

The Once upon a Time of Now: Mythic Adventures, Discoveries & Meditations in the Forest of Consciousness

Hope West

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Spiritual and allegorical, the fantasy novel The Once Upon a Time of Now follows a girl in a strange land who absorbs mystical ideas from magical teachers.

In Hope West's fantasy novel *The Once Upon a Time of Now*, a girl and her stuffed elephant set out to solve a mystery.

While she's at the playground with G, her toy elephant, Agnes finds a map inside a popped balloon. Like a portal key, the map transforms the northern landscape into a jungle, and a spider explains to Agnes and G that the map shows the way to a lost temple. A tiger, cheetah, and giraffe join their expedition one by one. Through forest hikes, river forges, and mountain climbs, the friends grow as individuals and as a group. They also meet others who advise them; when Agnes applies their advice, they become capable of reaching an unexpected destination.

Bookended by an introduction that discusses the riches of Indian mythology and a glossary that names the mythical figures upon whom the book's characters are based, this is an accessible allegorical novel. The traits that the cast exhibit are reflective of varieties of seeker-travelers, while the book's whimsical wilderness details, onomatopoeia, and exclamations are evocative. The setting that Agnes traverses is resplendent; it features talking beasts with magical gifts and deities who are reflective of the gods of known parables, and its true dangers are few. Though Agnes is sometimes confused, lost, and overwhelmed, her access to the wisdom and reassurances of others obliterates these conflicts before they can metastasize.

But in the book's second half, the friends' delightful banter gives way to lessons in the form of guided meditations that are embedded in the narrative. Its pace slows because of the many speeches that the characters stop to listen to. With so many interruptions, the goal of reaching the temple becomes more of a hurdle than a true conflict. Action sequences help when it comes to maintaining the book's momentum, as does the fact that Agnes herself is seen to learn from the sessions she enters. Further, there are quotes at the beginning of each chapter that clarify the book's pedagogy, and the story affirms these aphorisms as it goes.

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MARI CARLSON (March 30, 2023)

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