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Coelho targets celebrity in Cannes thriller

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By Mike Collett-White

LONDON (Reuters) - Bestselling author Paulo Coelho says important values have been lost in the frenzied pursuit of fame, and he turns a critical eye on celebrity in a new novel set amid the glitz and glamour of the Cannes film festival.

"The Winner Stands Alone" follows serial killer and wealthy Russian entrepreneur Igor as he resorts to extreme measures to win back the affections of his ex-wife Ewa.

Through a cast of stunning models, movie moguls, wannabe starlets and jaded hangers-on, the Brazilian said he had written "not a thriller, but a crude portrait of where we are now."

A regular visitor to the annual film festival, the 61-year-old author of "The Alchemist" set out to try to understand why visitors behaved as they did in Cannes.

People with beauty or big bucks or both descend on the Riviera resort each year and fret over coveted party invitations, lose sleep over what to wear and dream of being spotted as the "next big thing" in the world of entertainment.

"I said 'My god, these people are here, spending fortunes, and where is the fun?' That was my question," Coelho told Reuters in a telephone interview.

"And why do they behave like this? That was the starting point of writing a book on fashion and celebrity and values, because it is also a book about values."

Having sold tens of millions of books, and with The Alchemist due to be made into a movie produced by Harvey Weinstein, Coelho, to an extent, is part of the world he seeks to dissect in The Winner Stands Alone.

But, he said, there was a difference between earning fame and fortune through a talent or passion like writing, directing or performing, and wanting celebrity as an end in itself.

"Today this has become a kind of sickness," he said.

"Everybody now wants to be famous for the sake of being famous, not because they have something important to present or because they have something to share."

DESPERATE CHARACTERS

The Winner Stands Alone is an unflattering account of celebrity, and more particularly Cannes, where a desperate cast of characters reveal what really goes on behind the veneer of red carpets, luxury yachts, designer clothes and chic parties.

Maureen has waited three years to get a meeting in Cannes with a movie

magnate she hopes will get her film to screen. Gabriela is thrilled to be called for an audition, and her agent sends her a text message reading "Accept whatever they offer."

Human folly is exposed and dreams are more often than not dashed as the powerful seek to exploit young hopefuls.

"I don't know why I always wanted this," confesses the unnamed "Star" as he approaches the red carpet with Gabriela.

Coelho said he drew on his own experiences of Cannes.

"It is 100 percent based on my own experience. The book is perfectly accurate. Well, I never met a serial killer, but as for the 'machinery' of Cannes it is 100 percent accurate."

He added that it was more an examination of people's desire for fame and to follow fashion than a criticism of celebrity.

"I want to understand. To criticize something is easy ... but this is not good or bad, this is reality and I have to understand this reality."

Coelho added that his novel, which centers on a "superclass" of powerful, wealthy patrons envied by everyone else, would look very different had it been written after the financial crisis.

"Probably it would be another book," he said.

Early reviews of the novel, published by HarperCollins in April, have been mixed.

The Financial Times refers to "Coelho's laughably simplistic analysis of contemporary social structures" while the Washington Post concludes that the vanity on display in Cannes "isn't all that bad." "It's the human condition, after all."

(Editing by Paul Casciato)

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