

WITH novels that transcend any one belief system, Brazilian author Paulo Coelho is regarded as something of a mystic. He spoke to CELEAN JACOBSON

Brazilian author Paulo Coelho seldom feels like a stranger. In any place where his books are read, he says, his soul has gone before him. "So I will not feel a stranger in a strange land. I feel at home because my readers understand my soul."

These poetic words from a writer who has inspired millions make me go still for a moment. There is a haunting honesty to the way he speaks about laying himself bare.

"Every book of mine has a little bit of myself in it. Each one is telling a particular question or situation in my life," he says by phone from London ahead of the release of his new book, *The Devil and Miss Prym* (Harper Collins). This is the latest offering from the author whose slim volume *The Alchemist*, about a shepherd whose dream takes him on a pilgrimage to Egypt, had led to him being regarded as something of a modern mystic. And the deep voice on the other end of the line, with its melodic Latin American accent fits the dust-cover photograph of a gentle-looking, gray-bearded man.

Coelho has been compared with writers like Richard Bach, Carlos Castaneda and Gabriel Garcia Marquez for his classic tales with their simple, captivating, dream-like quality. He writes about weighty philosophical matters, about morality, humanity and spirituality.

The Devil and Miss Prym poses that ultimate questions: are humans by nature good or evil?

Deep in the forest, where a rogue wolf lurks, a village is on the brink of extinction, under threat from the encroaching outside world. Then one day a stranger arrives, accompanied by the Devil, and the scene is set for a battle between good and evil.

The stranger has come to test the village - if within one week there is a murder the villagers will receive the 10 bars of gold he has hidden in the woods. He shows the gold to the lonely barmaid Chantal Prym, the only young person left in the village, and asks her to pass on his message.

As Chantal weighs up her options she is first comforted by thoughts of goodness and then, in the presence of evil, left delirious by fever.

This question - whether we are good or bad - is one that has haunted Coelho all his life. "The books is somehow an answer I was looking for ... a confrontation that I have to accept is happening in my soul, and, in fact, there is no answer to this question," he says.

The stranger, an arms manufacturer whose wife and child were killed with guns his company produced thinks he has the answer. He has come to prove that evil will triumph. But as the story unfolds, with thrilling intensity, Chantal breaks down his defenses and the stranger is reduced to a vengeful man, hurt by the punishment he has received, by God's justice.

Coelho, 54, is also no stranger to getting a raw deal. "I myself used to look at the skies and say: 'God, you are not very fair with me.' Because I tried to do my best and then sometimes I am hit beyond my own capacity of resistance," he says.

As a young "hippy" in Brazil, he paid dearly for being perceived as anti-establishment, rebellious, different. Arrested and tortured in 1974 for rock songs he wrote, Coelho says he has seen "the manifestation of evil in its most horrible form".

He has also had to come to terms with his parents' decision - "out of mistaken love, desperate love" - to commit him to a mental institution at 17, an experience he shares in an earlier book, *Veronika Decides to Die*. "But I never saw myself as a victim," he says. "You choose your attitude towards life and then you cannot blame your parents or other people. You can just accept this is a part of life and it doesn't matter whether you understand it or not, it matters that you have to overcome the situation."

And so, too, must Chantal and the villagers. Deeply symbolic, *The Devil and Miss Prym* deals with fear and frustration, courage and cowardice. It is cleverly constructed, with a series of intricate narrative twists. In the end there may be no murder but neither is there a final result to the stranger's test. Instead there is a sense of a fragile balance between good and evil and the difference is, the stranger learns, a matter of choice and control. "I think we have an angel and a devil inside ourselves," Coelho says, "...and this confrontation is what makes life

so magical because you are always challenged by the circumstances... we are good and evil depending how we act, not how we think, not our intentions.

"But I think it is much more intelligent to be good because, in the long run, you will live a better life. People will respect you because you respect them and then you will feel more at ease in the world."

Coelho's insights have a way of touching a nerve, of reminding us of plain truths and he agrees this may be the success of *The Alchemist*, which he humbly describes as "an honest book about an honest search for meaning".

But which nerve it touches he doesn't know and shrugs off the idea that his writing fills any spiritual vacuums.

"When I write I am not trying to explain the universe. I write to understand myself. I don't believe in explanations. I believe that life is a mystery, so it is for us to accept instead of asking always this crazy question: 'What am I doing here?' It is better to try to fill our lives with meaningful things."

He prefers to see his books as a way of sharing his experiences and of possibly bringing hope and solace to others.

"A book can be a catalyst that can provoke in you a reaction that was there waiting. The readers understand they are not alone, however it is up to them to change their lives. A book cannot do that," he says.

Coelho's own turning point came when he made a pilgrimage along the Road to Santiago, an ancient Spanish route still walked by many. It was an important rite of passage and the theme of a spiritual journey is central to his work.

"I owe a lot to the road," he says. "It helped me simplify my life. When you do a pilgrimage you cannot carry a lot of things... So in this metaphoric pilgrimage from birth to death - don't carry too many things, it gets too heavy. And you must be attentive to the signs, to the omens, to other people so you can participate in the miracle each day carries."

You can hear the soul-searching in Coelho's voice. It is there when he says: "I think my spirituality came from curiosity and, later, by understanding there is a silent presence around myself and I don't try to explain it but I try to live my faith according to the things I believe."

And it is there in his books, with their intricate layers of parables and legends drawn from a life dedicated to gaining knowledge of other faiths and cultures. A practicing Catholic, Coelho embraces Islam, Judaism and Christianity in his books. His ability to go beyond any one dogma or belief system earned him an appointment as a special adviser to the Unesco program on spiritual convergences and intercultural dialogues.

His voice becomes stern as he cautions about "the tendency towards fundamentalism". He is quick to say that it is not Islam he is talking about but a broader enforcement of oppressive moral values and norms that he sees growing, with religious-like fervour, in societies across the world and he mentions as an example the US. The Unesco programme tries to counter this by helping cultures see their similarities and respect their differences. "By creating bridges," he says, "we understand that tolerance will keep us away from the danger of going back to religious wars."

"It is very important to defuse this bomb that may explode, not now but in 30 years from now. When you go back to religious wars there is no negotiation, no diplomacy because you are ready to sacrifice your life fighting for God, so there is no logic. And I see this danger in the future."

Entranced by Coelho's voice, I almost lose this fleeting warning in his talk about souls and angels. It is only later, as the world struggles to make sense of itself in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center that it returns to me, ominously prophetic.

And now, more than ever, I feel that for a brief moment, as I held that phone in my hand, I had a hotline to a very wise old soul.