

# Rachel Pollack

*A series of posts from Tarot | An Exploration Project*

The New York Times

## ***Rachel Pollack, Transgender Activist and Authority on Tarot, Dies at 77***

Her science fiction writing won awards. Her tarot books won her a devoted following. And she created DC Comics' first transgender superhero.



Rachel Pollack in 2012. Her professional writing career began in 1971, when she sold her first science-fiction short story. But she soon became better known for her writings on tarot cards. Rubi Rose

## Equinox 3.20.2023

A turning point . . .

The onset of Spring is our first major marker for the year. The two equinoxes (when day and night are equal in length) and two solstices (when either day or night is at its longest) remind us that we live on a planet, in a solar system, in a universe.

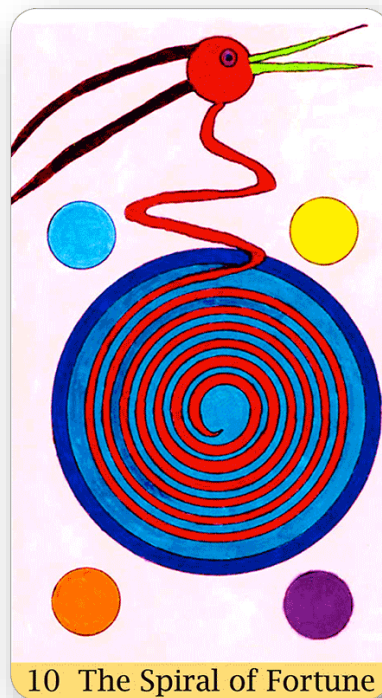
Rachel Pollack has an innate sense of that larger reality—and a rare gift for sharing her awareness with others.

It seems Rachel will be leaving us soon. Her brilliant, multifaceted body of work will remain, which offers consolation. But everyone who knows her (or appreciates her work) will miss her presence terribly.

I've known Rachel a little for many years, as we were brought together by a shared interest in serious Tarot. I didn't really focus, though, on the expansive range of her accomplishments. I've only now taken a more careful look—and to say I was impressed is to say the least.

I'm planning a series of Daily Notes this week, with more about Rachel, her work, and her personal gifts. I hope you'll join me, and share any comments you may have.

To start with, a little about her uniquely thoughtful and visually inspiring Tarot deck, *The Shining Tribe*.



Here's a brief description, from [The Fool's Dog](#):

Shining Tribe Tarot takes us to a mythic realm inspired by fifty thousand years of culturally diverse art. Sourced from ancient rock carvings, shamanic art from global cultures, the Kabbalah, and Jungian psychology, Shining Tribe is powerful, sophisticated, and utterly unique.

In Shining Tribe, the suits are renamed as Trees, Rivers, Birds, and Stones, and the royalty have become The Place, The Knower, The Gift, and The Speaker. The Major Arcana provides a map of the soul's journey from birth to enlightenment, and the Minors show the kaleidoscope of human experience in all its varied forms.

Author/artist Rachel Pollack is one of the world's foremost authorities on Tarot. "All of us who work with Tarot form a kind of tribe, one whose roots go back many thousands of years before the actual appearance of Tarot cards. This is the tribe of diviners, those special magicians, shamans, psychics, and visionaries who use cards, or sticks, or trees, or stones, or shells to communicate with the Gods."

If you'd like to know more about Rachel's process for creating the Shining Tribe, here's [a wonderful interview](#). It includes this illustration . . .



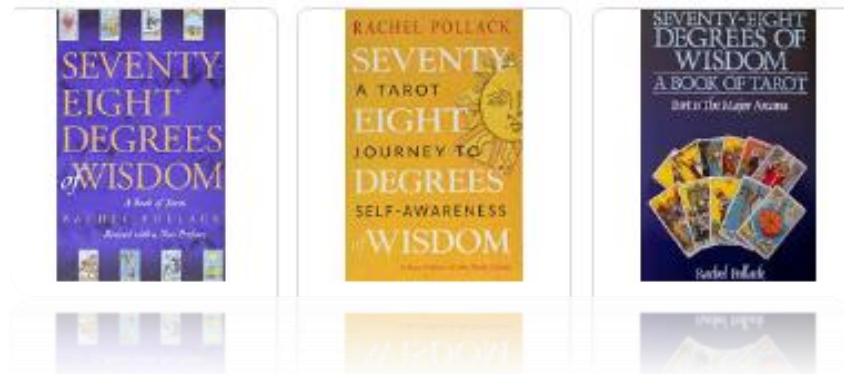
# Rachel Pollack

## The Tarot books . . .

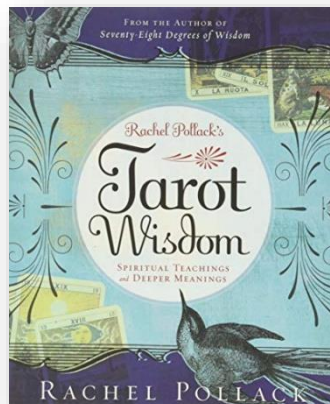
As promised in yesterday's post, I'm writing a series of Daily Notes that will shed a small amount of light on a very big topic: Rachel Pollack's work.

In case there are any readers not familiar with her exceptional contributions to the study of Tarot, here's an inadequate summary.

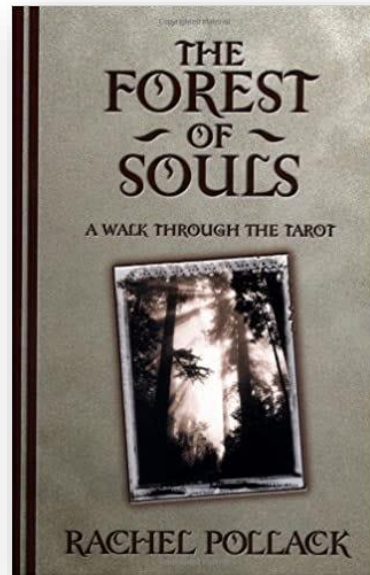
- Rachel's signature work, *78 Degrees of Wisdom*, was first published as a complete volume in 1983. Since that time, it has stayed near the top of every Tarot book list in both sales and influence. When I checked Amazon today, the most recent edition (revised and expanded in 2019) ranked #4 in Magical Studies (Books) and #10 in Tarot—a category that combines decks and books. This edition has 3,119 global ratings so far, 86% of which give five stars. There is an audiobook as well, along with a Kindle version.



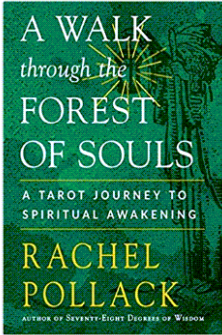
- The clarity and depth of *78 Degrees* have made it the best known of Rachel's Tarot books. But two others are equally important. In *Tarot Wisdom: Spiritual Teachings and Deeper Meanings* (2008), she shares a generous array of personal experiences and insights.



- And in *Forest of Souls: A Walk Through the Tarot* (2002) she illuminates many aspects of Tarot in relation to the Tree of Life metaphor. This early cover design is my favorite . . .



It's great good fortune that a revised and expanded version of the latter work is forthcoming this year, under the title *A Walk Through the Forest of Souls: A Tarot Journey to Spiritual Awakening*.



### A Walk Through the Forest of Souls: A Tarot Journey to Spiritual Awakening Paperback – May 1, 2023

by Rachel Pollack (Author)

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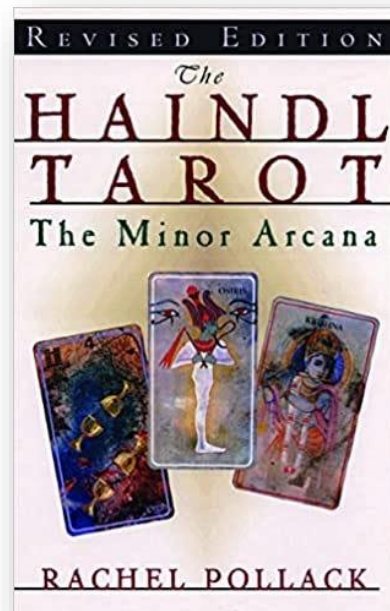
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“For forty years,” writes Neil Gaiman, “Rachel Pollack has been one of the finest writers and thinkers about tarot, and *A Walk Through the Forest of Souls* feels like a distillation of everything she has been trying to get us to see. A must for people who want the tarot in their lives or just for people like me who want it in our stories.”

It's [available for preorder](#) now.



- One other work that deserves special mention is Rachel's companion set (Major and Minor Arcanas) for the amazing *Haindl Tarot*—published in 1990, revised in 2002. Her explications of each image reflect a startling breadth of knowledge, and depth of insight. Years before, in 1985, she had written the classic book that accompanies the *Salvador Dali Tarot*.



Rachel's interest in the realm of art and myth has extended to the larger contexts of Tarot, in explorations like *The Body of the Goddess* (1997), *The Power of Ritual* (2000) and *Seeker* (2005).

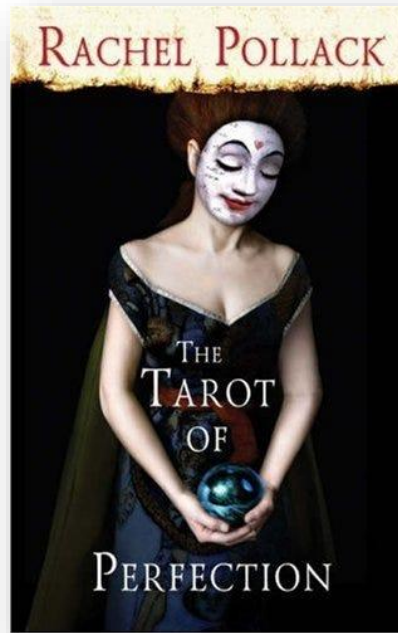
Beyond her own books, she has provided substantive introductions and commentaries for the works of others—among them, an edition of recently rediscovered Major Arcana paintings by Surrealist Leonora Carrington.



# Rachel Pollack, Continued

Imagining fictional worlds . . .

Today's note focuses on Rachel's accomplishments as a novelist and writer of short fiction. Our starting place is *The Tarot of Perfection*, her 2008 collection of very different but equally inventive stories . . . .



This particular book is long out of print, so if you don't already have a copy, you may not be able to acquire one easily. But here's a list of the eight stories it contains:

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INTRODUCTION-TAROT AND STORIES .....	6
THE TAROT OF PERFECTION .....	10
THE PICKPOCKET'S DESTINY .....	38
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And here is an extended excerpt from the Introduction, in which Rachel shares some information about how the stories came to be:

I will mix the cards and choose a small number at random, then turn them over to see what plot or characters they suggest. Most often I will ignore the cards' usual meanings and qualities and instead let the pictures work on me as if I have never seen them before and know nothing about them (this alone is an interesting exercise to try). The story "The Souls In The Trees" began with a handful of cards from a deck called *The Golden Tarot of the Renaissance*, whose medieval images include a picture of a headless woman, and another of a group of women looking cruelly at a young man suffering on his knees. The story developed far beyond these original images and the moments they suggested. At various times I drew more cards to help at transitions or difficult moments.

Other tales began with various inspirations but then the cards (various decks were used, such as *The Tarot of Prague*, and of course *The Fairytale Tarot*) helped to elaborate where the story might go. The idea for the final story, "Master Matyas," originally came to me after looking at an inscription on an antique fountain pen. Possibly because of such a tenuous beginning, or maybe because I wanted it to bring together the themes and images of the previous stories, it was very difficult to write. I found myself turning to the cards several times, not to develop new ideas, but almost the opposite, to simplify an over-burdened plot. Just as we might ask in a reading "What is the person's core truth in this situation?" so we can choose cards to look at the essential qualities of a story or character.

I'm fascinated by this description, which captures the experience not only of being a writer, but also of reading Tarot. She continues this way:

The Tarot has often seemed to me like a living being. The cards themselves are just cardboard and colored ink, but a kind of spirit inhabits them. It gave me pleasure to weave them into the stories.

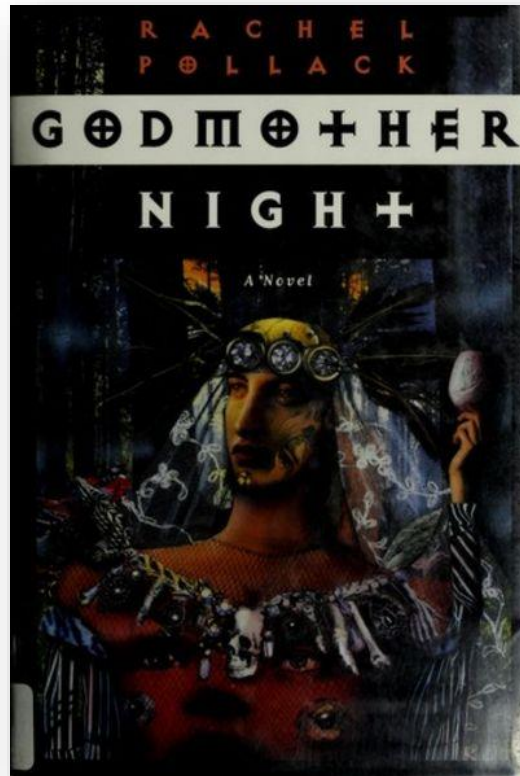
I have to confess that I almost never read fiction—so I can't speak from personal experience about Rachel's other, more well-known works of fiction. I'll have to fall back on the evidence of awards and rave reviews.

Fortunately, those are plentiful. Rachel gained instant notoriety in 1989, when *Unquenchable Fire* won the prestigious Arthur C. Clarke. Published five years later, *Temporary Agency* was set in the same world—an alternate America where storytellers are revered and magic is an ordinary part of everyone's life.

"Brilliantly original, funny, and fascinating," according to Kirkus Reviews, *Temporary Agency* was nominated for both the Nebula and Mythopoeic awards.



In 1997, *Godmother Night* won the World Fantasy Award, and was praised this way by Publisher's Weekly: "Pollack's fairy-tale plot is resourceful and original, but here, as in her earlier fiction, the emphasis is on character as she portrays women's intimate relationships with one another with resonance and realism. This is another fine outing by one of the most gifted and sensitive fantasists working today."



In addition to her accomplishments as a novelist, Rachel published a book of "Tarot poems" titled *Fortune's Lover*, and taught for more than a decade in the MFA writing program at Goddard College.

# Rachel Pollack, Going Further

How she changed the comics world . . .

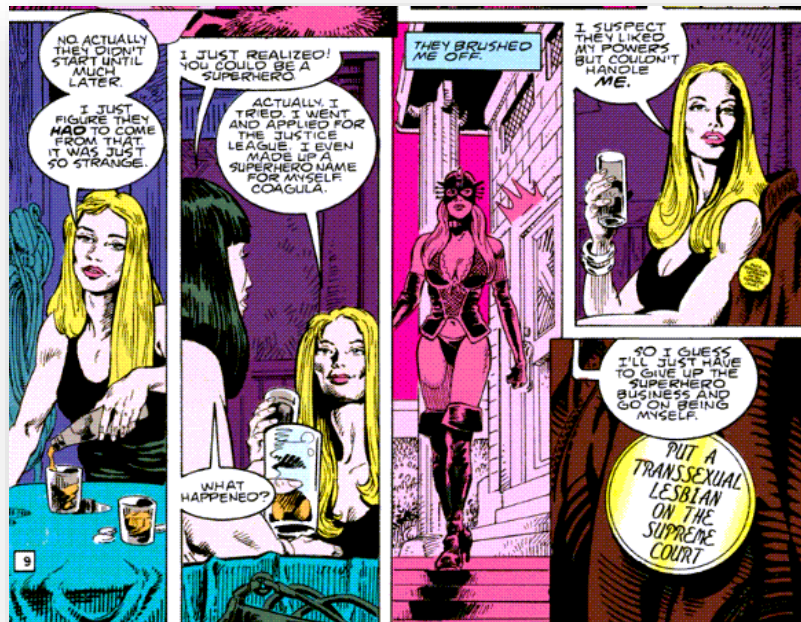
For this post I had planned to focus on how Rachel expanded the boundaries of super-hero comics. And that's still the plan. But I've since realized what an enormous topic this is, and how little I'm equipped to do it justice.

The world of super-hero comics is complicated just as a general matter, and that's on purpose. Characters and plot arcs are created and deconstructed unpredictably, often with a logic that is only apparent (if ever) in retrospect.

But the history of DC's *Doom Patrol* is in a class by itself.

I won't try to summarize! What's important is the "Rachel Pollack era," which began in 1993, and took a group of characters—who were already out of the ordinary—in new and wildly unexpected directions. Many story aspects that developed over the next two years displayed very obvious archetypal and mythological associations, as well as Rachel's signature sense of humor.

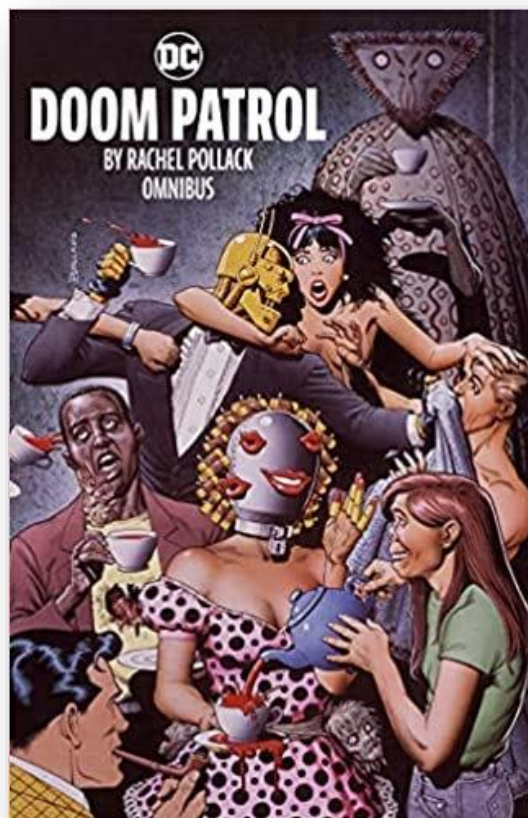
Best known among Rachel's contributions is the character Kate Godwin, a lesbian transgender woman whose superhero alter-ego "Coagula" has the power to dissolve and to combine—an echo of the alchemical process *solve et coagula*. Kate/Coagula was among the very first trans characters to appear in the comic world, and is still one of just a few.



Toward the end of Rachel's two years as the creative force at *Doom Patrol*, other esoteric story elements became increasingly recognizable, including aspects of Jewish mysticism. All along, though, her work on the series had been marked not only by a dazzling inventiveness, but also by an awareness of how myth and archetype shape and energize story-telling.

With just a little exploration into Rachel's vision of *Doom Patrol*, I've become completely mesmerized. I hope to explore further over the weekend—and I'll share some of the (many!) resources discovered along the way.

Above all, though, there's a long-awaited omnibus edition of her *Doom Patrol* run, published in 2022.



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I just didn't have the time to become knowledgeable about this complicated topic, which is such an important aspect of Rachel's legacy--so I left the post at a very high level. For those who would like to delve further, here are two resources:

- [Doom and Bloom: Rachel Pollack and the Evolution of the DOOM PATROL](#)
- [Rachel Pollack's Doom Patrol is an Underread Masterpiece](#)

# *Rachel Pollack, Legacies*

Sharing knowledge and creating conversations . . .

So far, I have grazed the surface of Rachel's accomplishments—as a deck creator, a Tarot scholar, a novelist, and a superhero innovator.

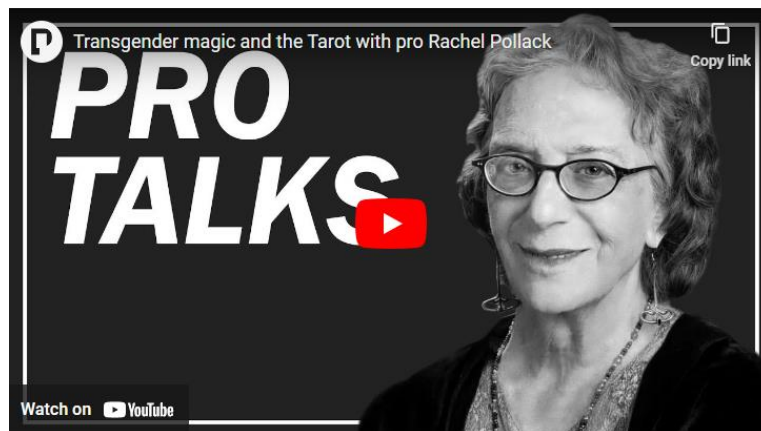
Running through those varied forms and genres are interconnected ideas and thematic threads that stand out even more clearly in her teaching.

For many years, Rachel teamed up with noted Tarot author Mary Greer to present workshops at the Omega Institute—annual appearances that have drawn a wide array of Tarot enthusiasts to upstate New York. She has also spoken at a variety of Tarot events, from East Coast to West.

In all those instances, she not only offered lessons and commentaries, but also shared her personal experiences and responded to questions with an often-amazing wealth of information and insight.

From beginning students to fellow professionals, everyone who hears Rachel talk on any topic will gain something valuable. And we can all continue to do that, thanks to the many recorded interviews in which she discusses Tarot and a wide range of other topics.

If you want to meet Rachel virtually, just type her name in the YouTube search box, then set aside a whole lot of time. There are so many Rachel interviews I wanted to watch! But to get this post out, I gathered just a few examples . . .



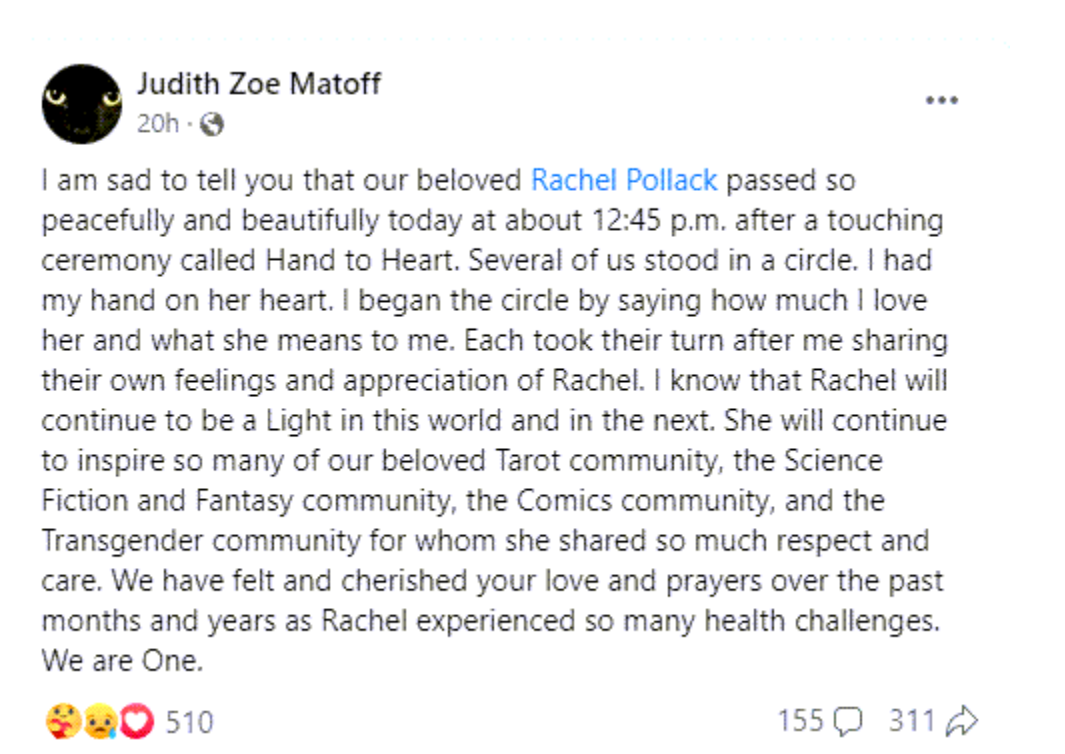
For good measure—here's [an expansive discussion](#) from Pam Grossman's WitchWave podcast, and the transcript of [a classic joint interview](#) in which Rachel and legendary writer/creator Neil Gaiman exchange ideas about "the connection between esoteric material and popular media."

## *A Gentle Good-bye to Rachel Pollack*

As some of you may already know, Rachel passed on from this life yesterday: Friday, April 7, 2023.

She left behind a legion of admirers (myself among them), and a remarkably influential body of work. I'm honored to have known her, even at a distance.

I plan to write one more post about Rachel, tomorrow. In the meantime . . . you can join the many people expressing both grief and gratitude on Facebook.





# Thoughts about Rachel

A few of my own, and some shared by others . . .

Rachel's passing has brought a keen sense of loss—not only because we will never know what else she might have shared with the world, but also because her generous spirit touched so many people.

I'll start out this post with a few quotes that capture different aspects of Rachel's life and work. Then I'll close with three of my own thoughts.

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From another Tarot legend, and Rachel's frequent co-teacher, Mary Greer:

Like Reply 19h



Mary K. Greer

This is the three card spread I drew yesterday afternoon for Rachel, less than 24 hours before her passing. As I've mentioned before, more than any other tarot text, her book on the Shining Tribe is its own Oracle with messages that are sacred divinations for those who choose to listen. May she walk in Beauty. Know that we and all Creation are the Shining Tribe.



Like Reply 19h

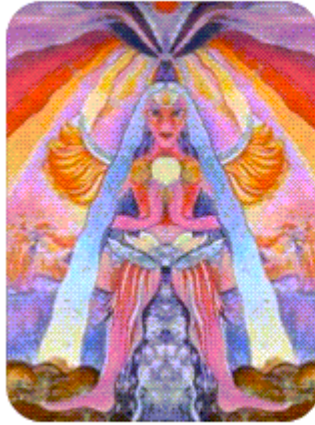
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These two from brilliant Tarot artists Carol Herzer and Alexandra Genetti:



Carol Herzer

May her sovereign soul fly in her true power and light unimpeded and free.



Like Reply 2d



Alexandra Genetti

Oh, Zoe. My heart goes out to you. Rachel is loved by so many, her memory will be a blessing to all of us. Sending comfort to you from afar.

To me, personally she is a light in the present darkness for my 8 year old trans granddaughter who loves superheros and deserves shining role models. Rachel is the best of these! 🏳️‍🌈

Love always ❤️❤️

And this wonderfully concise and correct note from Bobby Abate—whose work I’ve just discovered, and will write about soon.



Bobby Abate

Sending Love and Light. She is a legend (always was) and now she's a spirit guide, and dare I say, goddess!

Turning from Facebook to a more formal source, here a Neil Gaiman quote, from [Rachel's obituary in \*The Guardian\*](#):

Rachel was a beloved writer of fantasy, but I prefer to describe her as a magical realist. She wrote these wonderful books of heightened reality and magical worlds where she would concretise metaphor.

He goes on to say:

Rachel and I bonded over many, many things, one of which was Jewishness, and despite being a bastion of the new age she was also incredibly Jewish.

Rachel's passing on Good Friday (in the Christian calendar), during the Jewish Passover (which this year began at sundown on Wednesday, April 5, and will end on Thursday, April 13), seems emblematic of her "Shining Tribe" vision . . .

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There are, of course, many things I would love to say about Rachel and her work—but for this post, I've limited myself to three brief items.

1. It's very (very, very) hard to write both fiction and non-fiction well. But Rachel was an extraordinary novelist *and* an admirable scholar, whose Tarot books were not just clear and informative, but also entertaining and inspiring. As I surveyed the scope and excellence of her work, I was truly awestruck.
2. On top of that—she wrote *in longhand, with a fountain pen*. I cannot even imagine this. But you can hear Rachel talk about her fascination with fountain pens [in this interview](#).
3. I realize now that all the facets of Rachel's life and work are linked together in one word: *Storyteller*. She spoke at times about [Tarot as a storytelling device](#), and of course her novels are dazzling displays of the storyteller's art. All that goes without saying. But as I've looked over [the personal reminiscences people have shared](#) since her passing, it's come home to me that whenever she interacted with someone, she wove a story for that person—and with that person. Taken all together, those stories have formed a sort of living mythology, nurtured by one person's imagination.

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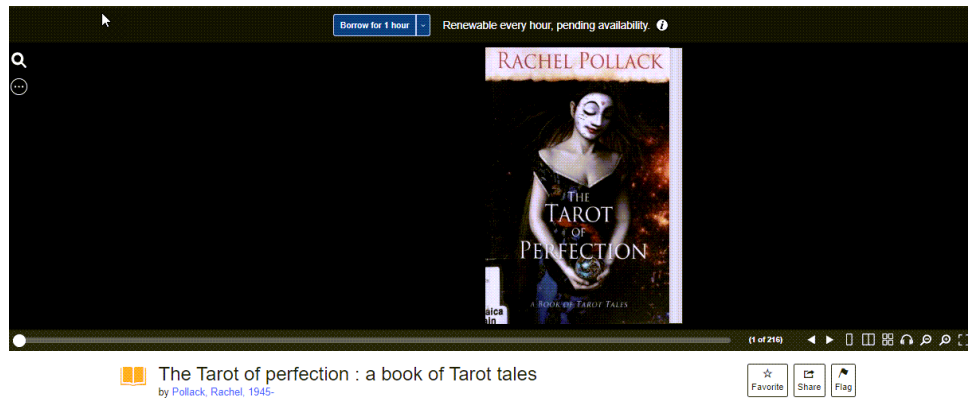
I'm going to round out the "Rachel Notes" tomorrow with a little more lore—including a way to read her short story collection *The Tarot of Perfection*.

# A New Week Begins

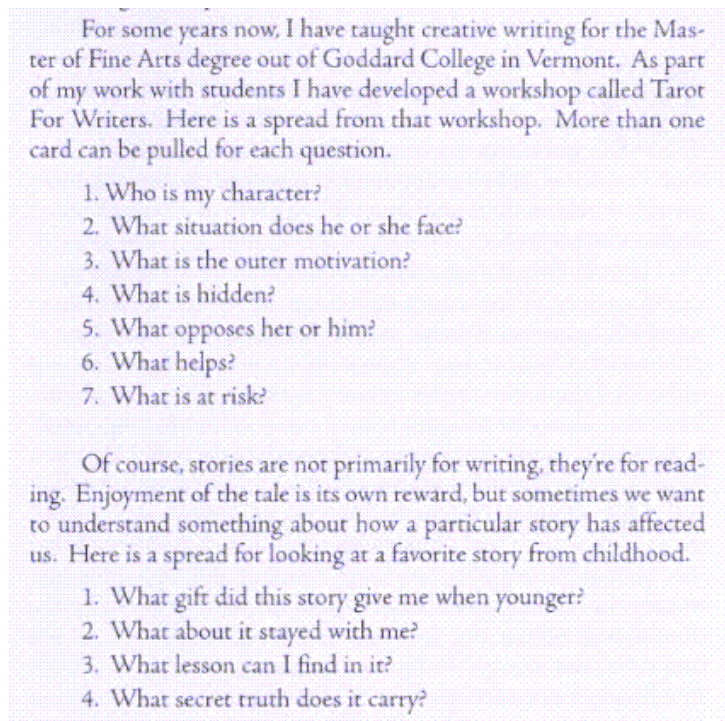
With a little more Rachel lore . . .

**First:** Although Rachel's short-story collection, *The Tarot of Perfection*, has been out of print for a long time, you can "borrow" it in digital form from the Internet Archive. I've previously offered a guide to this great resource for Tarot research

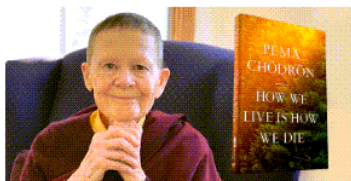
Happily for us, the IA Library contains a copy of [The Tarot of Perfection](#).



And here's a snippet from the book's "Introduction":



**Second:** I took it as a token of synchronicity that the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies—where Rachel taught so many Tarot workshops over the years—was offering this [free online event](#):



OMEGA  
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### HOW WE LIVE IS HOW WE DIE

A Free Omega Special Event

With Pema Chödrön and Robert "Skip" Backus

Saturday, April 15, 1:00 p.m. ET (10:00 a.m. PT)

*"Our task, in life and death, is to realize we always have a choice.  
We can fall asleep into unawareness and stay stuck, or we can wake up."  
—Pema Chödrön*

As much as we might resist them, endings happen in every moment—the end of a breath, a day, a relationship, and ultimately, the end of life. Accompanying each ending is a new beginning.

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Although the event is now in the past, you can still [hear an audio excerpt](#) from Chodron's new book by that title.

Also, you can find [this delightful essay](#) on the Omega site:

## Tarot and Revelation, Divination in Space

*Sci-fi author and divination tarot expert Rachel Pollack  
explores similarities between tarot readers and the famous fictional  
character Dr. Who.*

By [Rachel Pollack](#)

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And finally . . .

Rachel's accomplishments extended far beyond the Tarot world, as reflected in obituaries from [The Boston Globe](#), [The Washington Post](#), and [The New York Times](#). But the extent to which she influenced contemporary Tarot really cannot be overstated—as demonstrated by the many reflections posted on [her Facebook page](#).