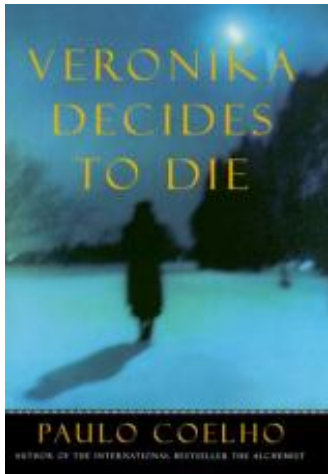


Veronika Decides to Die

by Paulo Coelho



About the Book

In his brilliant novel about the aftermath of a young woman's suicide attempt, Paulo Coelho explores three perennial themes: conformity, madness, and death. Twenty-four-year-old Veronika lives in Slovenia, one of the republics created by the dissolution of Yugoslavia. She works as a librarian by day, and by night carries on like many single women? dating men, occasionally sleeping with them, and returning to a single room she rents at a convent. It is a life, but not a very compelling one. So one day, Veronika decides to end it. Her failed attempt, and her inexplicable reasons for wanting to die, land her in a mental hospital, Vilette.

Veronika's disappointment at having survived suicide is palpable. She imagines the rest of her life filled with disillusionment and monotony, and vows not to leave Vilette alive. Much to her surprise, however, she learns that a fate she desires awaits her anyway: She is destined to die within a week's time, of a heart damage caused by her suicide attempt. Gradually, this knowledge changes Veronika's perception of death and life.

In the meantime, Vilette's head psychiatrist attempts a fascinating but provocative experiment. Can you "shock" someone into wanting to live by convincing her that death is imminent? Like a doctor applying defibrillator paddles to a heart attack victim, Dr. Igor's "prognosis" jump-starts Veronika's new appreciation of the world around her. From within Vilette's controlled environment, she finally allows herself to express the emotions she has never allowed herself to feel: hate and love, anger and joy, disgust and pleasure. Veronika also finds herself being drawn into the lives of other patients who lead constrained but oddly satisfying lives. Eduard, Zedka, and Mari have been sent to Vilette because there doesn't seem to be any other place for them. Their families don't understand them, and they can't adjust to the social structure that doesn't tolerate their individuality. Each of these patients reflects on Veronika's situation in his or her own flash of epiphany, exposing new desire and fresh vision for life that lies outside the asylum's walls.

Vilette is an asylum in the purest sense of the word: a place of protection, where one is shielded from danger. In this case the danger is society. Those who refuse to accept society's rules have two choices: succumb to the majority's perception

that they are mad, or struggle against that majority and try to find their own way in the world.

The protective walls of Vilette are liberating to its patients, allowing them to explore their "madness" without criticism or harm. What they discover is both natural and startling. A novel that starts out as contemplation on the expression of conformity and madness, turns into a dazzling exploration of the unconscious choices we make each day between living and dying, despair and liberation.

Discussion Guide

1. Veronika claims to have chosen suicide in order to achieve "freedom at last. Eternal oblivion." What would make freedom and oblivion so appealing to a twenty-four-year-old woman? What is significant about the use of the word "decides" in the title?

2. Although Veronika's story takes place in the former Yugoslavia, are there any elements of the novel that are universal? To what extent is Veronika's situation a result of living in a country such as Slovenia? a small country, that few people have heard of? but that nonetheless has a significant, and recently violent, history?

3. Of the four patients at Vilette that we come to know? Veronika, Zedka, Mari, and Eduard? with whom, if any, do you identify, and why?

4. What has each of these characters learned during his or her time at Vilette? How do you think they will do in the "outside" world?

5. Veronika asks, "In a world where everyone struggles to survive whatever the cost, how could one judge those people who decide to die?" Do people have a right to approve or disapprove of suicide? Do we have a moral obligation to stop someone from trying to kill himself? Can the decision to commit suicide ever be considered rational?

6. How does Veronika react to Dr. Igor's news that she is suffering from a fatal heart disorder? Why would someone who wants to commit suicide be devastated by the thought of dying?

7. What do you think of Dr. Igor's theory about Vitriol, the name he gives to a "disease of the soul" that affects people who have grown embittered? Do you recognize evidence of Vitriol in people around you? Is the condition widespread?

8. How do you feel about Dr. Igor's experiment on Veronika? Was it morally justifiable?

9. On hearing the news that she is soon to be released from Vilette, Zedka reflects, "Once in a mental hospital, a person grows used to the freedom that exists in the world of madness and becomes addicted to it. You no longer have to take on responsibilities, to struggle to earn your daily bread, to be bothered with repetitive, mundane tasks." And yet, she wants to leave. What enables Zedka as well as Eduard, Mari, and Veronika to decide that they will be able to survive outside Vilette's walls?

10. Has reading this novel changed your perception of what it means to be mentally ill? Do you think Paulo Coelho's novel is an allegory? If so, what is the journey all about?

Author Bio

Paulo Coelho is the author of many international bestsellers, including *THE ALCHEMIST*, *ELEVEN MINUTES*, *THE PILGRIMAGE* and *THE FIFTH MOUNTAIN*. He has been a member of the Academy of Letters of Brazil since 2002 and in 2007 was named a Messenger of Peace by the United Nations. In 2009, he received the Guinness World Record for Most Translated Author for the Same Book (*THE ALCHEMIST*). He lives in Geneva, Switzerland.

Paulo Coelho's books have been translated into 82 languages and have sold more than 230 million copies in more than 170 countries. His 1988 novel, *THE ALCHEMIST*, has sold more than 85 million copies and has been cited as an inspiration by people as diverse as Malala Yousafzai and Pharrell Williams.

Critical Praise

" A touching fable about learning to live in the face of death. "

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Publication Date: May 16, 2000

Hardcover: 224 pages

Publisher: Harper

ISBN-10: 0060196122

ISBN-13: 9780007639588