

Paulo Coelho

Focus Munich

10.12.2007

Interview by Marika Schaertl

Interview

The Boy from Ipanema

For critics, his books are esoteric flights of fancy, but for millions of readers a lifeline from a spiritual guru. A visit with the Brazilian bestseller author Paulo Coelho

MR. MYSTIC

UN Ambassador for Peace

Coelho, born in Rio in 1947, was a songwriter, Marxist activist, was thrown into prison and tortured.

His Books

95 million copies of The Pilgrimage, The Alchemist, Veronica Decides to Die, among others, have been sold in 150 countries. Most recently released: The Witch of Portobello (Diogenes).

Photo caption:

Supple: Yoga lover Coelho with alchemy signs: A butterfly as a tattoo and snake ring on his finger.

We seem to have come to the highpoint of our house visit with Paulo Coelho around 6 pm. The author abruptly races out the door mumbling something like “I have to pray to Mother Mary.” The Brazilian bestseller supplier is a Catholic – and always good for a brief show number. The man, who has sold 95 million books around the world and who is disparaged by the book reviewers as a writer of esoteric schmaltz while being idolized by his readers as a spiritual guru, also loves to let interviewers take part in his inclination for rituals, alchemy signs and superstitions. Therefore, prayer to Maria daily at 6 pm. At 6:05 pm he once again sits at the dining table in his feudal flat in a wonderful old building in Paris. Stucco, wood paneled walls, white leather sofas, fantastic view of the Seine. Yet another cup of coffee, a Philip Morris for the man of the house. At 6:30 pm, Coelho suddenly announces cheerfully: “And now we are going to practice archery.” He grabs his mighty wooden bow and eleven arrows, takes the precaution of locking the door to the servants’ quarters, and stands erect at the end of the hall. In rapid succession, he fires the eleven arrows towards the target eight meters away – all bull’s eyes. “And now you,” says Coelho, his rosy cheeks revealing a sense of pride. The guest complies out of politeness. “To your mouth,” shouts Coelho, which means: pull the arrow back towards your mouth. The reporter lets the arrow fly and hits the dining room wall a half meter to the left of the target. It bores a deep, round hole into the fine wooden paneling. Mr. Coelho is dumbfounded. After two minutes he moans, “How did you manage to do that?” The harmonious evening mood has flown. Good thing our talk took place beforehand.

Photo caption

CONCENTRATED

Coelho has been practicing archery for five years – in his daily search for spirituality.

Focus: Mr. Coelho, in your younger years your parents placed you in an insane asylum three times because you were a non-conformist and wanted to become an artist. After one stretch of therapy, you said that you had internally come to terms with the fact that everyone must live out his or her bit of madness. How much madness is still left in you today?

Coelho: If madness means being other than “normal” that is fine with me. If it is threatening for oneself and society, there is a problem. My motto is: A little bit of madness is quite healthful.

Focus: You believe in alchemy, angels, and omens. Is it not just more for show when you say that you can remember your own birthing?

Coelho: That is true. I came into this world, saw an old woman and knew that she was my grandmother. Doctors say that such things are possible.

Focus: You also believe that you should write a new book when a white feather floats down before your feet. Are you serious?

Coelho: Naturally. But I am not obsessed with these things. I also play around with the universe, and it plays around with me.

Focus: Your books are torn to pieces by the critics but loved by esoteric readers as well as by capitalists and statesmen. Why?

Coelho: I have no idea. I personally don't think of my books as esoteric. I write about sex, prostitution, and craziness. The common denominator: The essence of life. We live in a time when we do not just focus on fulfilling our obligations, retiring and dying – but rather, we look for more. I only provoke people to think about things: For the superrich as well as a small-time taxi driver.

Focus: You are a guest at the World Economic Forum in Davos each January – for critics, a summit meeting of the sweat-talkers. What do you do there?

Coelho: I am a fan of the WEF at Davos. Davos is the fantastic idea of bringing the powerbrokers together on neutral territory where they can have a dialog. This is where the magic of Davos lies. There I have learned that decision makers have the same issues as you and I.

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Headline:

“My motto: Be different. But respect others. A little bit of madness is quite healthful.” Paulo Coelho

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Focus: People are also coddled and pampered at Davos, as was recently the case with Pakistan's President Musharraf, who is exceptionally unpopular today.

Coelho: Well, he is not my type. Of course you meet people like that at Davos. He is certainly one of those who talks more than he listens.

Focus: Fans of *The Alchemist* include Bill Clinton, Schröder, and Putin. Do you really believe in the power of the author?

Coelho: No. For ten years, I have been a member of the Shimon Perez Center for Peace, which concerns itself with the struggle for peace in the Middle East. Has anything changed? Nothing! Before the invasion of Iraq, I wrote an essay titled “Thank you Mr. President”. Five hundred million people read it. Did that prevent Mr. Bush from bombing Iraq for one second? No. But it hit a nerve. By the way, the two countries where my books are read most are Israel and Iran. This tells me that all is not lost.

Focus: Do you chat with US political figures, such as Condoleezza Rice, about topics like Iran at afternoon coffee parties such as Davos?

Coelho: Yes. And they don't listen. None of them. I look upon America as a corporation in which I would not buy any shares.

Focus: You invest your millions conservatively anyway, as you once revealed

Coelho: True. In something like a fixed money account. I used to have a lot of apartments. This only led to problems with the tenants. Today I only have five in Brazil, Paris, Geneva and a house near Lourdes. The stock market is like a casino. And bankers only pass on their tips after everything has collapsed. I recently called up three of them. All of them warned me not to sell my dollars. I did it anyway. The dollar was at 1.34 and went to 1.46.

Focus: You used to be a fan of Che Guevara, Marx and Engels before. How much Marxism still resides in you?

Coelho: I believe in equal opportunity. This interview is provocative, however.

Focus: We could talk about books.

Coelho: For heaven's sake no. Don't destroy this wonderful moment. I am constantly asked about my success. Horrible.

Focus: Why not tell me why you wrote about God's feminine side in your new book about the "Great Mother"?

Coelho: Because we men are feminine. Our society is moving in the direction of intuition, emotion and empathy. Away from a manly, strict and powerful God with His Ten Commandments and towards His feminine side. You as a woman do not need that so much. But we men do.

Focus: Do you need this God for your spiritual happiness? You were once an atheist and Buddhist – and returned to Catholicism.

Coelho: Because it is in my blood and not because I think it is the ultimate religion. I also do not like Pope Benedict. I have tried everything that there is. All religions have the same objective. I see Christian fundamentalists, who wreak a great deal of havoc. One can still be spiritual as an atheist.

Focus: You rediscovered your faith while on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela 20 years ago. Today, that path is trendy and there have been numerous TV shows. Does that bother you?

Coelho: I think it is tremendous. Even if people set out on a pilgrimage because it is chic or they want to lose weight, they will still change their consciousness or their values while doing so.

Focus: A "Mr. J" haunts your books as some sort of guru. Does he exist in reality?

Coelho: Of course. He is a Jewish businessman, simply someone from whom I learn. He is not the guru of a sect but rather part of a group, which believes in the language of symbols. Symbols, such as the flowers in the vase behind you. There! I speak about flowers and you gently tug at the neckline of your dress. This hand movement that I follow – the language of symbols! A sign.

Focus: A very earthly sign for a spiritual master.

Coelho: I do not perceive a contradiction.

Focus: Let's talk about excesses. You have tried out many: sex of every form of play, drugs, black magic. In order to impress women, you said. What are you doing in this direction today?

Coelho: Nothing. We grow up. Even if men remain overgrown children.

Focus: You write about the dramatic events of your youth such as psychiatry in your books

Coelho: Oh! Freud! There are two utopias which have damaged society a great deal: Communism and Freud. I consider it useless to seek the blame for one's own failings in one's parents. My books are not catharsis. But I do place my soul on display. There are no open wounds. But there are some pretty scars.

Interview: Marika Schaertl

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Headline: My books are not catharsis. But I do place my soul on display. There are some pretty scars.
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Photo captions:

Close to Power

The author with the Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva

Vladimir the Reader

The author brought along his works to an audience with President Putin in Russia in 2006

Fourth Wife

Coelho lives with the Brazilian painter Christina between Brazil and France

Translated by Laurence Matson