

Karen Comer: Once Upon Tomorrow

How do fairytales help us understand ourselves? What happens when AI collides with ancient craft? How can we carve our own path in a world full of impossible choices?

In this thought-provoking presentation, Karen Comer reveals the creative sparks behind her expansive verse novel about the parallel journeys of three extraordinary girls carving out their own histories – and each other's.

Hear from the award-winning author as she considers the connections between identity, family and climate change and the paradoxes shaping modern life.

FAIRYTALES, ARCHETYPES AND SELF

Once Upon Tomorrow weaves fairytale imagery through contemporary and future storylines.

Why do fairytales continue to resonate across centuries? How do archetypes help us understand our own emotions and choices?

Which fairytale characters or patterns appear echoed in the novel?

Students select a character from the novel and identify:

- one fairytale archetype they connect with (seeker, trickster, orphan, ruler)
- one way the character either fulfils or resists that archetype

Then, complete a short written reflection starting with: *The archetype helps us understand this character because...*

THE THRESHOLD AND LIMINALITY

Use this passage from early in the book, where Miri reflects on The Three Fates shop:

“The Three Fates is a space
b / e / t / w / e / e / n
their work, their home, their fears
– and their creativity.

This space is liminal –
well, that’s how I think Jung would describe it.”
(*Once Upon Tomorrow*, pg. 3)

What does it mean to be “in between” stages of life? Where in the novel do characters stand at thresholds: emotional, social, technological or environmental? How does the idea of liminal space connect to adolescence?

Students should write a short free verse response titled “At the Threshold” about a personal or imagined moment of ending one

stage, or not yet beginning the next. They may echo the style of the passage or create their own.

PARALLEL NARRATIVES

The novel moves between timelines and entwined girls' lives. How do different time periods illuminate recurring problems or hopes? Where do we see continuities of gender, climate, family or technology across eras? What changes, and what doesn't?

Teachers draw a map on board that represents:

- 2025
- 2125
- fairytale time

For each, students should suggest:

- one fear
- one hope
- one moral dilemma

for each time period. Which issues are timeless? Which are new?

THE VERSE NOVEL

Once Upon Tomorrow is written in verse rather than in conventional prose. How does verse affect pacing, mood and emotional intensity? What can the gaps and white space on the page communicate? Which scenes feel more powerful because of the verse form?

Students should rewrite a short scene from the novel once as prose, and again as [free verse](#). Then answer briefly: which version communicates emotion more strongly, and why? Encourage attention to line breaks, repetition and imagery.

COLLIDING FUTURES

The novel interweaves AI, ancient craft traditions, libraries, and climate futures. What tensions arise when technology meets tradition? How does the story imagine future responses to climate damage? What role do libraries, stories and community knowledge play in survival?

Students design a two-column comparison sheet:

1. Ancient practice or story
2. Future technology or system

Then they write a short paragraph addressing: “What is gained, and what is at risk, when these collide?”

Encourage multiple perspectives (hopeful, critical, ambivalent).



Karen Comer



Once Upon Tomorrow is available at Readings.

KEY CURRICULUM AREAS (YEAR 7-10)

Learning areas: English, Humanities/Civics and Citizenship, Technologies/Digital Technologies

Capabilities: Critical and Creative Thinking, Ethical Capability

Foundational Skills: Literacy

Cross-curriculum Priorities: Sustainability