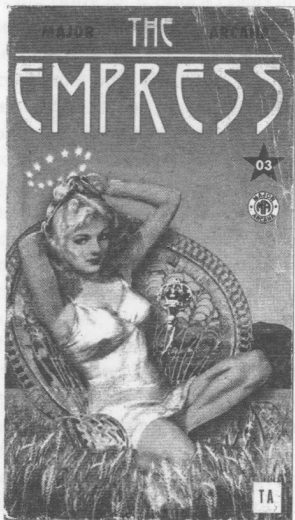


THE PULP TAROT



INSTRUCTION BOOK

HOW AN ORACLE WORKS:

An introduction for the skeptical

SOMETIME in the 1990s, a friend of mine had a fundraising party for a dance company and asked me to do Tarot readings for the event. I was familiar with the Tarot and I loved the Rider-Waite-Smith deck (RWS), but was by no means an expert. I had only used the deck on my own; I had never done readings for other people, but I figured the stakes would be pretty low, and I'd be among fellow artists, so I agreed to do it.

I sat at my table in the corner of the loft space and quietly did readings for the handful of people who wandered over. I told everyone who sat down, "I am not a professional reader, I have no psychic powers, I am no more qualified to read Tarot spreads than you are." I laid out a spread for each patron in turn. It was embarrassing how ill-prepared I was for the task. Cards turned up that were complete mysteries to me. I'd have to take out the booklet and look them up. I kept saying to the people, over and over, that I had only the vaguest idea what I was doing and that my own interpretations of the cards were all I

could really give them. But none of that mattered. Every single person who sat down for a reading was amazed at how insightful and penetrating their spreads were. A card like The Hierophant would come up, and I'd look up its meaning in the little booklet, and the customer would be astonished. "Yes!" they'd say, "I know exactly who that is. There's a guy at work who is exactly that!" Without having any idea what I was doing, I was telling my patrons deep truths about themselves.

That was when I realized just how well-designed RWS is. Its designs are so well-considered and so simply executed that anyone can use them and feel a deep connection to them, and truly gain self-knowledge through their use, even without training with the Tarot tradition.

A man goes to a storefront psychic. The psychic says "I sense you have a serious problem." The man, astonished, thinks, "She's reading my mind!" But, of course, the psychic knows the man has a serious problem the moment he walks in. She knows he has a serious problem because he's pursued the services of a psychic. If his problem was not serious, he would have stayed home and solved the problem himself.

The storefront psychic is an example of an oracle. Other oracles include the stars and planets, tea leaves, sheep's guts and fortune cookies. An oracle is a neutral arbiter that has no idea who you are or what your problem is. It has no opinion on your struggles in life. It is merely a lens through which to view yourself and your world.

We consult an oracle when we're presented with a problem we cannot solve. We turn to the world of "the unknown," to the supernatural. It's a form of prayer. You ask the oracle a question, and it provides a fresh, distinctive perspective on that question. When you pray, you don't really expect an answer on the spot. You merely put your mind in a different framework, one that allows you to judge your troubles from a different vantage point, one rooted in tradition and the wisdom of the ages. Astrologists do not consult with the stars; they consult with a tradition. When you look up your horoscope you join a tradition—a way of looking at life and the world that has been passed down generation upon generation.

RWS is the best-designed oracle I've ever encountered. It's not a collection of vague statements that can apply to any situation; it's

a complex network of ideas and concepts that can provide genuine reflection for those who seek answers. It does this by creating a narrative: a series of parables, symbols and characters, each of which communicates with its fellow cards in a kind of map for the human soul, a tapestry of trials, and all the different paths one takes on its road to enlightenment. When you lay out your Tarot spread, all those parables, symbols and characters collide and form a kind of portrait, and it means whatever you think it means.

Everyone has cards they consider "theirs." When I first began consulting the Tarot, my cards were The Hanged Man, the Three of Swords, the Five of Wands and the Nine of Swords. They turned up all the time. I was convinced that my deck was sharply attuned to my spirit. Of course, a 78-card deck has only so many combinations of images to display, and a well-shuffled deck should turn up each image an equal number of times. I finally realized that my perception of how often a card turned up depended largely on how I responded to the card. It seemed like the cards I responded to turned up all the time because

those cards really resonated with me, while other cards were symbolic dead ends.

One might gather from all this that there is no true magic in the Tarot. Untrue! The magic of the Tarot comes from the communication of ideas across continents and generations. I was inspired by Pamela Smith, who had her own inspirations, going back and back and back into the mists of time. Ideas, symbols and narratives have flown across eons, transferred from brain to brain, spreading self-knowledge and enlightenment everywhere they have touched down. You might say that the real fortune was the friends we made along the way.

THE PULP TAROT

THE PULP TAROT would not exist without Rider-Waite-Smith. Pamela Smith's illustrations, for me, pack so much more emotional and symbolic punch than any booklet describing Tarot traditions could. The simple goal of The Pulp Tarot is to reframe RWS for a more current time, with illustrations that are a little more grounded—more practical, perhaps, or more profane, more colloquial, more worldly and human—while retaining the bulk of RWS's allegories.

There are many, many paths to spiritual enlightenment, and one of the purposes of this deck is to demonstrate that the principles of the Tarot, and of RWS, transcend style. There is divinity everywhere, from the cathedral to the gutter. As Leonard Cohen put it, "There's a blaze of light in every word, it doesn't matter which you heard, the holy or the broken Hallelujah." It may be helpful to think of this deck as 78 broken Hallelujahs.

Why pulp? For me, it has to do with gut impact. Pulp illustrations, and the other mid-century American illustrations I've drawn from when creating this deck, were designed to

grab the viewer's attention. Pulp illustrations had to compete with hundreds of other illustrations on magazine and book covers at the corner magazine stand. That means that they tended towards hyperbole and sensationalism, with dynamic compositions, saturated colors and overstated emotions. Everything is bigger in pulp illustration—juicier, spicier, more dramatic. A pulp illustration had to punch through the noise of an ocean of printed matter, and the best pulp artists learned to get to the point as fast and as dramatically as possible. Their illustration style was so effective it's impossible to think of stories from the pulp era without seeing through the eyes of those artists.

One thing to keep in mind when perusing my interpretations of the cards is that my interpretations are not authoritative. If you see something that I don't mention in a card, that thing is real and true; yours is the only interpretation that matters.

Also, don't get hung up on gender. The figures on the cards are presented as male and female, but each can be either, including the kings and queens. We all have masculine and feminine parts of ourselves.

THE MAJOR ARCANA

00 THE FOOL. The Fool is blessed. She runs blithely off a cliff, not paying the slightest attention to the topography. She holds her white flower as she charges ahead, not a care in the world. The local dog happily trots beside her. It may be her pet, it may be her spirit guide. She may plummet to her death or she may take off and fly. The point is, she's enjoying this moment of pure joy and has faith in the universe.

01 THE MAGICIAN. The Magician is the master of the four suits: Wands, Cups, Swords and Pentacles. He knows all and sees all. He can bend the tools of the universe to his will. Flowers bloom wherever he goes. He wears a belt made of a snake eating its tail. He's a mystical wizard and divinely inspired spirit. Unless, of course, he's just a cheap hustler in a cool suit and it's all just tricks. Or maybe both things are true.

02 THE HIGH PRIESTESS. The High Priestess knows things. She's got wisdom and she makes the rules. But she's also kind and personable. You could say she's a mom. Her props—

her keys, her paper, her outfit, her moon-shaped brooch, her pomegranate-and-palm wallpaper—all point to her being a wise keeper of tradition and order.

03 THE EMPRESS. The Empress is the personification of fertility. She reclines in her peacock chair in the middle of a thriving wheat field, giving you a come-hither glance as she plays with her blond hair. She has a crown of twelve stars, one for each month of the year. There are vineyards and mountains in the distance. The Empress commands her domain and is the awe of everyone who meets her.

04 THE EMPEROR. The Emperor runs things. He's the guy in charge. He may not make the rules—it may be more a case of him doing what he wants and then that's the new rule. Just looking at him, you can tell he didn't inherit his empire but created it himself, the old-fashioned way: through force. Is he a good emperor or a bad emperor? He's obviously strong, and not someone you want to mess with, but is he strong for you or against you? He's draped in a red cape, but he has got a full set of armor on underneath, because

being at the top always means there's someone about to attack you.

05 THE HIEROPHANT. The Hierophant is related to The High Priestess. Like her, he makes the rules. Unlike her, he doesn't seem to be very kind. He's more of a rules-for-the-sake-of-rules sort of guy. Rules have served him very well: he's made it to the top of his religious order and has a fancy stone chair. Does he have the wisdom to go along with his strictness? Hard to say! He has the age, certainly, but I have my doubts, as any successful religious order tends toward corruption and favoritism.

06 THE LOVERS. Adam and Eve, clad in fig-leaf swimsuits, are just about to have an apple snack when an angel shows up to scream bloody murder at them. What does the angel want? Why is she bugging Adam and Eve? What are they doing wrong? The point is, any time two people fall in love there are always risks and always rewards. Be careful—an angel might come yell at you, too! The Lovers' proximity to The Hierophant suggests maybe the rule-maker sent the angel to spoil the couple's picnic.

07 THE CHARIOT. Look out, here comes The Chariot! The Chariot driver is a fresh-faced, confident young woman whose chariot is a top-of-the-line red and white mid-century sports car. She's ready to go anywhere and do anything. Go, Chariot driver! The blue square on her shoulder indicates strength and balance, and the two Great Danes in her chariot are there to make sure no one messes with her. They face different directions because they don't really like each other. The RWS Chariot driver seems to be a warrior returning home, but my driver is just starting out, bursting with confidence under an inviting evening sky. The winding mustard-colored canopy suggests that the road will not always be straight, but the Chariot driver will figure out her way.

08 STRENGTH. Strength wears a sporty white beach ensemble to show her purity, and a crown of flowers to show she's at one with nature. The lion is not her pet. They just met, but already the lion is perfectly comfortable around her, because Strength is all about using grace to control brute impulses.

09 THE HERMIT. The Hermit of The Pulp Tarot is essentially the same as the RWS Hermit, but seen from a different point of view. He's got his robe and his lantern, but the viewer is not with him—the viewer is on their way to meet him. Does he possess wisdom? Hard to say! He's been alone for a long time; maybe he's out of step with current trends, and maybe he's turned his back on society. Has his withdrawal from society given him special powers? Maybe! Should you go on to meet up with him, or should you turn around and go home? He may have answers for you, but he may also be insane. Or maybe you're the hermit. Maybe you're the hermit and the pilgrim.

10 WHEEL OF FORTUNE. Sometimes you can control things that happen to you—sometimes you can't. The Wheel of Fortune knows that sometimes things will turn out okay, sometimes not. The RWS Wheel of Fortune is a magical wheel in the sky, but mine is just a cheap carnival attraction. The cool part is, a cheap carnival attraction has no more or less divinatory power than the magic wheel in the sky. The poster for the Wheel of Fortune has all kinds of symbols on it, representing

different aspects of the soul, but the important thing is the “wheel” part — what goes around comes around. The wheel spins, and the ones who were on top will later be on the bottom. The question is, is this game rigged?

11 JUSTICE. Justice is not here to mess around. Justice is here to kick ass and take names. Her pillars represent strength and fairness, but the fire at her back shows her anger and force. She's got a pair of scales somewhere, but right now she's getting ready to mete out justice with her terrible swift sword.

12 THE HANGED MAN. The Hanged Man has been hoisted up by his foot and put on public display in the town square, where he is gawked at by passers-by. What did he do to deserve this kind of treatment, this kind of persecution? We don't know. Was he strung up by a hostile authoritative force, or did he string himself up as some kind of statement? Whatever the case, he seems to be perfectly okay looking at the world upside-down, which is what the card is really about — looking at the world from an inverse point of view regardless of what other people think.

13 DEATH. Death is the true magician, the force that transforms everything. We are all props in Death's top hat, and we never know which one of us he'll pluck out next. The beautiful woman, the wizened king, the valiant knight and the pious pope will all face Death before the curtain comes down. And yet Death is not the end, for rebirth—seen here in the form of the sun rising between the two distant towers—is always just over the horizon.

14 TEMPERANCE. Temperance is an angel, dedicated to the concepts of balance and moderation. Temperance stands half on land and half in the water, half grounded and half in the flow, pouring liquid from one cup to another, always seeking that perfect balance. Temperance is half male and half female, and suggests that all balanced people are, as well. The big crown glowing in the distance suggests a spiritual goal, and the golden path leading to it is the higher path.

15 THE DEVIL. The Devil is bad. The Devil seeks to enslave people. He may enslave two people at once, via a bond of sexual obsession, or he may enslave individuals with all

the tools of addiction at his disposal. The inverted pentagram on his forehead indicates that he is of the material world, but has twisted its delights for evil purposes.

16 THE TOWER. Uh-oh, here comes trouble! The Tower is a tall building, but tall buildings are the first to be struck by lightning. This Tower is in crisis, burning down under a stormy sky. Will anything be left of the The Tower by the time the fire has burnt itself out? Will humankind ever control the hubris that compels them to build towers ever higher, inviting greater and greater cataclysm? What Tower have you built, and how much has your hubris blinded you to your Tower's weaknesses?

17 THE STAR. The Star, like her younger sibling, Temperance, lives on both land and water. She's got one container of water more than Temperance though, and she doesn't seek balance so much as equity. One pitcher of water goes to the earth to fertilize the land, the other goes back into the water to keep the flow of her spirit invigorated.

18 THE MOON. Two wolves howl at the enormous moon as a lobster emerges from a nearby pond to see what all the commotion is about. The lobster, it is important to note, is a bottom-dweller. As water represents consciousness, we could say the story of this card is that the Moon, a symbol of intuition, has lured a bottom-dwelling thought out of the pond of the unconscious.

19 THE SUN. A boy rides his horse in the midday sun, ensconced in his safe, secure suburban back yard. He is captured in a moment of pure innocence. The backyard fence keeps out intruders, but four sunflowers peek over the top, symbolizing the four elements. The horse's red flag tells everyone that the young prince has arrived.

20 JUDGEMENT. Time's up! The world is ending and it's time to go. A corpse rises from its grave; maybe that means it's being called up to Heaven, and maybe it means that the zombie apocalypse has arrived. Judgement is the final buzzer of the Tarot. Wherever you are in your life, it's time to be reborn. Shed your skin, shed the Earth, stand tall, rise. Just

remember that, as you rise, you put yourself up for judgement from others.

21 THE WORLD. You made it! It's the end of the line! Great job! You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here! The design for The World, adapted from a mid-century art-show poster, abruptly strays from the world of pulp and into the world of post-war mid-century design—sleek, abstract, international. As the card symbolizes the act of completion, the design suggests a way out of the pulp world and, essentially, "what comes next" after pulp. It's the post-credits scene of the deck, a hint at what comes after spiritual enlightenment is achieved.

ACE OF WANDS. The suit of Wands deals with the spirit, and its element is fire. Why a wand, which is represented here mostly by a staff or club? No idea, except that a wooden staff is primed to burn well in the spiritual fire. Each Ace represents a gift. That gift may arrive to you through a friend, through your family, through your DNA, or through happenstance. In this case, a spiritual gift. The hand emerging from the cloud glows with a divine spark. Wands are the fire suit, and the

Ace provides the spark to start your spiritual fire. The white castle in the distance suggests that this gift has applications in the real world.

TWO OF WANDS. An adventurer plans for his journey into the unknown. Maybe you are planning for a journey into the unknown. In a larger sense, we're all planning for a journey into the unknown. We spend our whole lives planning for a final journey into the unknown. What awaits you on your journey? Our adventurer here confidently holds the world in the palm of his hand: is he ready for the journey ahead? Has he bitten off more than he can chew? Is he in control of his situation or is he merely foolhardy?

THREE OF WANDS. The adventurer of the Two of Wands has now set out on her journey and arrived at a threshold. She's no longer planning; she's out in the world. Either she has planned well, or she will come to ruin. She's removed her space helmet, which indicates that this new world is at least habitable. The wind is at her back, but she's still a little cautious about next steps.

FOUR OF WANDS. Wherever this spiritual journey is headed, here is a resting place. You've reached a goal; it's time to celebrate. RWS has two ladies at their party, but that's not enough for these times. Here, a whole bevy of babes are ready to give you a proper bash. And while most of them are focused on the here and now, the tall one in the back has her eye on what comes next. Celebrate how far you've come, but don't forget to watch out for potential storms.

FIVE OF WANDS. It looks like the storms suggested in the Four of Wands have struck. I refer to the Five of Wands as "Strife." Five people have wands, and they could be using them to build a shelter or start a fire, but instead they are attacking one another with them. Certainly you've been in group projects like this: everyone on the same journey, everyone committed to the same goal, conflicts nevertheless breaking out all over the place.

SIX OF WANDS. Wands has overcome his moment of strife and has come home a hero! He stands tall in his limo, showered with confetti, with an attractive blonde on his fender.

It's a moment of triumph. The laurel wreaths on the staffs lining the parade route are a reference to Apollo's pursuit of Daphne, who, upon being captured, transforms into a laurel tree. That is to say, the moment of triumph is great, but the triumph itself is always fleeting, ready to transform itself into something else.

SEVEN OF WANDS. It looks like the triumph of the Six of Wands was short-lived, because here we are at Seven and our hero is beset by all sorts of trouble. Will he persevere against the forces that try to defeat him, or will he succumb? A young lady clings to him for protection. Will he be able to rise to the challenge? The road to spiritual development is sometimes serene and rocky, and you can find yourself on a path where the way forward is not clear. Your enemies all have their spiritual staffs, but you have one too — use it!

EIGHT OF WANDS. The Eight of Wands is one of the most mysterious cards in the deck. All we know is that some sort of a change is coming, and it's a big one. In this deck, it's an outside force, from outer space, but for you it might be the new corporate shakeup

or changes in the law that will make your life easier or harder. And while a sky full of UFOs might seem like bad news, not everyone is terrified—the woman on the ground waves her hanky at them.

NINE OF WANDS. Remember that change promised by the Eight of Wands? It doesn't appear to have been a change for the good. The woman on the Nine of Wands has had her home invaded by an army. Her family and support system is gone and she's all on her own, wounded and terrified. She's built a makeshift barrier and is lying in wait with her last available weapon. She may very well lose this battle. What she won't do is give up. The important thing to remember is that she's built her barrier with her spiritual staffs, the things she's learned on her spiritual journey, and is armed with a final one.

TEN OF WANDS. The journey of the Wands is done. The spiritual staffs the journeyer has collected now weigh her down as she heads back home to her rocket ship across the sterile red desert of a hostile planet. The image suggests that the woman has been sent out

into the harsh wilderness to gather fuel rods for the trip home. The good thing is, she's succeeded—but her success has come at a cost to her. She's headed home, but her burden is heavy.

PAGE OF WANDS. The Page of Wands is related to the Ace, except that the gift in the Ace comes from above and the Page's gift originates with herself. That is to say, the Page of Wands holds a spiritual gift. She is just starting out in life, but she has a calm and centeredness that allows her gift to reveal keen insights and spiritual truths. She may or may not understand the value of this gift. Maybe you're the Page of Wands and you have yet to acknowledge or understand your spiritual gift—or maybe the Page of Wands is someone close to you.

KNIGHT OF WANDS. The Knight of Wands is no longer a child. He knows he's got a gift and he's directed his life to benefit from it. He's on a mission and he's got a powerful vehicle to carry him. His spiritual fire is emblazoned on the side of his car, alongside the salamander that symbolizes the importance of

vision when in action. He's popping a wheelie in his sweet ride, but he's completely in control of the vehicle. The featureless landscape is not laziness on my part: he is driving on a salt flat, an ancient lake bed in a waterless desert.

QUEEN OF WANDS. The Queen of Wands has reached a place in her spiritual development where she wields her power with serene, but severe, authority. Her black cat is her shadow self, which guards her and advises her. She controls her shadow self but also feeds it and keeps it close to her throne. You might be the Queen of Wands, or it may be someone you know. She may wield her power for good or evil.

KING OF WANDS. The King of Wands is not to be trifled with. Even more than the Queen of Wands, the King possesses immense spiritual power. We find him here exerting the strongest possible force on a town that has wronged him, or perhaps only stands in his way. He's burning the town to the ground—but is his fire destructive or creative? He may be eradicating a town, but he may be doing so in order to build something better. He may

be punishing the townsfolk or bringing them a spiritual sea change. Like the other members of the Wand family, he wears a salamander symbol on his greatcoat, which means that he wields fire but it cannot harm him.

ACE OF CUPS. The suit of Cups deals with emotions, and so the Ace of Cups represents an emotional gift that has arrived out of the blue. This Cup literally overfloweth, with five streams of water representing your five senses replenishing the lily-covered pond below. As Wands is a fire suit, Cups is a water suit, with water representing your intuition. A white dove of peace has shown up to dip a Eucharist wafer into your cup. I'm not a big believer in the Eucharist, but a white dove showing up to get in on the ground floor of your emotional gift feels like a good omen.

TWO OF CUPS. A pair of youngsters pledge their love for each other over a drink. They are entering a romantic union, an emotional partnership. The caduceus hovering between them suggests that this union will be strong and fruitful. We associate this symbol with medicine, but it is better understood as the Staff of

Hermes, the ancient Greek god of speed and commerce. The caduceus is here to underline the exchange of emotions—as opposed to the hoarding or suppression of emotions—that underscores a successful relationship.

THREE OF CUPS. Three women, perhaps at the same lawn party as the couple in the Two of Cups, raise a glass to you. Maybe you're invited to drink with them; maybe they're just saluting you from across the yard. They're all friends with each other, and maybe they'll let you be friends with them, too. Beyond them lies a fertile pumpkin patch, symbolizing an abundant harvest. The harvest may be a real harvest or it may be an emotional harvest. In any case, the journeyer in the world of Cups has successfully made it to a crucial emotional plateau.

FOUR OF CUPS. As soon as the journeyer in Cups reaches a point of celebration, depression sets in. The three cups of yesterday's celebration are now forgotten, and the journeyer rests her head on a table, lost in melancholy. So lost in melancholy that she does not notice the mysterious hand that comes through

the window. But that hand, despite its sinister appearance, is not there to harm her. It's there to present her with an emotional gift. And life is sometimes like that: at our lowest point, the universe presents us with an offer, and we don't always recognize it for what it is.

FIVE OF CUPS. A young lady, perhaps cleaning up after the lawn party, cries because three of her cups have toppled into the grass. Focusing on her loss, she doesn't see the other two cups behind her, which are fine. There's a valuable lesson here: no matter how hopeless you feel, how alone, how lost, how abandoned, you always have resources you haven't considered yet.

SIX OF CUPS. The Six of Cups is a card about the remembrance of the simple joys of childhood. A little boy and girl play in the front yard of their house. The older boy generously hands the younger girl a cup of flowers, to her delight. Perhaps they are brother and sister, or perhaps they are neighbors. The boy can afford to be generous—he's got five more cups of flowers in reserve. If Cups are about emotions, the Six of Cups is about the deep

well of emotion that exists within each of us—emotions that stretch back to our youth, when we understood things we don't understand now, when love and fear and anger were all pure and uncompromised.

SEVEN OF CUPS. The journeyer on the path of Cups has turned from childhood memories to the world of illusions. The Seven of Cups is different from The Magician, because the Magician controls his illusions and the Seven of Cups is beholden to them. Notice that not all of the illusions on display are positive! The only thing they share is that they're not real. Be careful what you wish for—things are not as they appear to be.

EIGHT OF CUPS. The pilgrim on the path of Cups has gone from reminiscing about childhood to thinking about illusions, and is now taking a moonlit journey. As suggested by their detective getup, they're searching for something missing. The nighttime setting is important: this is not a journey the pilgrim would make during daylight hours. This is a 3 a.m. lying-awake-thinking-about-mistakes-you've-made card. The important thing is that, like

the illusions in the Seven of Cups, the thing the pilgrim is searching for might exist only in their mind.

NINE OF CUPS. Whatever the journeyer was searching for in the Eight of Cups has apparently been found, and emotional equilibrium has been restored. In fact, she's doing pretty good right now! She's at the tail end of what seems to have been a very successful office party, one perhaps celebrating her promotion. She's attained control over her emotions and is ready to have some serious fun.

TEN OF CUPS. The journeyer on the path of Cups ends their pilgrimage in triumph. They have fulfilled their emotional goals and can now reap the benefits: a loving marriage, happy children, many bowling trophies. The image I've chosen for the Ten of Cups represents the postwar cliché of the happy middle-class patriarch-centered white family, but it's important to remember that "family" is whatever you make it.

PAGE OF CUPS. The Page of Cups is enjoying a cold drink at the beach when she gets a

surprise: a fish in her cup! But she's not upset about this surprising turn of events—instead, she is charmed and delighted. The Page of Cups is related to the Four of Cups in that it's about a gift coming from an unexpected place—the difference is the subject's mood. The journeyer in the Four of Cups has turned inward to sadness, while the Page is free, open, and happy. The seaside, again, represents her intuition, while the fish is the inspiration that comes seemingly from nowhere when one is in one's right mind.

KNIGHT OF CUPS. Like the other Knights, the Knight of Cups is on a mission. In this case, he's on a mission to deliver an emotional gift. He's in a healthy, green, natural world of mountains and plains but the wind is at his face, suggesting that he's facing some resistance on his journey. He's well-dressed for the journey and, most important, perseverant in his task. There is no doubt he will reach his goal. You might be the Knight of Cups, or it might be someone you know—someone who is trying to get through to you despite resistance.

QUEEN OF CUPS. The Queen of Cups has reached her emotional goals. She is secure, comfortable, self-effacing, and confident. She has achieved domestic contentment, the kind of contentment that comes from within. She holds her cup close; her emotional maturity and stability has been hard-won and is immensely valuable to her. It brings her warmth and strength.

KING OF CUPS. The King of Cups is, if anything, more emotionally secure than the Queen. He's achieved a position of emotional stability that allows him to be calm, free, ready to move in the world, ready to take whatever life hands him. He doesn't hold his cup close; he doesn't even look at it. It's a mere symbol to him now. He's at the marina, ready to board a boat to other destinations. Maybe it will be a simple day trip in the bay, and maybe he'll sail to an exotic destination full of mystery. Wherever he goes, he will be emotionally prepared.

ACE OF SWORDS. The suit of Swords is concerned with the mind, the intellect. Its element is air. Ask any artist about their work and

eventually they'll tell you that they don't know where their ideas come from—that, at their best, they're only channeling some sort of divine force. The Ace of Swords represents that force, a gift from above: that most desirable of commodities, an idea. The sword glows bright with divine light, but the landscape is a forbidding mountain range, which suggests that this idea may not be immediately accepted.

TWO OF SWORDS. The journeyer in the suit of Swords faces a tough road. There is not a lot of comfort in this suit, nor many triumphs. The woman in the Two of Swords has reached an impasse. Blindfolded, she cannot see the way forward. The swords she holds represent her conflicting impulses. She sits on a stone bench at the shore at midnight—an uncomfortable seat for difficult decision-making. The nighttime sea suggests dark emotions and inward thinking.

THREE OF SWORDS. Things are not looking up for the journeyer in Swords. Only three cards in, and their heart has been pierced thrice. One of my favorite things about the suit of Swords is how many of its cards are utterly non-allegor-

ical—the Three of Swords represents exactly what it looks like: a broken heart.

FOUR OF SWORDS. The Four of Swords comes about as close to the notion of contentment as is possible in the suit. A woman sleeps soundly in her four-poster bed. She sleeps soundly because she's got four swords around her bed, ready to grab at a moment's notice. As Swords represent the mind, we can surmise that the journeyer in the Four of Swords has her mental ducks in a row, which allows her some measure of security and inner peace. The image over the woman's bed is of a mother and child, which may indicate the source of her contentment.

FIVE OF SWORDS. I refer to the Five of Swords as "winning ugly." The journeyer has won the battle, and the bodies of his defeated foes lie scattered on the beach, but he has lost something in the process of winning. It's not enough for the journeyer's idea to triumph, he must ensure that everyone else's ideas become his, as well. Anyone who has been to a inter-office conference has met this guy.

SIX OF SWORDS. The Six of Swords is related to the Eight of Cups. They both represent variations on a nighttime journey. The journeyer in the Eight of Cups is searching for something, but the journeyer in the Six of Swords is fleeing something. The image shows a woman with a child wrapped in a shawl, as though hiding from anyone who might see them as they escape. The woman steering the boat may be a friend of the woman's, or she may be merely a hired pilot. The enormous swords looming on the riverbank are the woman's thoughts that plague her as she attempts her escape.

SEVEN OF SWORDS. The journeyer in the Seven of Swords has had a great idea: steal someone else's ideas. She knows it's wrong—you can tell by the look on her face. She has, perhaps, been interrupted in her pilfering, making her leave two of the swords behind. The safe is hidden behind the photo of an army camp, suggesting that the journeyer is capable of high-level espionage, of stealing state secrets in addition to bejeweled swords.

EIGHT OF SWORDS. If you thought things were going to turn around for the journeyer in Swords, I have bad news for you: it only gets more brutal from here. The Eight of Swords shows a woman bound and blindfolded on a beach, perhaps waiting for high tide to arrive to drown her. She is trapped inside her mind, which is feeding her a stream of bad ideas. Alternately, she is trapped by other people's ideas, being persecuted by other people's ideas.

NINE OF SWORDS. This is another card that is about exactly what it looks like: nightmares. The woman sits up in bed, wracked with overwhelming thoughts. I can't say I'm surprised, the nine swords over her bed certainly do not seem designed to give her sweet dreams. Up on the wall, she has a picture of the Five of Swords, suggesting that what's keeping her up is a guilty conscience.

TEN OF SWORDS. It doesn't get any blunter than this. The Ten of Swords signals bad news, indeed. The man is dead, that's all there is to it. This represents the terminus of the idea that shone so brightly with the Ace. Some ideas are literal dead ends.

PAGE OF SWORDS. The Page of Swords, like the other Pages, represents the neophyte, in this case a newcomer to the world of ideas. She's young and enthusiastic, very sure of herself, brimming with style, ready to take on the world. In practical terms, she's an eager student, ready to soak up knowledge and ideas.

KNIGHT OF SWORDS. The Knight of Swords did not come to mess around. He's on a mission, and he will take no prisoners. If the Page is an eager student, the Knight is a newly-minted PhD, ready to take their ideas in hand and charge into the world, taking on all challengers. The Knight of Swords must be careful not to turn into the dude from the Five of Swords.

QUEEN OF SWORDS. The Queen of Swords is represented in this deck by Joan of Arc, who, more than most people, knows what it's like to receive an idea from on high. Like Joan, the Queen of Swords is driven, motivated and very sure of herself and her ideas. The question then becomes: does she end up like the woman in the Eight of Swords, trapped by her ideas or persecuted by others' opposing ideas?

KING OF SWORDS. The King of Swords is fully content in his mental superiority, and offers his ideas up generously. He doesn't wear a crown or carry a scepter; he doesn't need such trappings. He's a practical thinker, secure in his authority and a master of intellectual clarity. He doesn't need to brag, boast, or call attention to himself. His mental acuity is all he needs and he is a humble servant of ideas.

ACE OF PENTACLES. The suit of Pentacles is about the material world, usually understood to us as "having money." It's not a coincidence that the symbol of the suit is a gold coin. The element of the suit is Earth, and its path is the most tumultuous in the deck. It's neither the steady march to glory of Cups nor the unraveling disaster of Swords. It's up and down, wave and trough, thick and thin. And it begins, like the other suits, with a gift from above. We might ask what material gift is granted to us by divine forces. Well, one answer is life itself. We may be spiritual beings, but we exist in a fragile bone cage protected by meat armor. If you are reading this paragraph, you have been granted the material gift of a corporeal body. And of course, another aspect of having

a corporeal form is the pursuit of worldly pleasures—including, but not limited to, sex.

TWO OF PENTACLES. A young woman in a fanciful beach outfit juggles a pair of pentacles on a stormy beach. The sky is green and the seas are in tumult, but she's smiling and confident because she's got balance. This is a great start for the journeyer in the world of Pentacles! She's got a lot on her plate but she's got her balance and her priorities in order. A glowing infinity symbol suggests that the juggling act of life never ends, that perhaps life is, itself, a juggling act.

THREE OF PENTACLES. Three thieves plan a heist. Pointing to the blueprint is Mr. Big, the brains of the outfit and the guy financing the job. Top left is The Dame, whose job is to distract and seduce. Bottom right is The Muscle, whose job is to do what needs to be done. The Three of Pentacles is about cooperation: it takes interdependent skills to make a plan work, whether you're building a cathedral or robbing a bank. The Muscle isn't the brains, but Mr. Big cannot enact his plan without The Muscle and The Dame. We each play our roles on the road to material success.

FOUR OF PENTACLES. Whoa, that was fast! The journeyer on the path of Pentacles has gone from planning a heist to being buried up to his neck in the desert, clutching his last four Pentacles. The Four of Pentacles is probably best understood as a warning: material wealth is not going to keep you alive. The positive way to say "greed" is "thrif." By all means, save money if you need to, but if you make it your sole reason for living, you'll find yourself alone in the desert with nothing but your money to comfort you.

FIVE OF PENTACLES. Halfway through the suit and things are not getting any better for our journeyer. She is now an unwed single mother, clad in rags, alone in the big city on a winter's night, being followed by a man with an unknown agenda. Wealth is all around her; Pentacles flash in a neon sign over her head. This is a card about hitting rock bottom with your arms filled with mounting pressures, and threats right behind you. And yet, the card also suggests, everything you need is all around you: you just need to figure out how to get it.

SIX OF PENTACLES. There are two ways to read the situation presented here. In one case, the card is about the man who has enough money to give it to the destitute. In the other case, the card is about being destitute and accepting money from the wealthy. In either case, the theme is "charity." Anywhere you look, there are people in need. You are never so poor that you cannot help, and you are never so wealthy that you cannot receive help. The scales on the wealthy man's hand are there to remind us that the goal of a healthy society is to stabilize the flow of wealth so that everyone has a chance to succeed.

SEVEN OF PENTACLES. The journeyer in Pentacles has reached a position beyond her dreams. She is comfortable and satisfied. She has acquired wealth and she's done it her way. She may be The Dame from the Three of Pentacles, getting away with the loot as her cohorts have been killed or arrested. The darkness of the room and the light from the street suggest that her wealth acquisition has not been entirely above-board.

EIGHT OF PENTACLES. The Eight of Pentacles is about learning a trade, developing a skill, finding your place in the world. It seems odd that the journeyer in the path of Pentacles should go from destitution to great wealth to apprenticeship, but then second careers are almost a requirement in this economy. The journeyer here has developed an artistic style and is sticking to it, regardless of distractions life offers him. Will his hard work pay off? Stay tuned!

NINE OF PENTACLES. The journeyer has struck it rich, again. What is the difference between the Seven of Pentacles and the Nine of Pentacles? I think there is a different quality to the wealth on display in Nine. In RWS, the Seven is a gardener and the Nine is a lady of leisure. In The Pulp Tarot, we have a femme fatale and a recording star. Some of us may play both roles in our lifetimes. Our recording star has acquired The Maltese Falcon, from the novel that was the first major work of the Pulp movement. The Falcon, any Bogart fan will tell you, is the stuff that dreams are made of.

TEN OF PENTACLES. And here we are at journey's end. The dedicated craftsman, or smart investor, or cunning businessman, or successful thief, has matured into ripe old age and respectability. Here is the reward of all his hard work and thrift: an apartment overlooking the park, successful children, an adorable grandchild, and an original painting by the journeyer from the Eight of Pentacles. He has brought home the big fish, as it were, and money has bought him happiness.

PAGE OF PENTACLES. The Page of Pentacles has acquired some wealth. Does she know what to do with it? I get the notion that this Page has just gained access to her trust fund and is indulging in some artsy fashion ideas. She may be in the throes of a brilliant idea, or she may be squandering her newly-gotten gains. The point is, she's in her element and expressing herself.

KNIGHT OF PENTACLES. The Knight of Pentacles is here to pick you up in his sleek black Pentamobile. He's got money, but he didn't get it by sitting around. He's a man of action who nevertheless thinks strategically. Where

is he taking you? Do you want to get in the car? Are you the Knight? The question is, the Knight has the wealth, but where is he going? Money, by itself, is a neutral force; it can be used to help others or it can be hoarded and used to entrench the status quo.

QUEEN OF PENTACLES. The Queen of Pentacles wields her wealth as a shield. Her wealth protects her family, her people, her world. The Queen of Pentacles would expend any amount of capital to protect those dear to her. She's the kind of woman you want in your corner. She's fearsome and authoritative, but the flowers indicate that she has a nurturing touch, as well.

KING OF PENTACLES. The King of Pentacles has nothing left to prove. He's made fortunes many times over. He doesn't even know how much wealth he possesses; it has, ironically, become immaterial to him. He knows that money is a means to an end, not a goal in and of itself. He also knows that a person's wealth is no indicator of the quality of their soul.

A NOTE ON PROCESS

Every one of the images in The Pulp Tarot is a collage of sorts, gleaned from hundreds of different sources and manipulated digitally in Photoshop. Most of the central figures on the various cards have been lifted from original pulp sources in my collection—magazines and novels and advertisements, along with the occasional movie poster or “serious” novel. Some figures have been cobbled together from multiple sources. The Two of Wands gentleman explorer, for instance, comes from five different sources: the head and trunk of the man came from a 1920s adventure magazine cover, his trousers from a different image, his boots from still another, and the tiny globe from yet another. His arms and hands are my own. A lot of the hands and arms in the deck are my own, like on the Six of Pentacles and Judgement. The goal, for me, is to assemble all these different elements, then futz with them until they look as if they have all been painted by the same hand.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to Varda Steinhardt, who first introduced me to the world of the Tarot, and to Sue Scarlett Montgomery, who first suggested the idea of a pulp Tarot deck to me.

To my friends, R. Sikoryak, Kriota Willberg and Miriam Leuchter, who offered invaluable design insights, not just for this project but over the decades.

To my wife, Sara, who has supported even my strangest ideas and put up with me for 30 years.

To the many, many people who live in the computer machine, who have shared and liked my art and supported my graphics endeavors.

And finally, to the hundreds of artists of yesteryear, whose dynamic, dramatic, super-charged paintings, drawings, and etchings have graced the covers of pulp publications through the decades and given me a lifetime of inspiration.

THE PULP TAROT
COPYRIGHT ©2022 TODD ALCOTT

THE UNEMPLOYED PHILOSOPHERS GUILD
www.philosophersguild.com
BROOKLYN NY

PRINTED IN CHINA