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The Phantomwise Tarot and Guidebook, by Erin Morgenstern

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The Phantomwise Tarot and Guidebook, by Erin Morgenstern

Abstract

Review of *The Phantomwise Tarot and Guidebook* [78 pp, illustrated]. Morgenstern, E. New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers. An Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC. © 2022. ISBN 978-0-593-57911-4. \$24.99.

Additional Keywords

Morgenstern; Night Circus; Tarot; Divination

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BRUCE R. JOHNSON is the General Editor of *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal* and Manager of the C. S. Lewis Correspondence Project. After four decades of work as a Presbyterian pastor, his time is now refocused on writing, editing, and nonprofit collaboration. In 2021, he edited the memorial volume *The Undiscovered C. S. Lewis: Essays in Memory of Christopher W. Mitchell*. His current research centers on the work of Lewis with the Royal Air Force Chaplains' Branch during World War II and is slated to appear in the forthcoming monograph, *Takeoff: The RAF Talks of C. S. Lewis*.



THE PHANTOMWISE TAROT AND GUIDEBOOK. Erin Morgenstern. New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers. An Imprint of Penguin Random House LLC. 2022. [78 pp, illustrated]. ISBN 978-0-593-57911-4. \$24.99.

*M*YTHLORE READERS WILL KNOW ERIN MORGENSTERN as the author of two extraordinary novels, *The Night Circus* (2011) and *The Starless Sea* (2019). *The Night Circus* was a finalist for the 2012 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult literature and winner of the Locus Award for best first novel, the Alex Award, and other accolades. Morgenstern is also an artist and between 2007 and 2010, at the same time she was writing *The Night Circus*, she created *The Phantomwise Tarot* deck in acrylics using a black, white, and grey color scheme matching that of the deck created for use in the novel's titular venue for magic. The published cards are thick with slightly pebbled surfaces, and are easily shuffled. The backs, in keeping with the novel's nineteenth-century London ambiance, have a reversible William Morris-like arabesque. The seventy-eight card front illustrations are re-imagined versions of the ever-popular *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot* (1909) created by Golden Dawn members Arthur E. Waite (1857–1942) and artist Pamela Colman Smith (1878–1951), some suggesting characters and scenes from *The Night Circus* and others evoking Alice's Wonderland. The Lewis Carroll connection is underscored by the deck's title, which is taken from that author's poem "A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky" found at the end of *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871): "Still she haunts me, phantomwise, / Alice moving under skies. Never seen by waking eyes."

Authors who incorporate Tarot into their fiction often rely on decks that are likely to be familiar to their readers already, such as the *Marseilles*, *Rider-Waite-Smith*, or *Thoth*, or they emphasize the meanings of the cards or their effects without further identifying them. A few have invented text-only decks suited to their fantasy realms. Morgenstern is exceptional for having actually designed and created her own Tarot and, as she explains in the guidebook, there are elements of the novel in the deck and vice versa. The Hanged Man, she

writes, is one card that is the same in both, and she has no idea which came first. The card shows a spotlight on a man in a tuxedo and top hat that remains firmly in place in spite of the fact that he is hanging upside down from one leg and his hands are behind his back. In the book, this figure is a trapeze artist who slowly lets his hands drop below his head as he starts spinning faster and faster until he stops, then falls rapidly toward the ground until he stops again, and, still upside down, lifts his hat and bows to the enthralled onlookers (ch. "The Hanged Man").

Further comparison of the deck and novel lead directly into the realm of spoilers and readers who have yet to join the *Night Circus's* *reveurs* might want to stop here. But then, the *reveurs* in the novel—those devotees who accent their dark clothing with a splash of red and follow the dream wherever it might take them—return to the Circus again and again, never fearing that familiarity will reduce their delight; just so, readers may happily return to the novel with no less anticipation for already knowing the story before it unfolds. Certainly, reading the novel enhances any viewing or laying of the *Phantomwise* cards which, like other Tarot decks, is meant to be read and reread again and again.

The novel's *reveurs* may thus enjoy a special rapport with Tarot reader Isobel Martin. Isobel is in love with the male co-protagonist Marco Alisdair. Marco is in a magical competition with Celia Bowen and the Circus is where the two try to outdo each other with marvelous displays and performances. Isobel learns something about magic and reads for herself with a Marseilles-style deck; a good choice given the period of the novel (*The Rider-Waite Tarot* had not yet been created at that time.) She also becomes a spy for Marco by working as the venue cartomancer and tries to help him hold the Circus together by using a Temperance card in a binding spell. When she finally realizes that Marco does not love her, she tears the card up, and at that very moment Herr Friedrick Thiessen, the man who created the Circus's magnificent signature clock, is murdered. *The Phantomwise Tarot* shows, not the classic Marseilles Tower card with people falling from a medieval structure struck by lightning, but rather a great clock tower struck by lightning. Thus, like the Hanged Man, it shows an event that takes place in the novel.

Isobel uses her Marseilles deck when reading for herself and for Celia. Not surprising, but perhaps just a little bit disappointing, is the fact that the one detailed reading Isobel does with the black-and-white *Night Circus* Tarot that she always uses in her professional role—does not acknowledge the *Phantomwise* variations. This reading is done for Bailey, the young man destined to save the circus from destruction. Bailey's character is suggested by the *Phantomwise* Four of Cups and Seven of Pentacles simply because they show a boy sitting beside a tree and in a tree, as Bailey was wont to do. However, the card he chooses for himself from Isobel's deck is the Knight of Swords, described in the novel as a

Knight on a horse, but the corresponding *Phantomwise* card shows a young man on a Gryphon, such as Celia creates for the Circus.

Ultimately, however, it is fortunate that Morgenstern did not aim for a complete alignment of the *Phantomwise* Tarot imagery and the novel. Such a project would certainly have resulted in a predictable set of illustrations for the text akin to the many “based-on” decks currently flooding the swag market. True *Night Circus* *reveurs* and Tarot readers alike will certainly prefer the more subtle and haunting delights of *The Phantomwise Tarot*.

—Emily E. Auger

Morgenstern, Erin. *The Night Circus*. Random House, 2011.

EMILY E. AUGER (Ph.D.) is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Cartomancy and Tarot in Film 1940-2010* (2016) and *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks* (2004; new expanded edition 2023), editor of the multi-author *Tarot in Culture Volumes I and II* (2014); and co-editor with Janet Brennan Croft of *Divining Tarot: Papers on Charles Williams's The Greater Trumps and Other Works* by Nancy-Lou Patterson (2019). She also served as the area chair for Tarot and Other Methods of Divination at the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association conference from 2004-2020.



PITY, POWER, AND TOLKIEN'S RING: TO RULE THE FATE OF MANY.

Thomas P. Hillman. Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 2023. 320 pp. ISBN 9781606354711. \$40.00.

CECI N'EST PAS UN ANNEAU. THIS IS NOT A RING. Or so René Magritte would have written under a painting of the One Ring, if he ever painted one. Because, of course, Tolkien's One Ring is not just *a* ring, meaning *any* ring. It is *the* Ring, the answer to a riddle that comes in the form of another riddle. It is a signifier the signification of which is found in the mythical sphere of the imagination and escapes clear explanations in plain everyday letters. Nonetheless, Hillman thought that it is possible both to describe the effects of the Ring on its bearers in Middle-earth and to comment on it with reference to real world literary and philosophical authors that Tolkien knew, from the *Beowulf*-Poet and Homer to Aristotle and Boethius. *Pity, Power, and Tolkien's Ring* is the result of this undertaking, a result that constitutes a rewarding and interesting read.

As the title suggests, the focus of the book is found in the opposition between Pity and Power, a contrast that is certainly highlighted by *The Lord of the Rings* and by Tolkien's correspondence as well as by several scholars. For the