

'I thought I'd be as famous as Ian Fleming': Madonna, Will Smith and Julia Roberts adore him, his book *The Alchemist* sold 65 million. So why is Paulo Coelho never recognised?

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Madonna says his book changed her life. **Will Smith** and Julia Roberts agree. **Oprah Winfrey** keeps a copy by her bed and says, 'Oh, I love *The Alchemist*!' But Paulo Coelho brushes it all away with a sweep of his hand. 'This is very moving, to see all these people trying to help me, but for the sake of sales, it does nothing.'

So how exactly exactly has Coelho sold a staggering 65 million copies of *The Alchemist*, a deceptively simple story of a shepherd boy who crosses the desert in search of treasure, only to find it back where he started?

The book is far more famous than its author, so who is this small, rotund, bald Brazilian with the white goatee and the chain-smoking habit? Is the 71-year-old a guru, as so many of his followers believe?



Paulo Coelho de Souza had a troubled childhood in Rio with strict Catholic parents who didn't understand his desire to be a writer. He started law school but dropped out to do what the character of 'Paulo' does in his new novel *Hippie*: travel Europe, meet a girl in Amsterdam and get on a Magic Bus all the way to Kathmandu

Event has come to his apartment on the shores of Lake Geneva to find out. Was he pleased to hear of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge listening to a passage from his book at the wedding of Kate's sister Pippa Middleton last year? Coelho looks blank. Nobody has told him about that. He's never heard of Pippa, has he? 'No.' She's the sister of our future Queen, I say. 'Right. I did not know that.'