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Chapter 1

Introducing Tarot and Oracle Card Reading

In this chapter, I help you start your journey as a card reader at the very beginning with a quick discussion of terminology, a broad look at different viewpoints on card reading, and a few thoughts about which decks you may want to read with.

Defining Some Key Terms

For an exploration like this one, let me begin with a few definitions:

» **Cartomancy:** To give it its proper name, the technical term for card reading is *cartomancy*. *Carto* refers to cards, and the suffix *-mancy* means “divination by means of.” For example, *necromancy* originally referred to divination by summoning the spirits of the dead (trust me, stick to the cards). As a person who reads cards, you are now a *cartomancer*. It’s official!

Note: *Cartomancy* sounds very dignified, and you should feel free to use it, but through most of this book I stick to the more common term *card reading* to refer to using both tarot and oracle cards.

- » **Querent:** *Querent* is a fancy term used mainly by card readers and lawyers today. Of course, card readers are far more trustworthy. The querent is the person asking for a reading. If you're reading for yourself, you're the querent.
- » **Tarot cards:** A *tarot deck* consists of 78 cards separated into five suits, most commonly the Major Arcana (or trumps), wands, swords, cups, and pentacles. It was originally a card game developed in Italy in the 1400s (and is still played today). In the 1700s, occultists began to use the deck for divination. I briefly explore the complexity of tarot history in Chapter 2.
- » **Oracle cards:** *Oracle cards* are a broader category of deck specifically designed for use in divination and personal reflection. These decks have no set number of cards, and most of them are centered on a specific theme — for example, angels, animals, deities, and so on. Head to Chapter 11 for more on various types of oracle decks. Most of these decks include the word *oracle* in their title.

Recognizing the Unique Gifts of Tarot and Oracle Cards

What has kept people enchanted with card reading for more than two centuries? All systems have something to offer, but I think card reading has a few unique characteristics that have helped it grow exponentially in popularity.

Shuffling the fates

Cartomancy falls into a category of divination called *sortilege*, which means the answer is given by randomly selecting one or more items from a group. This idea suggests a view of the future that isn't set in stone. Your reading isn't a calculation; it's a shifting series of scenes that change their story each time you lay out the cards. One question naturally brings another to the surface, and you can layer a new reading onto the first.

Sparking your imagination

The first readers looked at the traditional images of the tarot playing cards and saw the secrets of the universe encoded within

them. Their initial theories have proven to be untrue (I get to it in Chapter 2), but that's not important. What's important is the way the images spoke to them and got the wheels of their minds turning.

The cards have sets of traditional meanings, but the real magic happens when your sense of intuition comes into play and those meanings take on a new life as you see your own world reflected back to you. You'll discover new, personal meanings in the cards that the author and artist never imagined.

Telling stories

The cards are incredibly user-friendly. For more than 100 years, deck creators have found new and exciting ways to convey their ideas through beautiful and thought-provoking artwork. Card reading is filled with incredible mysteries and complexities, but at its core it's about finding the thread of your story in the pictures. Your brain is wired for narrative, which is why you can look up at a billboard and immediately understand the story the advertiser wants you to see.



IT'S IN THE
CARDS

Ready to start playing with the cards? This technique — which allows you to tell a story with the cards — is one that I return to a few times throughout this book (and it's also a great way to become familiar with your cards):

- 1. Shuffle your deck and lay out one card.**

If you don't have a deck yet, for this exercise just turn to a random page in Chapter 10 and use the image you find there.

- 2. Look at the card and start telling the story that comes to your mind based on what you see in the card's imagery.**

This step works best if you say the story out loud or write it down. Don't worry about the "correct" meanings; just begin with "Once upon a time, there was a . . ." and say what you see in the scene.

- 3. After you've told the first card's story to your satisfaction, lay down a card next to it and continue the story.**

- 4. Place a third card and bring the tale to its conclusion.**

If at any point you get stuck, pick a single object, animal, or other symbol on the card to focus on. Describe why that's important to the story and you'll be back on track.

Notice what surprised you about this experience. Perhaps small details in one card took on new significance when you saw a later card. Maybe you felt like some part of this story was really about what's going on in your own life. You just read a "three-card spread!" You'll find an exploration of that spread and others in Chapter 7.

Serving Diverse Definitions of Divination

Many definitions of *divination* insist on using the phrase *supernatural means*, but I define *divination* as "asking the universe a question and receiving an intelligible response."

This broader idea of divination fits better with the varied types of readings you can perform with the cards. In Chapter 4 you explore your personal worldview and how your ideas about the existence or nonexistence of divine beings will shape your practice. Here, I look at the range of ways you can seek answers with your cards.

Predicting outcomes

This is the fortune-telling side of the cards. In this mode, they answer the question "What happens next?"

This aspect of divination has been an essential pursuit for humanity since ancient times because

- » Uncertainty is stressful.
- » Decision-making can be crippling.
- » Having an idea about what's coming allows you to make choices in the here and now to prepare yourself.

Many people won't touch the cards because they're afraid to receive bad news, but forewarned is forearmed. Contained within every disappointing reading are directions for the best choices you can make. If it's going to rain tomorrow, try to find an umbrella.

Exploring your psyche

In this practice, the cards form a map of your life and your inner self for you to contemplate. They mirror the struggles and challenges you face and point to opportunities for healing and growth.

You'll find yourself responding to readings with new questions like these:

- » In what ways am I like this warrior on horseback?
- » What's in the cup I'm trying so hard to reach?
- » How can I wash away the pain of the past like this woman at a pool of water?

This sort of card reading relies more on your intuitive response to the images than the traditional meanings and keywords. However, those traditional meanings can be important because they help you push past personal biases that are ingrained in your worldview.

Kickstarting creativity

Here, the cards serve you as a symbol-rich brainstorming tool that helps you open yourself to new pathways of possibility. If you ever find yourself creatively blocked, the cards will help you by asking

- » What will bring more balance to this story?
- » What part of this project needs to die to give it new life and freedom?
- » How can I reclaim my throne?

This method of divination has been popular with artists, writers, and musicians looking to find new pathways, but increasingly engineers, project managers, marketers, and role-playing gamers are turning to the cards as a font of inspiration.

Pondering the mysteries

Philosophers, spiritual teachers, and mystics find a trove of inner wisdom in the images of the cards. Using this method, sometimes called *wisdom reading*, diviners wrestle with topics that have eternally confounded humanity. Weighty issues you can consider with the cards include the following:

- » What is the soul?
- » How do I find union with the divine?
- » What's the purpose of life?



WARNING

To be very clear: This method is intended to explore *your* answers to these questions and not to imagine you've uncovered *the* answers to them.

Choosing Your Deck(s)

All you need to get started as a reader is a deck of cards, a flat surface, and a healthy dose of curiosity. But which deck should you get?

When I started reading tarot in the mid-'90s, I remember my local game store had perhaps five or six different options to choose from. Today, readers are blessed with thousands of decks, from beloved classics to new releases by major publishers and indie creators alike. This wealth of options creates its own set of issues and a potential stumbling block for new readers.



TIP

Despite what you may have heard, you *can* purchase your own deck. I cover this myth in Chapter 5 but know that it's baseless; the deck you purchase will work just as well as one that's been gifted to you.

My formula for any new tarot reader is to start with two decks (I explain each in the upcoming sections):

- »» The Rider-Waite-Smith
- »» The deck you find most visually appealing

Considering the classic

If there's one deck every reader should have in their collection, it's the Rider-Waite-Smith (or RWS). Throughout this book, I use a reproduction of an RWS deck originally published in 1909 (as noted in the Introduction).

The RWS serves as the foundation for just about every deck in the English-speaking world. It's been beloved by readers for more than 100 years, and its images have stood the test of time for good reason.

Its artist, Pamela Colman Smith, was renowned for her work as an illustrator and a stage designer for the theater. Her clear and

straightforward linework makes the details and rich symbolism easy to decipher. You can read more about the RWS deck in Chapter 2.

Because of this deck's pervasiveness, two tarot readers discussing the meaning of the Six of Swords likely will both picture Smith's image of a shrouded figure rowing a boat with upright swords in it — even if neither of the readers uses the RWS as their primary deck.

You don't have to own a copy of the RWS, but you want to be aware of its images. If the deck's artwork doesn't quite do it for you, the good news is that most decks in the tradition let you know they're Rider-Waite-Smith-based (usually on their back cover).

Responding to the art



REMEMBER

One of the clearest indicators of whether you can work with a deck is the impact the imagery has on you. Card art comes in myriad styles and mediums, from realistic to fantastical to surreal. If you find a deck drab, boring, or otherwise off-putting, it will be a struggle to read. Here are some artistic concepts to think about:

» **Themes:** Most modern tarot and oracle decks are designed around a single theme. The sky is the limit here; you can find decks based on nature, magical and spiritual traditions, mythological creatures, and much more. If humans aren't your thing, you may prefer one of the many animal decks on the market. Many readers love cat-themed decks in particular but you can find decks featuring animals of all kinds.

If you're curious about a particular type of deck, quickly searching online for "[theme] tarot" will soon lead you to what's available.

To explore potential decks more fully, look for videos online where reviewers flip through each card in the deck. Your local metaphysical bookstore is likely to have samples of each of its decks for you to look through, too.

» **Diversity:** Modern decks have come a long way in terms of representation, with the cards better showcasing humanity in its infinite variety. Many modern decks feature people of various races, body types, genders, and sexualities.



TIP

- » **Scenes:** For most intuitive tarot practices, you want to choose a deck with scenes on every card. Decks without scenes, called *pip decks*, show simple arrangements of suit symbols on the cards. This setup has become increasingly common with media tie-in decks based on popular films and television series. I offer guidance for reading pip decks in Chapter 8, but you'll get much more mileage from this book with scenic decks.
- » **Pop-culture tie-ins:** Decks based on popular films, movies, and games are a quickly growing trend for both tarot and oracles. These decks can make learning the cards easier for beginning readers whose prior knowledge of the characters and story lines help them make connections with the meanings. Many of these decks have non-scenic minors, or *pip cards* (see Chapter 8).

Observing oracle decks

Unlike tarot, oracle cards don't have a single foundational deck on which the rest are based. Many of these decks are similar enough that they blend well with one another, but each one contains its own unique structure.

I explore the world of oracle cards more fully in Chapter 11, but for starters I advise you to choose a single deck whose theme and artwork are inspiring to you.

Growing your collection

With such variety available and the influence of social media videos in which collectors show off their latest acquisitions, you may be tempted to run out and buy a boatload of decks to play with.



TIP

Your skill with the cards will grow more quickly if you become intimately familiar with just one or two decks at the beginning. This approach allows you to encounter the same characters in all sorts of different spreads and exercises, training your intuitive muscles to recognize certain patterns and combinations. Start small; your deck library will increase in time.