

'Winner Stands Alone' thrills with a serial killer

By CARL HARTMAN, For The Associated Press
Wednesday, April 15, 2009

(04-15) 13:20 PDT , (AP) --

"The Winner Stands Alone" (Harper, 345 pages, \$25.99), by Paulo Coelho, translated from Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa: He's a serial killer running loose at the Cannes film festival, but he's convinced himself that he has a good motive: love.

Now a superrich magnate in the Russian telephone industry, Igor learned a barehanded way of killing in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It's called "Sambo" — an acronym of the Russian words for "self-defense without weapon."

It kills quickly and leaves so little chance of resistance that in the heart of Cannes, without anyone noticing, he can murder his first random victim: a young Portuguese woman named Olivia. He had been telling her his love story. In full view of busy traffic on the Boulevard de la Croisette he lays her dead body gently on the cloth where she had displayed the artsy souvenirs she was selling. Then he walks away, leaving the police to mistake her as the probable victim of a drug overdose.

The last time Igor talked with Ewa, his ex-wife, he had told her he would "destroy worlds" to get her back. An Orthodox Catholic, he has made a vow before relics of St. Mary Magdalene to do that "without too much sacrifice," as Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho puts it. He explains that everyone has a particular idea of the world. By killing a person, he destroys that world. He believes that Ewa wants to come back to him but lacks courage to leave her new husband.

Each time he destroys a world, he will send her a cryptic text message that she will understand.

The title "The Winner Stands Alone" relates to Igor's situation after half a dozen murders by varied and ingenious methods, described in thriller-perfect detail. He escapes Cannes in his private plane; he no longer loves Ewa but has a glimpse of a supernatural kind of love instead.

Coelho has written 12 novels, among the world's most widely read. They have sold over 100 million copies in 150 countries, including 5 million in the United States.

This one starts with a prayer but most of the novel has little to say about religion. It deals largely with the irrationalities of Hollywood, which dominates the festival, and high fashion. He sees the yearnings of women to become models and actresses as distorting their minds and bodies.

As for the rich "superclass" cavorting in Cannes: They're idle, unimaginative and irrelevant to the real world.



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