

The Winner Stands Alone

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Review by Kieron Corless

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By Paulo Coelho

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A serial killer on the loose at the Cannes film festival. That's the arresting premise of Paulo Coelho's 13th novel, which skilfully interweaves the fates of several festival-goers over 24 hours, during which time the bodies pile up in alarming fashion.

The killer's identity is no mystery. From the start, Coelho invites us into the deranged mind of Igor, a former Afghan war veteran who has subsequently become a Russian mobile phone tycoon. Igor has gone to Cannes to send "messages" – in the form of corpses, preferably illustrious – to his former wife Ewa. He desperately wants to win her back, albeit employing the kind of twisted logic that drove her away.

Ewa, however, is now more or less happily ensconced with Arab fashion magnate Hamid, who's attending the festival to seal his first high-profile venture into film production. This will be directed by "Gibson" (no prizes for guessing who that might be) and will star someone who Coelho coyly refers to as the "Star". Hamid's universe also embraces Gabriela, a young actress desperate for her first big break, and Jasmine, an electrifying newcomer to modelling, who feels profoundly ambivalent about the beckoning high life.

As Igor draws inexorably closer to a terrified Ewa and to a showdown with Hamid, will the spirit of his first victim – an innocent young woman caught in the wrong place at the wrong time – deflect Igor from his grisly mission and perhaps save his soul into the bargain?

The scene is set for an agreeably distracting page-turner but using the Cannes film festival as a backdrop is a double-edged sword. It's certainly useful for bringing the various protagonists into close proximity with each other, and it has to be said that Coelho has done his research on the festival machinery and the often predatory social types he encounters there. The problem is that the festival, these days a byword for celebrity excess and naked ambition, is catnip to a writer of mystical bent. Coelho's stock-in-trade is spiritual quests that address the big existential questions, most notably with *The Alchemist*. So Coelho alights on all the obvious clichés – the emptiness behind the glittering façade, how the struggle to get to the top destroys a person's identity – and repeats them at inordinate length, until his boundless sagacity becomes a bit wearing.

It makes for a one-sided (you might even say prim and miserabilist) view of goings-on at Cannes. Further problems arise when Coelho tries to depict Cannes as the epicentre of a global malaise, underpinned by a newly minted "big idea" – the notion of the "Superclass", a powerful elite several thousand strong who basically run (and ruin) the world.

There are the rudiments of a political critique here but one suspects the shade of Karl Marx won't be too troubled by Coelho's laughably simplistic analysis of contemporary social structures. And the irony, of course, is that said Superclass probably comprises a fair few of Coelho's own readers.

Half-baked philosophy this may be, but it also proves fatal for a novelist's ambitions. Coelho's protagonists, already like puppets who barely interact with each other, too often become mere mouthpieces for Coelho's sermonising. Consequently, they start to sound very similar to each other. The lengthy pontifications in which Coelho indulges also have the unhappy effect of draining narrative tension and momentum from the novel at key moments.

As the story lurches on and Igor's ingenious death-dealing methods wreak havoc at the festival, you'd be forgiven for expecting the novel's police-procedural element to step up a gear, ushering the reader towards a culminating battle of wits. But Coelho, as ever focused on higher matters, simply leaves his two policemen characters – one an engaging former Scotland Yard supremo now retired to the south of France – dangling and twisting in the Mediterranean breeze. Which is pretty much where readers will feel they've arrived by the end of this self-indulgent tale.

Kieron Corless is co-author of 'Cannes: Inside the World's Premier Film Festival' (Faber & Faber)

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