

The Alchemist

Paulo Coelho

Introduction

Paulo Coelho's enchanting novel has inspired a devoted following around the world. This story, dazzling in its simplicity and wisdom, is about an Andalusian shepherd boy named Santiago who travels from his homeland in Spain to the Egyptian desert in search of treasure buried in the Pyramids.

Santiago has a dream about finding a treasure in the pyramids of Egypt. A gypsy woman and an old man claiming to be a mysterious king advise him to pursue it. "To realize one's destiny is a person's only obligation," the old man tells him. "And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it."

With the courage of an adventurer, Santiago sells his sheep and travels to Tangiers in Africa. After a thief steals his money, Santiago takes a job with a crystal merchant who unwittingly teaches Santiago important lessons for his long journey ahead. After working at the crystal shop for a year, Santiago earns enough money to cover his losses and return home. But then something unexpected happens. On a desert caravan, Santiago meets an intriguing Englishman. The Englishman's passion for knowledge and his relentless quest to uncover the secrets of alchemy inspire Santiago to pursue his own dream of finding the treasure. As the Englishman searches for the two hundred year old alchemist who resides in the desert oasis, Santiago falls in love with a young woman, Fatima. Exposed to the greatest and eternal alchemy of all - love - Santiago thinks he has found the treasure. But the greatest test of all is yet to come. With the help of the alchemist, Santiago completes the last leg of his journey - dangerous and infused with discoveries of the most profound kind - to find that the treasure he was looking for was waiting for him in the place where he least expected.

This story, timeless and entertaining, exotic yet simple, breaks down the journey we all take to find the most meaningful treasures in our lives into steps that are at once natural and magical. It is about the faith, power, and courage we all have within us to pursue the intricate path of a Personal Legend, a path charted by the mysterious magnet of destiny but obscured by distractions. Santiago shows how along the way we learn to trust our hearts, read the seemingly inconspicuous signs, and understand that as we look to fulfill a dream, it looks to find us just the same, if we let it. *(From the publisher)*

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Discussion Questions

1. At the start of his journey, when Santiago asks a gypsy woman to interpret his dream about a treasure in the Egyptian pyramids, she asks for one tenth of the treasure in return. When Santiago asks the old man to show him the path to the treasure, the old man requests one tenth of his flock as "payment." Both payments represent a different price we have to pay to fulfill a dream; however, only one will yield a true result. Which payment represents false hope? Can you think of examples from your own life when you had to give up something to meet a goal and found the price too high?
2. Paulo Coelho once said that alchemy is all about pursuing our spiritual quest in the physical world as it was given to us. It is the art of transmuting the reality into something sacred, of mixing the sacred and the profane. With this in mind, can you define your Personal Legend? At what time in your life were you first able to act on it? What was your "beginner's luck"? Did anything prevent you from following it to conclusion? Having read **The Alchemist**, do you know what inner resources you need to continue the journey?
3. One of the first major diversions from Santiago's journey was the theft of his money in Tangiers, which forced him into taking a menial job with the crystal merchant. There, Santiago learned many lessons on everything from the art of business to the art of patience. Of all these, which lessons were the most crucial to the pursuit of his Personal Legend?
4. When he talked about the pilgrimage to Mecca, the crystal merchant argued that having a dream is more important than fulfilling it, which is what Santiago was trying to do. Do you agree with Santiago's rationale or crystal merchant's?

5. The Englishman, whom Santiago meets when he joins the caravan to the Egyptian pyramids, is searching for "a universal language, understood by everybody." What is that language? According to the Englishman, what are the parallels between reading and alchemy? How does the Englishman's search for the alchemist compare to Santiago's search for a treasure? How did the Englishman and Santiago feel about each other?

6. The alchemist tells Santiago "you don't have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation." With this in mind, why do you think the alchemist chose to befriend Santiago, though he knew that the Englishman was the one looking for him? What is the meaning of two dead hawks and the falcon in the oasis? At one point the alchemist explains to Santiago the secret of successfully turning metal into gold. How does this process compare to finding a Personal Legend?

7. Why did Santiago have to go through the dangers of tribal wars on the outskirts of the oasis in order to reach the pyramids? At the very end of the journey, why did the alchemist leave Santiago alone to complete it?

8. Earlier in the story, the alchemist told 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?

About the Author

- Birth—August 24, 1947
- Where—Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- Education—Left law school in second year
- Awards—Crystal Award (Switzerland), 1999; Rio Branco Order (Brazil), 2000; Legion d'Honneur (France), 2001; Brazilian Academy of Letters (Brazil), 2002
- Currently—lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Paulo Coelho's books have been translated into 56 languages, topped bestseller lists throughout the world, and scored him such celebrity fans as Julia Roberts, Bill Clinton, and Madonna; yet for Brazilian publishing phenom Paulo Coelho, the road to success has been strewn with a number of obstacles, many of them rooted in his troubled past.

As a youth, Coelho was expected to follow in the footsteps of his father, a professional engineer. When he rebelled, expressing his intentions to become a writer, his parents had him committed to a psychiatric hospital where he was subjected to electro-shock therapy. He left home to join the 1970s countercultural revolution, experimenting with drugs, dabbling in black magic, and getting involved in Brazil's bohemian art and music scene. He teamed with rock musician Raul Seixas for an extremely successful songwriting partnership that changed the face of Brazilian pop—and put a lot of money in Coelho's pockets. He also joined an anti-capitalist organization called the Alternative Society which attracted the attention of Brazil's military dictatorship. Marked down as a subversive, he was imprisoned and tortured.

Amazingly, Coelho survived these horrific experiences. He left the hippie lifestyle behind, went to work in the record industry, and began to write, but without much success. Then, in the mid-1980s, during a trip to Europe, he met a man, an unnamed mentor he refers to only as "J," who inducted him into Regnum Agnus Mundi, a secret society that blends Catholicism with a sort of New Age mysticism. At J's urging, Coelho journeyed across el Camino de Santiago, the legendary Spanish road traversed by pilgrims since the Middle Ages. He chronicled this life-changing, 500-mile journey—the culmination of decades of soul-searching—in *The Pilgrimage*, published in 1987.

The following year, Coelho wrote *The Alchemist*, the inspirational fable for which he is best known. The first edition sold so poorly the publisher decided not to reprint it. Undaunted, Coelho moved to a larger publishing house that seemed more interested in his work. When his third novel (1990's *Brida*) proved successful, the resulting media buzz carried *The Alchemist* all the way to the top of the charts. Released in the U.S. by HarperCollins in 1993, *The Alchemist* became a word-of-mouth sensation, turning Coelho into a cult hero.

Since then, he has gone on to create his own distinct literary brand—an amalgam of allegory and self-help filled with spiritual themes and symbols. In his novels, memoirs, and aphoristic nonfiction, he returns time and again to the concepts of quest and transformation and has often said that writing has helped connect him to his soul. While his books have not always been reviewed favorably and have often become the subject of strong cultural and philosophical debate, there is no doubt that this self-described "pilgrim writer" has struck a chord in readers everywhere. In the 2009 edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Coelho was named the most translated living author—with William Shakespeare the most translated of all time!

Extras

(From a 2003 interview with Barnes & Noble)

- Few writers are able to accomplish what Coelho can in just two to four weeks—which is how long it takes for him to write an entire novel.
- Before become a bestselling novelist, Coelho was a writer of a different sort. He co-wrote more than 60 songs with Brazilian musician Raul Seixas.
- Coelho is the founder of the Paulo Coelho Institute, a non-profit organization funded by his royalties that raises money for underprivileged children and the elderly in his homeland of Brazil.
- Coelho has practiced archery for a long time; a bow and arrow helps him to unwind.
- In writing, Coelho says "I apply my feminine side and respect the mystery involved in creation."
- Coelho loves almost everything about his work, *except* conferences. "I am too shy in front of an audience. But I love signings and having eye contact with a reader who already knows my soul."

- When asked what book most influenced his life, he answered: "The Bible, which contains all the stories and all the guidance humankind needs." (*Bio and interview from Barnes & Noble*)