



## The Creative Tarot: A Modern Guide to an Inspired Life

By Jessa Crispin

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A hip, accessible, and practical guide for artists and creative people looking to tarot for guidance and inspiration in the tradition of *The Secret Language of Birthdays* and *Steal Like an Artist*.

What if the path to creativity was not as challenging as everyone thinks? What if you could find that spark, plot twist, or next project by simply looking at your life and your art through a different lens?

Written for novices and seasoned readers alike, *The Creative Tarot* is a unique guidebook that reimagines tarot cards and the ways they can boost the creative process. Jessa Crispin guides you through the intuitive world of the tarot to get those creative juices flowing again. Thought to be esoteric and mystical, tarot cards are approachable and endlessly helpful to overcoming creative blocks. Crispin offers spiritual readings of the cards, practical information for the uninspired artist, and a wealth of fascinating anecdotes about famous artists including Virginia Woolf, Rembrandt, and David Bowie, and how they found inspiration.

With five original tarot spreads and beautiful illustrations throughout, *The Creative Tarot* is an accessible, colorful guide that demystifies both the tarot and the creative process.

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## The Creative Tarot: A Modern Guide to an Inspired Life By Jessa Crispin Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #55744 in Books
- Published on: 2016-02-16
- Released on: 2016-02-16
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.00" w x 6.00" l, .93 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 352 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"*The Creative Tarot* . . . playfully reinvents the arcane Renaissance-inspired cards." (*Elle magazine*)

"Maybe you don't think astrology or tarot or anything like that is anything more than a case of people falling prey to confirmation bias in order to better figure out who they are. Well, get over yourself and let Crispin enchant you with this beautiful and oftentimes surprising look into the intertwining of tarot and the creative process." (*BKMag.com*)

"Readers seeking creative inspiration will find this to be one of the most accessible books ever written on the subject." (*Library Journal* (starred review))

"Crispin presents a persuasive case for the tarot's usefulness to writers and artists; her many insights into the creative life as well as her dazzlingly wide array of examples throughout make this a valuable reference for readers not remotely interested in the 'psychic arts.'" (*Publishers Weekly* (starred review))

"Even readers with no previous interest in the tarot will be intrigued and delighted by Crispin's ardently researched, spirited, creative, and inspiring elucidation." (*Booklist*)

#### About the Author

Jessa Crispin is the editor and founder of *Bookslut.com* and *Spoliamag.com*. She has written for *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *Boston Review*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Architect Magazine*, *The Globe and Mail*, and other publications. Her first book, *The Dead Ladies Project: Exile, Expats and Ex-Countries* is forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press. She has lived in Ireland, Chicago, Texas, Kansas, and Germany. She currently lives nowhere in particular.

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*The Creative Tarot*

## INTRODUCTION

Like a lot of teenagers who wore too much black and had an extensive incense collection, I used to fool around with a tarot deck. I can't remember where I picked it up—some bookstore somewhere. It was exciting to look at all of the images, all of the mysterious men and women fighting with swords or juggling coins or drinking from cups.

But after a few aborted attempts to teach myself to read the cards, I gave up. The manual that came with the cards gave inadequate and confusing definitions—"the Empress: wife, mother, companion"—that detracted from what I was seeing. Unsure of what to do with the cards, I put them away, and they were lost in one move or another.

Ten years later, I came back to the tarot during a particularly difficult time in my life. With the help of a skilled reader, I was able to see my circumstances differently. She helped me find the narrative inside all the muddle. In short, she told me a new story about my life and what I was experiencing. A story I could move

through; a story in which I could see how all of the other characters and situations were operating.

After that, I was hooked. I began the slow process of studying the meaning of the tarot and understanding its uses. At the time I worked mostly as a book critic, and I was intrigued by the way the cards could be used as a tool for storytelling. Each reading is, essentially, a story. It begins here, at the center. One card represents you and tells you who you are as the protagonist; others say what's happening to you, what did happen to you, what will happen. Other cards show up as people wandering into your story; others create plot and action.

You lay out the cards, and there on the table you have the outline. You have the who, what, where, and when. You then flesh out that skeleton with your own circumstances, you populate it with the people in your life, and, using the intuitive cues provided by the cards' images, you fit your story onto the story in the cards.

It is not necessarily about telling the future. It is about retelling the present.

After noticing the way the cards hook into your intuition and imagination, I realized that they could easily be used to assist in the creative process. When stuck on a piece, I'd pull some cards to find clarity, or I'd use them to figure out how to structure it. When friends struggled with their book or visual art projects, I'd pull out my deck, and we'd take a look. Soon most of my tarot clients were artists, looking for a little guidance on what to work on next or how to overcome a block.

## **WHAT IS THE TAROT?**

The tarot is a deck of cards designed during the Renaissance. There is debate about whether the cards' origins stretch back further, but for our purposes, we'll stick with what we know for sure.

The deck consists of two parts: the Major Arcana and the Minor Arcana. The Major Arcana is made up of what you can consider archetypes: the Hermit, Death, the High Priestess, and so on. The Minor Arcana cards illustrate circumstances and conflicts—the kinds of things that add action to a story. The Minor Arcana comes in four suits that correspond with the four elements: Cups (water), Wands (fire), Swords (air), and Coins or Pentacles (earth). Each suit has cards numbering one through ten, and then four court cards: Page, Knight, Queen, and King.

The cards depict the whole realm of human experience, from love to death, from joy to sorrow, from loneliness to friendship. Some cards are particularly nasty; others easily cheer a reader up. But either way, you have to take the dark with the light, just like in life.

The interpretations of the cards change as society changes. The Lovers card, of course, does not require a man and a woman to fulfill its meaning. And at one point, I read in an old tarot book that the Three of Wands indicated that a family member was going to die and leave me a chateau in his or her will. But the Three of Wands no longer means "free chateau"; now it means exploration and adventure. You will experience the cards differently than I will, because they are based on your own experiences and your own philosophy and values. Just because we may have different takes on a card doesn't mean that I can't learn from your interpretations, and I hope you can learn something from mine.

## **HOW DO I USE THIS BOOK?**

As a starting point. Each card has its own thorough interpretation and guidance on how it relates specifically

to creativity. I've designed a few new ways to organize the cards for reading what are called "spreads" for different creative problems:

- wanting to start writing or painting or working on your medium of choice, but unsure how to begin;
- restarting a project that has become blocked or lost its way;
- figuring how best to present a project to the world; and
- getting out of a rut to try something new and daring.

The book is also meant to be a source of inspiration. Because I believe firmly in looking to our betters to teach us and guide us, I have included anecdotes of creators throughout time to show how others have overcome obstacles, as well as recommendations of paintings to study, books to read, music to listen to, films to watch, etc.

Remember: the Greeks believed our genius was not part of us but was a divine visitation. Our jobs, as artists and writers, was to become the best possible vessel for that genius. Part of that is to be forever learning, improving, expanding, and experimenting.

## QUESTIONS

Is it okay for me to buy my own tarot cards? I read somewhere that your first deck is supposed to be a gift.

It is absolutely okay for you to buy your first tarot deck. That is one of those mystical mumbo-jumbo things designed to make beginners feel inadequate and unwelcome. I have a Virgo moon; I have no time for such nonsense.

Is the tarot just about telling the future?

People have always wanted to know their fates. Will I be rich? Will I be wise? Will I fall in love? And they have used whatever they had around them to try to sneak a glimpse into the future.

I'm always very curious about the different methods used and the way they were developed. I've had my face read in Chinatown, dragged there by a Malaysian friend who swears it's an accurate, ancient practice. I've had my palm read by people in multiple countries. In Greece, I had my coffee grounds read. I sipped my Turkish coffee while chatting with the very nice woman. Then my cup was inverted on its saucer, and the shape the grounds made was interpreted to tell me my future. I had a woman in the American South read my cards, but she used a deck of playing cards rather than the tarot. I've had my tea leaves read in London, and my astrological chart read in New York City.

There are many other ways to tell your fortune. There's numerology, the telling of your fate by the numbers of your birthday or the number of letters in your name. There's bibliomancy, where you open a book to a random page and line, and through that your future is revealed. There's ceromancy, for which you pour melted wax onto a surface and read the shapes it makes. There's an old Irish New Year's custom that requires you to melt metal and then pour it into cold water. The shape it hardens into will tell you how your year will be. Many believe that your dreams can tell you your future, if you sleep with certain items under your pillow or drink or eat the right things before bed. With pyromancy, you gaze into a fire; with tyromancy, you look at the coagulation of cheese. There's divination by the shapes of clouds, the shapes of

the facets of gemstones, the entrails of a sacrificed pigeon or rabbit.

Which is to say that the impulses are all the same. As are the methods, although the medium changes from culture to culture and from person to person. We take an image—this shape of the candle wax or that image on the tarot card—and imbue it with meaning. That meaning is personal to us; it draws something out of us. So if we have been feeling lonely lately, wondering if we will ever see an end to our dry spell and if we'll ever fall in love again, we might see a man's silhouette in that wax.

That doesn't make us foolish or delusional. Maybe it gives us hope. Maybe it prepares something in us. We see that a man is on his way this year, and so we dress up a little. We look around and pay closer attention to the men who swing through our lives. Our depression and loneliness, which maybe had been keeping us isolated by making us unwilling to go out and socialize, lessen and we start trying again. Maybe we meet a man that year because of this or maybe we don't, but maybe in the act of trying—of going out and seeing people again—we start to fall back in love with our own lives, and the whole man thing becomes less of a priority.

We give things meaning by paying attention to them, and so moving your attention from one thing to another can absolutely change your future. Exactly who or what is doing the work here—whether fate is choosing the card, or your unconscious, or random chance—doesn't matter as much as the act of seeing, sensing, and paying attention.

How do the individual cards take on specific meanings? If we're supposed to interpret the images and use our intuition to guide us, all on our own, then why does the Ten of Swords have the same meaning from deck to deck?

In every culture, certain symbols take on certain meanings. And so the mixing of those symbols, adding an element to a number, to a Greek god, to an astrological marker, would create more complex meanings.

Part of that is the way stories are constructed and understood. And if you establish a meaning for one aspect of the card—say, that Sword refers to air, and air refers to thought and communication—then it makes sense that a story would arise rather naturally from a progression.

Swords is an easy way to understand this, because its progression shows that as the numbers go higher, the darkness of the cards increase. One Sword is a helpful thing to have. You can maneuver it, you can use it as a weapon or as a tool, it is easily carried around—just as one idea or one philosophy can be used as a tool to order your thoughts. But with two swords, things get unwieldy. You either have to choose one and discard the other, or both of your hands are full, and you're not so easily mobile anymore. Just like with two ideas, all of a sudden you have a contradiction, or a choice has to be made. The more you add, the harder it is to carry all of these swords, and the more your mind can spin out of control. So that's part of it.

But mostly the meaning comes from centuries of people writing, thinking, and using the tarot, and sharing their experiences. There is no right or wrong way to think about the tarot, but there are going to be shared meanings.

Let's consider the history of the word consider. I'm taking this from Russell A. Lockhart's book *Words as Eggs: Psyche in Language and Clinic*, a kind of psychological etymology book. The other major system of divination and intuitive response of our time is astrology. Now, some people draw the line there. They'll say they "believe" in tarot (believe is certainly the wrong word, but it's common parlance; use is more accurate) but not in astrology, because they consider astrology fortune-telling. And it can be; some people use it that

way, just as they use curds of cheese or shapes of clouds to predict the future. But others of us use it simply as a way to draw our attention to certain parts of our lives and expand our understanding of what's happening to us and with us. It's a way of creating meaning.

The -sider part of consider comes from the word for "star." Like the word sidereal, which means "of or with respect to distant stars." Or siderated, which means "planet-struck." A sidus, then, was someone who paid attention to the stars. And as this person paid attention to the stars, she would begin to notice certain patterns. When a star or a planet was positioned just so, certain things would happen in her life or in the world. And she would note it. And when there was a different combination of stars, the circumstances would change. And she would note it. And so consider started its life as con-sider, meaning "with the stars." Coexisting.

Our sidus would share her knowledge with another sidus, and so on, until a system of meaning and symbolism was built up. And that's how the rather complex system of astrology was born.

I don't believe in God, so . . .

You can be an atheist and use the tarot. You can be a Christian and use the tarot. There is a long history of writing about chance and synchronicity that has nothing to do with the gods meddling in our realm. (I bet that made you uncomfortable, didn't it?) You get out of the tarot what you put in. It is merely a tool that works on an intuitive, rather than logical, level. No gods required.

What if I'm a total beginner to tarot? Or what if I've never written a thing in my life?

I worked very hard to provide something for everyone, no matter his or her level of expertise. That's both for readers' familiarity with the tarot and for how advanced they are in their creative expression.

That said, it's important to remember there is no right or wrong way to interpret a card. I have been studying tarot for a long time, but I am constantly surprised and learning more. This book is not meant to be the last word on the tarot. Consider it one step in the process, or a friend to help you along the way.

How long does it take to learn the tarot?

It all depends on how often you use the cards and for what purposes, and how much you decide to read and study about them. It took me about eight years before I felt comfortable reading for other people for pay, but you might feel like you've mastered the cards in a year or two.

Which tarot cards should I buy? It seems like there are so many different decks to choose from.

Whichever deck is most comfortable for you is the right tarot deck. There are a lot of options out there. I have several different decks—including the Spolia deck I made with the artist Jen May—and I switch them out, depending on mood. Tarot decks can get a little addictive; the art is so beautiful, and each one has a different feel. My own favorites are the Golden, a contemporary deck that features medieval art; the Haindl, a very complex and nontraditional German deck; and the Minchiate, a Renaissance-era deck that has 96 cards instead of the more standard 78. Each one has its strengths and weaknesses. I find the Minchiate most helpful for creative issues, but I'll almost always turn to the Golden if I have a problem with love. Feel free to experiment. There are online resources such as Facade ([www.facade.com](http://www.facade.com)) that feature databases of images from a wide range of decks.

Can I read my own cards?

For things like relationship troubles, or money troubles, or Why-do-I-want-to-stab-my-coworker-with-a-screwdriver-every-time-I-see-him? kind of work-related problems, it helps to get an outside perspective. But for daily card draws, for creativity questions, things of that nature, it's pretty easy to read for yourself. If you're still confused, you can always talk to a friend about the cards you drew or swap readings with each other. Don't feel like you always have to fork out money for a professional every time you have a problem.

## **A FEW THOUGHTS**

There is no right or wrong way to express your creativity. There is no perfect way to write a novel, there is no ideal way for a painter to work or for a chef to create a new dish or for a musician to put together a new album. And that is the wonderful and terrifying thing about it. With no rules, how does one keep from getting lost?

I talk to creators all the time who feel like they are wandering around in the dark. They want to know, Why is this taking so long? Why doesn't it work for me the way it seems to work for everyone else? I feel like I'm not making any progress; should I give up?

Nothing kills creativity faster than anxiety: worrying if you're doing things "right," worrying that no one else is going to like what you're doing, panicking about how it's all going to turn out.

Almost every time, the solution is listening to and honoring your intuitive sense of not what you think you need but what your project needs to come to fruition. Maybe that is the greatest thing the cards can do for us: quiet down our worried thoughts and our expectations for how it's "supposed" to go and help us get back in touch with our imagination.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Steven Deloatch:**

As people who live in the particular modest era should be revise about what going on or facts even knowledge to make these people keep up with the era that is certainly always change and move ahead. Some of you maybe will probably update themselves by reading books. It is a good choice for you but the problems coming to an individual is you don't know what one you should start with. This The Creative Tarot: A Modern Guide to an Inspired Life is our recommendation to make you keep up with the world. Why, since this book serves what you want and need in this era.

#### **Cynthia Necaïse:**

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**Donald Foster:**

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