

The Kabbalah Tree, by Rachel Pollack

Reviewed by Frater F.P.

“I think you can delve deeply into the tradition and its images in their most powerful form and still discover it's all about life as people live it. The Tree of Life should be just that, and I think Hermann's painting reminds us of the life in the Tree.”

Rachel Pollack.

Rachel Pollack, author of twelve books on Tarot, including the widely respected “Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom” here turns her attention directly to the Kabbalah and its relationship to Tarot, through an extended analysis of Hermann Haindl’s Tree of Life painting, usefully included as a poster within the book. Pollack has already worked with Haindl to produce two essential titles as companions to his Tarot deck, and spent several weeks with him on that task, so was no stranger to his artwork.

This artwork, blending natural and animal motifs in earthy hues as a backdrop to the Tree of Life, is both complex and simplistic at the same time, interweaving diverse cultural myths and hinting at a common universality. His Tarot has the same approach, with both I-Ching hexagrams, Runes, and Native American imagery woven into the rich tapestry of the deck, setting numerous paths of interpretation and exploration for those seeking beyond the superficial symbolism of other decks.

Pollack’s book is presented as 8 chapters of 156 pages, a 4-page appendix, and a related reading list and index. The poster is included in a small pocket in the inner back sleeve of the book, which does unfortunately mean it is heavily folded – folds which are still evident even when the poster is framed under glass.

The aim of the book is given as an interpretation of the piece of artwork, but – like the Tree of Life itself – this artwork soon forms a structured focal point for Pollack to work against as she examines the shamanistic side of the tree, the use of Hebrew letters to convey a mystical understanding of the Universe, and the history of the Kabbalah itself.

She expands into the Four Worlds of the Kabbalah, then, after taking a break to ponder on the polarities of the Sephiroth, or components of the Tree diagram, she presents two chapters working through the Sephiroth in turn, and a final chapter on the twenty-two paths where she explores the relationship of the Hebrew letters to the Tarot symbolism.

The cover notes of the book quote that she “draws on many unusual sources” and to some extent this is evident, although her main sources include the usual authors such as Regardie, Ponce, Crowley and Scholem. Her most unusual source is Alan Moore, a graphic-novel writer, whose work she refers to a number of times through the book,

particularly his work, “Promethea” (pgs. 95, 129, 133). This is not something I have read, but will no doubt look for if it indeed is based on a Kabbalistic model!

There is much to be gained from reading this book, as either a novice to the Kabbalah or with some experience of the subject, although those looking for an instant key-guide to the correspondences between the two systems will be disappointed by the brevity of the final chapter where the attributions of the Tarot to the Paths – and hence, the Hebrew letters – are examined. There is little also in the way of using the Tree in performing Tarot reading, which is the subject of the brief four-page appendix, although this is compensated by the inclusion of a method of laying the cards out in a four-world reading (pg. 73) which simple method provides deep meaning.

In fact, for me, it was the highlighting of the Kabbalistic idea of the Four Worlds, mainly through the allied concept of PRDS – Paradise – that raises this book above other similar titles. The idea that all things can be interpreted on four levels, from their actual manifestation to their divine source, is fundamental to any reading of the Tarot, the teachings of the Tree, and the universal commonality in all mystical approaches. That this can be summarised in four key letters, and used to unlock a new way of experiencing the world is a gem of a secret within Kabbalah that deserves to be conveyed to a wider audience, and for doing this so clearly, Pollack can be applauded.

This book is not without minor faults, namely an avoidance of examining the complexities of difference between systems, for example, the concept of *gilgul*, or re-incarnation, is not in Kabbalah as it is in Buddhism, etc. There are also broad-brushed phrases such as “western Kabbalah” and “most Kabbalists” which skate over the complexities of difference within the traditions. I also found her reference to Regardie as a “great historian” slightly jarring – other than his publication of the Golden Dawn rituals, indeed a useful historical document – I was unaware of his standing as a historian.

None of these minor issues detract from the work, which is a Llewellyn publication after all, not a PhD thesis! It is refreshing to read a work that never loses sight of the application of the concepts to understanding the world around us, and as Pollack rightly says, “The lines on the Tree do not just construct a diagram, they signify ideas.” (pg. 56)

Websites

Rachel Pollack’s site: <http://www.rachelpollack.com>

Pollack interview dealing with this title and her thoughts on Kabbalah at <http://www.angelfire.com/nm/spiritualwarrior/index.562.html>

Alan Moore information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Moore

My website: <http://www.kabbalahcourse.com>