

Crafting a Fantasy Map

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MAP ILLUSTRATOR & AUTHOR



Cropped section of Thana Pel Map for the fantasy novel
The Legend of Winterking by J. Kent Holloway.

It was an author's first fantasy novel and my first fantasy map as a professional illustrator. Here's the story of how author J. Kent Holloway and I collaborated in the crafting of the Thana Pel fantasy map used in *The Legend of Winterking*.

Filtering out noise in the world and telling a visually relevant story is the essence of mapmaking. It's about capturing that unique moment in time which makes a location worthy of visitation and exploration. A well-designed map allows a person to be pulled into the picture like a magnet, navigating the landscape for the first time. Book authors and publishers know the power of this personal experience by adding a map to complement a story or even making it a key element of the plot itself. We all know a map's primary function is quite simply to keep you from getting lost. For authors, though, it acts as a tool to propel readers along in their own journey within a storyline. It's why we always say *the book was better than the movie*. It's wayfinding for the minds-eye.

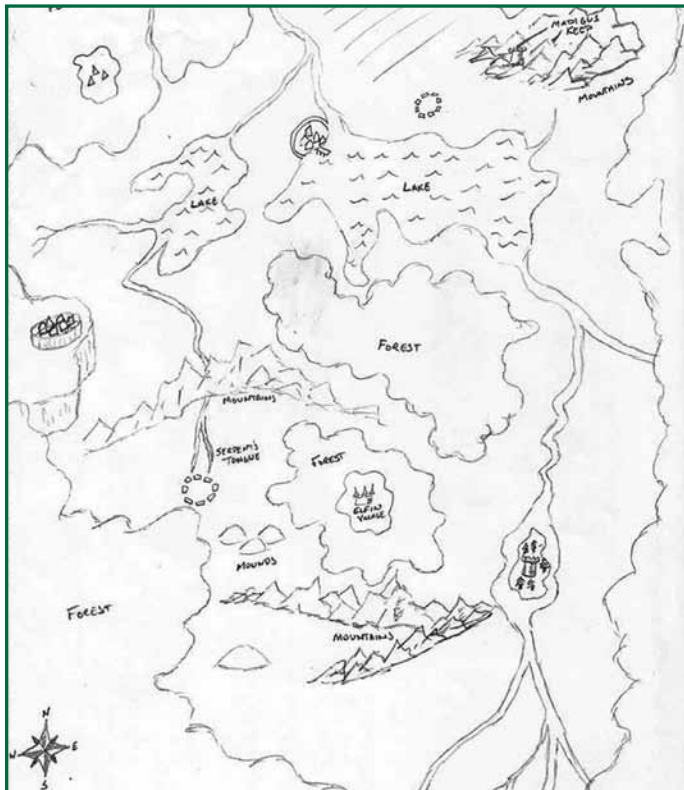
As a prolific map illustrator, I've created both 2D flat maps and 3D birds-eye-view pictorial maps for many clients. From college campus maps to tourism maps to road maps and even an estate map for a legendary heavy-metal guitarist; I've told many visual stories. But one genre of mapping that has always eluded my portfolio was the fantasy map.

It wasn't until I authored a set of mystery novels (with maps) that I started connecting with other authors on social media. That's where I met J. Kent Holloway, a publisher and author of mystery and horror novels. We soon exchanged books and started

talking the trade of publishing. He then announced he was moving into a new writing genre: fantasy. And he needed a mapmaker.

The only fantasy maps I ever made were deep in the bowels of my parent's basement in a secret, behind-the-curtains Dungeons & Dragons room when I was thirteen or so. I drew detailed dungeon and terrain maps complete with booby traps and evil characters lurking in the shadows. My friends loved the effort. I loved the new adventure at every roll of the dice. It was the time of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and his Middle Earth map and Terry Brooks *Sword of Shannara* and his world map; two fantasy book series I devoured. Their maps are still familiar to me even today. Needless to say, I jumped at the opportunity to craft one professionally so many years later.

Soon I was commissioned and given the creative brief on Holloway's manuscript-in-progress, along with a simple pencil sketch of what he had in mind for a map. Seeing the author's vision and hearing his sense of direction is immeasurable for a designer.



Original sketch by J. Kent Holloway.

"The map sketch I created has basically been a guide for me as I wrote the original manuscript," said Holloway, during early instructions. "It's a magical,

secretive forested valley hidden somewhere within the secluded mountainous region of 4th century Germania. Romans are still in power. Constantine is the emperor. It just happens to have dwarves, elves, goblins, and dragons. It's a place that wouldn't exist to anyone not invited. It's both of our historical world and of the world of faery. Sort of a cross point between the two worlds."

We traded reference maps we found on the Internet, both fantasy maps from other illustrators and true historical maps from the past. We zoomed in on the detail and I suggested elements I'd like to emulate. Gerbels Map of Greece from 1540 gave me ideas for how rolling hills and towns were depicted in the two-dimension.



Gerbels Map of Greece, 1540.

I borrowed a single tree from a historical map of Ireland to act as my forest symbol. Another map gave me the elevation line work I needed. And still another old map nailed how I was going to use the sharp rock outcrops in the southern part of Holloway's map sketch. He described it as, "a series of wild rock formations jutting into the sky almost like stalagmites, but much higher." He wanted them to mirror what a dragon might look like while sleeping, as if viewing an overhead shot of its spine. Hence, the label we would add later: Dragon's Spine.



Inspiration for the Dragon's Spine formation.

After finding stained antique paper, I created Celtic style corner elements and a woven border treatment. I then drew in the base art of rivers, lakes and where densely forested areas would go.



Base layout and borders.

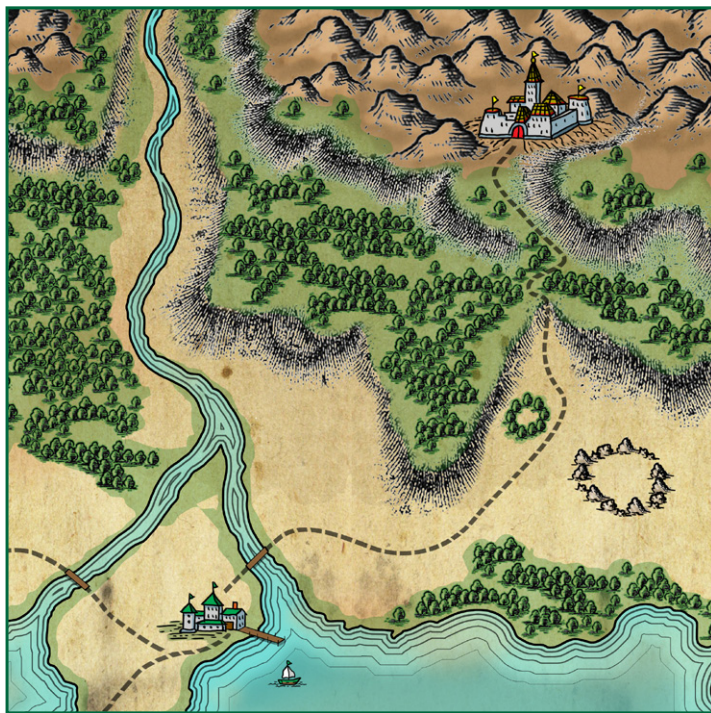
Holloway was starting to see his black and white sketch coming to life. As the author, it was instant excitement, a world that once existed only in his mind was now coming to fruition.

Parameters in mapmaking for books involve oversimplification, readability and graphic branding relevant to the storyline. Real world maps are complex, large and filled with hard-to-read content where you can either zoom in on a computer or unfold a poster and hold in your hands. Book maps must fit on one small page and be instantly legible.

Our map needed to fit on a 6" x 9" paperback book page. Holloway also wanted to market the map for merchandising as a stand-alone poster.

I worked exclusively in Photoshop to develop the digital artwork, using various layers for each graphic element. For instance, the antique paper background was the bottom layer, forested areas were the next layer on top, then water, then trees, mountains, castles and so forth as if you're building a stack of books. Later, the text labels would be added and the compass rose would be the cherry on top. Each layer can be turned on or off, its opacity settings adjusted and any graphics within easily isolated for manipulation. This allows flexibility and speed during production, especially when cloning hundreds of trees or duplicating mountains and resizing them.

Next came the finer terrain work: graduating strokes of the water coastlines, river rapids, waterfalls, elevation changes, adding individual trees and mountains. The flat 2D map was now looking 3D.



Detail work.

This was followed by the human element of villages, towns, castles and keeps, road networks, bridges, even tiny fishing boats on the lake.

The last phase of design was the addition of text labels. Holloway created a Dwarf lexicon for these, naming key landmarks from his story. Font choice is then a crucial dressing; its character needs to be appropriate to the story's branding. But there are literally hundreds to choose from. Fortunately for me,

Holloway knew what he wanted and it fit: PR Celtic Narrow. But the final touch was an idea that I've always loved in fantasy maps. We just had to have a mysterious code or cipher embedded into the map somewhere. It wouldn't be right without one. Holloway loved the idea, and so, in the Dwarven language there exists a barely noticeable set of sentences repeated around the edges of the map. *You better watch out.*

After contrast and grayscale adjustments for the black and white version, our final fantasy map was borne. Holloway announced it to his fan base as part of the hype for his novel's launch and it was greeted with incredible enthusiasm. I was one of the first to order a 24" x 36" collector's edition poster for my wall. Now I get a kick out of my own teenage sons' reactions as they stop and gaze at this mystical land and ask: *where in the world is that?*

Fantasyland!

"Michael Karpovage was an absolute delight to work with. A true master at taking a writer's vision and turning it into a reality. With just a few half-hearted scribbles from my notes, he took a lack-luster idea and transformed it into a breathtaking masterpiece of color and fantasy. Thank you, Michael, for an amazing job!"

~ J. Kent Holloway,
Managing Editor, Seven Realms Publishing.
Author, *The Legend of Winterking*

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Michael Karpovage is principal of Karpovage Creative, Inc. He has worked in the graphic design and marketing field for over twenty years as an award-winning art director and map illustrator. He creates a broad range of commissioned 2D and 3D maps. The *Savannah Historic District Illustrated Map* (2012) was his first birds-eye-view pictorial map available to the public. A companion title came next, the *Haunted Savannah Illustrated Map* (2015), to capture tales of the dead in America's Most Haunted City. Michael is also a published novelist; *Crown of Serpents* (2009) followed by *Map of Thieves* (2014). He is a native of western New York and a graduate of the Rochester Institute of Technology. He lives in Roswell, GA. Visit: www.KarpovageCreative.com