

# The WITCH of PORTOBELLO

## READING GROUP GUIDE

With the story of Athena, the mysterious and charismatic young woman known as the “witch of Portobello,” Coelho said he wanted to explore the feminine side of divinity.

Told in the voices of the people she encountered, *The Witch of Portobello* describes how Athena cultivated a strong connection to the Great Mother and shared that connection with those around her.



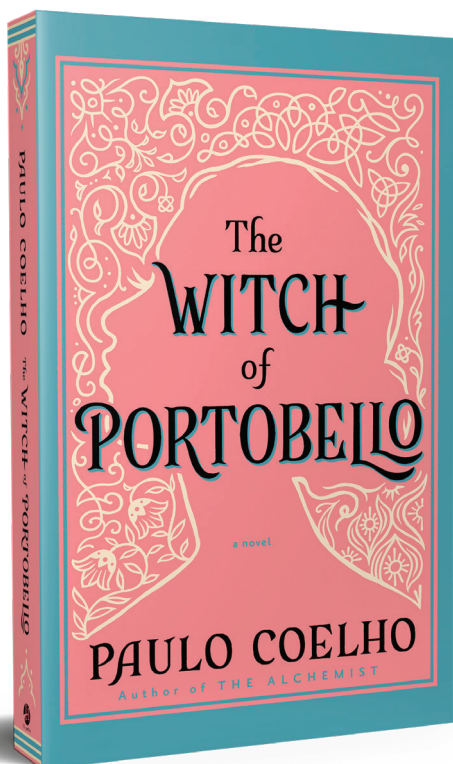
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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Athena's story is told not by her but by those who knew her or encountered her on her journey, her teachers, and her students, some of whom didn't like her very much. Why do you think Coelho chose to tell the story this way? How might it have differed if it were told in Athena's own voice?
2. Athena has a powerful influence on just about everyone she meets, and Andrea McCain claims Athena used and manipulated her. Yet, also according to Andrea, Athena said, "No one can manipulate anyone else. In any relationship, both parties know what they're doing, even if one of them complains later that they were used" (p. 7). Was Athena manipulative? Were others in the story manipulating her? Why or why not?
3. According to Edda, women identify with one of four classic archetypes: the Virgin, the Martyr, the Saint, and the Witch (p. 12). Do you agree? Which of the archetypes are you drawn to?
4. Despite all that she accomplishes, Athena feels from a very young age that her mission is to be a mother and she has Viorel when she is only 19. Why was motherhood so important to her? How did having Viorel change Athena and influence the events of her life and work?
5. Athena's gift for and love of music is a constant. In talking about how much he learned about himself from Athena through music, Lukas says, "Music isn't just something that comforts or distracts us, it goes beyond that—it's an ideology. You can judge people by the kind of music they listen to" (p. 35). What is the role of music in your life? Would you agree with Lukas that it is an ideology? What would your choice of music say to others about you?
6. After he refuses her communion because of her divorce, Athena's priest imagines Athena encountering Jesus and Jesus saying, "My child, I've been excluded too. It's a very long time since they've allowed me in there" (p. 47). How did Athena's feelings of being an outsider in many different aspects of her life affect her life and her work?

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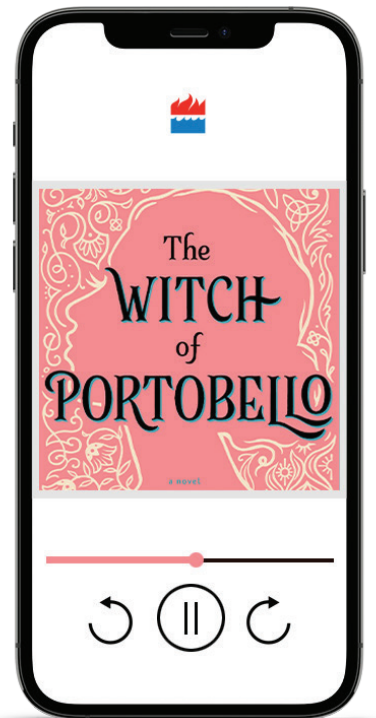
7. From her landlord Pavel, Athena learns “The Search for the Vertex” dance, which he describes to reach the hidden light emanating from our hearts (p. 51). For Athena, dance “is a way of rising into space, of discovering new dimensions while remaining in touch with your body. When you dance, the spiritual world and the real world manage to coexist quite happily” (p. 58). What is it about dancing that touches both so powerfully? Have you had a similar experience of dance?
8. After her powerful experiences with music and dancing, Athena finds herself drawn to the stillness and discipline of calligraphy with Nabil. Which most appeals to you: the exuberance and energy of dance or the stillness and precision of calligraphy? Have you experienced either practice to connect to something greater than yourself? How have you balanced these two qualities in your life?
9. Athena feels she must find her birth mother to understand the “blank spaces”—the pauses in music, the space between words. What might the blank spaces represent in your life? How can you fill in these blank spaces?



10. Edda refers often to the Mother. Who is the Mother to Edda? What are some key characteristics of God as Mother? How does the Great Mother differ from other concepts of God?
11. To Edda, the Witch is an archetype; to Andrea, a witch was someone who could perform magic, but they both (and others, including Andrea’s director and Rev. Buck) use this word to describe Athena. What does “witch” mean to you? Why do you think Coelho used this word in his title?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

12. When Athena danced unrhythmically, the Mother was able to speak through her. When Edda knitted badly, she had an experience of “a warm, loving, companionable presence” (p. 194). What was it about doing something familiar in the wrong way that allowed both women to have these experiences? Have you ever tried something similar? If so, what was the result?
13. Athena is very reluctant to become a teacher and her first teaching experience is less than a complete success, yet she soon embraces the role. Edda says to Athena, “A group has just asked you to teach them something, and that will make you a teacher” (p. 153). Also, according to Edda, the only difference between teacher and disciple is that “the former is slightly less afraid than the latter” (p. 213). Who are your teachers? Your students? In what ways are you a teacher? In what ways are you a disciple? Do teachers ever stop being disciples? What does it mean to you that Edda and Athena also refer to their teachers as “protectors”?
14. Edda says the Great Mother told her to be discreet and probably told Athena too, but Athena failed to heed this advice (p. 222). Should Athena have been more “discreet”? Why or why not?
15. Athena’s mission is carried on by Andrea, who began by hating Athena. Athena says, “When hatred makes a person grow, it’s transformed into one of the many ways of loving” (p. 260). How can hatred be a way of loving? Have you ever experienced this? Why is Andrea the one to carry on Athena’s mission?
16. What is the most significant insight you have gained from *The Witch of Portobello*? How does the way Athena live her life make you want to live yours?



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