

©1998 Jackie Aher. Map in *Blind Descent* by Nevada Barr, Putnam, 1998.

# Mapping THE Mystery

by George Demko

**A**s a literary form, the mystery is uniquely suited to provide a window into places, cultures, environments and more. Each mystery has a special geography—economic, social, physical, etc.—that provides a setting for the action. These settings are the stage over which the action occurs and are often vital to the plot and the solution of the crime. Consequently, there is a rich history of mapping the mystery and the results are often not only useful but quite attractive.

Many early mystery writers felt strongly about including maps of the scene, even very simple maps. As far back as 1878 Anna Katharine Green added two primitive maps to *The Leavenworth Case*. Her little sketch map of the bedroom and study provided readers with important spatial information about the murder scene.

Maps became fashionable in English Golden Age mysteries. Agatha Christie often used them, although often to no good effect. She included maps of a sort in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *Death on the Nile* (1937), and a number of other stories. Often these maps disappeared in later editions of her works which may indicate their level of usefulness. Dorothy Sayers used some rather primitive maps in *The Nine Tailors* (1934)—of the village and the church rather than the awesome flooded landscape of the story—but they were mercifully not reprinted in later versions.

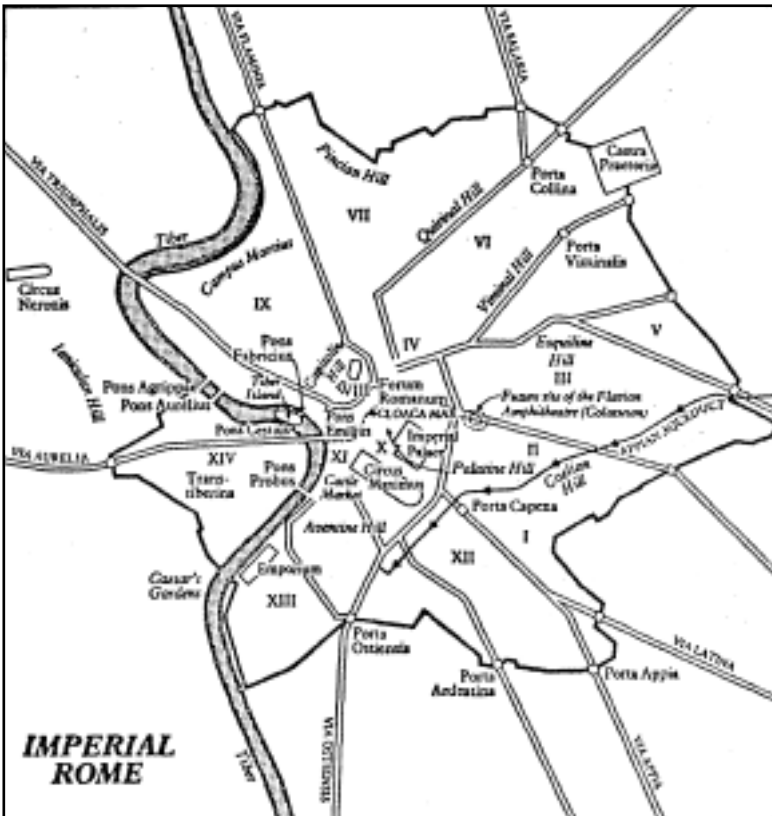
Margery Allingham included a rather handsome map of the mystery mile in her 1930 novel of the same name. S.S. Van Dine

in *The Bishop Murder Case* (1929) provided quite an elaborate fold-out map of the Riverside Drive area of New York to help readers to follow the peregrinations of his famous Philo Vance. Phoebe Atwood Taylor in her classic Cape Cod mysteries was given to using maps as she does in *The Mystery of the Cape Cod Players* published in 1933.

But the map and the mystery entered their heyday from 1943 to 1951 when Dell began to publish the colorful Dell Mapback series. Most of these delightful little paperbacks had a colorfully illustrated front cover and an extremely well-drawn map on the back cover. Most of the luminaries of the genre were published in this series including Christie, Hammett, A.A. Fair (a.k.a. Erle Stanley Gardner), and many more. Interestingly, the Library of Congress received a gift of a complete archival set of 8,500 Dell paperbacks in 1976 which are available to all in Washington. William Lyles has also published a fascinating book entitled *Putting Dell on the Map: A History of Dell Paperbacks* (1983). The Dell Mapback books are now very collectible.

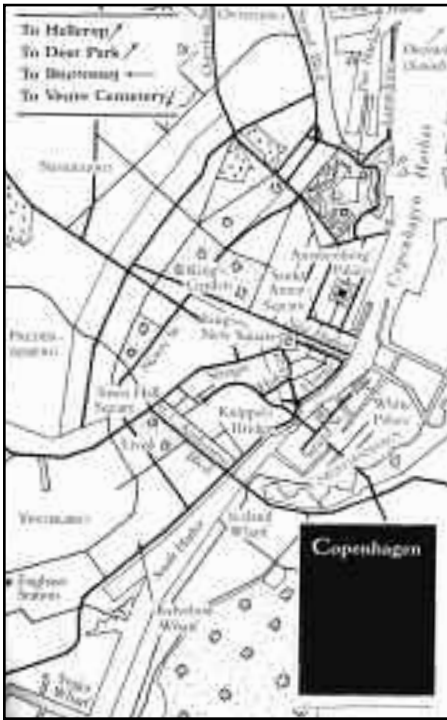
Maps offer readers geographical information, of course, but also cultural and temporal clues.

Maps were, and are, often used by what I prefer to call the best geographical writers. Robert Van Gulik used maps and also wonderfully suggestive hand drawings in his magnificent Judge Dee series. Novels including *The Red Pavilion* (1961) and

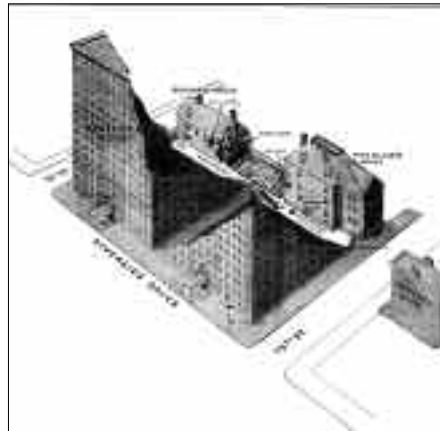
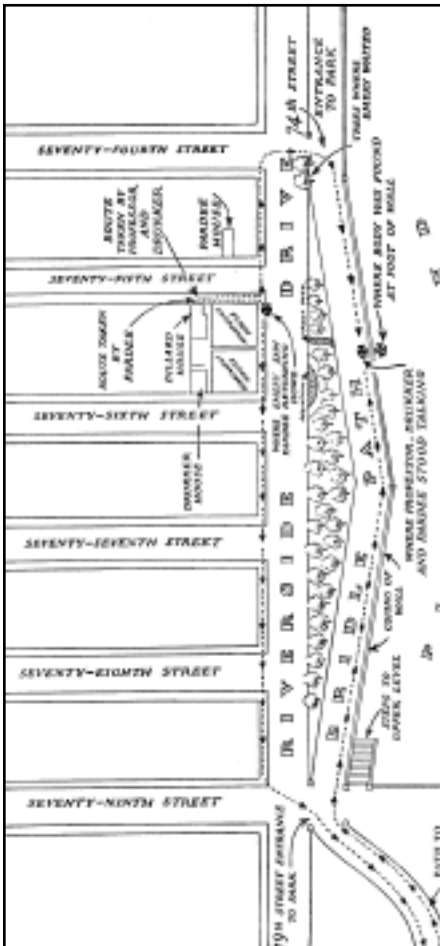


Opposite page: The evocative map printed on the endpapers of Nevada Barr's *Blind Descent* (1998) which shows Park Ranger Anna Pigeon in action. The setting is Lechuguilla Cave, part of New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns National Park, which was discovered in the 1980s and is not yet fully explored. Above: A map of ancient Rome circa 70 A.D. helps readers track Marcus Didius Falco, informer for Emperor Vespasian, in *Venus in Copper* (1991) by Lindsay Davis. Right: Shrewsbury, England, is the setting for Ellis Peters 12th-century historical mystery *The Rose Rent* (1986).





Above: These two maps in Peter Hoeg's *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1993) provide emotional as well as geographic information. Below left: An annotated fold-out map graced S.S. Van Dine's *The Bishop Murder Case* (Scribners, 1928) which takes place on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Below right: The smaller map, also a fold-out, shows a cutaway view of the murder scene.



*The Chinese Gold Murders* (1959) have superb hand-drawn maps by Van Gulik. Arthur Upfield, the creator of the Napoleon "Boney" Bonaparte series set in outback Australia used maps effectively in such stories as *The Mystery of Swordfish Reef* (1939) and *Murder Down Under* (1943, US; originally 1937, Australia, as *Mr. Jelly's Business*). His books may not be written with great literary style but they are remarkable for their landscape portraits as well as his perspective on ecology and race which were years ahead of his time. It is possible to find a map of all the Upfield stories' locations <nicholnl.wcp.muohio.edu/DingosBreakfastClub/Australia/UpfieldMysteries.html>.

Unfortunately, maps have become rarer in modern mysteries as psychological stories and the post-modern style have impacted the scene. Maps also add to the publishing cost and I am sure are discouraged by publishers. Add to that the skill required to make an attractive and helpful map and this sad decline is understandable.

Still, maps did pop up throughout the '70s and '80s. The late Ellis Peters often used maps in her *Brother Cadfael* series set in and around the 12th-century town of Shrewsbury near the Welsh border. There is a very attractive and useful map in *The Rose Rent* (1986) which provides a bird's eye view of Shrewsbury, the Benedictine Abbey of St. Peter and St. Paul and the surrounding area. *Brother Cadfael's Penance* (1994) also contains two beautifully rendered maps.

In 1993, Peter Hoeg published *Smilla's Sense of Snow* which offers maps of the two important places in the story—Copenhagen and Greenland. The maps reveal Hoeg's attitude regarding these places and his resentment of Denmark's role as the former colonial power. Note that the Copenhagen map is incomplete, small and rather ugly, whereas the Greenland map is fully drawn, detailed, and handsome. It is a rare example of maps being used to emphasize the bias of the author.

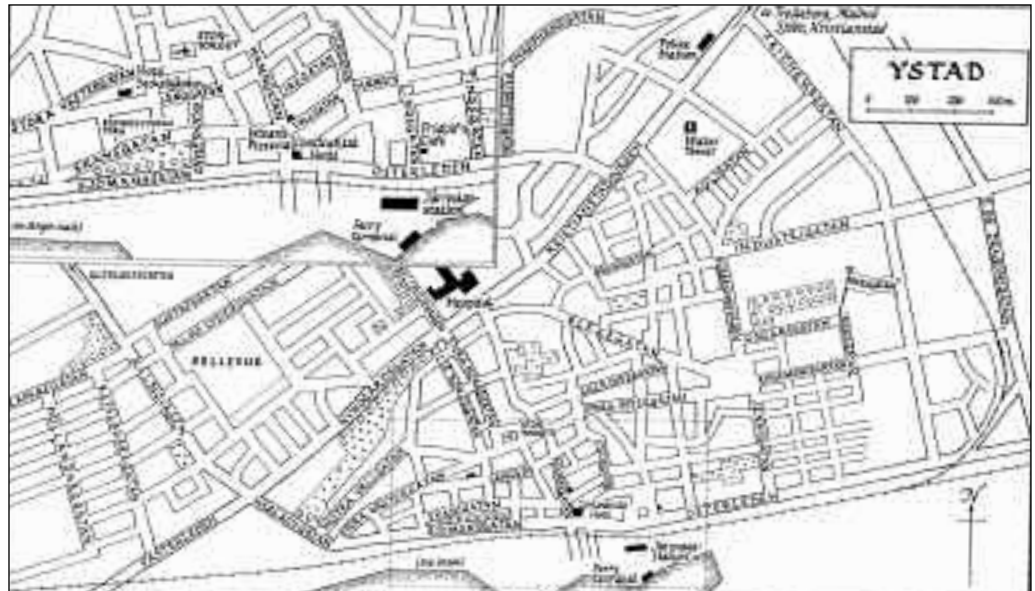
Nevada Barr, who sets her Park Ranger Anna Pigeon loose in the national parks of America, almost always provides a very professional and useful map for her stories. Her underground map of Carlsbad Caverns in *Blind Descent* (1998) is truly superb as are her maps in *Endangered Species* (1997) and *Hunting Season* (2002). These maps add greatly to the reader's enjoyment and are quite attractive in their own right.

The historical mystery writer Caroline Roe uses simple but effective maps of the area around Girona, Spain in the 14th century. One of my favorites appears in *Remedy for Treason* (1998), the first book featuring her blind Jewish physician Isaac of Girona. The well-known Umberto Eco in *The Name of the Rose* (1983) also utilizes a map of the complex abbey where so much of the action occurs. Lindsey Davis usually includes a useful map in each of her historical novels set in the ancient Roman Empire. *Venus in Copper* (1991) is especially noteworthy for its map of the main features of historical Rome.

A European writer, the Icelandic Arnaldur Indridason, in a newly translated novel, *Jar City* (2005), greatly enhances the Reyk-



Above: The Dell Mapback edition of David Goodis' *Dark Passage* can sell for up to \$155 in fine condition. Right: Henning Mankell's Inspector Kurt Wallander lives in Ystad, Sweden, shown in this map from *The Man Who Smiled* (2006).

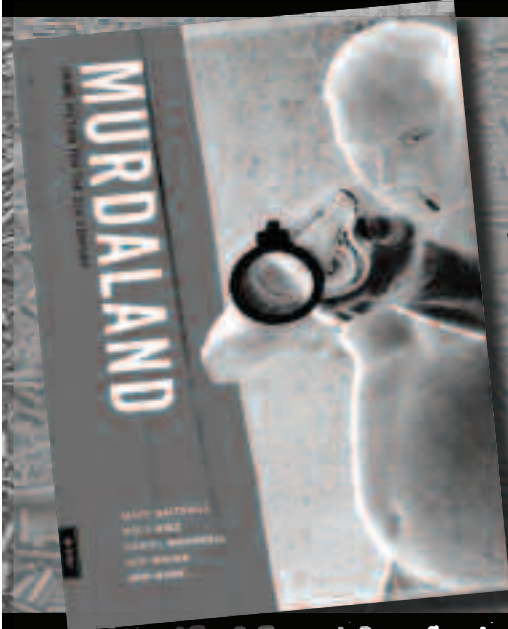


javik story with two pages of superb maps of Iceland and the city. The well-known and respected Swedish police procedural novelist Henning Mankell has an appreciation of maps. His *The Man Who Smiled* (2006, US edition) has two excellent maps, distance scales and all! Let's hope the Europeans revive a great tradition.

Often as I read a mystery I think how much a map would help in understanding and enhancing the story. We cannot hope for a rebirth of the Dell Mapback series but we can hope that writers will become more conscious of how important cartographic aids can be to the enjoyment of their work. Without maps, we're lost!

*George J. Demko is an emeritus professor of geography at Dartmouth College and a specialist in international mysteries and the locus operandi of crime fiction. He is the author/editor of 15 books and many articles on social science problems in foreign countries. His website may be accessed at <www.Dartmouth.edu/~gjdemko>.*

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