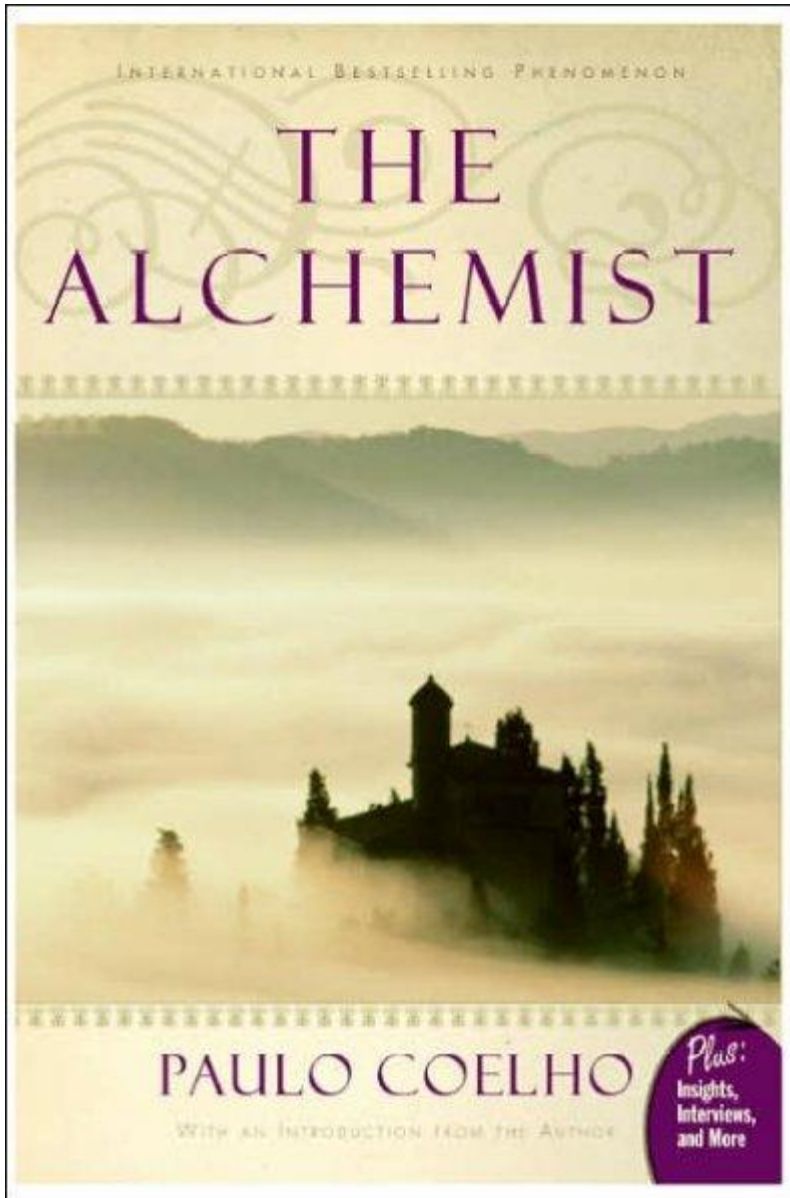


About the book...



The Alchemist is the magical story of Santiago, an Andalusian shepherd boy who yearns to travel in search of a worldly treasure as extravagant as any ever found. From his home in Spain he journeys to the markets of Tangiers and across the Egyptian desert to a fateful encounter with the alchemist.

The story of the treasures Santiago finds along the way teaches us, as only a few stories have done, about the essential wisdom of listening to our hearts, learning to read the omens strewn along life's path, and, above all, following our dreams.

About the author...



Paulo Coelho was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in August 1947. He has led a very intense life. Before he became internationally known and a worldwide bestseller, he had to overcome many obstacles. As a teenager, he had to face the brutality of electric shock treatment in the psychiatric hospital where his parents, who took his rebelliousness as a sign of madness, interned him three times between 1966 and 1968.

As a member of the esoteric underworld, he was put in prison for alleged subversive activities against the Brazilian dictatorship and subjected to physical torture.

Later, Paulo joined forces with rock star Raul Seixas and, as a hippie, was very much part of the age of "love and peace" and "sex, drugs and rock'n'roll". Together they composed 120 songs (between 1973 and 1982) that revolutionized Brazilian rock music; some of which are hits today. Hérica Marmo has described that period of his life in his book, *The Magician's Song: Paulo Coelho's Musical Career*, published in 2007. Hippie, journalist, rock star, actor, playwright, theatre director and producer of television programs, this whirlwind life came to an end in 1982, during a trip to Europe. In Dachau and later in Amsterdam, Paulo had a mystical meeting with "J", his new mentor, who persuaded him to walk the Road to Santiago de Compostela, a medieval pilgrim's route between France and Spain.

The man behind the author loves reading, travelling, computers, the Internet, music, football, walking, and practicing Kyudo – a kind of meditative archery. He has always been interested in cinema and is at present working on his first film project called the *Experimental Witch*. Every morning, he wakes early and, after a two-hour walk, shoots 24 arrows using one of his three bows. He and his wife Christina Oiticica divide their lives between Rio de Janeiro and Europe."

Reviews

Booklist: In his native Brazil, novelist Coelho is outsold only by Colombia's Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and he will undoubtedly establish himself here with the publication of this, his second novel, which has been a hit all over Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Coelho's story seems like something from the land of Scheherazade, told by one lover to the other in postcoital bliss, all with the outward simplicity yet deep resonance that is common to fables. "The boy's name was Santiago," it begins; Santiago is well educated and had intended to be a priest. But a desire for travel, to see every part of his native Spain, prompted him to become a shepherd instead. He's contented. But then twice he dreams about hidden treasure, and a seer tells him to follow the dream's instructions: go to Egypt to the pyramids, where he will find a treasure. After that, a wise man informs Santiago that "to realize one's destiny is a person's only real obligation," and that life is full of omens one must read and follow. Santiago parts with his flock and sets off for Tangier en route to Egypt. In Tangier Santiago flourishes, and much time passes. But at last he joins a caravan heading eastward and meets a famous alchemist, who further points Santiago in the direction of his treasure. Santiago makes it to the pyramids and there learns where his fortune is actually to be found. Beneath this novel's compelling story and the shimmering elegance with which it's told, lies a bedrock of wisdom about following one's heart. Coelho teaches the lesson with originality and dignity and without excess emotion.

Kirkus: Coelho is a Brazilian writer with four books to his credit. Following *Diary of a Magus* (1992--not reviewed) came this book, published in Brazil in 1988: it's an interdenominational, transcendental, inspirational fable--in other words, a bag of wind. The story is about a youth empowered to follow his dream. Santiago is an Andalusian shepherd boy who learns through a dream of a treasure in the Egyptian pyramids. An old man, the king of Salem, the first of various spiritual guides, tells the boy that he has discovered his destiny: "to realize one's destiny is a person's only real obligation." So Santiago sells his sheep, sails to Tangier, is tricked out of his money, regains it through hard work, crosses the desert with a caravan, stops at an oasis long enough to fall in love, escapes from warring tribesmen by performing a miracle, reaches the pyramids, and eventually gets both the gold and the girl. Along the way he meets an Englishman who describes the Soul of the World; the desert woman Fatima, who teaches him the Language of the World; and an alchemist who says, "Listen to your heart." A message clings like ivy to every encounter; everyone, but everyone, has to put in their two cents' worth, from the crystal merchant to the camel driver ("concentrate always on the present, you'll be a happy man"). The absence of characterization and overall blandness suggest authorship by a committee of self-improvement pundits--a far cry from Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*: that flagship of the genre was a genuine charmer because it clearly derived from a quirky, individual sensibility. Coelho's placebo has racked up impressive sales in Brazil and Europe. Americans should flock to it like gulls.

Publishers Weekly: This inspirational fable by Brazilian author and translator Coelho has been a runaway bestseller throughout Latin America and seems poised to achieve the same prominence here. The charming tale of Santiago, a shepherd boy, who dreams of seeing the world, is compelling in its own right, but gains resonance through the many lessons Santiago learns during his adventures. He journeys from Spain to Morocco in search of worldly success, and eventually to Egypt, where a fateful encounter with an alchemist brings him at last to self-understanding and spiritual enlightenment. The story has the comic charm, dramatic tension and psychological intensity of a fairy tale, but it's full of specific wisdom as well, about becoming self-empowered, overcoming depression, and believing in dreams. The cumulative effect is like hearing a wonderful bedtime story from an inspirational psychiatrist. Comparisons to *The Little Prince* are appropriate; this is a sweetly exotic tale for young and old alike.

Literary Criticism

Title: The Little Prince - The Alchemist

These two books, *The Little Prince* and *The Alchemist* were written by authors from different corners of the world and were published during different epochs. *The Little Prince* was first published in France early in the twentieth century, while *The Alchemist* was originally written in Brazil towards the end of that century. However, as *Gazeta Wymborcza* from Poland observes, "*The Alchemist* brings to mind *The*

Little Prince by Saint-Exupéry.”¹ Although we are listening to different voices in the two novels, yet when unravelling the fundamental message, we realize there is an amazing similarity in both theme and approach.

Both authors have opted for narrative voices of young or small people whose words are usually dismissed by adults. Even before the end of each novel, the reader realizes that the authors deliberately have chosen these voices that are so easily disregarded. They have done so in order to sharpen their poignancy in bringing us down from our ivory towers of narrow-mindedness, self-righteousness, egocentricity and spiritual sterility. In *The Little Prince* we listen to the narrative voice of a little person who sounds like a child, while in *The Alchemist* we are made to hear the message from a boy.

What is also common to both authors is their emphasis on the soul, the heart and the intrinsic spirit of being and of relationships. For instance, in *The Little Prince* the author satirizes the way in which we evaluate our friends. We are not interested in how they feel; we do not wish to know their anxieties, their aspirations, their greatest concerns. We live in a world where statistics and material things have become more important than human beings and human relationships. Saint-Exupéry rightly observes that our love of numbers leads us into “weighing” and “measuring” people with questions such as “how much money does his father make?” (*The Little Prince*, p. 16)

Saint-Exupéry contends that relationships based on statistics, material matters or factors external to people’s inner selves, are empty. This point is emphasized further by the profundity of the relationship between the little prince and his rose, and also by the depth of the friendship that develops between the little prince and the fox. Coelho takes a similar view when the boy decides he cannot find God in the seminary and therefore has to undertake a pilgrimage as a simple shepherd. Coelho’s presentation of the relationship that develops between the boy and his sheep reminds the reader of the little prince’s relationship with his rose. There is a mysterious force that seems to bind the boy to his sheep and though each speaks a different language they operate from an understanding that draws the one to the other.

The two authors seem to be telling us that something has gone wrong in the relationships between fellow human beings.

What is it that has gone wrong? What do Saint-Exupéry and Coelho see as the major tragedy of our existence? Saint-Exupéry feels we have made the world around us ugly through extreme conformity in the name of “attending to matters of consequence,” (*The Little Prince*, p. 42, 52). We are too lazy to tend to our planet and pull out the weeds that threaten to destroy our mother, the earth.

Like Saint-Exupéry, Coelho sees conformity as having killed initiative and throttled creativity. Conformity has led us into dictating how others should lead their lives instead of engaging in the kind of self-examination that could reveal to us where we

ourselves have gone wrong. The author makes a very strong point on this when he says: "If someone isn't what others want him to be, the others become angry. Everyone seems to have a clear idea of how other people should lead their lives, but none about his or her own" (*The Alchemist*, p. 16).

The two authors' major criticism is that we have become dehumanised through emphasis on material things for their own sake. They see this as having led to hypocrisy and spiritual sterility. In both novels, we are led to see that in order to find a solution to the major tragedies in the world we must come to realize the key role played by the heart. Just as the little prince in Saint-Exupéry's novel realizes that what he has been looking for in the desert is water that is good for the heart, so the boy in Coelho's novel realizes that the treasure he has been looking for in the desert is not some precious stone but something that is hidden in his own heart.

The major role of creative writers is to act as social thermometers. The pen is their stethoscope and they use it to comment on society's ills. Both Saint-Exupéry and Coelho use the allegorical mode to diagnose our social malaise. *The Little Prince* and *The Alchemist* are told in a deliberately simple style in order to expose our self-deception. Both novels are in the form of journeys through the desert of life and readers are invited to join the protagonists on their journey of self-discovery and spiritual regeneration.

Source: Ciarunji Chesaina. "The Little Prince - The Alchemist."
http://africa.peacelink.org/wajibu/articles/art_4491.html

Discussion questions

(<http://www.santjordi-asociados.com/titles/discussion.htm?6#alchemist>)

1. What tests and setbacks does the boy experience on his journey?
2. Why is it important that he faces and overcomes these challenges?
3. How would the novel be different if his quest was easier?
4. After he has been robbed of all his money in Tanger, how does Santiago choose to regard his situation? Did this surprise you?
5. What allows him to understand his loss this way?
6. Examine the student/teacher relationship in *The Alchemist*. Look at all Santiago's teachers – human, divine, animal and natural - and discuss what the boy learns from each of these teachers.
7. Early in the story, the alchemist tells Santiago "when you possess great treasures within you, and try to tell others of them, seldom are you believed".

At the end of the story, how did this simple lesson save Santiago's life? How did it lead him back to the treasure he was looking for?

Multimedia

Paulo Coelho on Luck, Coincidence, and Faith (Online Content)

Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwxzx6N6XE>

Paulo Coelho discusses his thoughts on Luck, Coincidence, and Faith.

Further Reading

The Alchemist: A Graphic Novel by Paulo Coelho

(Call Number: Graphic Novel Coelho, Paulo)

(This) offers an adaptation in graphic novel format of a modern classic about the globe-trotting spiritual journey of a humble shepherd boy.

The Rise and Fall of Paradise by Elmer Bendiner

(Call Number: 946.8 Be)

Arabs and Jews together once built an elegant kingdom in the southern half of Spain. Others thought it a paradise because no one went hungry, the poor had some hope of riches, and the slaves could hope for freedom. An engaging history well seasoned with wit.

Author's Official Website: <http://www.paulocoelho.com/>

Read Alike (Novelist)

Richard Bach, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (1970)

More concerned with the dynamics of his flight than with gathering food, Jonathan is scorned by the other seagulls

Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (1943)

An aviator whose plane is forced down in the Sahara Desert encounters a little prince from a small planet who relates his adventures in seeking the secret of what is important in life.

Colin Channer, *The Girl with the Golden Shoes* (2007)

After Estrella Thompson approaches a diver that flops up on a Caribbean island, she is banished from the only home she has ever known, and her first goal is to buy a pair of shoes so that she can find a job.

Paul Coelho, *Warrior of the Light: a Manual* (2003)

A collection of philosophical stories and observations invites readers to live out dreams, embrace the uncertainty of life, and rise to a personal destiny.

Jose Saramago, *The Tale of the Unknown Island* (1999)

A fable from the 1998 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature offers a unique blend of love and philosophy as a man petitions a boat from the king, finds a crew to volunteer, and sets sail

Ko Un, *Little Pilgrim* (2005)

A novel of spiritual adventure written in the spirit of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* follows the journey of Sudhana, who mounts an epic search for the truth and encounters many other searchers on the path--human, animal, and spiritual.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Activity

As a group go for a long walk, drive, or bike ride (whatever meets your needs best). Use this time for the group to self reflect or even discuss the book amongst yourselves. In this way you will be reenacting Santiago's journey.

