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Journalist Fernando Morais, the author of some of the most well-known biographies to be published in Brazil, among them the best-sellers *Olga* (1985) and *Chato, o Rei do Brasil* (1994), has in the past sifted through military archives and manuscripts in Russian for his work. However, even after such experience he was astonished when, at the beginning of 2007, he was handed the key to an enormous black chest almost the size of a wardrobe and disguised as a television stand in the maid's room of a magnificent penthouse apartment in Copacabana. The owner of the chest, author Paulo Coelho, handed over more than the key, for he gave the journalist permission to use as he wished the contents of the chest. Morais was not only at liberty to examine the diaries, letters, tapes, photos and notes spanning more than six decades, but he was also promised that the subject of the biography would not interfere at any point in the production of the work. What more could a celebrity biographer desire?

His first feeling was a tremor of excitement. 'I had imagined it would be a small chest containing correspondence', he said, 'but when I removed the seal on the enormous box I sensed a special redolence emanating from it – a redolence of pure gold.' Piece by piece he took out the contents, as thrilled as though he were looking on Ali Baba's treasure: a hundred cassette recordings and more and more black, hard-covered notebooks totalling 170, filled with letters, cuttings and memorabilia. These were Coelho's diaries, both written and recorded on tape, dating from the age of 12 to 48. 'I began searching his soul and his guts', Morais says. The result of this study of Paulo Coelho's more obscure regions, his transgressions, his character changes and his redemption is *O Mago (The Wizard)* (published by Planeta, 630 pages, R\$59.90), whose first issue of 100,000 copies will reach Brazilian bookshops this week.

When he first started on the venture, Morais had to destroy some 100 pages he had already written two years earlier for the biography of the world's best-known Brazilian author. This initial project, which had been sanctioned by Coelho and his publisher, Planeta, had resulted in 200 hours of recordings with the author, as well as dozens of interviews with his ex-lovers, both male and female, some embittered and others who had remained his friends. Morais decided to start over again. 'Another Coelho was appearing before me', he said.

The biographer said that, from that moment, he began to feel engulfed in hell, in the tormented life and in the astonishing, megalomaniac path of a young man who, alongside Pelé and Gisele Bündchen, was to become one of the most famous Brazilians in the world and the only living author to be translated into more languages than Shakespeare. His 19 published books (not to mention earlier works which he abandoned) have been translated in 160 countries and into 66 languages and have sold more than 100 million copies, a record by Brazilian standards, where a book selling 3000 copies merits the title 'best-seller'. At 60 Paulo Coelho is proud of the fact that he

changed the Brazilian measure of success with the publication in 1987 of his first book in his literary canon, *O Diário de um Mago*, which in its first year sold 40,000 copies and marked the beginning of his international career.

From childhood Coelho let it be known that his greatest ambition was 'to become a world-famous author', and to have 'money, prestige and power'. According to Moraes, he constantly aimed at fame. His intense ambition led him to crises of despair and depression. Raised in a traditional Rio de Janeiro household, a relative of, among others, the author José de Alencar, he read from an early age. He achieved appalling grades at the Colégio Santo Inácio, a Jesuit college where he found his first spiritual mentor, the priest from Rio Grande do Sul, Guy Jorge Ruffier. As an adolescent he experienced sexual and mystical dilemmas and his parents had him placed in a mental institution, where he claims to have been visited by the 'Angel of Death', who proposed an assault on his soul. At this the young man suggested a trade-off: he used a kitchen knife to cut the throat of a goat belonging to neighbours and offered the animal's blood to the apparition. 'This is a character worthy of Dostoyevsky or Néelson Rodrigues', writes Moraes, who describes Coelho as 'a miser', 'a paranoid', 'a coward', 'a fantasist' and 'sensitive'.

His sensitivity was to lead him to extremes. While at first he was scared of women, he soon began to entice them into the most varied of sexual extravagances, from ménages à trois to having sex in random places. Among his many misdemeanours he reported that he had visited a girl who lived with her great aunt, where he experienced an event akin to that to be found in the novel *O Casamento* by Néelson Rodrigues. 'As it was a one-room apartment, they enjoyed themselves before the astonished eyes of the senile, deaf and dumb woman – an experience which they were to repeat several times', writes Moraes. In Rodrigues's work the involuntary witness is an old, paralysed woman. The similarity suggests that Paulo Coelho, who read Rodrigues, was either inspired by the latter's account or that he invented the event detailed in his diary.

Coelho returned twice to the mental institution, then ran away to become involved with theatre groups. He says that, while trying to write works that would sell, he tested his sexuality by going to bed with male actor friends, until he decided that he was not homosexual. Instead he had a string of women, whom he treated badly. He turned a deaf ear to the request for help from Gisa [the architect Adalgisa Magalhães] when the two were imprisoned in a DOI-Codi [Department for Information Operations – Centre for Internal Defence Operations] jail, an institution set up by the military dictatorship. Gisa died in 2007 without ever speaking to him again. Unhappy with the repressive regime he turned to drugs and in 1972 joined the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), a satanic cult set up by the English mystic Aleister Crowley. In one of the invocations to the devil described in the book he masturbated in a trance, leaping like a frog in the centre of a mystic circle. While in Mato Grosso, in an attempt at enlarging the membership of the cult, he tried to enlist minors, pretending that he was a drama teacher. He told Moraes that, when he decided upon a unilateral termination of his pact, he received a visit from Satan himself, 'who almost set fire to his apartment'. It was

then that he began a partnership with the musician Raul Seixas, whom Coelho introduced to the OTO, as well as to drugs. The duo wrote 41 songs, among them 'Gita' and 'Al Capone', which became hits and made him a fortune.

This, though, was not enough for Coelho. He wanted to triumph in fiction. When in 1982 he visited the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau, in Germany, he experienced an epiphany: the apparition of his future master, Jean. Some time later Jean was to 'materialize' and he suggested to Coelho that he return to Catholicism and join the Regnum Agnus Mundi, or the Kingdom of the Lamb of the World. Jean, who Coelho states was a French engineer, originally a Jew, instructed the novice to make a pilgrimage along the route to Santiago de Compostela. From then on, he became a wizard, assuming a sense of mission and beginning his path to success, until becoming a literary star of international renown. Fernando Morais went with him on his trips to the Middle East and Europe and gives the reader details of the particular places visited nowadays by the remorseful sinner.

Morais tells us that this is not merely a life of celebrity. Paulo Coelho is important for the fact that he is a cultural innovator, changing the shape of the literary market and making reading a mass phenomenon in Brazil. In 2004 this led to his being invited to become a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters. 'His work deserves the place it holds', Morais says, adding, 'He attracts people of faith. This is not the case with me'. Coelho's stories are esoteric narratives full of sensual episodes and mystic adventures in exotic regions which won over a public thirsty for a new spirituality, much to the horror of a large number of Brazilian critics whom Coelho nowadays regards with contempt. He could well have pleased these critics with the most incredible story that had lain in his hands for years, but which he lacked the courage to tell. This is the story of his life, now told by Fernando Morais. 'I always loved the idea of an autobiography', he told his biographer, 'but it's impossible to write about oneself without ending up justifying one's mistakes and embellishing one's acts – it's human nature'. He went on, 'Even if I don't recognize myself in the book, I know that it's a part of me.'

Coelho did not read *O Mago* before its publication, which is very rare for an authorized biography. 'I honestly had no idea what was in the chest', he told *Época*. All the same, he revealed its contents to Morais, although not before suggesting that he solve a riddle. During his research Morais came across the author's will, which stated that he wished the chest to be burnt immediately following his death. At the insistence of Morais, Coelho agreed to revoke the document, with one proviso so typical of his character. The enigmatic author, 1.69 metres tall, with white hair tied in a pony tail, dressed in black from head to toe, challenged his biographer: 'I'll only give you the key if you find out the name of the major who threatened to poke out my eyes and those of my three friends in a prison in Ponta Grossa in August, 1969, when we were imprisoned without cause.' Well used to sifting through the vaults of the military regime of 1964-1985, Morais studied the list of torturers that had been put together by the Archdiocese of São Paulo and that was held by the Projeto Brasil Nunca Mais. Here he discovered that the major in question was Índio do Brasil Leme, a descendant of Charrua Indians from Rio

Grande do Sul, who is on record as being a resolute torturer. 'I sent a picture of him to Paulo, who was sure I was right, so he said I was to be given the key to the chest and free rein in my research', Morais says.

Usually authorized biographies are monitored by their subjects, meaning that the character is made more sympathetic. Those that are not authorized, such as that written by Paulo César de Araújo on Roberto Carlos, do not benefit from access to essential sources, starting with the subject himself. A moral conviction led Coelho to grant total access to the hidden depths of his life. Two years ago, when Roberto Carlos won an injunction for the removal of the biography from bookshops, Coelho defended Araújo in an article in the *Folha de S. Paulo*, in which he argued that no one is the owner of his or her biography and that to prevent publication of a work is a suppression of freedom of expression. 'Paulo follows his principles', says Morais. However, he has often regretted this, as he told *Época*, but he still wants to read the book. 'I let him have my diaries, because someone was going to get them sooner or later. It's better to be able to read something that's going to end up being written some day or other.'

What he will read still troubles Morais. 'I acted like the female vampires he talks about in his diaries: I sucked his blood', he says. 'Perhaps he'll be upset by things such as the fact that he has psoriasis, which means that he has to take cream with him when he travels, as well as a series of indiscretions. But I went further. I didn't want to treat the reader in the same way that Paulo treated me, withholding information.' For Paulo Coelho a biography during his lifetime has led to periods of reflection. 'I don't know what my reaction will be when I read what's in it', he wrote in a letter to his biographer. 'However, among those things within my field of vision is written, "You will discover the truth, and the truth will release you".' This mystical and astonishingly detached attitude towards his own story helps one to understand why, in spite of his detractors, Paulo Coelho is revered worldwide as such a special individual.