

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW FROM FRANCE

PAULO COELHO: BOW, ARROW & TARGET

Paulo Coelho's house, in the foothills of the French Pyrenees, is alarmingly modest for a man of such fame and success. It is a converted watermill some 40km from Pau, in the French Basque country, its old preserved stonework combined with new glass and slate additions. Mr. Coelho was in the back garden chopping wood when I arrived to meet him. "Everyone expects to find a mansion here," he smiles and I couldn't refute him.

WRITTEN BY DON DUNCAN PHOTOS BY KATERINA TOPOLAC



THE PILGRIMAGE FROM BRAZIL TO FRANCE

Coelho's journey to this, now his primary residence (he also has an apartment in Paris and one in his native Rio de Janeiro), is an interesting one. He was born in 1947 and came to adolescence in a Brazil seized by a military Junta, unfriendly to liberals and artists. Coelho's non-conformity and will to write and become an artist saw him dabble with the hippie explosion of the 60's. On three separate occasions in his late teens, Coelho was committed by his parents, convinced his behaviour was neurotic, to a psychiatric hospital where he would endure electroshock therapy. Later, his subversive lyrics for 60s Brazilian pop icon Raul Seixas would gain him fame in his country and political notoriety among the secret police who kidnapped and tortured him. This experience terrified Coelho and provoked him to abandon his dreams and choose a corporate life in the vertiginous hierarchy of Brazilian music corporations. And there he stayed until 1986 when he took the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain and decided to return to his dream and write.

He is chopping wood and puts down his axe, welcoming me into his old house with its airy, luminous interior. Having read his novels, I was expecting a mystic's nest: walls covered in spiritual iconography, incense and clutter but his living space is minimal and unambiguous. There are several hints to his internationalism among his furnishings. In a corner there is a cylinder of brightly coloured arrows beside which is propped a sizeable bow. There is a painting on the wall next to the fireplace containing a heart held by hands, the Claddagh, a symbol endemic of Ireland's west coast city Galway. A sketch of a Native American is to be found near the bow and arrows. He brings Brazilian coffee, water and we sit.

DD: Don Duncan PC: Paulo Coelho

DD: So, I know you are fond of travelling and you have spoken about the importance of "Travelling light"? If writing is a voyage, in what ways do you "Travel light"?

PC: The first drafts of my books have twice as many pages as are in the final draft so yes, writing light is to go directly to the point of provoking the reader to use his or her imagination, to fill the empty spaces. That's why writing is something so modern because you leave the page to the imagination.

DD: When you are revising your first draft, what kinds of things you look to cut out?

PC: Descriptions of landscapes and faces and clothes. You know, at the very beginning, when you write the first draft, you need to have something in order to connect yourself with the character so you need faces and clothes and landscapes - descriptions. But then, when you finish that draft, you can easily erase all these things and go to the things that are the most important: human conflict.

DD: But to get to that point, you need to write with detail before you delete it, right?

PC: Yes, so that I can follow the main character. It's basically a tool for the writer, not for the reader. It's a tool to help me write.

DD: Is this about removing distinguishing factors that may diminish the eventual universality of your tales?



The village church of St Martin, where Coelho takes mass.

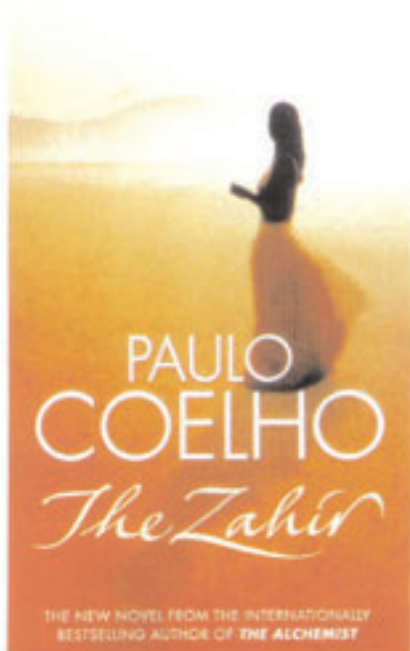




PAULO COELHO'S NEW NOVEL: THE ZAHIR

Already fond of autobiographical "insertions" in his previous work, Paulo Coelho, in his new novel *The Zahir*, makes himself a central character: a very successful and renowned writer who one day is deserted by his wife. "This is the premise, however, the novel," says Coelho, "is about the stories told to us about marriage, about life, about success and about how one day we get stuck, we don't move anymore because we become secure in everything we do from our professional career to our marriage to love." As with other Coelho novels, this story is also an alchemy of his reality and of fiction derived from lived experience. "The main plot concerns his wife leaving him when in reality my own wife is now upstairs," laughs Coelho. The character of the wife is based on a journalist and war correspondent with «The Sunday Times» who once came to interview Coelho and with whom he became friends. It is through the character of the war correspondent wife that *The Zahir* examines, among other things, the transformative effects of living through war, a theme most pertinent in these days. "When you are so close to your limits, to life and death," explains Coelho, "many things change."

Paulo Coelho's new novel *The Zahir* is to be released at of April this year in 81 countries and 42 languages. It is being translated into Chinese and will be released in Hong Kong and China either in the second half of 2005 or the first half of 2006.



PC: This is not what I intend to do. The reader is craving to know what say, France or Belgrade is like, but I am not writing tourist guides, you know.

DD: So what is your centre of focus then?

PC: Human conflict. Human potential.

DD: Does this motivate your writing. What drives your writing?

PC: Well, my own conflict. Writing is a way to discover and better understand myself, my confrontations that I have with myself. What I try to write are timeless novels I don't put a timeframe on it. *The Alchemist* could take place in the 17th century or in the 21st century. And it is not because I don't leave clues. There's a moment [in *The Alchemist*] where the shepherd boy goes to a gypsy and the curtain there is made of plastic. This is the only touch that I added [in the book] to place it in the 20th century.

DD: Why would you choose to leave a detail like that in the text?

PC: In the case of *The Alchemist*, just to offer the possibility of reading the tale as happening in the present moment, but of course, normally the reader does not pay attention to that detail.

DD: I know you were a song writer before. A good song is often a very simple idea conveyed simply yet is very profound. Did your song-writing inform your novel writing in this way?

PC: Yes, I think the same goes for books. My learning shift through lyrics was exactly that. You have to convey, in one sentence, a whole thought. You have to be at the same time poetic and profound and at the same time keep a rhythm. And that's why, and this is just a guess, my books survive translation. They have been translated in 56 languages. When I write, I have in my mind, somehow, the musicality and the rhythm of song.

DD: You've met with astounding success which has continued and I was wondering how you, as a writer, "Keep your head while all about you are losing theirs," as Rudyard Kipling said. How do you stay focussed on your art and your voyage when there is this huge attention and media flurry and promotion every time a book of yours comes out?

PC: For a writer, success is totally abstract. When you arrived today, I was chopping wood and I know that at that moment there were, I would say, thousands of people with my books in their hands but I don't think about that because I don't have this physical contact. I am not a movie star, I am not a pop star and although I may sell more books than many, many groups or singers sell records, I have little direct or visual connection with this reality. I only realise it when I go to a book fair or a conference, then I see it.

DD: But it is now easier to perceive this fame? Because of the internet. I know you have a website which is quite active...

PC: The website (www.paulocoelho.com.br) is basically for people who don't have information about me and my work and then I also publish a newsletter on it every two weeks called "Warrior of the Light Online" in which I share my reflections. What's interesting with the internet is that we are back to the written medium. You write and you read and again you use your imagination.

DD: Yes, many people see the internet as a further degradation commenced with the "Rot" that is TV and video culture. Another nail in the literary coffin, as it were...

PC: I think it is great. It is a way to allow yourself to contact your tribe. That classic idea of the "Global Village" is dead. We're back to the tribes. We're back to the people who think alike, that have something in common and who can interact using the internet. Otherwise you feel alone, like no-one is interested in what you have to say and in your opinions, but with the internet you have all these possibilities: you can have your own television, your own radio, your own newsletter. So you meet people who think like you and then you don't feel so alone and when you don't feel alone you feel an extra step to move forward.

DD: Speaking of tribalism. Why is it that your work is so popular, that so many "Tribes" enjoy and find something of worth in it?

PC: The story about one person is the story about everybody, isn't it? I mean, in the end when I listen to The Beatles, they are talking about me. But how did I manage and not the writer next door? I don't know and I don't think about it.

DD: Most authors would agree that their work is infused with autobiographical detail. Would you label that fiction nonetheless?

PC: Yes, every book is infused with autobiographical detail. You cannot write about things that you... Well in fact you can. There are two types of writer, I suppose: one is Hemingway or Baudelaire who need life experience in order to write and the other is, well, Joyce or Proust who lead an inner journey.

DD: And where would you put yourself?

PC: Well, with Hemingway or Baudelaire. I am not comparing myself to them! But yes, I am a writer who needs life experience [in order to write].

DD: In terms of preparation, what's involved in writing your novels? Do you research much, or...?

PC: No, in terms of preparation, you always have a book in mind that is not the book which wants to be written so you prepare yourself to write a book about A and end up writing a book about B. Somehow, at least for me, in the preparatory period, I am unconsciously writing a book but when I sit in front of the computer I may say: "Ok I'm going to write about - death" and then I try and struggle. I do the research but you feel that it is totally artificial so after forcing yourself through the book that is not ready, you go to the book that is ready and the book is there waiting for you.

DD: In *The Pilgrimage*, you express travel as a perennial rebirth.

PC: Rebirth and destruction. It's like the seasons. No leaves in the trees but the leaves will come back. They will return. This is the cycle, nature's cycle of life so you have to allow yourself to be destroyed and be rebuilt several times in your life and in what you do.

DD: One has several journeys in one's life...

PC: One has several lives in one's life.

DD: And one needs to focus on the detail...

PC: I think you need to focus on the miracle of your daily life more than anything else. I do archery, so I have a target and I have a bow and I have an arrow but my main goal when I do archery is to forget the target and forget the bow and forget the arrow and become the three of them. So the bow, it is your potential, the arrow is your intention and the target, of course, is your objective but each arrow is a different arrow so you don't learn if you shoot perfectly the first time. It does not mean that the next one will be as precise. I think this is what life is all about, having these three tools: an objective, an intention and a goal but also having the understanding that it works differently every time that they move.

DD: Are there other activities you do that parallel your perception of the world in this way? Do you draw comfort from the action, as with your archery, for example, because for you, it corresponds for how you feel about life?

PC: I'm not this classical kind of wise man who meditates and sits and contemplates. No no, I need to move. I need to have tension and at the end, to relax. I can only meditate while I am active not while I am passive.

DD: Do you have any other activities that work in this way?

PC: I walk [laughs]. And it is the same thing. Every day is a different day. Every walk is a different walk. Even if you keep the same track or the same path, it is still a different walk because you have different thoughts. It may be snowing or rainy or sunny or whatever.

DD: And do you see that as spiritual, when inanimate objects seem to reverberate with how you feel your state of being?

PC: What do you mean by spiritual?

DD: Well I mean if you have your bow and arrow and target, for many it can be just those three things.





PC: It can be only those three things but it is a very stupid way to spend your life.

DD: But many people live that way...

PC: Yes absolutely. You can live your life not giving all things the magic contents they have. I would not, however, call this spiritual. I would call it common sense. If every time I shoot an arrow is a repetition of my previous shot, it is nonsense and if the only thing I am trying to do is put the arrow in the centre of the target, this is meaningless. However, when I open the bow and I can see the whole world through it, well, it makes sense and it becomes a very important thing in life: Fun and Joy.

DD: And walking is fun?

PC: Walking is fantastic!

DD: You are quite near the Pilgrim trail to Santiago here?

PC: There are several routes for Santiago but yes, I am 500 metres from one of them. The main route is 150km from here.

DD: In *The Pilgrimage* you talk about a moment when you are walking and come across a bridge that is too big for its stream and you suggest that the stream may have changed course since the bridge was built. Looking back over your writing, do you perceive any bridges that appear too big to you now, the writer-stream? Have your ideologies changed at all?

PC: I am not a bridge. I am much more like a river. And I would say that books are rivers, not bridges.



COELHO'S LITERARY PILGRIMAGE

Published in 150 countries and in 56 languages, and read by millions of people worldwide, Paulo Coelho and his work has come to redefine what a global literary phenomenon is. He has written all his life, winning a poetry competition while at school and passing through writing pop songs, theatre, journalism, TV dramas and stories to arrive, at the ripe age of 38, at novel writing. He has never looked back.

On walking the ancient pilgrim trail across the north of Spain to Santiago de Compostela in 1986, Coelho decided to put himself assiduously to realising his dream to write novels. A year later *The Pilgrimage* was published, relating the journey along the route and the parallel journey Coelho made with himself. It was his next book, *The Alchemist* (1988), which would make Coelho a recognised author the world over. He has since written *Bride* (1990), *The Valkyries* (1992), *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* (1994), *The Fifth Mountain* (1996), *The Manual of the Warrior of Light* (1997), *Veronica Decides to Die* (1998), *The Devil and Miss Prym* (2000) and *Eleven Minutes* (2003).

What recurs throughout Coelho's work is the sense of the 'journey' or 'voyage' both physical and spiritual as first encountered in *The Pilgrimage*. Coelho's core philosophy, a belief which binds his literary universe, is in what he calls 'The Soul of the World,' a conviction that everything has spiritual significance, is connected and can help you in your journey towards your dream if you believe in that dream strongly enough.

His characters are invariably in transition, soul-searching, experiencing a journey which leads eventually to a formative epiphany. It is our journey with these characters that is in part responsible for the pleasure felt by his many readers on reading his texts. Located in various countries and regions of the world, his narratives and allegories are very simple, a feature which has earned him the scorn of not a few critics. However, the simplicity is counterbalanced by a richness of spiritual and philosophical meanderings largely drawn from Judeo-Christian culture yet devoid of setenable religious significance and thus accessible across many nations and creeds.

