

## Advance Praise for TAROT FOR STORYTELLERS



*“Tarot for Storytellers* is a must for any author struggling with mental blocks or confusion, for anyone searching for unexpected inspiration and guidance. Kris’s methods take brainstorming to another dimension. Here—finally—is an approachable resource, grounded in experience and expertise, on connecting with the creative spirit! Because of Kris, a box of tarot cards has a permanent place on my writing desk.”

—LAUREN J. A. BEAR, author of *Medusa’s Sisters*

“Kris Waldherr has crafted a remarkable resource in *Tarot for Storytellers*. It moves beyond the practical mechanics of storytelling and uses tarot to invoke the muse, open the heart and spark fresh ideas. This stunning creative resource belongs on every author, writer, and tarot reader’s desk.”

—SASHA GRAHAM, author of *365 Tarot Spreads* and *Dark Wood Tarot*

“Modern writers will be excited by the possibilities for unlocking intuition and creative flow when the craft of writing is united with the ancient symbols of the deck. And what better guide than Kris Waldherr, who’s both a well-known figure in the tarot community and an exceptional writer in her own right?”

—OLIVIA HAWKER, bestselling author of  
*One for the Blackbird, One for the Crow*

“Kris Waldherr is a font of knowledge when it comes to tarot. When you combine such wisdom with her experience borne from publishing captivating novels, you have *Tarot for Storytellers*, which will enhance the work of any writer...I’m here for it, ready to employ these powerful tools to transform the stories I want to tell.”

—CRYSTAL KING, author of *The Chef’s Secret* and *Feast of Sorrow*



# TAROT for STORYTELLERS

A MODERN  
GUIDE FOR  
WRITERS  
AND OTHER  
CREATIVES

written and designed by

**KRIS WALDHERR**

MUSE   
PUBLICATIONS  
NEW YORK



## **ALSO BY KRIS WALDHERR**

### **Select Books:**

*Unnatural Creatures: A Novel of the Frankenstein Women*

*The Lost History of Dreams*

*Bad Princess*

*Doomed Queens*

*The Book of Goddesses*

### **Select Card Decks:**

The Goddess Tarot

The Lover's Path Tarot

The Goddess Inspiration Oracle

The Sacred World Oracle



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No A.I. was used to write, illustrate, or design this book. The tarot card graphics in this book were adapted from Pamela Colman Smith's 1909 illustrations for the Rider-Waite Tarot, which are in the public domain. The official Rider-Waite Tarot deck is published by U.S. Games Systems, Inc.



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## INTRODUCTION



It always starts the same way. I pull out my tarot deck, take a few deep breaths. I shuffle until the cards feel right. Then I begin the reading.

Sometimes I choose a preordained number of cards, if I'm using a spread such as the Celtic Cross. (Ten cards if you're counting, though I like to include an eleventh card for insight.) More often, I just converse with the cards as though they're an old friend.

I ask a question and see what they have to say. I respond with a new question and randomly pull another card, continuing until clarity is reached. Whether I'm reading tarot for myself or for another person, I trust the cards. After all, we've been working together a long time, over thirty years. I understand them when they speak to me.

Sometimes the cards respond with humor, in an "Are you really asking this question *again?*" Other times, the cards go unexpectedly deep. I am there for it, filled with gratitude and amazement—no matter how many times I've read tarot for myself and others, the process still feels like magic to me.

While all this is going on, my mind and eyes are busy as I scan the cards that have appeared. I'm searching for patterns and progressions: are there more of one type of card than another? Didn't that one show up last time? How are the cards connected? What insight do they offer?

Most of all, what story are they telling?



Hello and welcome! I'm Kris Waldherr and I'm an artist, writer, designer, tarotist, and a teacher. With these skills, I've created books, illustrated tarot decks,

written novels, and taught the tarot to students around the world. However, I primarily see myself as a storyteller.

It wasn't always this way. For decades, I considered my skill sets unrelated except when they were used in a creative project. For example, I consulted the tarot when I wrote fiction; when I illustrated books, I used my design and writing talents. I joked it was expedient to be a designer-slash-writer-slash-artist because I didn't need someone else to do these jobs. I considered myself just one of those people who loved doing all these different things—a renaissance woman, if you will.

It wasn't until the publication of my first novel, *The Lost History of Dreams*, that I realized how everything connected. It was about this time that I began offering tarot classes and workshops to writers and other creatives. When asked how all my work as an illustrator, tarotist, and writer overlapped, the answer was so obvious that I felt a little foolish: they were all forms of storytelling.

So, hello! I'm a storyteller. Chances are you are too. In fact, I'll go one step further and state that everyone is a storyteller, even if they've never picked up a pen, drawn a picture, or pulled a tarot card, though writers have a special calling as such.

Ultimately, it's human nature to tell stories. We seek stories all the time to better understand the world around us. Stories help us make sense of our life, seek creative solutions, find connections, and to experience empathy for others. Stories transport us, so we can see the forest for the trees.

It's the same way with the tarot. Whenever we read tarot cards, we're seeking stories, especially if we're writers. Tarot can help us shape characters, uncover plot arcs, and understand the core themes behind our words. The cards can also help us untangle writer's block, cut past overthinking brains, and quicken inspiration. Tarot helps us unearth the magic we seek.



## TAROT HITS AND MYTHS

Though the tarot is a powerful tool for storytelling, it comes loaded with a lot of preconceptions. If you're new to the tarot, you may have picked up this book with some existing beliefs yourself, and possibly a little trepidation. It's hard to avoid, for it's a rare person who hasn't encountered a film or novel where a tarot card plays a dramatic role: The Lovers card indicating a soulmate, or the Death card predicting someone's unexpected demise—for the record, neither card are traditionally interpreted this way.

Let's look at some of these myths.

**MYTH #1: The tarot has to do with the supernatural.**

*Answer:* From personal experience, this is the belief that most intimidates those new to the tarot. For what it's worth, the tarot is just a set of cards with pictures on them; they only reflect what we bring to them. Though some people use the cards for spellcasting and fortunetelling, you don't need to dabble in the supernatural to use the tarot for writing or to heighten creativity.

**MYTH #2: The tarot predicts the future.**

*Answer:* Tarot can be used for fortunetelling, but that's not the focus of *Tarot for Storytellers*. As far as predictions go, I believe the future is never written in stone; the cards simply reflect what might happen, if things continue as they have been. Plus life is complicated—there are so many factors we have no control over. (Don't like what the cards suggest? Take action to change it.)

**MYTH #3: Your first tarot deck must be given to you or it's bad luck.**

*Answer:* Definitely not bad luck. Anyway, it's better if you choose your first deck. Think of choosing a tarot deck as akin to choosing a friend: who do you want to spend time with? There are decks featuring every imaginable type of art and subject—only you know which deck is best for you.

**MYTH #4: It's bad luck to let another person handle your deck.**

*Answer:* Not true, though a tarot deck shouldn't be bandied about like a toy. When not in use, I keep my decks stored in a special area of my studio. This is out of respect for the cards, not fear.

**MYTH #5: You have to be psychic to use the tarot.**

*Answer:* No, though if you're psychic, all the better! That said, the tarot helps us develop intuition, which can seem akin to precognition. I think of intuition as a magical superpower we all possess; it's when we take in information so quickly that we can't break it down into a conscious chain of thought. Bottom line: If you've ever known something you couldn't explain using logic, most likely this was your intuition at work.





Now it's your turn. What are your preconceptions about the tarot? If these beliefs are getting in your way, how can you set them aside to approach the cards with an open mind?

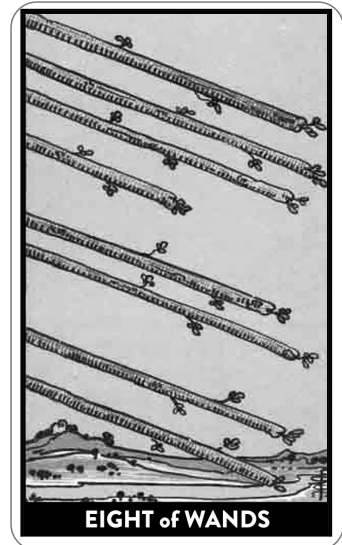


## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The content in *Tarot for Storytellers* is structured progressively in the same manner as my multi-week classes. Each chapter builds upon the previous, focusing on a subject centering on writing and the tarot. These chapters include themed tarot exercises, card spreads, writing prompts, and activities that have been road tested and fine-tuned on writers and creatives in person.

Part One of this book introduces you to the tarot as a storytelling tool; if you've never worked with the tarot before, it'll give you a foundational understanding of the cards. In Part Two, we move onto applying the tarot to the macro and micro elements of story: characters, narrative arcs, plot, scenes, and more. Finally, we'll explore using the tarot to gain inspiration, dissolve writer's block, and even to set personal and professional goals—all good stuff for writers and creatives.

If you're an experienced tarot reader, you might be tempted to skip the first part of this book and its exercises. Though this is understandable, you'd be missing information that'll orient you for the rest of the book, especially if you're starting out as a writer. At the minimum, I suggest reading through Part One before jumping ahead to Part Two.



**EIGHT of WANDS**

### WHAT IF I'M NOT A WRITER?

Though *Tarot for Storytellers* sprang out of my classes for novelists and narrative nonfiction writers, much of this book can also be used by other creatives. Some exercises include variations meant for your personal life, rather than a manuscript—after all, your life is your most important story! These variations are marked after the main text for each exercise.

Regardless, I hope you'll try the writing exercises with the spirit of exploring a new art form. You never know what might happen!

To get the most out of *Tarot for Storytellers*, I recommend the following items:

### 1. TAROT JOURNAL

Scattered throughout *Tarot for Storytellers* are tarot activities, exercises, writing prompts, and card spreads. I encourage you to set up a designated tarot journal to record your notes about the cards, readings, and whatever else arises as you work through this book. In time, you'll find your journal a useful resource. I love being able to look back at my readings and notes, which helps me track my progress while I worked on a manuscript. You can use any notebook for your tarot journal.

In addition, there's a *Tarot for Storytellers Workbook* created to accompany this book. The workbook includes blank reading diagrams, pages for each tarot card, and writing prompts with room to write down your thoughts.

### 2. TAROT DECK

Since we'll be working directly with the tarot, you need a deck. (Yes, you can look up tarot cards online, but this only goes so far.) If you don't already own a deck, I recommend using the Rider-Waite Tarot with *Tarot for Storytellers*. Besides being the most popular tarot deck in the world, the art from the Rider-Waite is featured throughout this book.

If you prefer or own another deck, no worries. You can use any modern tarot deck with *Tarot for Storytellers* as long as it has a picture on every card, not abstract symbols. Your deck should also have seventy-eight cards divided into a Major Arcana of twenty-two cards and fifty-six Minor Arcana cards. (We'll talk more about the Major and Minor Arcanas soon.)

**A last note on choosing your first deck:** Each tarot deck has its own "voice" or personality—this is one reason tarotists often end up owning more than one deck.

Different decks fulfill different needs. For example, I use The Goddess Tarot for questions about creativity, the Rider-Waite for exploring plot issues, the Gaian Tarot when concerned about practicalities. If you're stressing over finding the perfect deck, in time you may want more than one to work with. For now, consider your first tarot deck a tool for learning, akin to a starter instrument for a new musician.



## PLOTTERS VERSUS PANTSERS

Whenever I mention the tarot to writers, one question that arises is whether plotters and pantsers should use the tarot differently—it's a valid consideration.

Before I answer, here's an overview of plotters and pantsers, if this a new concept for you. Fiction writers often get divided into two camps, plotters and pantsers, which sound as you'd expect. Plotters plan their story before they write. Pantsers figuratively write by the seat of their pants, discovering their story as it unfolds; for this reason, pantsers are also referred to as discovery writers.

One isn't better than the other, just different—it's all about how our brains are wired for creativity. Plotters need to process their thinking ahead of time. Pantsers need to think on the page or they get bored; they trust their subconscious to come up with answers they require at the right time.

**If you're a plotter**, most likely using the tarot as part of your writing process will be a natural fit. You'll love having a shiny, new tool to incorporate into your pre-writing routine—after all, the more information you have before you start drafting, the better! Later, when you revise your manuscript, the tarot will come in handy as you deepen and clarify what's already on the page.

**If you're a pantser**, you might worry whether the tarot will stifle your creativity. After all, your muse thrives on unpredictability and eureka moments while you write. My take: if anything, the tarot will enhance your creative process. By adding an element of happenstance to coax inspiration from your subconscious, it'll amplify what's already there.

That said, unlike a plotter, chances are you'll get more from the tarot by using it *while* you draft and *after* you finish, when you're wrestling your Messy First Draft into shape. You'll also find the tarot valuable for brainstorming, if you need new story ideas.

**Uncertain which camp you fall into?** From personal experience, I've found most writers are a mix, or "plantsers." I know I am! I only begin writing my novels after much research and many notes about plot and character and theme. Even so, my draft usually hits a dead end when I'm about 20,000 words into a manuscript; the tarot helps me navigate my way out when it does.



**Another consideration:** When you think about it, it's not only fiction writers who can be categorized as plotters or pantsers. It's the same for nonfiction writers, screenwriters, and other creatives. For example, I know visual artists who meticulously plan ahead, and others who only discover what they're making once they start painting. Same for musicians who prefer improvisation over sheet music, or clothing designers who intuitively drape and cut fabric instead of sketching first.

**To reiterate, the “plotters versus pantsers” debate comes down to how brains are wired.** Again, one isn't better than the other—and, in either case, the tarot can enhance your process.



Let's move onto our first chapter, which presents an overview of the tarot and its history. But before we do so, one last thought.

If there's one gift I hope *Tarot for Storytellers* brings you, it's the ability to trust your intuition. In today's world, we're continuously surrounded by messages that the only useful information is information that can be quantified with facts and figures. The tarot goes against this, for it urges us to look within our psyches, to trust that there's more to life than what can be seen and measured. After all, like love and creativity, the best things in life are intangible.

It's the same with intuition, which the tarot helps us access and develop. When we write, our intuition tells us to honor our storytelling instinct, to know that the characters we create are worthy of empathy, that our tales offer catharsis, truth, and beauty. Our art holds value.

While you progress through *Tarot for Storytellers*, I hope you will take note of emotions that may arise as you work with the cards, along with any flashes of insight that arrive. You may even feel a physical sensation, such as a tingling along your arm or a splash of warmth, when you hit upon something that rings true for your art. Something inside you says, “This is good”—and it *is* good. All these experiences are markers of your intuition at work. As you learn to recognize this innermost voice, your confidence will expand beyond your creative process, empowering and enriching you in unexpected ways.

Ultimately, the tarot is a tool to invite this wisdom into our lives. I truly believe it is here our true treasure lies, patiently waiting for us to embrace it.

And on that note, let's begin!

# PART ONE



## Tarot Basics





## **IN THIS SECTION:**

Hello to the Tarot

The Major Arcana

The Minor Arcana

Court Cards



## Chapter 1

# HELLO TO THE TAROT



**T**hough it's been decades, I can still recall the first time I encountered the tarot. I was a child of nine visiting a grown up cousin, whom I regarded as infinitely sophisticated. After all, she lived in a tiny studio apartment in the wilds of Manhattan, which seemed a universe away from the North Jersey suburb I called home. My excitement at visiting her bohemian abode was only heightened when I discovered a brightly colored deck scattered across her bed.

Crowning the deck was a card depicting a beautiful, ethereal woman draped in veils, a card I now know to be The High Priestess, a potent archetype of feminine mysticism.

My first thought: these aren't playing cards.

My second thought: whatever they are, they're powerful.

And my third thought...well, there was no time for a third, for my cousin whisked me out the door since we were late for our ballet matinee—isn't that what glamorous older cousins are for? However, even then I sensed I'd come across something magical, and perhaps even a little forbidden. This first impression of the tarot remained with me, though I would not see another deck for a long time.

Years later, while studying illustration at the School of Visual Arts, I studied painting with David Palladini, and here the tarot re-entered my life with a flourish. It turned out Palladini was the artist behind The Aquarian Tarot, a 1970 tarot deck inspired by the Art Nouveau movement of the early twentieth century.



If that wasn't enough enticement, another student in our class gave me my very first tarot reading. Her deck of choice: the Aquarian. Though The Aquarian Tarot wasn't the same tarot deck I'd encountered in my cousin's studio way back when, the cards appeared close enough.

The Aquarian Tarot became the first tarot deck I owned, though certainly not my last. I also began reading tarot for myself and friends, as well as creating illustrations inspired by the imagery of the tarot. At first, my tarot readings were what you'd expect, revolving around questions about love and the future and riches and fame. As I gained a handle on the tarot and its symbolism, my relationship with the cards evolved into something richer and deeper.

Since those art school days, I've read tarot with more decks than I can recall for more people than I can number in public events, private consultations, and tarot salons hosted in my studio. I've created two tarot decks, The Goddess Tarot and The Lover's Path Tarot, and written books to accompany them. However, when I teach the tarot, I usually default to the Rider-Waite Tarot, the mother of all contemporary tarot decks, for reasons I'll soon explain.

Over the decades, as I continued working with the tarot in earnest, I grew to understand that the magic I'd sensed in the cards was there for a reason. First off, the cards were illustrated with potent images—archetypes, if you will. These archetypes presented me with patterns to observe over time, inviting me to acknowledge difficult truths and to take responsibility for my life; for example, Strength (Major Arcana VIII) appeared repeatedly in my readings while I dealt with an ongoing family situation. I also gained satisfaction in helping others when I read cards for them.

Later, when I began writing fiction, I realized tarot cards were more than magical. They were a potent tool for storytelling.

And here I am today with *Tarot for Storytellers*.



The narrative I just told you was offered to give context to my experiences with the tarot—a story, if you will. It's a story I've told many times before. I shared it in the Goddess Tarot 25th Anniversary book. I've told it in presentations, during classes, and in conversations when I'm asked, "How did you get involved with the tarot?"

Perhaps you have a similar story about your initial encounter with the cards. Or maybe you're completely new to the tarot, and feel overwhelmed by all the art and symbols. In either case, let's start with an overview of the tarot to orient us. After all, knowledge is power!

In its most basic form, the tarot is a deck consisting of seventy-eight illus-

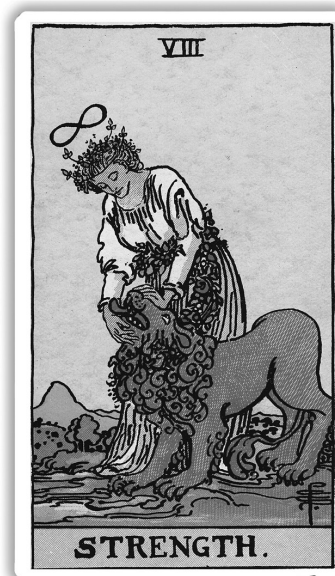


trated cards. The history of how the tarot gained its current form is worthy of more than a few scholarly books—here’s an extremely truncated version.

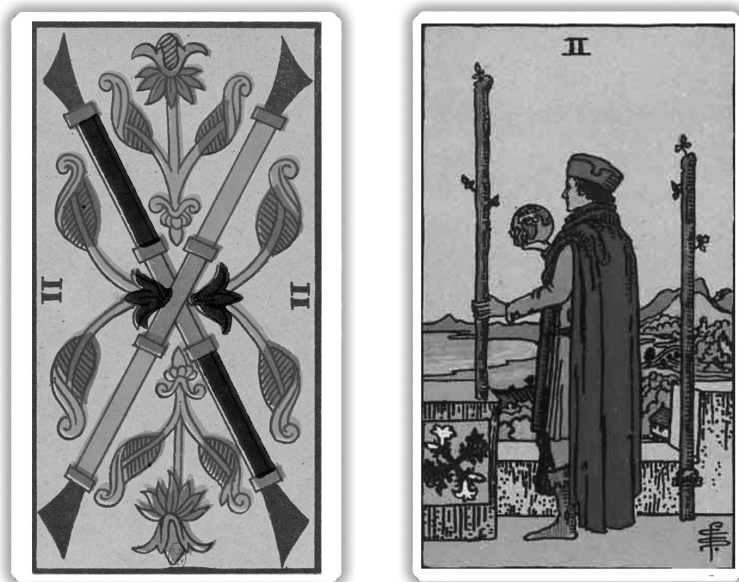
The tarot has been around in one form or another since the Italian Renaissance: the earliest known tarot deck, the Visconti-Sforza, dates from the fifteenth century. Back then, these cards were known as *trifoni*, or “trumps,” and were used more for playing games than fortunetelling. Approximately two centuries later, a deck of cards known commonly as the Tarot de Marseille took on the structure we now recognize as the modern tarot: seventy-eight cards divided into two sections known as the Major and Minor Arcanas. (Get it? Arcana as in “arcane”, or secret knowledge.)

However, it wasn’t until the 1909 publication of the Rider-Waite Tarot that the tarot really took on wings in the world. This is primarily because of Pamela Colman Smith’s iconic card art, which is what most people think of when they hear the word “tarot.”

Born in London in 1878, Pamela (*right*) was an artist, writer, and occultist who lived in Jamaica for a portion of her life. Later, she attended the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn before returning to England, where she fell in with Bram Stoker, Ellen Terry, William Butler Yeats, and other London bohemians. Rumor holds that Pamela was granted the charming nickname of “Pixie” during this period.



Marseille and Rider-Waite Major Arcana cards.



*Marseille and Rider-Waite Minor Arcana cards.*

In 1901, Pixie was introduced by Yeats to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which is where she met Arthur Waite, who eventually commissioned art for a tarot deck from her. Though Pixie took inspiration from the Tarot de Marseille when creating her cards, she went one step further by illustrating full scenes for every Minor Arcana numbered card, or “pips,” making the tarot more accessible of meaning to the average user. Prior to Pixie, the pips were decorated with symbols, like playing cards.

From start to finish, it took Pixie only six months to create the art for what would become the bestselling tarot deck in the world. You can purchase the Rider-Waite Tarot in just about any format you can think of, from glow-in-the-dark to small enough to fit on a keychain. The deck is also published under the name of the Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot, which is only fair—after all, it's Pixie's art that makes the deck so extraordinary.

These days, most contemporary tarot decks base their structure and symbolism on Rider-Waite Tarot. This is why I teach using the Rider-Waite, though my students can use whatever deck they prefer; I always say that if they understand the Rider-Waite, they'll understand most other tarot decks without too much struggling.

Bottom line: no matter what tarot deck you use with this book, chances are it's based in some way on Pixie's deck. If you'd like to know more about the specific symbols and imagery of the Rider-Waite, I highly recommend Sasha Graham's *Llewellyn's Complete Book of the Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot*.



## TAROT IN MODERN TIMES

Because of the Rider-Waite and the wonders of modern printing, the tarot has become popularized far beyond anything that might have been imagined back in Renaissance Italy. While the Rider-Waite still dominates, tarot books and decks now abound for every imaginable subject—from gummy bears to vampires and beyond. The tarot is also used today for more than card games.

Here are the two main schools of thought for the tarot:

### 1. PREDICTIVE: tarot for forecasting the future

What many people think of when they think of the tarot: as a fortunetelling tool, or oracle. Related note: all tarot cards can be used as an oracle, but not all oracle decks are tarot decks. The primary difference between an oracle deck and a tarot deck is that the tarot has seventy-eight cards divided into a major and minor arcana; oracle decks can be structured however their creator likes.

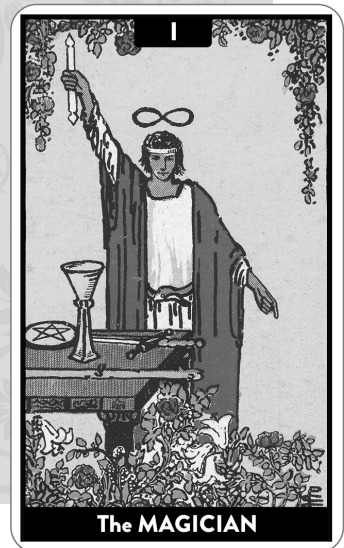
### 2. PSYCHOLOGICAL: tarot as a therapeutic experience

Like with dreams, the tarot can help us dig into our subconscious. By analyzing our reactions to the card art and symbolism, we can explore our emotions, motivations, and other aspects of our psyche. In other words, by using the cards, we get to know ourselves better. Finally, tarot cards can also provide us with an experience of synchronicity, which can offer insight.

#### ON THE MAGIC OF SYNCHRONICITY

Synchronicity is a term coined by Swiss psychologist Carl Jung to describe a series of seemingly random events that are interpreted as a whole for greater meaning. Which, when you think about it, is what we do when we tell ourselves a story—as humans, it's natural for us to yearn for meaning in our experiences, to set them into order by seeking symbolism and patterns. When a synchronistic experience occurs, it can feel downright magical, like there's something bigger out there smiling down on us.

Synchronicity is one of many reasons that the tarot makes such a great tool for writers and artists.



So, got that so far? Two tarot schools of thought, the first being predictive, such as in fortunetelling, and the second psychological or therapeutic.

However, there's a third way the tarot can be used—and this will be our primary focus in *Tarot for Storytellers*.

### **3. INSPIRATION: tarot for creative purposes**

Besides helping us tap into our subconscious and invite experiences of synchronicity—all good stuff!—the tarot can spark inspiration, revitalize creative projects, dissolve writer's block, and much more. Because tarot cards are image-based, we can even use them for ekphrastic writing, aka writing inspired by art. (The term comes from the Greek *ekphrasis*, meaning a written description of a piece of visual art. An example: Keat's poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn.")

The tarot works whether you're a pantsner or a plotter, novelist, nonfiction writer, or any other kind of storyteller. When we pull tarot cards and interpreting their meanings, they offer us new perspectives and ideas to write about. When it comes to writing about characters in our stories, or people in our life, tarot helps us understand their motivations, desires, and fears. We go deep. The cards shift us out of Logical Mind into a wider, more expansive state, where we're forced to surpass our limitations and embrace possibility. We invite magic.

Finally, the tarot helps us create narrative structure. You can even think of the tarot as a nonlinear form of storytelling:

**The tarot is composed of seventy-eight cards.  
Ergo, every time you shuffle, you get a new story.**

With seventy-eight cards, the possibilities are endless—it's literally a Choose Your Own Adventure made up of tarot cards. To quote the immortal J.R.R. Tolkien: "We may say that the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty...But if we speak of a Cauldron, we must not wholly forget the Cooks."

When we shuffle the cards, we become the Cooks stirring the Cauldron of Story—and what could be more empowering for a writer?



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