

Entertainment

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The Alchemist: Out of the barn and off to the pyramids

By Mark Morris
Staff writer

So there's this guy in a bar. Actually, there's this guy in a barn, because he is born there. His family is dirt poor so from the barn he foregoes college and becomes a carpenter. Prior to age 35 this guy turns the world onto its ear with clever parables and theological interpretations so precise that high-ranking church officials have him killed for fear of his public opinion rating. For centuries after, people worship his very name, regurgitate his poetry and stare into the sky awaiting his promised return. The best part is he didn't accomplish all this through ambition. It was simply what he was born to do.

If you can fathom that story, I invite you to continue your study of metaphysics by reading "The Alchemist" by Paulo Coelho. After all, can twenty million people be wrong? Coelho, the Brazilian author of seven books, originally published "The Alchemist" in 1988 and has since seen it published in fifty-six languages. Critics, pop icons and former President William Jefferson Clinton have heralded the fictional piece. It is essentially a novel about realizing your dreams and manifesting your destiny, a quest that begins prior to you even realizing it. Coelho approaches the concept by painting a world that is wholly intelligible, alive and connected without surfeiting us with pyrotechnic theism.

His central character is Santiago, a shepherd straddling the border of clumsiness and manhood. This wide-eyed youth, trained in Latin, Spanish and religion, decided he would rather see the world than bury his head in a dusty seminary. His father, acting paternally with a touch of envy, gives him three ancient Spanish coins to buy a flock of sheep and begin his journey.



Santiago adopts his sheep as a pseudo family, choosing to talk and read to them as he takes advantage of their wool and meat for survival. While he sweeps the countryside perfecting the art of livestock negotiation, Santiago has a recurring nightly dream. The dream features a child instructing him to go to the Egyptian Pyramids to find a hidden treasure. After sharing this vision with a Gypsy interpreter and getting little to no help from her, he decides to trash the idea altogether.

Within twenty-four hours Santiago is greeted by an elderly man named Melchizedek who mysteriously knows the names of Santiago's father, mother and the girl he had a crush on. Astounded by the man's psychic abilities, Santiago is further taken aback when he pronounces to him, "When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it." In exchange for one tenth of his sheep, the mysterious gentleman advises Santiago to find his treasure by following a divinely laid path. The boy immediately sells the remainder of his "family" and embarks on a mission to Egypt.

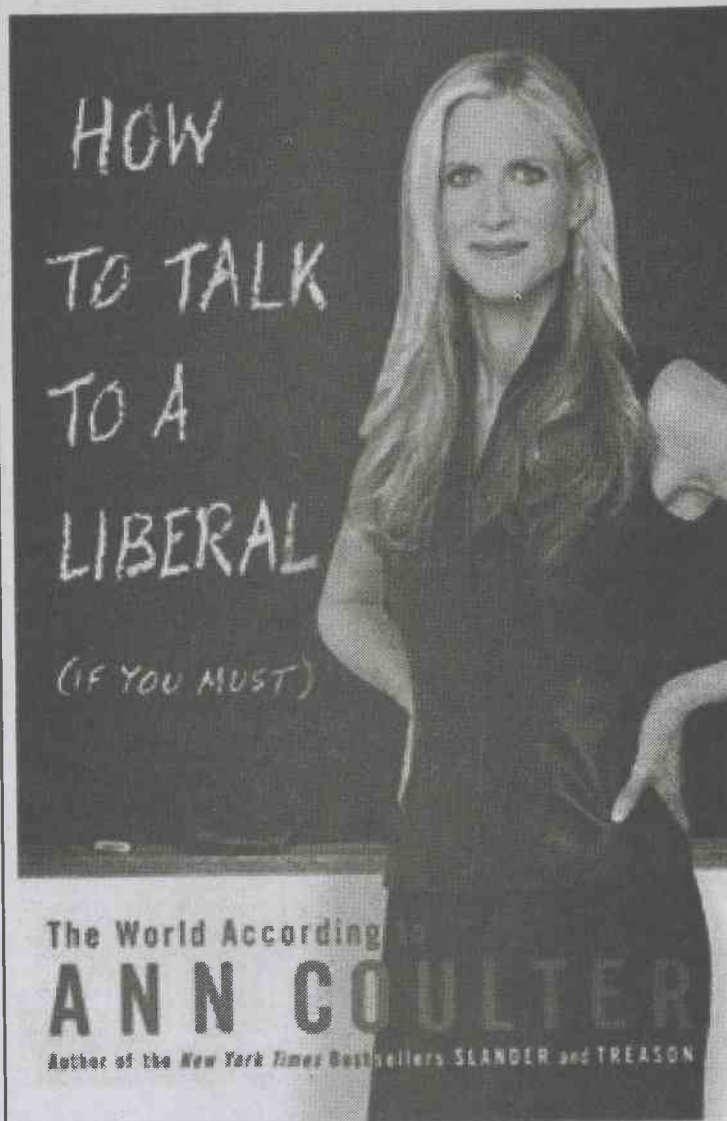
While crossing the sea and the desert, Santiago gets robbed a couple of times, learns new job skills and meets a series of peculiar characters, none the least being an alchemist. An

alchemist is a person claiming to have the conscious power of controlling mutations and transmutations within matter and energy and even within life itself. Count Saint Germain of France identified Christ's walk on the Sea of Galilee as demonstrative of applied alchemy. The Alchemist becomes a second father to Santiago, guiding him through a series of potentially life threatening situations and even giving advice on relationships en route to the pyramids. At the climax of his exhaustive trek across the sand, Santiago finds his treasure in a place that jolts readers like a double shot espresso.

"The Alchemist" is an enchanting reminder of things for accomplished people and a motivational anecdote for those of us on the sometimes-disheartening path to success. Equipped with cynical humor, fuel-injected action sequences, and magnificent geographical shifts, "The Alchemist" reduces "Who Moved my Cheese?" to ashes of a burned out Mother Goose rhyme.

Best of all, "The Alchemist" is a light enough read to serve as a break between homework assignments or a source of entertainment, in case your personal destiny includes driving forty miles north of Elizabeth City seeking a venti cup of Starbucks.

In 2003, Harper Collins released a 10th anniversary edition in paperback. I recommend it for the \$13 price tag and the new introduction by Paulo Coelho. You can find it at Barnes and Nobles—provided your current mode of transportation is equipped with a satellite navigation system—or purchase a used copy from Amazon.com for as little as five bucks. If all else fails you may borrow a copy from Mr. Larry Wilson in the ECSU admissions office. ISBN 0-06-250218-2 (163pp).



How to win friends, influence enemies

By Rene Finkeneller
Staff Writer

In *SLANDER: Liberal Lies About the American Right* (2002), she meticulously captured every politically biased "report" by nationally renowned newspapers and TV journalists, and summed it up with one gentle truth: "The immutable fact of politics in America is this: Liberals hate Conservatives." Ironically, faithful readers knew Dan Rather wasn't the first to make a mistake, nor would he be the last. In *TREASON: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (2003), she took everyone back to school to relearn everything we had been taught about the McCarthy era.

And she didn't dare mince words when she summed it up with "...the irreconcilable opposites—God or Man, Soul or Mind, Freedom or Communism? Liberals chose God." And now in her latest book, *How to Talk to a Liberal (if you must)*. Ann Coulter, concerned that she is "the most unpublished writer in America", has put into book form her most favorite and sacred political columns that were only granted blogger space since 9/11. What does she start us off with? "Historically, the best way to convert liberals is to have them move out of their parents' home, get a job, and start paying taxes. But if this doesn't work, you might have to actually argue with a liberal."

She has compiled all of her online columns related to the injustices and missed opportunities conservative politicians have lost to set records straight, and to "put liberals back in their place." She's no longer concerned with what liberals think, or why they think it. She's on a mission now to re-train conservatives on how to act and react to liberals. In Coulter's eyes, liberals are out to repeat as many lies as they possibly can, in the least amount of time, so America is too preoccupied to notice that liberals are building a Death Star. (And the Star Wars Trilogy came out on DVD this month too; you should visit or revisit that as well!). Coulter's sophisticated wit, lack of fear, and intellectual compulsion to get every detail and footnote right, (so those nonbelievers can look up the facts for themselves), is so effective, you're either repeating to yourself, "Why are we so blind to this?" or "I can't believe she actually said that!" By compiling her pieces over the past 3 years, she also unintentionally, or maybe very intentionally, makes a stunning point that the majority of her articles could've been written last week, and no one could tell the difference. Liberal's game plans never change, their arguments never change, and despite them being the party that screams for change, the actual liberal voices and names haven't changed (some for 30-40 years!).

Ann Coulter is a graduate of Cornell University and the University of Michigan Law School. When she's not opining in syndicated columns or books about her brothers and sisters on the wrong side of politics (while maintaining her perfect record of being a New York Times Best Seller), she's a legal affairs correspondent, an attorney, a frequent guest on talk-news programs, and was voted one of the Top 100 Public Intellectuals in 2001. Whew. But to most, she's the college professor you never had! *Release date October 5, 2004/US \$26.95.*

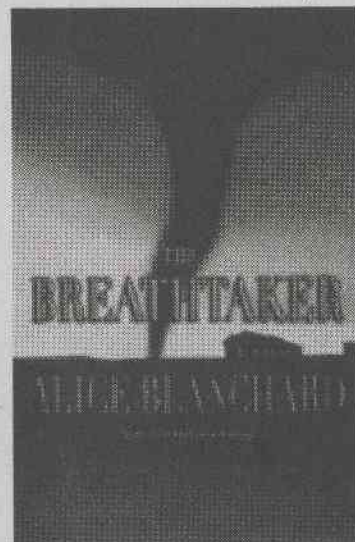
Blanchard's Breathtaker a breath of fresh air

By Toby Tate
Editor-in-Chief

Imagine waking up in the middle of the night, lightning flashing like a strobe light on maximum, hail the size of baseballs pounding the shingles off your roof, and sirens wailing in the distance like World War two air raid alerts. You gather your family into the nearest windowless room, heart racing and adrenaline pumping, while outside the wind howls like a freight train coming down the tracks. Then, the front door swings open, and in the doorway stands the black silhouette of a man backlit by a sky full of jagged streaks of electric fire.

The book is Alice Blanchard's *Breathtaker*, author of the thriller *Darkness Peering* and the award-winning short story collection *The Stuntman's Daughter*. Though the book takes place mostly in Oklahoma, Ms. Blanchard was born in Connecticut, lives in L.A., and studied at Emerson and Harvard. There is no information as to whether or not she earned a degree, but one would assume so.

Charlie Grover, Police Chief of Promise, Oklahoma, finds a family of three dead, with several wooden objects protruding from their bodies. This is not an unusual occurrence since flying debris is quite common during a tornado, and most of it moves through the



air with the speed and force of a crossbow. A couple of things that strike Grover as odd, however, are the facts there are drag marks on the floor of the house made where the bodies had been moved from one place to another, and defensive wounds on the arms. Further investigation finds that teeth had been removed and replaced with other teeth from someone else's mouth; very bizarre.

The M.O. (modus operandi) of the killer makes no sense, but when does it ever? Charlie eventually finds that a similar killing took place previously in a small Texas town, and after unearthing the bodies, learns that teeth were switched in them as well. Whoever it is, this person possesses a lot of pent up rage and hostility, made apparent by the sheer ferocity of the killings. It takes a lot of anger-driven power to stab someone all the way through the

body with a piece of wood, let alone several pieces of wood.

In the story we learn that Charlie was not only abused as a boy by a violent, alcoholic father named Isaac, but that he was severely burned in a house fire that killed his mother and younger sister, earning him the cruel childhood nickname of "Burned-All-Over Grover." This tragic event sobered his father up, but there is still bitterness between them, a resentment which Charlie harbors toward his father, blaming him for the deaths of his mother and sister.

There is the typical teenage daughter, Sophie, intelligent and sweetly innocent with a rebellious streak. She misses her mother, who died from cancer a few years earlier (Charlie has had a rough life), but she is attached to her grandfather, and doesn't know of the abusive life he led.

Some of the other characters include a love interest, Willa, a storm expert and research scientist who Charlie gets advice from concerning the killer's ability to find tornados; an assistant Chief named Lester Deere, a former football star and ladies man who rubs Charlie the wrong way, and who wants to relive past glories; Boone Pritchett, a high school bad boy and storm chaser trying to win the heart of Sophie, Charlie's daughter.

Of course, Charlie suspects anyone and everyone of being the killer, including his

own father and Boone Pritchett. This adds a lot of tension to the story and makes for a pulse-pounding read. It feels like a James Patterson novel; short chapters and concise prose, yet there is a more eloquent, mellifluous description of events and emotions, actually bringing me to tears in several places. Maybe I'm just a wimp.

One of the things that I enjoyed about this book was the use of the "storm chaser" vernacular. It seemed to be well researched and very detailed in the areas of storm chasing and medical examination of the bodies. Lots of techno-jargon and medical-speak, adding to the realism of the story. It's fun to drive around with the chasers and hear detailed descriptions of giant cumulonimbus clouds dropping out of the sky and forming spinning vortexes that rip apart everything in their path.

Some things that bothered me: the names were a little too "hickified," like Lester Deere and a couple named Sailor and Birdie Rideout. It reminded me of the "Dukes of Hazzard" and Roscoe P. Coltraine. Contrary to popular belief, people from Oklahoma and the Midwest tend to have the same types of names people in other states do, like Johnson or Rosenberg. It seems to be a common occurrence in books to sort of stereotype people from certain parts of the country, especially the south, as hicks and bumpkins, and since I actually

lived in many of the places where the events took place, it made the story a little less believable for me.

There were a few things that happened in the book that didn't quite get resolved, certain relationships which just kind of languished at the end. Maybe the author felt they had lost importance after the climax, or maybe she just plain forgot about them, but I didn't. I wanted to know what the hell happened. I can't really mention specifics, as I don't want to give away too much of the story, just suffice it to say some loose ends were left untied. Overall, the story doesn't suffer from it, it's just a nitpick.

One thing that was different from Patterson was that I knew early on who the killer was. In a Patterson novel, you can try to think until your brain pops and you're not even going to be close in most cases. I have to give Blanchard credit, however, she did throw a couple of curves, but not really enough to knock me off base.

Another small problem for me was that the killer's motive was not fully explained. Why stick wood through the bodies? In fact, why kill people at all? I never quite got the premise behind that. It was clear the man was a psycho, and there was good reason for that, as we find out later, but the mind of the killer was never really probed, making my

feelings towards him ambiguous. What was he thinking? Why was he doing this? Most of the story centers around the thoughts of Charlie, and all other characters, except Sophie, are secondary. I wanted Charlie to win, not because I hated the antagonist so much, but just because I liked Charlie. I hate to keep bringing up Patterson, but in his stories you usually get two narratives: the protagonist and the antagonist, so even though you may not know who the killer is you get to see inside their head and learn their secrets and motives.

Criticisms aside, the plot was solid and the events were described in an exciting way. Charlie is quite a strong character, and we really feel for him and get to know him. Though the book was written in third person, I felt I was seeing everything from Charlie's point of view. We also feel a lot of empathy for Sophie, Isaac Grover and Willa. I found that I had a very hard time putting this book down. I wanted to read it until I was done. Of course, I realize that shouldn't be the ultimate test for good literature, but if you're looking for a great female author with similarities to Patterson or Jeffery Deaver, this book is highly recommended.

"Breathtaker," a hardcover with 416 pages, was a Today Show pick, retails for \$24.95, and is published by Warner Books. Also available in paperback for \$6.99.