The title of *Eleven Minutes* is inspired by Irving Wallace’s novel *The Seven Minutes*, published in the 70s. Wallace’s bestseller deals with a long-running legal battle over the banning of a book that takes a close look at sex: in particular the seven minute duration of the average sexual encounter. Although this censored book never existed, Paulo Coelho imagines its content and determined to write it. While Coelho abandoned his original idea, *The Seven Minutes* remains the inspiration for the title (modified to *Eleven Minutes* because Coelho found Wallace’s original estimate too conservative) and the subject matter: an attempt to talk about the association and dissociation of bodily pleasures in relation to those of the heart. After a conference in Italy in 1999, Coelho returned to his hotel to find a manuscript waiting for him. It was the story of a Brazilian prostitute, Sonia, recounting her life in Europe. The text interested him and, three years later, he was finally able to meet her in Zurich. She took him to the local red light district, Langstrasse, where his visit turned into an unusual signing session during which Coelho inscribed copies of his books for several of Sonia’s colleagues. After this incident had been mentioned in the press, several other prostitutes of various nationalities gave Paulo other manuscripts at another book signing in Geneva. And so he later met Maria, Amy, Vanessa and many others. From these meetings emerged the protagonist and the main theme of *Eleven Minutes*.

**What is the central idea in Eleven Minutes?**

We live in a world of standardized behaviour, standardized beauty, quality, intelligence, efficiency. We believe there is a standard for everything, and we
believe, too, that if we stick to that standard we’ll be safe. Because of this, we have created a kind of ‘standardized sex’, which, in fact, consists of nothing but a string of lies, vaginal orgasm, virility above all else that it’s better to pretend than to disappoint your partner, etc. As a direct consequence of this, millions of people have been left feeling frustrated, unhappy and guilty. It also lies at the root of all kinds of aberrant behaviour, for example, pedophilia, incest and rape. Why do we behave in this way with something that is so important?

**To what extent is the Maria in the book the real-life Maria? How much of herself will she find in the story?**

Maria is a real person, and is now married with two children. However, the book isn’t simply her biography, because I’ve also tried to make use of various other parallel elements. I think she would recognize her story in the book as a whole, but she wouldn’t necessarily have been confronted by the same situations with which my character is confronted.

**Has she read Eleven Minutes?**

She read a first draft, in October 2002. She felt that the book was made up of a blend of different people, and I told her that this had been precisely my intention. She asked who had written the diary in the book, and said that she wished she could have written it. She did ask me to change the age of the principal male character, and I agreed - he’s older in real life than he is in the book.

**Did meeting foreign prostitutes working in Switzerland mean that the book turned out very differently from the way you had originally envisaged it?**
The idea of writing about sex is one that had been in my mind for a long time, but I hadn’t found the right approach. Besides, the gestation of every book is a mystery to me: the text itself only comes into being once I’ve written it already in my subconscious. Perhaps in my other attempts to write about sex, I was too determined to deal only with its sacred side. The reality is very different though and I’m very pleased with the way I’ve resolved the problem.

Hundreds of Brazilian women share Maria’s story: going from the backlands of Brazil to the big city and then travelling abroad to work as prostitutes. Is there a parallel between that sad trajectory and the pilgrimage routes?

My book doesn’t set out to be a study of prostitution. I’ve tried to avoid any kind of moralizing tone and in any way judging the main character for the choice she makes. What really interests me is how people relate to each other sexually. My intention, as always, is to be straightforward without being superficial.

What is the significance in the book of the reference to the Road to Santiago? Is there something particularly significant about the fact that Maria meets the male character, Ralf, on a stretch of that particular pilgrimage route, even though she knows nothing about it?

There’s a realistic aspect to it - the Road to Santiago does, in fact, pass through Geneva - and there’s symbolic aspect too - because, from that moment on, Maria’s body and soul begin to become reintegrated, because of love.

Do you think the fact that your main character as a prostitute will cause you problems in Muslim countries, like Iran, where your books have had great success?
I don’t think about these things when I write. I think only about being true to myself.

**In the dedication, you say that some books make a reader dream, whilst other bring him or her face to face with reality. Could this be seen as a warning?**

The dedication isn’t warning, it’s a declaration of personal principle. I have to write about topics that interest me, not just things that others might want to read about. My readers are intelligent people. If they felt there was a formula that was repeated in all my books, they would stop reading them. I myself am always surprised by what I write, and that, I think, gives life to a book.