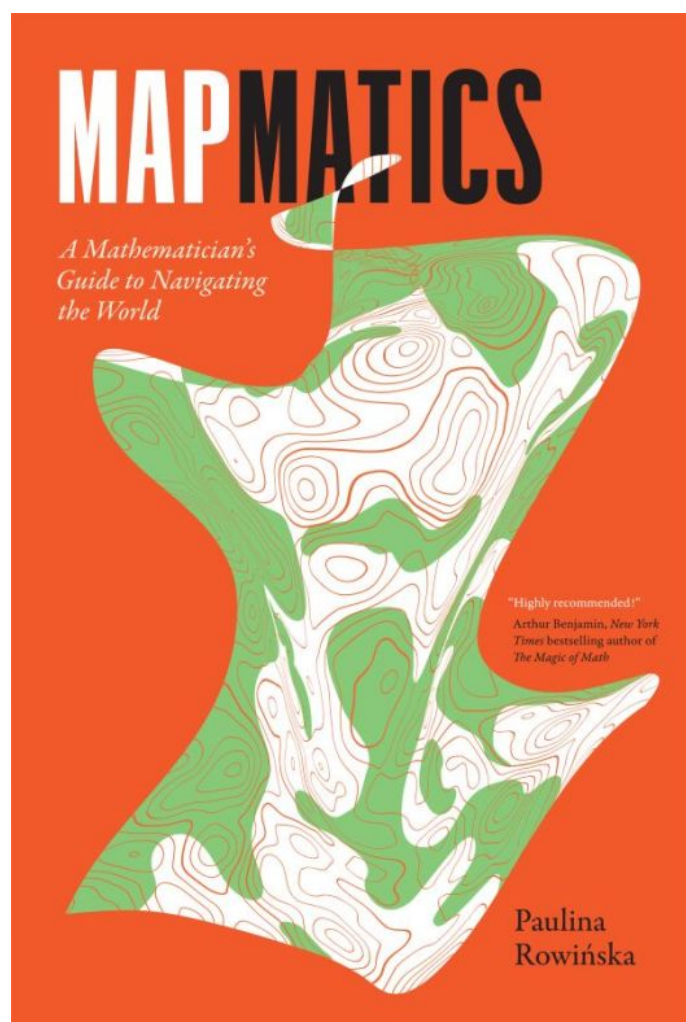




[< issue toc next >>](#)

Book review: Mapmatics: A Mathematician's Guide to Navigating the World

reviewed by Julia Guy



Rowińska, P. Mapmatics: A Mathematician's Guide to Navigating the World. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard



University Press, 2024. 292 p. \$29.95. ISBN: 9780674294233

Mapmatics by Paulina Rowińska provides an approachable introduction to the relationship between mathematics and maps and how it has informed our modern understanding of the earth, geography, navigation, and more. Most of the work is text with simple diagrams and images to illustrate key concepts. Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, this book is organized into eight main sections. Each chapter is dedicated to a particular type of mapping problem and the different mathematical solutions to those problems. For example, in the chapter titled “Curved: How To Describe The Earth,” the author covers concepts like triangulation and gaussian curvature, along with a variety of historical figures from Eratosthenes to Columbus. The author also helpfully includes diagrams of pizza slices and bananas to relate these lofty concepts back to the familiar. Throughout the book, Rowińska prompts the reader to see the relationship between maps and math everywhere, from creating a seating chart for a wedding to tracking COVID-19 outbreaks.

Based on the book’s description, you might not expect it to provide so many historical details, but in many cases that historical context is essential to fully understanding the concepts Rowińska is describing. By telling the stories of the characters that have shaped our current understanding of the world (while playfully poking fun at their propensity for adopting Latin names) the author creates a book that is filled with amusing anecdotes and narratives that make it continuously interesting and delightfully readable. Some of the examples in the book may be familiar to map enthusiasts, for example John Snow’s mapping of cholera 19th century London. Other examples might be new to readers, like the origin of the word “gerrymandering” or the Coast Line Paradox.

This is not a groundbreaking work in geographic research, but it is effective at explaining the relationship between maps and mathematics in an engaging way to non-experts. The tone of the book is refreshing and at times very funny. The shift between scientific explanations and personal stories can be somewhat jarring at times, but readers may appreciate these casual moments. Although it is unlikely this book will be highly cited by researchers, it is easy to imagine chapters being assigned by clever instructors hoping to introduce these topics to undergraduate students in an approachable way. I would recommend this book for public library collections as well as academic libraries, as its tone and approachability makes it suitable for many readers.



Julia Guy, Digital Projects Librarian GIS
Libraries and Cultural Resources, University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

[< issue toc next >>](#)