

You're listening to imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

SUSAN: All right. So first thing I do when I do a tarot reading is I like to shuffle the cards. And as I do that, I ask you to let go of looking for answers and just ask for guidance.

That is Susan Wands. She's an author and a tarot card expert, although she uses the European pronunciation, ta-ROW. I had never had a tarot or ta-row reading before. I was both skeptical and nervous. On one hand I didn't really believe but on the other hand I believed to the point that I was worried she would tell me something awful was about to happen me. But it was actually more like a therapy session with the cards doing the talking.

SUSAN: Okay. This is the hermit. So this means that the work and the place that you come from has all been self-initiated, is that you build your world according to your own ideas of how the world should be. (FADE UNDER)

Now I didn't meet with Susan to get a tarot card reading, it just happened at the end of the interview. I came to Susan's home to talk with her about the person who designed those cards.

She was using what's commonly known as the Rider-Waite deck from 1909. Rider was the publisher. Waite was the author. But a lot of tarot card experts prefer to call it the Smith-Waite deck, playing homage to the woman who illustrated the cards, Pamela Colman Smith.

The Smith-Waite deck is the most popular deck in the world. It's sold over \$100 million copies. You've probably seen it in movies and TV shows. It wasn't a huge hit when it was released in 1909. It really made a comeback in the 1960s and '70s -- and tarot cards had new resurgence just in the last several years.

But what sucked into this world was a photograph I saw of Pamela Colman Smith.

The picture is from 1912. It's a grainy black and white photo but she looks shockingly modern. She seems to be biracial. She's sitting sideways on a chair, with her arms folded, looking directly at the camera with a very playful smile. I have never seen anyone smile like that in an old photo. And

it looks like she's wearing a theater costume, with a ruffled blouse, beaded necklaces, and a feathered headscarf. It's as if someone in our time took an iPhone picture, added an old timely Instagram filter, but barely tried to conceal the fact that the picture was taken today and not over 100 years ago. When I see pictures like that, of someone who seems to be out of sync with their time, I'm always dying to know.

So who was Pamela Colman Smith? Are there any clues hiding in plain sight within the tarot cards?

We'll do a reading on her life just after the break.

BREAK

To understand the world Pamela Colman Smith designed within the tarot cards, we need to understand her life story.

Pamela grew up in Brooklyn. She traveled a lot with her father who had business in Jamaica and England. And she came from a distinguished family. Her grandfather was the first mayor of Brooklyn. Her father was an artist. Her mother was a writer. They were friends with literary icons like William Butler Yeats. But we don't know if they were her biological parents.

ELIZABETH: There's a lot of mystery surrounding Colman Smith's birth.

Elizabeth Foley O'Connor is a professor at Washington College, who is working on a biography on Colman Smith. She's says there were a lot of rumors at the time that Pamela was adopted, or that one her parents was not fully Caucasian, or that she was the product of an affair. Either way, white people looked at Pamela and thought, you can't be one of us.

ELIZABETH: And what to me as a scholar is the way that contemporaries viewed her. When Ellen Terry first met her. Ellen Terry was, um, the Shakespearian actress, but she called her a Japanese toy to a friend in a letter. I've found several published accounts, uh, various people talking about Colman Smith as black, as a witch, a 1912 Delineator article -- it's actually a very positive accounted for work, but it calls her brown squirrel, a Chinese baby, and a radiant morning.

And these were comments by people who were considered progressive at that time. You can imagine how the rest of society treated her.

She was an outsider in other ways too. She had synesthesia. That's a neurological condition where people perceive colors through sounds or smells. It affects everyone differently, and she had visions that were like waking dreams while she listened to music. That's when she was most prolific creating artwork.

ELIZABETH: And very different music had different, you had different tones and colors and associations, and she was very interested in tapping into the unconscious, right, until before people even really, we're calling it the unconscious.

Even her faith was unorthodox. Her parents were part of a religion called Swedenborgianism.

SUSAN: Which is a wackadoodle religion.

Susan Wands has an open mind about a lot of things but....

SUSAN: I mean their, their founder in the 1700s in Sweden believed he could astral travel from planets to planets and that they were different little beings on each planet that could speak and some look like cheese and other people look like rodents. I mean it was, it was a crazy religion

Had he seen in the Marvel cinematic universe, is that why he believed that?

SUSAN: (LAUGHS) I don't know, he very well could have designed it. So her parents went to this sort of church that was really out there. Then she, from the age of about seven to 15 lived in Jamaica with voodoo and all these great stories that she wrote in her first Anansi book.

Anansi The Spider is a beloved character from African and Caribbean folklore. She wrote books of Anansi stories, and did the illustrations. She also ran a feminist printing press, and attended art school. Today we'd call her an interdisciplinary artist. But back then she was baffling even to Bohemians. For instance, one of her patrons, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz once had a gallery show for her paintings and drawings.

ELIZABETH: She showed up for a gallery talk dressed in her Jamaican West Indian garb. Rather than talking about her art, she started chanting Yeats'

poems. She started singing West Indian songs and telling Anansi stories. And the New York socialites who came to this gallery event did not know what to make of her at all. That, uh, you know, they just rejected her. And that happened repeatedly. Um, I think to her credit, she stood her ground and didn't really meld or conform her art to what was expected. Um, but she did pay a, a pretty heavy price professionally, socially, artistically, financially for it.

There was someone who had unshakable faith in her – her Dad. In 1899, Charles Smith brought his daughter to London to help promote her book, and help her get work as an illustrator. That's when he introduced her a man who would change her life: Bram Stoker.

Yes, the guy that wrote Dracula. Although at the time, Bram Stoker was the stage manager of the Lyceum Theater in London. Pamela was fangirling out – not over Stoker, but the actors at the Lyceum were superstars of the day, who filled up the gossip columns. And they did not dismiss Pamela as a groupie. They really dug her and asked her to join them on a tour of North America. She designed costumes and posters for them.

Then at the age of 21, she was orphaned. Her father suddenly died, her mother had also died recently. She made a big decision. She would move to London and join the Lyceum Company.

The troupe welcomed her like an adopted family. The big star at the time, Henry Irving, became a father figure. The leading lady of the group, Ellen Terry, was her surrogate mother. Ellen actually gave Pamela an affectionate nickname, "Pixie," which Pamela embraced as her new persona.

SUSAN: Yes, she was the fairy godmother in a way.

Again Susan Wands:

SUSAN: But Ellen was also the superstar for day. She was the highest paid actress in London at the time. And she was very Bohemian. You know, she had children out of wedlock. She was having this affair with Henry Irving. She was larger than life. And I think she wasn't afraid to live her life.

Another reason why Pamela was a good fit with the Lyceum group -- they had their own alternative religion called The Hermetic Order of The Golden

Dawn. One of their leaders was Aleister Crowley, who was such an infamous occultist; he known as The Wickedest Man in the World.

SUSAN: They were trying to explore the alchemy of magic, they were trying to see if they could become magicians and what could they affect in the world with their magic.

And this is literal believing in magic, right?

SUSAN: Oh yes!

There was so much drama in the group to the point where they split into warring factions. But it was through the Order of The Golden Dawn that Pamela was first introduced to tarot cards.

Tarot cards had started out in the 15th century as a parlor game for Italian aristocrats. The cards made their way to France where aristocrats were using them for divine guidance. But they weren't common in the modern world until one of the members of The Golden Dawn, Arthur Edward Waite, saw an exhibit on tarot cards and hired Pamela to design a deck.

SUSAN: There was an exhibit at the British museum of the Sola Busca cards and the Marseille Cards. And he wanted to do his own interpretation of the cards according to the Golden Dawn.

Pamela was not thrilled with this assignment. She had 6 months to create 80 cards, and she complained to a friend that it was a “big job for very little cash.” But she was intrigued by the idea, and dove in.

The deck is unmistakably her work in a lot of other ways. First there's her signature on every card – which was important because she never got any official credit. And her initial P, C and S are drawn in a Japanese wood-block style, which goes back to her art school training.

But overall the cards look like her theater posters. The colors are primarily golden yellow, tangerine orange and pale blue. The backgrounds are very intricate in the Art Nouveau style, but they're flat, just like a stage backdrop. The characters are front and center, drawn with thick whimsical lines. And the main characters on the cards are played by the members of the Lyceum Theater. For instance, Susan says The Emperor is clearly Bram Stoker.

SUSAN: Because he's got sort of that, that a boxer hold to it. He was the theater manager, but he ran the Lyceum Theater and he ran, I mean, it was because of him and his connection to Pamela that Pamela ever had any contact or any employment with the Lyceum Theater or with the Golden Dawn. So in some ways, Bram who was a lifelong friend, she illustrated his last book, the layer of the white worm, and he was not well, so they were lifelong friends.

The character on The Fool Card is the actor William Terriss.

SUSAN: A lot of people find exception, take exception to her full card because they find it very childlike instead of the fool in other cards from the Renaissance were seen as a beggar in a mad man. He's seen more as a troubadour.

But that fit with how she saw Terriss. He was a leading man that was stabbed to death by a fellow actor outside the theater.

Another famous actress in the troupe, Florence Farr is The Priestess. Henry Irving is The Magician. Edy Craig – the daughter of Ellen Terry -- is The Queen of Wands.

SUSAN: Yes, she is very much the queen of wands. You can see there's a little black cat sitting next to her, which they did have. Um, she was Pamela's roommate for a while. Then she went on to become notorious because she was one the first woman to have a manage a tois with two other women in London.

And finally there's Ellen Terry, Pamela's surrogate mother. Ellen is the only performer who plays many roles throughout the deck.

SUSAN: Oh, Ellen Terry is everywhere. She's, uh, she's in several things. She's the Empress. Here's Ellen, she looks so much like her, there's several things that Pamela drew of Ellen Terry that has almost that same oval face, that same blonde strawberry blonde hair, strawberry blonde hair.

The nature of theater is ephemeral, especially in that era before audio or visual recordings were widespread. These stars are mostly forgotten today, but they live forever in these cards, playing roles in the lives of countless people who use the deck for readings.

And the Lyceum cast was reserved for what's called the Major Arcana – the cards with iconic figures like kings and queens. But there's another set

within the deck called the minor arcana, which showed every day people dealing with different scenarios that did not involve royalty. And it was groundbreaking to have the minor and major arcana within the same deck.

SUSAN: She did create a universe. She understood arc types. She understood the effect of having a little child look up the death skeleton on a horse and the drama of that and the tension within that. Now these are two dimensional, there's no vanishing point, there's no fine art shading to it. But I think the reason they have become the bestselling tarot deck of all time is because they are universal. In every country, there's a Cinderella story, there's a King or queen story, there's an exile story, and each one of these cards tells the story of a society where you belong. There's a hierarchy and there's a fall from grace.

Yeah. There's kind of a generic in a way, medieval sort of culture that everybody can relate to, on kind of a deeper Jungian, Joseph Campbell level.

SUSAN: Right. And Jung himself was absolutely fanatical about this deck of cards.

Was he?

SUSAN: Oh yes. He really believed that they should be used for therapy. And a lot of therapists do use them now as part of their process, but he went a step further and Jung can actually set that. He thought the cards could be used for telling the future. (Laughs)

Elizabeth O'Connor says Jung was not the only famous person into the cards.

ELIZABETH: T.S. Elliot found this deck pretty early on and uses it, um, used it personally evidently, but also references it in the wasteland, you know, Madam Sosostriis and her wicked pack of cards. And now there's, you know, hundreds if not thousands of different tarot decks, but that was not the case in the early 20th century.

But at the time, Pamela had no idea how important the tarot card deck would become. It was just one project she was working on with the support of the Lyceum group. She also didn't realize how much her life was like a house of cards that could easily fall apart.

SUSAN: The Lyceum theater was drawing to a close, Edy was trying to start her own repertory company and there just wasn't a place for Pamela in it. You know,

Sir Henry died. Ellen was getting on in years. The whole infrastructure of how Pamela is folded into their life pretty much collapsed.

That's so interesting because I've had so many times in my life. You come across a really creative group of people that are all vibing and they feel like a family.

SUSAN: Right.

And you forget, you don't realize how circumstantial this sort of temporary make your own family is.

SUSAN: Exactly. And at the time, because they were the Lyceum theater and they were, you know, famous and all these important famous people were coming through a sort of self-sustaining for awhile. But when sir Henry didn't ensure the scenery and it all burned up, then the Lyceum theaters future was pretty much determined to be over, and it was bought by a syndicate and it was over a year and a half later.

Times were changing in other ways. Pamela had always followed her instincts and landed on her feet, but Elizabeth says that was getting harder.

ELIZABETH: After the war, there was again, another kind of turn towards realism, which had really started, um, at the beginning of the century, but she was more interested in, uh, imagined worlds. But the 1930s, as you know, it was a period of depression both in and growing war, especially in England and severe depression in the United States. And people were not really interested in magical, mystical, other worldly landscapes. Her illustrative work was not in demand. And so she decided to move to Cornwall and she did still continue to work while she was in Cornwall. But the output slowed dramatically and increasingly, um, she was in a quite severe poverty. Shortly before she left Park Garland, she sent a letter to a former associate in New York, kind of begging if there's any work and she talks about how she doesn't really have any food and she has to kill her last chicken.

There was not much creative output in their final years. In fact, she was trading paintings for food. And when she died in 1951, her death certificate labeled her, "a spinster of independent means."

But she didn't die alone. She has been living with a woman named Nora Lake. And that was the last mystery around her life.

ELIZABETH: We don't know a whole lot about her explicit sexuality. I can tell you that she never married nor had children. With Nora Lake, it is unclear. Nora who

was married was her housekeeper in Park Garland. And then pretty early on, I'm forgetting the exact year, Nora's husband dies from about 1920 to when um, Colman Smith died in 1951, Lake and Colman Smith lived together. I did find inscriptions that they had written to each other in books, um, where they have pet names, one's more and one bear. And it's very clear that there's a deep love there, but most of most of Colman Smith's letters were destroyed.

She is often identified as a queer icon although we don't know for sure. Susan thinks she could've been asexual for all we know. The fact is, Pamela Colman Smith will always be something of a mystery to us, which I think she would've appreciated because like a tarot card, we have to fill in the rest with our intuition and imagination.

SUSAN: I'll tell you something.

Yeah.

SUSAN: I went to her graveyard where she's buried in an unmarked grave and we did the sort of ceremony to try to say thank you Pamela, you gave so much to the world and I got all choked up cause I had all these things to say to her. I'm writing a book about you. I want people to know who you are. And I couldn't get a vibe of who she was. And Rose, one of the wonderful psychics that was there, part of it, she could see I was distressed and I said, Hey, I'm getting nothing back. I traveled all the way here to Bude Cornwall to talk with. He's not talking with her and I just want to tell her how important the cards were. And I will never forget. She turned to me and she said, Oh, the cards weren't that important to her. People were.

It's appropriate that this person who searched for community throughout her life gave people an instrument to find guidance in their lives. I think she embodied the question of how to live your best life, how to live your most authentic life when society's conventions are telling you to stick to the path of least resistance, even though it's a path that was never designed for you.

ELIZABETH: One of the elements of Colman Smith's persona and self really not even her persona of who she was that she does manage to inflect into the deck is that creativity that mischievousness that space for people to explore various connections that they may not have previously seen. Because that was something that over and over and over again I have found and Colman Smith's life, she was constantly making connections between disparate worldviews, disparate mythologies, disparate things and bringing them together into

something that had residents her. I think she gives tools for people to begin to tap into things that they might not be aware of.

That's what happened to me when Susan read my cards. I came out of there feeling more confident and self-assured than I had in days.

SUSAN: All right, so that's your reading. Did it strike home at all?

Wow. Like shockingly.

SUSAN: Yeah. Okay, great.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Susan Wands. She wrote a fantasy novel about Pamela Colman Smith called *Magician and Fool*. There's a link in the show notes. And thanks to Elizabeth Foley O'Connor. Her biography of Pamela Colman Smith is scheduled to come out later this year.

And if you'd like to learn about Bram Stoker, I did an episode in January 2016 about the inspiration for *Dracula*. A lot of people think *Dracula* was based on the actor Henry Irving, but there's theory that the real inspiration may have been Buffalo Bill Cody. The episode is called *Dracula From Nebraska*. I also did an episode a few months ago about spiritualism and the occult in the early 20th century called *Talking to the Dead*.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at [emolinsky](#) and [imagine worlds pod](#). I also put a slideshow of her tarot cards, and that picture of her from 1912, on the [Imaginary Worlds Instagram](#) feed.

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