's an insult to the children of the world, presented here as unimaginative consumers of graphic clichés and political slogans. This makes it equally insulting to anyone who lays down \$29.95 for the book (though I'll bet ESRI plans on giving most of the copies away). It's an insult to the “educators, cartographers, and amateur map enthusiasts” who are promised “a wonderful opportunity to analyze how children apply spatial thinking and approach mapping,” since there is little spatial thinking going on in these posters beyond that involved in their layout, and *zero* mapping. And god knows it's an insult to the memory of Barbara Bartz Petchenik, in whose name this promotional gimmick of the International Cartographic Association is perpetrated.

I don't claim to have been a friend of Barbara's, but we were more than acquaintances, and during the last years of her life our paths crossed more and more frequently. We had several interests in common, especially children and mapping, and in 1986 spent three memorable days together as colleagues-in-arms at a conference in Calgary on atlases for schools. Her paper (Petchenik 1987) was a no-nonsense calling-into-question of received truths about school atlases – “I found myself outraged and frustrated,” “I doubt that anyone takes such facile statements seriously – I certainly don't,” and “I am pained *and* disturbed as we all should be when publishers treat maps as mere images, without meaning and without factual integrity,” are characteristic flourishes – but Barbara *really* let fly in discussion. There is no doubt in my mind that she would have found this volume, its predecessor, and indeed the entire competition vapid, facile, and meaningless.

I grant that Barbara was the first woman to be elected vice president of the ICA – as the book can't say just once (but who cares anyhow?) – and that she was seriously interested in how to design maps for children, but how does that translate into an ICA children's poster competition? The competition it might translate into is one in which professional map-makers vie to make the best map for children on a given topic ... but professional map-makers probably already know about the ICA, and they certainly know

about maps, and the goal here, you know, is to let kids know how great maps are, how important, how vital.

Just in case there are any out there who might not already have gotten the message, the competition is sponsored by the ICA Commission on Cartography and Children, whose goals include “promoting the use and enjoyment of maps by children,” which is to say that the competition is a promotional campaign. For maps. Oh, and for the ICA, “the world authoritative body for cartography.” If you Google “children's poster competition,” you get 4.5 million hits. At the top of the first page today is the competition sponsored by Dialogue on Diarrhea. The winning poster shows a nursing calf and a nursing baby, with the text “Baby cow should feed on cows milk / Human baby should feed on human milk.” Next on Google's list is a competition sponsored by the UN's Agenda 21 on sustainable development. The third is for *World without Polio: Children's Thematic Poster Competition*, which lamentably is ... out of print. Further on we find the Beatles Day Children's Poster Competition. You didn't know there was a Beatles Day? Ah, well, that's where children's poster competitions come in. It's 10 July, by the way, if only in Liverpool.

As a member of a design school faculty I was often roped into judging competitions like these. Typically there'd be three of us, me from the “art” side, someone from the children's education side, and someone representing the sponsor. My favourite may have been the North Carolina Chiropractic Association Poster Contest – if only because it was so blatantly a promotion without any pretence of educational value – but in any case we mostly stood around looking at the posters that some staff person had laid out. Usually the posters were arranged in age groups so that we could award prizes to young and old without having to compare them. We could weed out pretty easily those that could simply never be used in a PR campaign, but after that it was inevitably an exercise in polite deferral: “Oh really? You think that one's better. Well ... maybe.” I mean, it wasn't worth getting worked up over.

It didn't matter what the subject was, either – chiropractic, Amnesty International, water awareness, litter – the posters all looked more or less the same. That is, they looked just like the posters in *Children Map the World*, only with patella hammers, candles wrapped in barbed wire, giant drops of water, and huge cigarette butts in place of the maps. Though they're not really maps, are they? They're pictures of maps. Take the poster on the cover. Here nine cartoon kids in a variety of shades and costumes are arrayed around an impeccably reproduced political map of the world. It's a Mercator. The oceans are blue, the land green with some hypsometric tinting. Armed with

pens and crayons, the kids are *so* happy with the map they're making. In the background there's a frieze of talismanic monuments – the Statue of Liberty, an Egyptian pyramid, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Great Wall of China, a golden Buddha. That Nicholas William calls this “Many Nations, One World,” is stupefyingly unsurprising, not only because it's the competition's theme but because his poster could scarcely shout “Harmony of Happy Nations” more loudly.

Now, it would be almost impossible for Nicholas to have invented this image, not because I doubt his inventiveness but because this is not a genre that invites or encourages inventiveness. Poster competitions are opportunities for the dutiful satisfaction of parents and teachers, and in this case apparently the national ICA committee as well. Of the six Indonesian posters reproduced here, five show happy kids clustered around world maps, from 7-year-old Moh Afda's “Holding Hands Among Nations, United in Peace,” through 10-year-old Nayafakda Ihsania's “Let's Make Our World Merrier with Smiles of United Nations,” to 15-year-old Nicholas's “Many Nations, One World.” Even the palette is identical. But calling out Indonesia is silly. The majority of the posters in this book strike similar poses, this at a time – the maps were drawn for the 2005 and 2007 competitions – when terrorist fatalities were up everywhere, wars were raging in Iraq and Afghanistan, massacres of Tamils were taking place in Sri Lanka, millions were being killed in the Sudan, and the number of displaced persons hit 50 million.

Are kids really so oblivious? No, don't be silly. The kids who made these posters were among the elite, they all consumed media, and even if they weren't paying much attention they couldn't have helped knowing that George Bush, whose second inauguration opened 2005, wasn't waging war to Make Our World Merrier with Smiles of United Nations, or that Darfur wasn't going on, or that ... well, you finish the sentence. No, what we see in these posters is very little of children and very much of the professional hierarchies that called the posters into being, with their implacable bourgeois proclivities for the greater myths, here the Family of Man. Well, here the Family of Man United under Maps! But it's the same old myth, the one Roland Barthes atomized back in the mid-1950s (Barthes 1957, 100–102), here put to work to advance the ICA's interest in the proliferation of maps and mapping.

If there's a limit to the obliviousness of kids, there's none to the cynicism of professional organizations out to stake their claims. Here, from the back cover: “These hand-drawn, sewn, or assembled maps convey powerful messages of optimism, anxiety, tolerance, and hope that radiate the competition's most recent theme: Many Nations – One World.” Aside from the sticky, cloying quality of the sentiments, what most galls, and what would have most galled Barbara Bartz Petchenik, is the notion that these are maps at all, rather than the “mere images, without

meaning and without factual integrity,” that she so excoriated. To go further, as the editors do, and insist that one can analyze them for insights into children's spatial thinking or mapping is either mendacious or wildly ignorant. It can't be necessary to explain why posters made under unknown conditions with unknown direction and collaboration cannot tell us anything about the spatial thinking or mapping behaviour of kids (if doubtful, just check out Herzig and Jarausch 2003), but the presence of the claim in *Children Map the World* does highlight the editors' anxiety to justify the publication – and it's the usual flawless ESRI product – of 100 of these posters, posters selected from hundreds of others using unspecified criteria in a process never described (but I'd bet on *excessively* polite deferential). It makes it plain that they understood this to be little more than a promotional pitch from the ICA for some kind of relevance in a world where the organization lacks any at all.

May the ICA – and this book – rest in peace.

References

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RETHINKING MAPS: NEW FRONTIERS IN CARTOGRAPHIC THEORY / Martin Dodge, Rob Kitchin, and Chris Perkins. Routledge Studies in Human Geography. London: Routledge, 2011. Pp. 272. ISBN-10 0415676673 (paper), £24.99.

First published in 2009, *Rethinking Maps* was reissued as a much more affordable paperback in the summer of 2011. It has a rhizomatic structure, and in this it remains true to its own guiding philosophy, as exemplified by theorists favoured by many of the contributors to this fine book. Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Donna Haraway show up to bolster claims that maps are or should be non-representational (see chapter 8 on cinema, by Tom Conley, and chapter 7 on cartographic practice, by Amy Proppen), power laden (see chapter 2 on race mapping, by Jeremy Crampton, and chapter 3 conservation mapping, by Leila Harris and Helen Hazen), and embodied (see Proppen's chapter 7 again, as well as chapter 6 on participatory mapping, by Domenica Williamson and Emmet Connolly).