

THE MAKING OF A MAGUS

by SARAH STACEY

THE world's leading spiritual writer is in a most unholy tizzy. We have just eaten dinner in a chic restaurant near his apartment overlooking Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro. But although Paulo Coelho, author of *The Alchemist*, is a multimillionaire - "I have enough money for three incarnations" is his standard quip - he doesn't have the right credit card to pay the bill.

The manager shimmies up, recognises Brazil's most celebrated author and declares there to be no problem, the invoice will be sent to his secretary. "It is sometimes useful being famous" Paulo says quietly as we leave.

End of story I thought. Wrong. Outside we look in vain for his driver Carlos. The doorman is despatched to find him without success. Paulo calls Carlos on his mobile - no answer. It's a balmy evening and we can talk in the street as well as any other place but the Big Chief of Spirituality, as he was dubbed by one American newspaper, is unable to relax. He rings the answerphone to warn his secretary to pay the restaurant bill, presses the buttons for Carlos repeatedly. "I feel a bit paranoid" he confides, his dark eyes like those of a sad monkey.

This laying bare of his own vulnerability is one of Paulo Coelho's most engaging characteristics. It's accompanied by an equal volatility. Minutes later Carlos tips up and so does Paulo's mood. He beams and starts over. "I am Brazilian" he declares by way of explanation, "I am very emotional." And at 54, still the quintessential hippy with a tiny pony tail nestling on his nape, his ability to share his emotions with readers has made him one of the most successful authors on the planet.

Above us on the peak of Corcovado, the cathedral-high statue of Christ the Redeemer spreads his arms over a city where, alongside the wealth of Coelho and a small number of others, 80 per cent of people live in doubt of their next meal. Coelho freely admits his privilege. "Here is the best that money can buy and five minutes away you see very very poor people living in abject misery." Six years ago, he and his wife, the artist Christina Oiticica, set up the Paulo Coelho Foundation which, among other things, gives free schooling to 360 children from the favelas. It makes no difference what their parents do, he emphasises, "some will be hardworking, others drug dealers". Coelho was jet-propelled into success in 1989 with the publication of *The Alchemist*, a tender contemplative tale which has become a blockbuster.

The hero Santiago, a young Spanish shepherd, travels across the harsh desert to the Egyptian Pyramids in search of material treasure and then finally understands that the riches are in his own heart. The take home message of *The Alchemist* is that when you want something with all your heart, the universe conspires to help you achieve it.

His books have been variously described as self help books, spiritual novels, even the new genre of "wisdom manuals". Coelho says they are simply fables. "My idea is to share the symbolic language of humankind - like angels and devils, dark forests, high mountains and wolves, gold and buried treasure. For this I have to have a story - a fable - because then you can read it at different levels at different times and it will touch another part of your soul." Everyone, he says, can understand this universal language: "it is something very primeval in our soul. There is a part of everyone - whatever their cultural background - that connects with symbols."

Coelho's intuition has been validated by extraordinary success throughout the world. Consistently rated among the ten best selling authors in the world, at the last count his nine books in print had sold 32 million copies in over 100 countries. *The Alchemist* alone has sold 11 million to date, 500,000 of them in Britain. Self-professed devotees include glitterati from Julia Roberts and Madonna to Bill Clinton who at the nadir of Monica fever was photographed by the *Washington Post* carrying a copy of *The Alchemist*.

But his appeal is completely non-exclusive. Last night I sat next to an Oxford-educated international lawyer who said that without reservation *The Alchemist* was one of the most brilliant books ever written. "Coelho's genius is to be able - at a time of spiritual uncertainty - to cut through to the universal root of humanity" he told me. Every day, hundreds of emails come ordinary folk the world over, including such unlikely cultures for a Christian author as Israel, where more than one in four people own a Coelho, and Iran.

When he touched down at Tehran - the first Christian author to visit Iran - his plane was greeted by 2000 fans at 3 am. "Like Madonna" he says delightedly. Hollywood filmmaker Santiago Pozo, who has optioned *The Valkyries*, believes his books transcend religious divisiveness. "Paulo Coelho has a wonderful ability to present a different face of God - a God that has no denomination, not Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim or any other religion."

Coelho himself makes no great claims for his works. Each of us is following a spiritual path of our own personal legend, whether we recognise it or not, and the writer is just one more companion on this adventure.

"What novelties do my books have? None. What do I share with my readers?" he asks his friend Juan Arias rhetorically in *Confessions of a Pilgrim*. "My life, my experiences."

"His books are terribly important because they are about finding meaning in life" says Professor Kim Jobst of Oxford Brookes University, a holistic physician who has been profoundly moved by Coelho's writings and gives them to his patients. "Someone with an apparently intractable illness can find a different meaning in their lives and get better. You know his experiences are partly fictionalised but the truth comes through the words. The message is that there is more to life than meets the eye. That you must never give up believing that magic - the seemingly impossible, improbable and unexpected - can happen in a twinkling."

But Coelho's reception is not always glowing. The literary elite seethes at his simple pared down style and, perhaps even more, at his collection of literary awards. "You can't call what he writes literature."

This is more a ragbag of New Age-y bits and pieces "pronounced one eminent British writer who refused to be named. In Brazil, his work has been labelled "the product of a convenience store", its popularity a symptom of the crisis of reason and a narcissism characteristic of the end of the 20th century."

He is unabashed. "My language is modern and revolutionary, very direct and at the same time very deep. It is very difficult to write a simple book." His style is terse, the descriptions of people and places minimal - a deliberate policy, he says. After the first draft, he cuts and cuts, "drying up the language to the maximum" so that people can use their imaginations. "Instead of describing a desert landscape with all its rocks, I will just say, 'They were in a desert'."

With no financial imperative for Coelho to go on writing he is subject only to his inner compulsion. "If I don't write I am dead" he declares. Unlike many best-selling authors, however, each book is very different, each arising from a different stage in his life. "I can't follow a formula. I have to tell the truth or I cheat my readers. When I wrote *The Alchemist* I needed to talk to myself as if I were a shepherd boy. In *The Devil and Miss Prym* (his latest novel, which will be published in Britain at the beginning of September) I had to recognise that I have a dark side as well as a bright side. My major concern was to deal with the angels and demmons (sic) that we have in our souls."

The Devil and Miss Prym tells the tale of a wealthy stranger who tries, through the agency of a bored barmaid Chantal Prym (named after a square in Spain, Plaza Prym), to persuade the inhabitants of a small tourist paradise to murder one of their number. Far from the life-enchanting sweetness of *The Alchemist*, it's a tough dark book with an inconclusive ending. "You can't simplify this fight between good and evil. I see humankind at a crossroads, between choosing something very selfish and always having the excuse that society is to blame, or taking responsibility for their own lives."

We are sitting now in the room where he works in his big apartment overlooking Copacabana beach. As well as his desk, the white painted space also houses a double bed, corner bath, two basins and a vast television. There is hubbub inside and out. The phone rings incessantly. Through the open windows you can hear the squawks and roars of Rio life. Beyond the Avenida Atlantica and the long white beach with its strutting, oiling, self adoring brown bodies, the creamy spume crashes.

The rooms all flow into each other with few walls and fewer doors. His wife of over 20 years, the artist Christina Oiticica, has her studio the other side of the partition. She is painting a heart full of red fruit floating in a blue sky. It symbolises the communication between our hearts and souls with nature, she tells me, adding more prosaically that the idea came from a telephone card. In *The Valkyries*, published in 1992, the account of his search for his guardian angel and an extraordinarily intimate portrait of their marriage, Paulo describes himself as the hunter always questing, Christina as the farmer who stays at home. He is open about the importance of women in his life but, he says, "Chris is the real heroine, she is the base". Whenever he wants to find something in our interview, he shouts for her. She comes in her own time, calmly.

An interview with Coelho is not so much question and answer as exploration. "It is by talking like this I find out what I think." He pauses frequently to reflect, sometimes for unnervingly long periods, stroking his neat goatee fiercely between finger and thumb. He is unfailingly solicitous: am I comfortable, do I mind if he smokes, would I like a hot dog? He talks in fluent English, conducting his words with cigarette batons, lit and unlit.

Coelho's personal legend encapsulates the battle of good and evil, both in his actions and others. It is suffused with magic - not rabbits and hats but the Brazilian version where the invisible is as valid and important as that which you see and grasp. "When we look at the sea" he explains "we see the waves but we see also the goddess of the sea superimposed like in a photograph." And Coelho's brilliant career has been dictated not by any life coach but by a series of omens and rituals. At six pm and again at 11, for instance, he prays for a few moments and he will only start writing a book when he finds a white feather: "then I must write until it is finished".

It would be hard to imagine a Brit or indeed any other Westerner with a history such as his. In the febrile air of Rio his dances with madness and mysticism, violence and near death seem commonplace but so weird and brutal is the history of his life that several Westerners I know have dismissed it as fantasy. When I tell Coelho this, he says rather sadly "but it is all true.... it is too complicated to lie, you spend so much energy trying to remember what you have said."

Coelho was born into a sternly conventional family in Rio de Janeiro, his father an engineer and "a very dominant person". His birth was so difficult that his university educated mother, now dead, had him baptised immediately. As we talk, his younger sister Sonia, a chemical engineer - "she's the conventional one, I was always wild" - whirls in to collect a copy of his new book. His whole face lights up as they embrace. She's a great cuddler, I am folded in her arms several times - her only means of communication since she doesn't speak English.

His problems began at 17. After a shy adolescence the young Coelho confronted his parents with his desire to be a writer. Horrified, they took him to a psychiatrist and, at the age of 17, he spent three periods in a mental hospital, "like a madman".

For years he was unsure why he was institutionalised. Only when he wrote *Veronika Decides To Die*, published in 1998, did he trace his medical records. He cried. "I was very sad. The report said that I was very lonely which was true. That I didn't socialise very easily, I was not dating girls and I had very strange behaviour because I was typing until two or three o'clock in the morning." Not enough you might think to subject a 17 year old to incarceration and electric shock treatment. Paulo believes he forgave his parents long ago "when all's said and done, they took me there out of love - desperate, dominating and mistaken but love all the same". As we walked up and down outside the restaurant, he told me that his father still labours under an intense burden of guilt, nearly

four decades later.

The boy escaped twice from the clinic and was returned by his parents. Paradoxically, however, it was not his parents but Paulo who wanted to go back a fourth time. "I got used to it: it was very comfortable... like a maternal womb. But my parents decided eventually - 'Ehe's strange but he's our son and we must take care of him'."

Deprived of the refuge of madness, Coelho had to face reality. "The worst part of anything is when you feel alone. You feel lost, under pressure and you think that you don't deserve anything." Hope that he was not the only one rejecting a conventional life came with his discovery of the hippy movement "my new family, my new tribe" and with it copious drugs and sex. Then at the tail end of the Sixties, when the underground press was emerging in a Brazil still ruled by the military regime, Coelho met a record producer called Raul Seixas. He wrote 65 lyrics for him and, he says, became rich overnight. "Imagine... (one day) I didn't have enough money to go to the movies or eat out and the next day I had 40,000 dollars". His father was so impressed that he helped him buy a flat. Within the next few years, he had made enough money to buy five apartments.

Unlike their public, the military regime didn't like Coelho and his peers. By this time he was heavily involved in black magic - not unusual in this country where Catholicism is threaded through with spiritist cults some concerned with devil worship. "I invoked the devil" admits Coelho "but I paid the price" His songs about free will and alternative societies were red rags to the bulls of the Department of Social and Political Order. By now on his second marriage, he was picked off the street by secret police and accused of alleged subversive activity.

In 1974, he spent three brief periods in prison. During one incarceration, he was tortured with electric shock to his genitals and, later, thrown into a two by two metre completely dark cell - "the refrigerator" - alone for days on end. He and his then wife, who left him immediately afterwards, joined the ranks of the disappeared. "This was the worst time of my life because you learn nothing from it, only the experience of hatred. This only taught me how evil a human can be." It took years to rid himself of the terror of being tortured.

After his final release from prison, he gave up all interest in the occult and took a job in the record industry. He rose to be Artistic Director for CBS in Brazil. "Of course, my great dream - to be a writer - had to be set aside. But what did that matter?" Then, he says, events beyond his understanding thrust him back on his real path.

"On 12th August 1979, I went to sleep with a single certainty: at the age of 30 I was successfully making my way to the top of my career." The next day, he was fired without explanation. Over the next two years he knocked fruitlessly on doors before giving up and decamping with Christina to Europe. Neither of the books he wrote during that time - A Practical Guide to Vampirism, which he condemns now as "horrible", and The Archives of Hell, a volume of short stories - was successful. Then, in 1982, came an encounter which would change his life. Visiting the former concentration camp at Dachau, he was overcome by what had happened there. "I realised that I had to do something with my life to stop the horror of a humanity that doesn't learn the lessons of its madness." At that moment, he heard a voice and saw a person who then disappeared. "I didn't have time to speak to the person because (he) vanished so quickly but the image remained perfectly engraved on my memory." Two months later, he saw the same man in a hotel bar in Amsterdam.

The man denied being at Dachau, saying that it must be astral projection - the sort of thing that happened when you took hallucinogens. Finally, he said his name was Jean, he worked for a multinational company and he could give Coelho a hand if he sincerely wanted his help.

Jean introduced Paulo Coelho to RAM - the order of Regnus Agnus Mundi - a tiny brotherhood with Catholic origins, founded in 1492, which studies a symbolic language known as The Tradition which has been passed down orally.

Each person seeks his own answers through a series of tasks and rites which lead to earning the sword of the magus. Paulo keeps his in the umbrella stand: "I always think it is wise to keep the sacred among the commonplace." When I move to pick up the black and red handle, however, he stops me immediately.

The last part of his initiation was the pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostella in Spain in 1986 - a rite of passage which was a turning point in his life and led to his book The Pilgrimage, originally The Diary of a Magus. "I realised that everything was much simpler than I thought. Everyone is a pilgrim on the road and you have to be dependent on others. Then you realise that the search for God is much easier than you thought because your angel is using other peoples' mouths to speak to you."

From the horror of his own life Coelho has salvaged faith. He goes to mass regularly and stops whatever he is doing at 6 in the evening and then 11pm to pray for a few moments. A triptych travels with him in the tiny suitcase he takes on even the longest journeys. "God is a three letter word, an experience not a person" he says but his guardian angel is a presence - "a blessing" - with him constantly. I asked him how he dealt with people who did not believe in angels. "It makes no difference to the angels" he chuckled.

Like his hero Borges, he disdains happiness saying it's for Sunday afternoons and he prefers life to be a bullfight. Small things however give him pleasure. In Rio, his morning ritual is to buy coconut milk from his friend Sevro on the beach and discuss everything from a great philosophical problem to what happened with soccer yesterday.

His passion for the Brazilian football team, Vasco, has shocked some fans who want their spirituality pure. "But I say I am a human being. This world is the physical manifestation of God. Life is not about saying we have to purify our souls, not smoke, not drink, make love or watch football."

We thrive, he is adamant, on living life with enthusiasm: "It is the best we can do. I spent half my life asking this silly question which all mankind asks: what is the purpose of life? I met a lot of people who said they knew. In the

end, I realised it was totally useless because each one had a different explanation - very convincing. Then I met people who said we don't know what it is, but there is a purpose. Therefore do something, live your life with enthusiasm. Then you will somehow know that in this huge puzzle, you are helping something change. You are helping the soul of the world."

Paulo Coelho will be signing copies of his new novel *The Devil and Miss Prym* at Borders Bookshop, Oxford Street, London W1 on Wednesday 5th September at 6.30pm. For further information call Borders on 020 7292 1600

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