

### **The Alchemist Book Review:**

“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- Exupery'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.”

### **Sapiens Book Review:**

“Harari (History/Hebrew Univ. of Jerusalem) provides an immersion into the important revolutions that shaped world history: cognitive, agricultural and scientific. The book was originally published in Israel in 2011 and became a best-seller.

There is enormous gratification in reading books of this nature, an encyclopedic approach from a well-versed scholar who is concise but eloquent, both skeptical and opinionated, and open enough to entertain competing points of view. As Harari firmly believes, history hinges on stories: some stories for understanding, others prompting people to act cooperatively toward common goals. Of course, these stories—“ ‘fictions,’ ‘social constructs’ or ‘imagined realities’ ”—can be humble or evil, inclusive or self-serving, but they hold the power of belief. Harari doesn't avoid the distant past, when humans “were insignificant animals with no more impact on their environment than gorillas, fireflies or jellyfish,” but he is a skeptic and rightfully relies on specific source material to support his arguments—though he is happy to offer conjectures. Harari launches fully into his story with the cognitive revolution, when our brains were rewired, now more intelligent and creative, with language, gossip and myths to fashion the stories that, from politicians to

priests to sorcerers, serve to convince people of certain ideas and beliefs. The agricultural revolution (“lives generally more difficult and less satisfying than those of foragers”) comes next and firmly establishes the intersubjectivity of imagined orders: hierarchies, money, religion, gender issues, and “communication network [s] linking the subjective consciousness of many individuals Throughout, the author revels in the chaos of history. He discusses the good and bad of empires and science, suggests that modern economic history comes down to a single word (“growth”), rues the loss of familial and societal safety nets, and continues to find wonder in the concept that “the keys to happiness are in the hands of our biochemical system.”

The great debates of history aired out with satisfying vigor.

### **The Secret Book Review:**

Following his death in 1997, Robbins’s hard-driving, spiritually empty *The Predators* (1998) turns out not to be his farewell novel. Is *The Secret*? Who knows? But he will be hailed as the same old Harold by his billions of new readers on whatever uncertain plane he happens to be spending the afterlife. For readers eager for the juice only he can pump into scene, Robbins opens page one at a boys’ prep school with the lads playing poker, reading *Hustler*, and fondling themselves, talking about “bare tit,” “curly crotch hair,” “pussy hair,” then being startled by a knock at the door just as one of them reaches the logical conclusion of such activities. Where can you go from there? Well, into a business novel about sexy lingerie and a chain of stores called Cheeks (the kind you sit on in your undies). And the “secret” of the title? Think of Victoria’s.

Sure to work for those sex-starved, homesick, hungry ghosts Robbins now writes for, who can grab only steam, not their cheeks or other parts, when the novel ends with “a first-class blow job.”

### **Book Review Of Forty Rules Of Love:**

The bestselling, controversial Turkish author (*Bastard of Istanbul*, 2007, etc.) enfolds a historical narrative about a Sufi poet within the contemporary tale of a discontented Massachusetts housewife.

With her daughter in college and her twins in high school, Ella Rubinstein has gone back to work as a reader for a Boston literary agent. She accepts the lack of passion in her marriage to a philandering dentist—this unfortunate stereotype is typical of Shafak’s tin ear where Americans are concerned—until her first reading assignment forces her to reexamine her complacency. It’s a manuscript entitled *Sweet Blasphemy*, which describes the 13th-century friendship between Rumi, a respected Muslim scholar, and Shams, a wandering dervish who became his soul mate. Soon Ella is carrying on an e-mail correspondence of growing intensity with the manuscript’s author, Craig, a Scot who

found Sufism after a long period of personal crisis. Craig and Ella are soul mates too, and it doesn't hurt that he's cute. It's hard to care about Ella, who considers her younger daughter's eating disorder a distraction from her pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. The energy, complexity and empathy found in Shafak's previous work are evident only in the sections of the text devoted to Rumi. He suffers humiliations from Shams, a gifted mystic but far from perfect human being who cuts him off from his family and followers, but Rumi appreciates the deeper meaning behind the tests Shams sets for him. When Shams is murdered with the help of Rumi's jealous son, Rumi's grief blossoms into great poetry still beloved today. In the parallel present, Ella leaves her family to follow Craig to Turkey, knowing he has terminal cancer. His death only deepens her commitment to her personal quest, and she heads to Amsterdam, where he had lived. After all, the kids can always visit.

Shafak should have dropped Ella's story, with its preachy spiritual ruminations, and stuck to Rumi's odyssey, which opens a window into a world Westerners know little about.

### **Book Review Of Matilda:**

After some autobiographical excursions, Dahl here returns to the sort of whimsically grotesque fantasy that makes grown-ups wince and children beg for more. His heroine is five-year-old Matilda, a genius whose mathematical abilities, as well as her impressive reading list (Hemingway, Steinbeck, etc.), are totally unappreciated by her father—a dishonest used-car salesman—and her mother, a devotee of bingo and TV soaps. Only when the girl enters school does she find an understanding ally, Miss Honey, a paragon of virtue who attempts to defend her pupils against unbelievably cruel headmistress Miss Trunchbull, who hates children in direct proportion to their youth and tortures them accordingly. Just when things seem to be at their worst, Matilda discovers still another gift, telekinesis, enabling her to defeat the horrible Trunchbull and give Miss Honey, and herself, a new start. Dahl's tightly woven plots, his strict sense of absolute justice, and his raunchy "funny bits" make him popular with children who also appreciate the empowerment he grants to his smaller, weaker protagonists. Matilda is the most simplistic of his efforts in this direction, but it does retain the time-honored appeal, abetted by Blake's apt illustrations. It probably should be marked "For Children Only," though. And Dahl slips badly when he says that C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien have no "funny bits" in their books.

### **Book Review Treasure Island:**

Arousing abridgment of the classic tale is buoyed by atmospheric sound effects and hearty digital surprises.

Though not all of the 91 screens feature interactive effects, each is illustrated. These are usually multilayered and shadowy, and all are unfailingly evocative of the violent events,

exotic locales and dramatic highlights young Jim describes in the overlaid narrative. Automated animations include moving strips of scenery and eerie fade-ins, among others. The frequent touch-activated features (each of which is cued by an inconspicuous icon) are an unusually diverse mix: Sliders cause figures to rise or fog to clear, spinners focus a spyglass or spin a skeleton around a compass rose, cannon fire with a tap. Three-dimensional looks are achieved with moveable scenes viewed through a window. The background audio is similarly varied, switching from a hornpipe to a melodramatic orchestral blare with a turn of the page or presenting a medley of creaking timbers, seagull cries, crashing waves and low muttering. A tap at any page's bottom brings up buttons to turn the sound off, check a glossary or open a "Contents" strip of page-by-page thumbnails.

Avast! Young mateys not ready for the original will get an eyeful, an earful and a taste of the timeless pirate adventure that awaits.

### **Educated Book Review:**

A recent Cambridge University doctorate debuts with a wrenching account of her childhood and youth in a strict Mormon family in a remote region of Idaho.

It's difficult to imagine a young woman who, in her teens, hadn't heard of the World Trade Center, the Holocaust, and virtually everything having to do with arts and popular culture. But so it was, as Westover chronicles here in fairly chronological fashion. In some ways, the author's father was a classic anti-government paranoiac—when Y2K failed to bring the end of the world, as he'd predicted, he was briefly humbled. Her mother, though supportive at times, remained true to her beliefs about the subordinate roles of women. One brother was horrendously abusive to the author and a sister, but the parents didn't do much about it. Westover didn't go to public school and never received professional medical care or vaccinations. She worked in a junkyard with her father, whose fortunes rose and fell and rose again when his wife struck it rich selling homeopathic remedies. She remained profoundly ignorant about most things, but she liked to read. A brother went to Brigham Young University, and the author eventually did, too. Then, with the encouragement of professors, she ended up at Cambridge and Harvard, where she excelled—though she includes a stark account of her near breakdown while working on her doctoral dissertation. We learn about a third of the way through the book that she kept journals, but she is a bit vague about a few things. How, for example, did her family pay for the professional medical treatment of severe injuries that several of them experienced? And—with some justification—she is quick to praise herself and to quote the praise of others.

An astonishing account of deprivation, confusion, survival, and success.

**Source:** Kirkus Reviews