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# Book review: 'A Muse and a Maze,' by Peter Turchi

By Joanna Scutts January 25, 2015

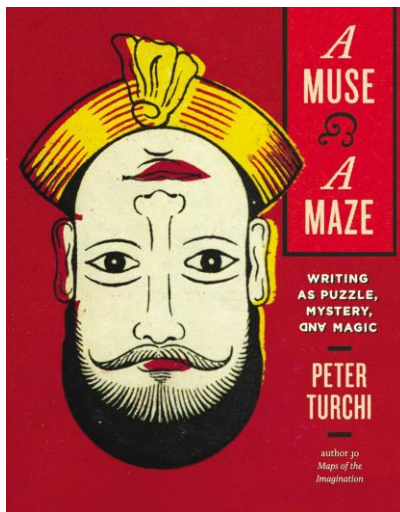
A MUSE AND A MAZE

Writing As Puzzle, Mystery, and Magic

By Peter Turchi

Trinity Univ. \$29.95

The playful title of Peter Turchi's new book is a hint at what lies inside. "[A Muse and a Maze](#)" is about not only muses and mazes but about what amuses and amazes us. Like his 2004 book "[Maps of the Imagination](#)" — an equally fascinating foray into the idea of writing as cartography — "A Muse and a Maze" is meant to "invite writers to think differently about what we do." But there is plenty here for any curious reader.



"A Muse and a Maze: Writing as Puzzle, Mystery, and Magic"

by Peter Turchi (Trinity Univ.)

This is a book about puzzles that also contains puzzles (there are answers in the back, for those transgressive readers who always skip to the last page). It is also about, among other things, literature reconceived as mystery and illusion. The book explores the work of writers — from Walt Whitman to William Gibson — who are fascinated by the conventional structures and patterns of storytelling and delight in blowing them up.

Turchi invites us to think about books as mysteries unfolding in time, giving us clues that we piece together. They're like maps, he explains, a way of imposing order on space, but they can't be followed out of order. They're more like jigsaws, puzzles that were developed as "dissected maps" to teach geography to children. Interpreting fiction, like putting together a jigsaw puzzle, is a challenge of putting the pieces in order and making sense of an imaginary world. But when there are pieces missing or a character is "unresolvable" — such as Jay Gatsby or Humbert Humbert — we're intrigued, not frustrated, by the mystery.

The artist Charles Ritchie, several of whose paintings and etchings are reproduced here, offers a visual analog to Turchi's literary explorations. Ritchie's tightly restricted subject matter — the trees and rooftops he can see from his studio window — fascinates Turchi, who finds inspiration in the way that the artist repeatedly works over that seemingly unchanging view (think Whitman's revisions of "Leaves of Grass" or Mark Twain's endless "yearning for his youth"): "Our obsessions and constraints define us. We must cultivate them."

If Turchi's close readings, quotations and tangential curiosities add up to an argument, it is that the contemplation of a difficult problem appeals to something basic and powerful in us. When we struggle to make sense of "Lolita," in other words, we're feeding a desire that is connected to

crosswords, magic shows, chess, mazes, jigsaws — all the slightly guilt-inducing games we play when we think we don't want to think.

*Scutts is a freelance writer and board member of the National Book Critics Circle.*

On Sunday, Jan. 25 at 1:00 p.m., Peter Turchi will be at Politics and Prose Bookstore, 5015 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, D.C.