

WARRIOR OF LIGHT

Paulo Coelho changes lives with his inspirational books

The person who has inspired me more than anyone else is a Brazilian author whose fables of following your dreams, living every moment and being the best person you can be have touched the hearts of people from all countries and cultures.

Paulo Coelho is one of the bestselling writers ever – *The Alchemist* alone has sold almost 30 million copies and been translated into 56 languages.

Yet he is a down to earth and humble man who says he does not have any answers – he is merely searching like anyone else. 'I write to understand myself,' he says. 'I write so that I am not alone.'

'Writing is a solitary occupation, but by sharing what is in my soul I connect with people all over the world. To know they understand me means I am not alone.'

His latest book *Eleven Minutes* is a story of love and sex, and the darkness and light in each.

'I am Brazilian. The sacred and the profane co-exist for us – we don't separate them.

But sex is about understanding the sacredness of life, and I needed to share my vision of that,' he says.

'It was hard to write because I didn't know how people would respond – it's such a confronting subject. But it is my fastest-selling book ever,' he smiles.

It has touched a nerve, as many people have trouble reconciling love and sex. They believe you can't be both spiritual and sexual.

'Yes,' Paulo laughs. 'And they believe that you can't be spiritual if you eat red meat. Or if you have money, make love, feel joy. People think you must suffer to find God.'

'But the first miracle Jesus performed was to turn water into wine. He didn't turn wine into water. He wanted people to live, to enjoy life, to love.'

'He took suffering away. People just remember the last three days, where he suffered. But the rest of his life was filled with joy.'

Paulo has suffered in his life, but through his writing, travelling, through the love of wife Christina and his connection with the divine he has found a way to transform it, to find hope in the darkness and a reason for most things.

When he was young his parents put him in a mental institution

because he wanted to be a writer instead of following their plan for his life, which he later wrote about in *Veronika Decides To Die*, a book about the freedom in madness and humankind's overwhelming desire to live against all odds.

Later he became a journalist and songwriter and was jailed and tortured by Brazil's then-government for his 'subversive' writing. 'I learnt nothing from it, only the experience of hatred,' he says – but in *The Devil and Miss Prym* he explores good versus evil, the nature of man and the angel and devil within each person.

He has seen the most evil of human nature, yet he continues to believe in goodness. That every moment we can choose to be better, to refuse to be victims and take responsibility for our own lives – that we can create a world where our dreams come true.

He knows there are dark places within everyone's soul, secret feelings of vengeance, guilt, despair. And he acknowledges these shadows while inspiring people with their ability to transform the darkness into light.

His books tackle the biggest topics, yet he writes them in a simple way, using everyday people who find within themselves the strength to do extraordinary things, the power to achieve their dreams and look within.

In *The Alchemist* a young boy goes off in search of treasure – and finally finds it within himself.

Paulo believes in magic. That miracles happen. That everything is possible. And reading his books helps people see the magic within all things too. His power is in capturing the essence of what matters in life, of reminding us of the basic truths of existence, regardless of language, religion, background or culture.

'There are no universal truths,' he says. 'But there is a soul of the world. I'm not trying to explain the universe. I believe life is a mystery, and it's better to fill our lives with meaningful things than to try to understand it.'

'I use symbolic language because in that way I can talk to my own soul, and other people's souls too. And everyone can understand it because there is a part of everyone – whatever their cultural background – that connects with symbols.'

'If there's a message in my books it is that if you want something you have to fight for it – then the whole universe will help you. That provided you believe in what you are doing, you will succeed. That you have to take risks.'

Regardless of what happens in our lives, if we persevere, we will survive and fulfil our destiny.'

When *The Alchemist* was first published in Brazil it sold 900 copies.

Paulo could have given up, but he followed his own wisdom, risked everything, persevered – and it is now one of the bestselling books, and about to be made into a movie by *The Matrix* star Laurence Fishburne.

He's not overjoyed at this prospect, but he sold the film rights at the beginning of his career, back when he couldn't imagine people reading his books, let alone wanting to turn them into a Hollywood blockbuster.

'I've read Laurence's script, and it's good – but what will make it to the screen, who knows? But I will buy a ticket at the cinema and then I will know if I love it or hate it,' he shrugs.

Many of Paulo's central characters are women, and he has a talent for writing from their point of view.

'From women one learns love in all its forms, and so I write through them. With my book *Brida* I needed to find my feminine side, because it is the side that loves. That book was me walking the feminine path, exploring the archetypes of the virgin, the saint, the martyr, the witch,' he says.

'In *The Pilgrimage* I walked the masculine path. From men one learns discipline. There is the way of the warrior and the way of the wise man. Some people find connection with God through meditation, but I know myself and grow spiritually from the way of the warrior, through action. Even when not travelling, I am doing archery, gardening, walking. But this is just my way, it's different for everyone.'

His way of writing is different too. He lives every moment of his life with passion, with adventure, with magic. His days are full of symbolism and ritual. Having rediscovered his Catholic faith – while seeing that all religious paths lead to God – he goes to mass regularly and stops what he is doing at 6pm and 11pm to pray.

And he won't begin a new book until he has found a white feather – his sign to start writing. And he has found it.

'Now I'm just waiting,' he laughs. 'But soon my soul will start telling me what I need to share. All that really matters is knowing that I can share my soul with those who understand me.'

