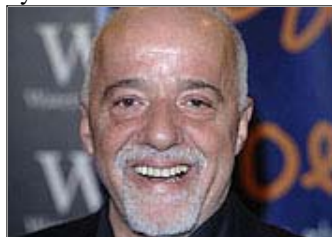




Your views

## 60 SECONDS: Paulo Coelho

by ANDREW WILLIAMS - Tuesday, May 1, 2007



Brazilian author Paulo Coelho has sold almost 90million books. His 1988 novel *The Alchemist* has sold more than 40million copies and has been translated into 63 languages. Although he is often criticised for his simple writing style and New Age philosophy, his fans lap up his allegorical tales. His latest, *The Witch Of Portobello* (HarperCollins), is out now.

What's the new book about?

It's about trying to develop the gifts we all have but deny ourselves – such as intuition and compassion. It's also about the feminine face of God.

That sounds quite esoteric.

Not at all – it's the opposite. The main character works in a bank – dealing with real estate. In the whole book I don't talk about any esoteric thing. I talk about dance and calligraphy. It's about a normal person dealing with the normal challenges of normal life.

Have you lived in Portobello yourself?

Yes, back in 1977. I was in London after a turbulent period of my life when Brazil lived under a military dictatorship. The only way to get around the situation was to live in a foreign country. I chose London because it was a city that seemed magical to me – I used to be a hippie. I chose Portobello because it wasn't expensive. People tell me it has changed a lot now. I don't look back. I don't want to go back and see where I used to live.

Why do your books appeal?

It's difficult to explain because they are translated into many languages and appeal to people from many cultural backgrounds. I write the books for myself but all humankind shares the same questions, even if we don't have the same answers. So I guess that's why they appeal to so many people. I don't set out to address questions that people have, though. When I write, it's to understand myself better.

Do you mind what the critics say? Some are quite mean.

No, no, it's OK. It's not up to me to criticise the critics. It's OK to be criticised, it's not a big deal.

Have you read your reviews?

My parents worried that I wanted to be an artist so they put me in an institution where I underwent electroshock therapy

Oh yes, all of them but I don't mind what they say at all. I read the reviews of my books just the same as I read reviews of other people's books. I never take it personally.

What was it like to be 2003's best-selling author?

It's abstract. I don't have much direct contact with the readers. I just meet them on MySpace or the website or at signings. It's not like being an actor or musician where you have more interaction with your audience. When I see hundreds and hundreds of people at a signing, as I have done in Britain recently, I remember I am not alone and people can somehow understand my heart. When you talk about how I've sold nearly 100million copies – which means I have 300million readers – that becomes very abstract.

Are you tempted to misuse your power for evil?

I write for myself – how can I be a good or bad influence on people? My readers know very well that I'm not trying to teach them anything. Was Henry Miller a bad influence on me? No, I just read his books and thought he was an icon.

Do fans send you any weird things in the post?

Ha ha, like a bomb? No, never. Sometimes they give white feathers at a signing. The tradition is: I finish a book and I get a white feather – but I must find the feather myself.

You've sold millions of books. What have you spent the cash on?

My luxury is travel but my publisher pays for me to travel anyway, so books pay my expenses. My main thing is my institute that looks after 430 children in Rio de Janeiro. I'm trying to make it bigger so we can support 800 children. We take care of children from birth to 16 years old. We teach them, we feed them, we give them love, we work every day on this project. We also support those who are mentally ill because I was in a mental institution when I was 17.

You weren't mad, though.

No, my parents were concerned about my behaviour because I wanted to be an artist. They put me in an institution because they thought no one could make a living

writing. I now support Amnesty International and human rights projects.

You received electroshock therapy in the institution. Did you blame your parents? Never, never. They didn't want to hurt me. It's completely different to being arrested and held in prison for political reasons, which I also went through. My parents thought they were helping me.

Do you still do an hour of archery every day?

I walk every morning and do archery after that. I have a small house in the Pyrenees and I do archery there each day. It is a kind of meditation, it's not just about hitting the target. I would say I'm a six out of ten. I've been doing it for many years.

When will you get to a ten?

There are moments when you get a ten when you become the bow, arrow and the target. On average, I am a six. I'm just grateful I can hold a bow in my hands and shoot an arrow.

What is your philosophy of life?

There are a lot of people who are dead while they are still alive. I want to be alive until the day I die. Sometimes you renounce your enthusiasm and adrenaline for the sake of comfort. I want to die while I still have this curiosity and this commitment to life.

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