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The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho - review

'This book is brilliantly written. It touches your heart and teaches that every treasure lies in our own hearts'

Trishit
guardian.co.uk, Friday 11 May 2012 10.00 EDT

The story begins with a young Andalusian shepherd boy Santiago sleeping under a sycamore on barren lands.

The Alchemist
by Paulo Coelho



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He sets out to locate treasure, which he dreamed was hidden in the dusty lands of Egyptian Pyramids. A Gypsy who interpreted his dream told him "I am not going to charge you anything now; But I want one-tenth of the treasure, if you find it". She added that he must go to the Pyramids of Egypt to unearth the treasure. And thus he set out in quest for the treasure.

On his way he meets Melchizedek – King of Salem - who tells him that he will help him locate the treasure provided he parts with one-tenth of his sheep. On his way, he works with a crystal merchant in the Tangier market to earn money to buy some sheep.

He works there for almost a month and then sets off on his journey again. On his way through the African desert he meets a

girl called Fatima, who tells him: "Maktub, if I am really part of your dream, you will come back one day"

In an oasis he meets the Alchemist, who teaches him the language of the world, telling him: "Don't think about what you have left behind; everything is written in the soul of the world and there it will stay forever."

On their way the alchemist and the shepherd are taken captive by tribesmen dressed in blue who take them to a nearby military camp thinking they are spies. To make the tribesmen believe, the boy had to accept their challenge and turn into wind and after the wind stops he comes to know about the soul of the world.

He finally arrives at the Pyramids of Egypt. As he starts digging for the treasure, he is surrounded by the refugees of the tribal wars who ask him "What are you hiding there?"

The boy pleads that he was digging for a mysterious treasure. The leader of the group says he too had a dream where he saw a treasure in the fields of Spain, where shepherds and their sheep slept under a ruined church with a sycamore growing out of it. But he was not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a dream. So the boy comes to understand that the greatest treasure is himself.

This book is brilliantly written. It touches your heart as the story comes to an end. It teaches that every treasure lies in our own hearts and there is no need to search for it in the outside world. Search yourself and you get the world. It is recommended for those who love spirituality and for those who would love to read something to make their heart smile...

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THE ALCHEMIST

By Paulo Coelho

New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993

ISBN # 0-06-250218-2 (paper)

174 pages

Comments by Bob Corbett

November 2009

This is a lovely book, tender but profound. It is about the importance of seeking one's own meaning of life and spending one's life fulfilling it. Coelho calls it seeking one's "Personal Legend." It reminds me very much of what the Existentialists would have called "authenticity." However, unlike the Existentialists who write rather darkly about this process of seeking one's own meaning system, Coelho's young shepherd boy is seeking his Personal Legend in something much like a fairy tale. However, Coelho at least gives us a process and set of obstacles we might well expect, and his hero fulfills all four:

First one must discover that our lives are dictated by custom, family, law and tradition and we must be willing to overcome these in order to seek our own unique Personal Legend.

If we get to this first stage we may well run up against love as an obstacle, particularly in believing that in order to have the love of some other we must give up our own Personal Legend and live in a way that the other needs for us. On the author's view this is a mistaken notion of love.



"You must understand that love never keeps a man from pursuing his Personal Legend. If he abandons that pursuit it's because it wasn't true love .. the love that speaks the Language of the World."

Supposing one gets past that second stage and realizes love is not incompatible with one's Personal Legend, then one is likely to run into grave difficulties in realizing this legend and be tempted to give up. It is just too hard. But that would be the great tragedy of one's life, one would have given up what makes life worthwhile in order to avoid the hardships perhaps required to get there.

“My heart is a traitor,” the boy said to the alchemist, when they had paused to rest the horses. “It doesn’t want me to go on.”

“That makes sense,” the alchemist answered. “Naturally it’s afraid that, in pursuing your dream, you might lose everything you’ve won.”

“Well, then, why should I listen to my heart?”

“Because you will never again be able to keep it quiet. Even if you pretend not to have heard what it tells you, it will always be there inside you, repeating to you what you’re thinking about life and about the world.”

“You mean I should listen, even if it’s treasonous?”

“Treason is a blow that comes unexpectedly. If you know your heart well, it will never be able to do that to you. Because you’ll know its dreams and wishes, and will know how to deal with them.”

Shortly after this, they return to this hard subject of discouragement and seeming failures:

“My heart is afraid that it will have to suffer,” the boy told the alchemist one night as they looked up at the moonless sky.

✱ “Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second’s encounter with God and with eternity.”

“Every second of the search is an encounter with God,” the boy told his heart. “When I have been truly searching for my treasure, every day has been luminous, because I’ve known that every bout was a part of the dream that I would find it. When I have been truly searching for my treasure, I’ve discovered things along the way that I never would have seen had I not had the courage to try things that seemed impossible for a shepherd to achieve.”

Finally, when one has embraced all the hardships and fought for and discovered one's Personal Legend, then one is likely to run into the fourth and last obstacle: guilt. We look around us and see that so many others have not achieved this Personal Legend and we become embarrassed that we have and tend to want to deny it or hide it. This too is an obstacle we must overcome. And so we follow this shepherd boy in sort of a pilgrimage from stage one through the final achievement of his Personal Legend. It takes him far from home, through many adventures, failures and successes, and changing notions of what his own Personal Legend is after all.

Coelho writes a beautiful and moving legend of the boy's journey and enlightenment. I did find the title rather odd. There is an alchemist in the novel whom the shepherd boy meets and who, indeed, helps him in many ways and actually sort of makes the shepherd boy into an alchemist himself. But the use of the definite article "the" in the title seems a bit confusing. It would seem, on Coelho's account, that anyone who actually achieves his or her Personal Legend becomes "an" alchemist, changing the baser life we have from birth into the gold of our own Personal Success. But this is a journey upon which any person may embark.

On the other hand Coelho seems right to me in bringing in the influential alchemist whom the boy meets in the north African desert. I think most of us who have seriously undertaken this journey meet people along the way who teach us and inspire us toward this mysterious and even occult route toward our Personal Legend. I'm 70 now and still on my journey, and like the boy, have arrived at various stages I once was almost sure were arrival points, only to discover another stage of enlightenment along the way.

Everyone who is such a seeker should read this optimistic book of one who seems to have succeeded in the process of turning a potentially base life into a golden achievement, a true alchemist's conversion.

Bob Corbett corbetre@webster.edu

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Discussion Questions for The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho

1. At the start of his journey, when Santiago asks a gypsy woman to interpret his dream about a treasure in the Egyptian pyramids, she asks for one tenth of the treasure in return. When Santiago asks the old man to show him the path to the treasure, the old man requests one tenth of his flock as "payment." Both payments represent a different price we have to pay to fulfill a dream; however, only one will yield a true result. Which payment represents false hope? Can you think of examples from your own life when you had to give up something to meet a goal and found the price too high?


2. Paulo Coelho once said that alchemy is all about pursuing our spiritual quest in the physical world as it was given to us. It is the art of transmuting the reality into something sacred, of mixing the sacred and the profane. With this in mind, can you define your Personal Legend? At what time in your life were you first able to act on it? What was your "beginner's luck"? Did anything prevent you from following it to conclusion? Having read *The Alchemist*, do you know what inner resources you need to continue the journey?


3. One of the first major diversions from Santiago's journey was the theft of his money in Tangiers, which forced him into taking a menial job with the crystal merchant. There, Santiago learned many lessons on everything from the art of business to the art of patience. Of all these, which lessons were the most crucial to the pursuit of his Personal Legend?

 4. When he talked about the pilgrimage to Mecca, the crystal merchant argued that having a dream is more important than fulfilling it, which is what Santiago was trying to do. Do you agree with Santiago's rationale or crystal merchant's?

5. The Englishman, whom Santiago meets when he joins the caravan to the Egyptian pyramids, is searching for "a universal language, understood by everybody." What is that language? According to the Englishman, what are the parallels between reading and alchemy? How does the Englishman's search for the alchemist compares to Santiago's search for a treasure? How did the Englishman and Santiago feel about each other?

6. The alchemist tells Santiago "you don't have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation." With this in mind, why do you think the alchemist chose to befriend Santiago, though he knew that the Englishman was the one looking for him? What is the meaning of two dead hawks and the falcon in the oasis? At one point the alchemist explains to Santiago the secret of successfully turning metal into gold. How does this process compare to finding a Personal Legend?

 7. Why did Santiago have to go through the dangers of tribal wars on the outskirts of the oasis in order to reach the pyramids? At the very end of the journey, why did the alchemist leave Santiago alone to complete it?

 8. Earlier in the story, the alchemist told Santiago "when you possess great treasures within you, and try to tell others of them, seldom are you believed." At the end of the story, how did this simple lesson save Santiago's life? How did it lead him back to the treasure he was looking for?



Community Rating ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Hardcover

9780062502179 Trade Cloth
0062502174 Trade Cloth

Softcover

9780062502186 Trade Paper
0062502182 Trade Paper

The Alchemist (Coelho, Paulo) (1988)

Paulo Coelho (Author)

Young Santiago studies to be a priest but changes his profession to that of shepherd so he can travel throughout Spain. A recurring dream encourages him to travel further, for it tells of his finding a treasure far away. Listening to and following his heart, Santiago travels first to Tangier and then to Egypt to see the pyramids. In the conclusion of this charming fable, he also locates his treasure. (177pages)

MAIN CHARACTERS : Santiago, Shepherd

SETTING(S) : Andalusia, Spain, Tangier, Morocco, Egypt, Africa, Arab Countries, Europe, Middle East, Northern Africa, Western Europe

SUBJECT : Fables

TIME PERIOD : Indeterminate Past AD

RECOMMENDED SIMILAR TITLES

- The Alchemist's Daughter - Katharine Mahon
- Aleph - Paulo Coelho
- Fantastic Worlds: Myths, Tales and Stories - Eric S. Rabkin
- The Innkeeper's Song - Peter S. Beagle
- The Little Prince - Antoine de Saint-Exupery
- Red Hook Road - Ayelet Waldman
- The Walk - Richard Paul Evans
- The Year of the Flood - Maragaret Atwood

BEST SELLERS LIST

Chicago Tribune Books Hardback Bestsellers (Chicago): Fiction
Total Number of Weeks: 1
First Appearance: 6/13/1993
Last Appearance: 6/13/1993
Highest Position Achieved: 10

Globe and Mail National Bestseller: Paperback Non-Fiction
Total Number of Weeks: 2
First Appearance: 12/18/1993
Last Appearance: 12/24/1993
Highest Position Achieved: 6

Los Angeles Times Book Review (Southern California): Paperback Fiction
Total Number of Weeks: 20
First Appearance: 10/13/1996
Last Appearance: 4/1/2001
Highest Position Achieved: 2

Publishers Weekly Paperback Bestsellers: Trade
Total Number of Weeks: 4
First Appearance: 5/22/1995
Last Appearance: 6/12/1995
Highest Position Achieved: 13

Gale Document Number: GALE|M1300008187

Gale Database: *What Do I Read Next?*, 2012

SOURCE CITATION : "The Alchemist (Coelho, Paulo)." 2012. [Books & Authors](#) Gale. Gale Internal User. 11 Aug 2012 <<http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/start.do?p=BNA&u=gale>>

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About the Author

Full text biography:

Paulo Coelho

Birth Date : 1947

Place of Birth : Brazil, Rio de Janeiro

Nationality: Brazilian

Occupation : Writer

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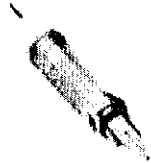
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about this author

Awards:

Prix Lectrices d'Elle, 1995, France; Golden Book, Yugoslavia, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2004; decorated knight of arts and letters of France, 1996; Flaiano International Award of Italy and Super Grinzane Cavour Book Award of Italy, both 1996; decorated commander, Ordem do Rio Branco of Brazil, 1998; Crystal Award, World Economic Forum, 1999; Golden Medal of Galicia, Spain, 1999; decorated *chevalier*, French Legion of Honor, 2000; Crystal Mirror Award of Poland, 2000; XXIII Premio Internazionale Fregene, 2001; Bambi Award, Hubert Burda Media, 2001; Planetary Arts Award and Best Fiction Corine Award for best fiction, both Club of Budapest, 2002; Corine International Award for best fiction, 2002, and Nielsen Gold Book Award, 2004, both for *The Alchemist*; *The Alchemist* was also voted 'one of the nation's 100 best-loved novels' by the British public as part of the British Broadcasting Corporation "Big Read" campaign, 2003; Golden Bestseller Prize, *Vecernje Novosti*, 2004; Ex Libris Award, 2004, for *Eleven Minutes*; Order of St. Sophia, 2004, for contribution to revival of science and culture; Order of Honor of Ukraine, 2004; Budapest Prize, 2005; Goldene Feder Award, 2005; DirectGroup International Author Award, 2005; Platin Book Award and Kiklop Literary Award, both 2006, for *The Zahir*; I Premio Álava en el Corazón, 2006; Cruz do Mérito do Empreendedor Juscelino Kubitschek, 2006; Wilbur Award, Religion Communicators Council, 2006; Las Pergolas Prize, Association of Mexican Booksellers, 2006; Hans Christian Andersen Award Distinction of Honor, City of Odense, 2007; a street was named in the author's honor in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 2008; named best international writer, 2008, by *Elle* magazine.

Personal Information:

Born August 24, 1947, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; son of Pedro (an engineer) and Lygia (a homemaker) Coelho; married fourth wife, Christina Oiticica (an artist). **Education:** Attended law school. **Religion:** Roman Catholic. **Memberships:** Bazilian Academy of Letters.

Career Information:

Writer. Worked as a journalist, a theater director, and a popular songwriter (often working with Raul Seixas); worked as a recording executive in late 1970s, first for the Polygram record label, then for the Columbia Broadcasting System; actor, appearing in the films *Amor em Quatro Tempos*, 1970, *Mansos, Os*, 1973, and *Tangarela, a tanga de cristal*, 1976, television miniseries *Labirinto*, 1998, and television series *Eterna magia*, 2007; appeared in documentary films and on television and radio programs across the world. Affiliate of Alternative Society, beginning 1973; imprisoned, 1974, for alleged subversive activities against the Brazilian government, activities associated with the "Kring-ha" comic strips series he created with Seixas. Instituto Paulo Coelho (nonprofit organization to assist underprivileged Brazilian

children and the elderly), founder with wife, Christina Oiticica, 1996; special advisor to UNESCO program "Spiritual Convergences and Intercultural Dialogues"; Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, board member, 2001--.

Writings:

- *Arquivos do inferno*, Shogun Editora e Arte (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1982.
- (With Fernanda Ferreira) *Os símbolos do tempo*, Litexa Portugal (Lisbon, Portugal), 1985.
- *O diário de um mago*, Editora Eco (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1987, translation by Alan R. Clarke published as *The Diary of a Magus: The Road to Santiago*, HarperSanFrancisco (San Francisco, CA), 1992, translation by Alan Clarke published as *The Pilgrimage: A Contemporary Quest for Ancient Wisdom*. 1995.
- *O alquimista*, Rocco (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1988, translation by Alan R. Clarke published as *The Alchemist: A Fable about Following Your Dream*, HarperSanFrancisco (San Francisco, CA), 1993, translation illustrated by French artist Moebius and published as *The Illustrated Alchemist: A Fable about Following Your Dream*, HarperFlamingo (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Brida* (also see below), Editora Rocco (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1990, translation by Margaret Jull Costa published as *Brida*, Harper (New York, NY), 2008.
- *O Dom Supremo (The Gift)*, Editora Rocco (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1991.
- *As Valkírias*, Editora Rocco (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1992, translation by Alan R. Clarke published as *The Valkyries: An Encounter with Angels*, HarperSanFrancisco (San Francisco, CA), 1995.
- *Maktub*, Editora Rocco (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1994.
- *O Monte Cinco*, Objetiva (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1996.
- *A orilla del río Piedra me senté y lloré*, HarperSanFrancisco (San Francisco, CA), 1996.
- *La quinta montaña*, Editora Objetiva (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1996, translation by Clifford E. Landers published as *The Fifth Mountain*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Love Letters from a Prophet*, Pergaminho (Portugal), 1997.
- *Manual do guerreiro da luz* (collection of newspaper articles), Editora Objetiva (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1997, translation by Margaret Jull Costa published as *The Manual of the Warrior of Light*, HarperCollins (London, England), 2002, and as *Warrior of the Light: A Manual*, HarperCollins Publishers (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Brida* (television series based on the author's book of the same title), 1998.
- *Paulo Coelho: Confissões de um peregrino*, Editora Objetiva (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1999, translation by Anne McLean published as *Paulo Coelho: The Confessions of a Pilgrim*, Harper Collins (London, England), 2001.
- *Histórias para pais, filhos e netos*, Editora Globo (Sao Paulo, Brazil), 2001.
- *Onze minutos*, Editora Rocco (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 2003, translation by Margaret Jull Costa published as *Eleven Minutes*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Zahir: A Novel of Obsession*, translated by Margaret Jull Costa, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2005.
- *A Bruxa de Portobello* (novel), 2006, translation by Margaret Jull Costa published as *The Witch of Portobello: A Novel*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2007.
- *Life: Selected Quotations* illustrated by Anne Kristin Hagesther, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2007.
- *O vencedor está só*, Agir (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 2008, translation by Margaret Jull Costa published as *The Winner Stands Alone: A Novel*, HarperCollins Publishers (New York, NY), 2008.
- *Aleph*, Knopf New York, NY), 2011.

Author of *Ser como o rio que flui*. ... Author, with Raul Seixas, of "Kring-ha," a series of comic strips, during 1970s.

Author of a column in *O Globo*, also syndicated worldwide. Contributor to periodicals. Author of a series of daily Internet messages. Author of blog and online magazine, *Warrior of Light*. Author of newsletter *The Manual On-Line*.

Collaborated on design of computer games *The Pilgrim*, *The Legend*, and *The Secrets of Alamut (The Arxel Guild)*, all adapted from his books. Contributor to *Diário da revolução, 1974: o dia 25 de abril* (sound recording), Guilda da Musica (Portugal), 1974.

Coelho's works have been translated into more than fifty-five languages in more than one hundred countries.

"AND ON THE SEVENTH DAY" TRILOGY

- *Na margem do rio Piedra eu sentei e chorei*. Rocco (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1994, translation by Alan R. Clarke published as *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, HarperSanFrancisco (San Francisco, CA), 1996.
- *Veronika decide morrer*. Objetiva (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 1998, translation by Margaret Jull Costa published as *Veronika Decides to Die*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2000.
- *O demonio e a Srta. Prym*. Editora Objetiva (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), 2000, translation by Amanda Hopkinson and Nick Caistor published as *The Devil and Miss Prym*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2006.
- *And on the Seventh Day* (contains *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*, *Veronika Decides to Die*, and *The Devil and Miss Prym*), HarperCollins (Sydney, Australia), 2004.
- *Veronika Decides to Die* (screenplay based on the book), 2008.

Media Adaptions:

The Alchemist: A Fable about Following Your Dream has been adapted and produced on all five continents in various theatrical forms, including musicals, dance theater, puppets, dramatized readings, and opera; French composer Walter Taieb wrote *The Alchemist's Symphony*, recorded by BMG Classics; film rights were purchased by Warner Bros.; and a Broadway production is planned. *Eleven Minutes* was optioned for film by Italian producer Gianni Nunnari and Hollywood Gang Productions. *Veronika Decides to Die* was optioned by Muse Productions and adapted for the stage. Other works, such as *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* and *The Devil and Miss Prym*, were also adapted for the stage. Coelho's works have been adapted for miscellaneous other products, such as diaries, calendars, journals, appointment books, art books, and electronic games. The 1979 screenplay *Amante Latino* was based on a story by Coelho.

Sidelights:

Brazilian author Paulo Coelho has penned several books that have been translated into English and numerous other languages. They include *The Diary of a Magus: The Road to Santiago* and *The Valkyries: An Encounter with Angels*. According to a reviewer writing in the *Economist*, Coelho's "stories are packed with proverbs, parables and advice (or 'sharings' as he prefers) that resemble entries in a New Age self-help manual: pursue your dreams, resist temptation, banish 'negative thoughts,' listen to your heart." The author's debut novel and perhaps most popular book, *The Alchemist: A Fable about Following Your Dream* "transformed Coelho ... a self-described former hippie, into Brazil's best known literary export," reported *Time International* contributor Julie K.L. Dam, noting that the "South American author of fables about soul-searching" shrugs off the title of guru, believing himself to be "merely addressing his own inner questions." Coelho's only motivation in creating *The Alchemist*, according to the author's declarations in a *UNESCO Courier* interview with Baghat Elnadi and Adel Rifaat, was "to write about what I firmly believe, which is that everybody needs to live out their personal legend."

Despite being a favorite of readers, Coelho often endures criticism from reviewers, who, as the *Economist* contributor noted, "denounce him as a charlatan, a bore, a seller of snake oil." Although critics recognize readers' interest in Coelho's writing, they often fault his text. For example, Ilene Cooper, in her assessment of the English translation *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* for *Booklist*, claimed that despite the occasional interest, charm, and vibrancy of the story, "it is ... occasionally muddled, especially in its theology, which is only vaguely explained." More positively in an *Americas* review, Barbara Mujica referred to *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* as "a sensitive, deeply moving [novel] ... sure to become a classic." Mujica commented: "Although some elements of the literary establishment may pooh-poo Coelho's writing, calling it trendy and middle brow, the wide appeal of the author's earlier books demonstrates that he touches a chord in his reader."

While explaining his beliefs in the *UNESCO Courier* interview, Coelho stated that he "was raised by the Jesuits" and ended up leaving "the Catholic church precisely because it had been forced on [him]." "At those times [when we need collective adoration and prayer], we turn to religion. Religion is there to satisfy a desire to belong to the community, to find brothers and sisters. But," informed Coelho, "it does not show us the path to God." The author conceives spirituality, art, and science as overlapping entities, but warns that "certain things ... [are] very dangerous to mix up." He added: "The experience of faith belongs to an order of reality that cannot be reduced to the world of concepts or be forced into a scientific mould." Earlier in the interview, Coelho explained his belief that "mystery is part of the human

condition." The author also commented: "I do trust those who have sufficient humility to respect the mystery surrounding our lives and to acknowledge that there are major reasons that are beyond our understanding."

The Alchemist concerns the journey of a young Spanish shepherd to Egypt. As his odyssey progresses, the shepherd undergoes a spiritual transformation and receives sage advice from various old men, gypsies, desert people, and an alchemist he encounters along the way. Coelho used the tale *Thousand and One Nights* to lead him when creating *The Alchemist*, as he explained in the *UNESCO Courier* interview: "I took four guiding ideas from it: the personal legend, the language of signs, the soul of the world, and the need to listen to one's heart." The author also noted: "The rest was vague, like being in a fog. The only thing I knew was that the boy would eventually return to his starting point."

The Alchemist did not receive widespread critical attention in the United States, although the novel did generate some favorable reviews. *School Library Journal* contributor Sabrina Fraunfelter commented that "this simple, yet eloquent parable celebrates the richness of the human spirit." A reviewer observed in *Publishers Weekly* that *The Alchemist* "has the comic charm, dramatic tension and psychological intensity of a fairy tale." *Booklist* contributor Brad Hooper noted: "Beneath this novel's compelling story and the shimmering elegance with which it's told, lies a bedrock of wisdom about following one's heart."

Mixed reviews also followed the Coelho novel translated as *The Fifth Mountain*. In a review in *Publishers Weekly*, a contributor called the book a "quiet retelling of the story of the biblical prophet Elijah," adding that work is "a passable approximation of the King James version" and warned that Coelho might have "'humanized' Elijah into puniness." Ray Olson reported in *Booklist* that Coelho "greatly expands upon the biblical account." According to Olson, in Coelho's "take on the prophet Elijah's time of exile with a widow," Elijah "becom[es] a respected citizen." "Neither dull nor preachy," noted *Library Journal* contributor Ann H. Fisher, the "smoothly" updated tale is propelled by "Elijah's introspective struggle with faith." Barbara Mujica wrote in *Americas* that "in this lovely retelling of an age-old story, Coelho captures Elijah's humanity and turns him into an Everyman. Like all of us, Elijah is an individual with a particular mission, a particular contribution to make, but it is only by questioning, grappling, and 'struggling with the angel' that he can come to terms with his destiny."

As a young man, Coelho was committed to mental hospitals on three occasions by his parents, who did not understand their son's wish to become an artist. In the novel translated as *Veronika Decides to Die*, Coelho revisits these experiences and questions involuntary commitment. A writer for *Kirkus Reviews* described the novel as "a touching, if overexplicit, fable about learning to live in the face of death." His protagonist, Veronika, twenty-four and working in a library in Ljubljana, Slovenia, despairs over her inability to make changes in her life and the world. She overdoses on sleeping pills in a suicide attempt and finds herself in Villette, an infamous asylum for the insane, where she receives information from Dr. Igor that she has weakened her heart and will die in a week. This prognosis is the jolt that gives her the will to live.

"Employing his trademark blend of religious and philosophical overtones," wrote a *Publishers Weekly* contributor, "Coelho focuses on his central question: why do people go on when life seems unfair and fate indifferent?" The reviewer added that *Veronika Decides to Die* "will appeal to readers who enjoy animated homilies about the worth of human existence." As Veronika meets other patients and becomes aware of their diagnoses and treatments, she questions the definitions of mental illness and the use of drugs to alter people who fall outside the usual descriptions of normal. Following the original publication of the book in Brazil, new laws were put in place to lessen the ease of involuntary commitment. In 1998, with book sales exceeding twenty-seven million in over one hundred countries, Coelho became the second-best-selling author worldwide.

The novel translated as *The Devil and Miss Prym* concludes the "And on the Seventh Day" trilogy, which includes *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* and *Veronika Decides to Die*. According to the author on the HarperCollins Web site: "Each of the three books is concerned with a week in the life of ordinary people, all of who find themselves suddenly confronted by love, death and power." On the Web site, the author commented: "I think we are always asking ourselves questions such as Are we good or are we bad? How do we deal with these contradictions? The main idea behind the book was to show that although we have inner conflicts, we can overcome them. We can move towards a better way of living in the sense that it is much more intelligent, more practical to be good rather than evil."

The story in *The Devil and Miss Prym* begins with a stranger carrying eleven gold bars coming to the small and quiet town of Viscos. But the stranger, a former arms dealer named Carlos, has not come alone. Accompanied by the devil, Carlos tells the townspeople that all they need to do to claim the gold bars is to come up with a murdered person within a week. If they do, they all will be rich. Carlos confides in Chantal Prym, an orphan and bartender, who is the only one who knows that Carlos is out to prove that people are essentially evil. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor called the book "quite a little Garden of Eden potboiler." Referring to the novel as "excellent" in a review in *Booklist*, Margaret Flanagan added that it is a "provocative morality tale."

In the novel translated as *Eleven Minutes*, Coelho tells the story of a Brazilian woman who at the age of nineteen goes to Sweden to find fame and fortune, only to eventually decide to become a prostitute, albeit one with a high-class clientele. Part of her decision is based on her growing belief that one person can only truly know or own another person during the act of sex, which typically takes about eleven minutes. In an interview on the HarperCollins Web site, the author explained the fundamental idea behind his novel: "We live in a world of standardised behaviour, standardised beauty, quality, intelligence, efficiency. We believe there is a standard for everything, and we believe, too, that if we stick to that standard we'll be safe. Because of this, we have created a kind of standardised sex, which, in fact, consists of nothing but a string of lies." The author went on to note: "As a direct consequence of this, millions of people have been left feeling frustrated, unhappy and guilty."

Writing in the *Library Journal*, Anne Berard compared the book to *The Alchemist*, noting that the primary characters in both books adhere to the idea of "the power of destiny and rely on their inner voices." In a review in *Booklist*, Whitney Scott called the book "a gripping exploration of the potentially sacred nature of sex within the context of love." Noting the novel's "down-to-earth dialogue and detail," a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor went on to call the novel "one of Coelho's strongest."

Coelho again called upon his interest in the spiritual world of humans and reawakenings in the novel translated as *The Zahir: A Novel of Obsession*. The title word "Zahir" relates to the idea of obsession in Arabic. The story revolves around a writer whose wife has disappeared with someone who is most likely her lover. The writer's search to find out exactly what happened to his wife takes him from Paris to Kazakhstan but is in reality a journey of self-discovery as he learns that he really can never find his wife until he finds himself. Margaret Flanagan, writing in *Booklist*, noted that the author "continues to prove himself a contemporary fabulist, spinning irresistible stories while seeking enlightenment at the same time." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor noted: "Coelho's plain prose does go down easily." In a review in the *Library Journal*, Joy St. John wrote that the author "has written an enlightening story of faith and the reclamation of pure love."

A Bruxa de Portobello, which was later translated as *The Witch of Portobello: A Novel*, continues with the author's fascination for the spiritual world in his fiction. In an interview published on his home page, he explained how he got the idea for the main character: "In October 2005, I met in Transylvania a roma stewardess that inspired me [to write] the story of Athena. She told me how she had been adopted by an Austrian family and about her gypsy roots. Of course, she was the starting point of the novel; many aspects came from a myriad of situations and people I met along the way. I'm also portrayed in this character." Athena, whose story is told through the viewpoints of multiple characters who knew her and who are interviewed after her death, leads a remarkable life. As a child, she has visions of the future, predicting that her adoptive home of Beirut will be stricken by war, so she and her parents move to London. She attends university but finds little satisfaction in studying economics. Instead she marries young and gives birth to a son. These decisions in her life are compelled by her need to fill a void within her. When marriage fails to be fulfilling, she divorces, finds work at a bank, and seeks spiritualism in a dance reminiscent of that practiced by the Whirling Dervishes. Teaching the dance to her coworkers increases their productivity, but more to the point, she transforms into Hagia Sophia, a goddess who can speak with spirits. She gains followers, but also detractors, who call her the Witch of Portobello.

Continuing her quest for fulfillment takes Athena to other locales, such as Dubai, where she learns the art of calligraphy; then it takes her back to Romania, where she seeks out her birth mother. She eventually meets a Scottish woman named Deidre O'Neill, who becomes her mentor and spiritual guide. Returning to England, Athena's old enemies catch up to her, and a witch hunt ensues, ending in tragedy. These details in her life are pieced together by her biographer, a character who was one of her former lovers and who is now trying to discover more about her by interviewing all those people who were involved in her life. Within the narrative, observed a *Publishers Weekly* critic, "Coelho veers between

his signature criticism of modern life and the hydra-headed alternative that Athena taps into." Some critics were less than impressed with the work, however, with Anna Katterjohn expressing in a *Library Journal* review that "the plot is tired until the end, when the witch is revealed as an unsettled, egotistical martyr," and a *Kirkus Reviews* writer calling it a "disappointing rehash of pretty conventional spirituality." Margaret Flanagan in *Booklist*, however, considered *The Witch of Portobello* to be another fine example of Coelho's "spellbinding examinations of the human soul."

In 2008 Coelho's novel *Brida*, first published in Brazil in 1990, was finally translated into English, its title remaining unchanged. In it, he tells the tale of the Irish woman, Brida O'Fern, who is on a spiritual path and turns to witchcraft to gain knowledge. The work is supposedly the real story of a young woman Coelho met on a pilgrimage. Brida leaves her native Dublin to go to the woods, there to seek out a wizard called Magus, with whom she hopes to learn the art of magic. The Magus identifies her immediately as a kindred spirit, a Soul Mate, and takes her into his tutelage for a time. But Brida eventually is sent to another teacher, Wicca, who initiates her into the Tradition of the Moon and other magical disciplines, including the tarot and how to enter trance states. She experiences past lives through the guidance of Wicca, always looking for her true path. She must also come to grips with her growing fascination with and attraction to Magus. Brida's journey of self-discovery takes her through early Celtic spirituality, paganism, and pantheism as well as the teachings of Christians such as Saint Paul and Saint Augustine. Ultimately Brida finds a form of self-fulfillment in her search and can, at the end, accept the fact that she has supernatural powers. Along the way, Brida also learns that true love is one of the greatest secrets of all, and the most liberating.

Booklist contributor Margaret Flanagan offered a positive assessment of this work, noting that, though "slighter than some of Coelho's philosophically meatier novels, *Brida* is still a journey well worth taking." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor was less enthusiastic, commenting that Coelho "whitewashes witchcraft" in the story of *Brida*. The contributor concluded: "This patchy melange of vaguely Gnostic sounding aphorisms and not much action ... will mostly appeal to Coelho's diehard devotees." *Library Journal* contributor Joy St. John, on the other hand, found Coelho to be a "masterful spiritual storyteller," further noting that the author "pulls through the common threads of love, faith, and the journey of the soul."

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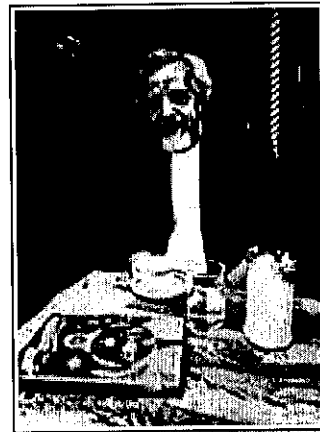
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Welcome to the Interviews section of Worldguide!
You have found the October 14, 1995 interview with author Paulo Coelho, aired on the Futurist Radio Hour in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Now a conversation with Paulo Coelho, the author of *The Alchemist*. Among Latin American writers, only Columbia's Gabriel Garcia Marquez is more widely read than Brazil's Paulo Coelho, says "The Economist." The conversation was recorded at the Cafe Trieste in San Francisco. The sharp clink of silverware hitting the plate, animated conversations and the gurgle of coffee being brewed fills the background in a wash of sound.



[Click here](#) to visit Paulo Coelho's Home Page.

Photo courtesy of HarperCollins



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COELHO: So, the first time that I was in San Francisco it was during the beginning of the seventies. As a hippie, I was crossing America -- Well, I begin with two hundred dollars in my pocket, and I arrive in Mexico city with one hundred dollar left, so... it was quite a fantastic experience because at that time I didn't speak English at all. But there was a solidarity among young people that, well, helped me cross this country and go that far. So, that was it.

CAPEN: So, when did you start writing, and what motivated you to become a writer?

COEHLO: Well, my dream was always to become a writer, but when I went to my mother to tell her that I would like to write books and become a writer, she said, "Well, of course you can do this, but first you enroll yourself in the law school, become a lawyer, and then (laughs) you'll be able to write in your spare time. Which I did, of course, because sometimes you feel very insecure about the future. But it was then that the hippie generation arrived, and give me strength to quit everything, to quit the law school and started to pursue my dream -- to follow my dream. But I didn't yet write books until 1986 when I wrote my first book, that is currently published here as *The Pilgrimage*. After that, that time, I was writing, you know, for television, for newspapers, and even lyrics for rock songs that are very popular in Brazil. But *The Pilgrimage*, my first book, I wrote when I was almost thirty-eight years old. I'm now forty-eight.



CAPEN: What is it that moves you to write? What inspires you? What are the -- what are you trying to get at in your writing?

COEHLO: In a certain way I try to share with my readers my inner quest, that's basically my spiritual quest. I don't have anything to teach, I don't have anything to explain about the universe, I don't believe in explanations of the universe, but actually I do have something to share. It is how I am experiencing this strange and sometimes very tricky path. So, in all my books, *The Pilgrimage* is my journey to Santiago del Compostella. I walked from France to Spain during fifty-six days. It is my

journey in that sacred road, and very ancient one.

The Alchemist is about -- well, it is a fable about the necessity we have to follow our dreams, and now The Valkyries, where I try to share my experience of being in the Mojave Desert with my wife for forty days. What surprised me the most is that this book became a worldwide success -- I sold nearly ten million copies of all of them, of course, and some that are not yet translated into English. There, by sharing something, I realized that I'm not alone, that there is a lot of people that share with me the same preoccupations, the same ideas, the same ideals, and the same quest for a meaning for this life.



CAPEN: Do you think there's a void along those lines, in this world, of some sort of spiritual connection?




COELHO: I think that we are starting to get much more conscious about, you know, the importance of the spiritual path, and we are fulfilling it by paying attention to ourselves, by paying attention to, well, the connection that we have every single day with the soul of the world. We have this language of the omens, the language of the signs. It is an alphabet that is directed to us. If we do not fear to commit mistakes, if we take the omens as a warning, as a help to cross that particular day, then we start to get deeper and deeper into the soul of the world. Well, to find, not the meaning of life because I believe in mysteries, I believe that there is a mystery that goes far beyond our understanding. But at least to know that there is something for us to do here and we have to do.

CAPEN: So there is this other world that people

really need to try and pay attention to, other than this mundane world we have in front of us: too many hours of work a day, too many responsibilities, too many entanglements in most people's lives. But, did it ever occur to -- I mean, your book is wildly popular, *The Alchemist* is just unbelievably popular around the world. But, did it ever occur to you that if everybody started paying attention to these things, to this other world, that homes would break apart, and families would break-up, and people would lose their jobs by the tens of thousands if they pursued this sort of quest?


COELHO: Uh, yes! They will lose their jobs, they will start to having problems, but it is the only choice because in any case you have to pay a price for your dreams. On the other hand, I would not separate the mundane world and the spiritual one, because as far as alchemy goes, this is the art of projecting into this world, and to the material world, all our spiritual quests, so we have to mix this instead of separating it, and leading a life that is not connected with the spirituality. What I expect is that we will be brave enough to quit jobs, and to break some pacts, and then, after difficult times, we will realize that there is a meaning and that the universe has in fact has conspired to put all the pieces of this puzzle together by giving us, you know, a clue to follow our destiny. But don't expect that this will be a very, you know easy, road. It is a road that has all the problems as the road of someone who is not following his or her dreams. However, the price for a jacket that suits you, it is the same price of a jacket that is horrible and doesn't suit you, or is a size bigger than your own. So, well we must be prepared to pay the price, then any difficulty will make sense. On the other hand, if you do not follow your dreams, a difficulty is just a difficulty, it is just a difficult

moment, and doesn't make any sense.




CAPEN: So without -- there are probably very few people who have not read *The Alchemist* yet, but without giving the ending away, this boy goes on a spiritual quest. You certainly deliver this story with beautiful wit and humor, and call for a great deal of courage along that path as well, but there's a funny twist at the end which really resolves the whole thing. I don't know if we can really discuss it without giving this away, you know. But you have to go through this sort of gauntlet, these rigors, and yet you end up in a place which probably you would not expect to end up in.

COEHLO: Exactly! But, even if everything that you need is near you, you should go forward to find that, because there is no shortcuts. I mean, the keys of the chapel -- boy, I also don't want to discuss the end of the book because it is a very interesting one -- but, in any case this shepherd boy, that we are all this shepherd boy, he has to leave the things that he is used to, and then, by traveling, he starts to discover a new being inside himself. He start to discover his own capacity and possibilities, but there were no other way, because then he's detaching himself from the routine. I'm not saying that you cannot discover the universe in a daily life basis of repeating the same, you know, job -- you can do this. You can do this, but you can now get blind by seeing each day as a similiar one. Each day is a different one, each day brings a miracle of its own. It's just a matter to pay attention to this miracle. So, if we do this we will succeed in discover the clues of our destiny, even if we do the most boring, you know, task every single morning.



CAPEN: Paulo, your new book, *The Valkyries*, is this something of a continuation of *The Alchemist*?

COELHO: No. In fact, *The Valkyries* and *The Pilgrimage*, they are nonfiction books. They are, I am experiencing my path. So, I always propose tasks to myself and I try to fulfill them. To also avoid, because as anybody else, I have this tendency to getting used to, well, to everything. So, once in a while I propose to myself different tasks and *The Valkyries* is my experience with my wife into the desert, into the Mojave Desert. We went there to, well, to have a spiritual contact with angels in 1988, and I tried not only to show the task itself, but also, oh, the complexities inside someone who is trying to following in his spiritual path. I mean because the clue is not the Valkyrie, we have problems, we are sometimes not as good as we should be. But even though, this cannot keep us away from the spiritual path. We have to accept ourselves as we are and stop worrying, instead of trying to become perfect and then start working. So, I myself I have a lot of things that, well, can be barely described as not, you know, typical politically correct type, but even though, I'm not ashamed to follow this path and I know that in a certain way God is understanding of what I am doing. This is very important for me. Because we have to pay attention to this, we have to know that, as I said before, that someone is watching even if we don't understand what we are doing, we are doing something very meaningful.



CAPEN: It's safe to say that at times that maybe God is the only one who is understanding what you're doing and the path that makes sense to you.

COEHLO: Yes. Even if we do not (laughs) understand that he is understanding! If we do not realize that he is paying attention to us, but most of all it is he/she who controls the meaning of the soul of the world. If he's there, if he/she's there, well everything starts to have a meaning. So, also not to be ashamed to pray and to ask for help that can come from heaven. Sometimes we try to behave very much like adults, and we do not understand that, it's just like Jesus Christ said once, that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the children. So we have to be children ourselves in order to be amazed by the experience of a day of the sunshine, of the nighttime, of the moon. So we -- by being children, we can go into the experience of life.

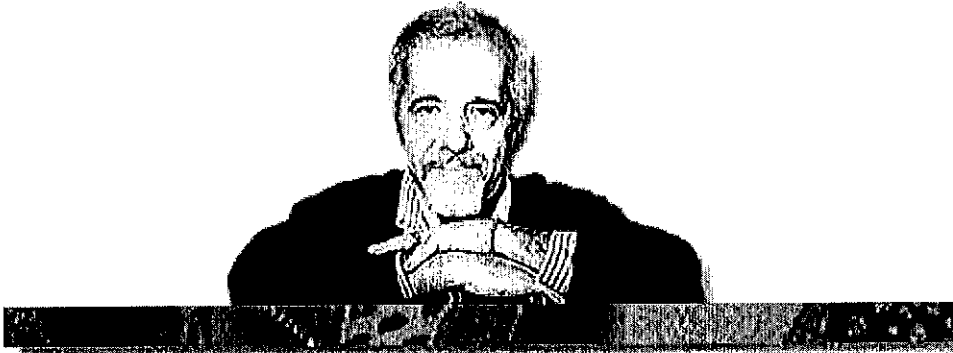
CAPEN: Do you think eventually that might hurt corporate profits, Paulo?

COEHLO: (Laughs.) Yeah. Yes. But, uh -- that's -- (Laughs again.)

CAPEN: Do you have a favorite part of *The Alchemist*? Is there one passage or section that is -- that means so much to you?

COEHLO: Yes, there was a moment when I was writing *The Alchemist* that I thought I had been trapped in the writing because, in fact, I wrote *The Alchemist* in fifteen days. Not fifteen days, but thirty-nine years and fifteen days. Picasso probably was poor. (Laughs.) And there was a moment in *The Alchemist* when the boy has to change himself into the wind, and when I reached that moment, I thought, I don't know how to end this part of the book. But, in fact, the book wrote itself, and I had it. So I think, for me, this is not a favorite part, but I remember it as clear as the day that it was -- the most difficult moment in writing it and that the

universe conspired to help me.



CAPEN: Would you like to read from the book?

COELHO: So, at that moment in the book the boy's there and he's challenged to transform himself into the wind. He starts -- the book *The Alchemist*, is not -- is very realistic, besides that part. And the boy starts to try to relate himself with the Nature, and then, I will read:

The boy looked out at the horizon. There were mountains in the distance, and there were dunes, rocks, and plants that insisted on living where survival seemed impossible. There was the desert that he had wandered for so many months. Despite all that time, he knew only a small part of it. Within that small part, he had found an Englishman, caravans, tribal wars an oasis with fifty thousand palm trees and three hundred wells.

"What do you want here, today?" the desert asked him. "Didn't you spend enough time looking at me yesterday?"

"Somewhere you're holding the person I love," the boy said. "So, when I look out over your sands, I'm also looking at her. I want to return to her, and I

need your help so that I can turn myself into the wind."

"What is love?" the desert asked.

And the boy answered, "Love is the falcon's flight over your sands. Because for him, you are a green field from which he always returns with game. He knows your rocks, your dunes, and your mountains, and you are generous to him."

"The falcon's beak carries bits of me, myself," the desert said. "For years I care for his game, for the little water that I have, and then I show him where the game is. And, one day, as I enjoy the fact that his game thrives on my surface, the falcon dives out of the sky, and takes away what I've created."

"But that's why you created the game in the first place," the boy answered. "To nourish the falcon. And the falcon then nourishes man. And, eventually, man will nourish your sands, where the game will once again flourish. That's how the world goes."

"So is that what love is?"

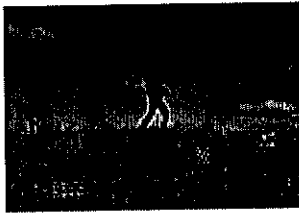
"Yes, that's what love is. It's what makes the game become the falcon, the falcon become the man, and man, in his turn, become the desert. It's what turns lead into gold, and makes the gold return to the earth."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," the desert said.

"But you can at least understand that somewhere in your sands there is a woman waiting for me. And that's why I have to turn myself into the wind."

CAPEN: Paulo Coelho. His latest book, *The Valkries*. This is the Futurist Radio Hour.

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Stephen Capen

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