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The Star Online: 'Liberating' souls

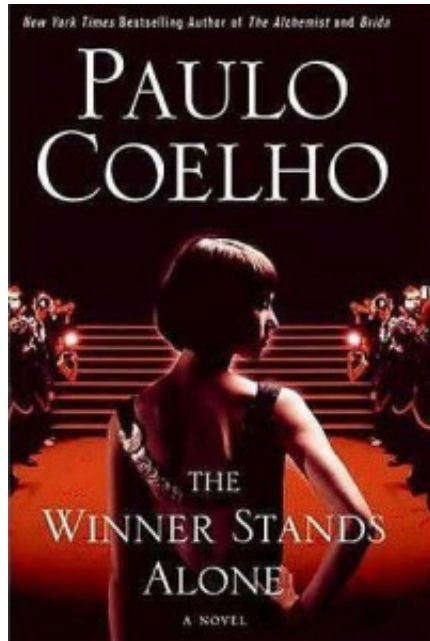
[The Star Online](#) > Lifebookshelf

Sunday June 28, 2009

'Liberating' souls

Review by AMY DE KANTER

Enjoy this easy read with its strong message about the evils of materialism.



THE WINNER STANDS ALONE

By **Paulo Coelho**

Publisher: Harper, 368 pages

ISBN: 978-0061776335

I DO not want to preach to the choir here. For his millions of fans worldwide, Paulo Coelho needs no introduction.

He is consistently on best-seller lists. Several people I know await his new books with as much anticipation as the rest of us had for a new Harry Potter book. These people do not need a review of *The Winner Stands Alone*. They finished the book before I started typing.

So this is for the rest of you.

The first book I read of Coelho's was *Veronika Wants to Die*. In the world of fiction, where most books revolve around a limited number of plots, Veronika was a real find. A young woman tries to commit suicide for no better reason than she thinks her life is as good as it is ever going to be. She wants to die at the peak of her life, before she starts sliding downhill.

She both succeeds and fails in her attempt; she is rescued, but the overdose she took has done its damage. She only has a few days left to live and spends them in a sanitarium, dying slowly and at the same, free from the expectations put on young women, finding that life has far more to offer.

Though Veronika did not convert me to the Church of Coelho, it did earn my immediate respect.

Coelho is the king of modern cautionary tales, using interesting situations to preach his gentle wisdom about life and understanding.

The Winner Stands Alone is quite different. For one thing, it is a thriller. Coelho starts us running on the first page and keeps the pace all the way to a galloping end.

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The story takes place during the Cannes Film Festival.

The rich, the beautiful and the powerful are all there to realise a dream or to keep the dream they have from ending. One man, a telco billionaire, has arrived with his own agenda; to get his ex-wife's attention and get her back.

He sends her messages by "liberating" souls from their dark existence. In other words, by killing them.

Coelho's characters may be succeeding or failing at what they want from life, but they are all unhappy. The only one who feels he has found the secret of happiness is the murderer. He believes he is doing his victims a favour.

There is no rhyme or reason to who he chooses to kill. As he zeros in, Coelho takes his readers deeper than the killer sees, into the victims' minds.

A young woman sells crafts to help her parents, whom she loves. She also loves her boyfriend, even though he hits her. The killer singles her out.

Also in the crosshairs is a fantastically rich film distributor who carries around a bitter list of things that are considered normal, such as "making fun of anyone who seeks happiness rather than money and accusing them of 'lacking ambition'", and "being equally convinced that aggression and rudeness are synonymous with having a 'powerful personality'".

Coelho's characters are his voice and there is nothing subtle to its delivery. The characters never talk, they orate. It may not be very realistic, but it gets the message across without any effort on our part.

He takes on superficiality, smashes the illusion that actors are rich (most don't own anything they live in, drive or wear), that modeling can be a career (certainly not one that lasts more than a few years), that anything can buy happiness.

His description of a woman's first walk onto the red carpet is mind-bending in the planning, calculation, fear and desperation that stars go through for the all-important 10 seconds in front of the cameras.

If you do not already boycott diamonds, his description of how they only reach consumers after several baths of human blood will have you joining the ranks.

And I sincerely hope that his message about the revolting sacrifices we make in the name of beauty finally gets heard. I want to live to see a generation of girls grow up without that neck-breaking yoke.

Reading Coelho is as easy as watching TV or reading classic Sydney Sheldon. There are no lines to read between, what you see is what you get.

By all means read *The Winner Stands Alone*. But do not stop there if you want to read the books that brought Coelho his worldwide following. Try some of his older work next if you want to truly understand why the United Nations named Coelho its Messenger of Peace.

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2/3

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