

## *Background about the Book – The Alchemist*

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He holds the secret that can end the world.

The truth: Nicholas Flamel was born in Paris on September 28, 1330. Nearly 700 years later, he is acknowledged as the greatest Alchemist of his day. It is said that he discovered the secret of eternal life. The records show that he died in 1418. But his tomb is empty.

The legend: Nicholas Flamel lives; but only because he has been making the elixir of life for centuries. The secret of eternal life is hidden within the book he protects—the Book of Abraham the Mage. It's the most powerful book that has ever existed. In the wrong hands, it will destroy the world. That's exactly what Dr. John Dee plans to do when he steals it. Humankind won't know what's happening until it's too late. And if the prophecy is right, Sophie and Josh Newman are the only ones with the power to save the world as we know it.

Sometimes legends are true. And Sophie and Josh Newman are about to find themselves in the middle of the greatest legend of all time.

From: randomhouse.com

## *About the Author*

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Irish-born Michael Scott began writing over twenty-five years ago, and is one of Ireland's most successful and prolific authors, with one hundred titles to his credit, spanning a variety of genres, including Fantasy, Science Fiction and Folklore. He writes for both adults and young adults and is published in thirty-three countries, in twenty languages. He is considered one of the authorities on the folklore of the Celtic lands and is credited with the resurgence of interest in the subject in the mid-1980's.

Michael Scott is an accomplished scriptwriter and headed up the drama department in Tyrone Productions, the creators of *Riverdance*. He has written for the stage and screen and also created and scripted documentaries and drama for television. He has also scripted high profile events such as the Special Olympics which were held in Ireland in 2002 and the Irish Film and Television Awards.

Praised for his "unparalleled contribution to children's literature," by the Guide to Children's Books, Michael Scott was the Writer in Residence during Dublin's tenure as European City of Culture in 1991, and featured in the 2006 edition of *Who's Who in Ireland* as one of the 1000 "most significant Irish."

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## A Letter from the Author

Some stories wait their turn to be told, others just tap you on the shoulder and insist you tell them.”

By one of those wonderful coincidences with which life is filled, I find that the first time the word *alchemyst*—with a Y—appears in my notes is in May 1997. Ten years later, almost to the day, *The Alchemyst*, the first book in the Nicholas Flamel series, will be published in May.

Every writer I know keeps a notebook full of those ideas, which might, one day, turn into a story. Most writers know they will probably never write the vast majority of those ideas. Most stories wait their turn to be told, but there are a few which tap you on the shoulder and insist on being told. These are the stories which simply will not go away until you get them down on paper, where you find yourself coming across precisely the research you need, or discovering the perfect character or, in my case, actually stumbling across Nicholas Flamel’s house in Paris.

Discovering Flamel’s house was the final piece I needed to put the book together. It also gave me the character of Nicholas Flamel because, up to that point, the book was without a hero.

And Nicholas Flamel brought so much to the story.

Nicholas Flamel was one of the most famous alchemists of his day. He was born in 1330 and earned his living as a bookseller, which, by another of those wonderful coincidences, was the same job I had for many years.

One day he bought a book, the same book mentioned in *The Alchemyst*: the Book of Abraham. It, too, really existed and Nicholas Flamel left us with a very detailed description of the copper-bound book. Although the book itself is lost, the illustrations from the text still exist.

Accompanied by his wife Perenelle, Nicholas spent more than 20 years trying to translate book. He must have succeeded. He became extraordinarily wealthy and used some of his great wealth to found hospitals, churches, and orphanages. Perhaps he had discovered the secret of the Philosopher’s Stone: how to turn base metal into gold.

Of course the greatest mystery linked to Nicholas Flamel is the story of what happened *after* he died. When his tomb was opened by thieves looking for some of his great wealth, it was found to be empty. Had Nicholas and Perenelle Flamel been buried in secret graves, or had they never died in the first place? In the months and years to follow, sightings of the Flamels were reported all over Europe. Had Nicholas also discovered that other great mystery of alchemy: the secret of immortality?

What writer couldn’t resist a story that combined magical books, an immortal magician and grave robbing and, even more excitingly, that had a basis in fact? It begged the questions: if he was still alive today, where would he be and what would he be doing? Obvious really—he would be running a bookshop in San Francisco.

*The Alchemyst* was a tough book to write, probably the toughest of all the books I've done so far. It is the first in a series, and because the story told across all six books is so tightly integrated, keeping track of the characters and events means that I have to keep extensive and detailed notes. A minor change in book one could impact dramatically book three. There are tiny clues seeded into the first book that pay off in later books. The time frame for the entire series is very tight—*The Alchemyst*, for example, takes place over two days—so I need to keep an hour-by-hour breakdown of events.

For people who like to know the practicalities, I write every day and sometimes all day and often long into the night. Nights really are the best time for writing. It's that time the conscious side of the brain is starting to shut down and the unconscious takes over. The following day I'll read what I've written the previous day, then edit and rewrite. I work on two computer screens; the story on one screen, notes and research on the second screen.

And now let me answer the question you are about to ask me because, sooner or later, everyone asks, "What is the secret of writing?"

A comfortable chair. A really comfortable chair—because if you're a writer, you're going to spend a lot of time sitting in it.

From: [randomhouse.com](http://randomhouse.com) and [dillonscott.com](http://dillonscott.com)

## Reviews – The Alchemyst

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### **From School Library Journal**

*Starred Review.* Grade 6-9—Scott uses a gigantic canvas for this riveting fantasy. The well-worn theme of saving the world from the forces of evil gets a fresh look here as he incorporates ancient myth and legend and sets it firmly, pitch-perfect, in present-day California. At the emotional center of the tale are contemporary 15-year-old twins, Josh and Sophie, who, it turns out, are potentially powerful magicians. They are spoken of in a prophecy appearing in the ancient Book of Abraham the Mage, all but two pages of which have been stolen by evil John Dee, alchemist and magician. The pursuit of the twins and Flamel by Dee and his allies to get the missing pages constitutes the book's central plot. Amid all this exhilarating action, Scott keeps his sights on the small details of character and dialogue and provides evocative descriptions of people, mythical beings, and places. He uses as his starting point the figures of the historical alchemist Nicholas Flamel and his wife, who have found the secret of immortality, along with mythical beings, including the terrifying Scottish crow-goddess, the Morrigan; the three-faced Greek Hekate; the powerful Egyptian cat-goddess, Bastet; and Scathach, a legendary Irish woman warrior and vegetarian vampire. While there is plenty here to send readers rushing to their encyclopedias of mythology and alchemy, those who read the book at face value will simply be caught up in the enthralling story. A fabulous read.—*Sue Giffard, Ethical Culture Fieldston School, New York City*

### **From Publishers Weekly**

Twin 15-year-old siblings Sophie and Josh Newman take summer jobs in San Francisco across the street from one another: she at a coffee shop, he at a bookstore owned by Nick and Perry Fleming. In the very first chapter, armed goons garbed in black with "dead-looking skin and... marble eyes" (actually Golems) storm the bookshop, take Perry hostage and swipe a rare Book (but not before Josh snatches its two most important pages). The stolen volume is the Codex, an ancient text of magical wisdom. Nick Fleming is really Nicholas Flamel, the 14th-century alchemist who could turn base metal into gold, and make a potion that ensures immortality. Sophie and Josh learn that they are mentioned in the Codex's prophecies: "The two that are one will come either to save or to destroy the world." Mayhem ensues, as Irish author Scott draws on a wide knowledge of world mythology to stage a battle between the Dark Elders and their hired gun—Dr. John Dee—against the forces of good, led by Flamel and the twins (Sophie's powers are "awakened" by the goddess Hekate, who'd been living in an elaborate treehouse north of San Francisco). Not only do they need the Codex back to stop Dee and company, but the immortality potion must be brewed afresh every month. Time is running out, literally, for the Flamels. Proceeding at a breakneck pace, and populated by the likes of werewolves and vampires, the novel ends on a precipice, presumably to be picked up in volume two. Ages 12-up.

## Read Alikes – The Alchemist

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The Magician by Michael Scott

The Sorceress by Michael Scott

The Akhenaten Adventure by P. B. Kerr

The Amulet of Samarkand by Jonathan Stroud

The Warrior Heir by Cinda Williams Chima

## Discussion Questions: The Alchemyst

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1. How do Josh and Sophie know they can trust Flamel? How do they know that Dee's motives are evil ones? Do their feelings toward these two characters change through the course of the story?
2. Discuss the power of the codex, the Book of Abraham the Mage. Do you think that one book could contain the secrets to immortal life?
3. Compare the personalities of Josh and Sophie, and Flamel and Dee. In what ways are the pairs alike and different? How does Perenelle compare to them?
4. Flamel and Dee both call on beings of the Elder Race. Discuss the idea that entities from many different mythologies could still exist in our world, and that they could interact with one another and with humans.
5. Why does Perenelle use a ghost to help her communicate with Flamel? Why can't she call on beings of the Elder Race?
6. Discuss the character of Scathach. What part does she play in the story? What is her relationship to Flamel? To the twins? To Hekate and the Witch of Endor?
7. Flamel says, "We are all prisoners of a sort here—prisoners of circumstance and events." (p. 197) What does he mean? Are Josh and Sophie involved in the battle between Flamel and Dee because of their destiny, or because they choose to become involved? What does the codex mean when it says, "The two that are one will come either to save or to destroy the world"? (p. 199)
8. Why do Josh and Sophie agree to go through the Awakening? Why does Hekate only "awaken" Sophie's powers? How does this affect the twins' connection to each other?
9. What does Hekate mean when she says, "Great change always comes down to the actions of a single person"? (p. 210) Can you identify times in the history of the world when great change happened because of the actions of a single person?
10. Why does Josh believe what Dee is telling him at the fountain in Ojai? What does Dee mean when he says, "It seems we are all victims of Nicholas Flamel"? (p. 338) Who do you believe is telling the truth?
11. The ending of the book seems to lead to another beginning, at the other side of the leygate. What do you think will happen to the twins in a future story? Is Dee destroyed, or will he return?

From: Random House - Prepared by Connie Rockman, children's literature consultant, adjunct professor of children's and young adult literature, and editor of the H. W. Wilson Junior Book of Authors and Illustrators series

# GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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The following questions can be applied to any book. You can tweak the questions for your specific book. They can be cut into strips and passed around in a basket to help facilitate discussion.

My favorite part of the book was...

A better title for this book would be...because...

(Name of character) reminds me of myself because...

My least favorite character was...because...

If I were (name of character, -----) I would (wouldn't) have...

(Name of character) reminds me of someone I know because...

I changed my mind about...because...

I would (wouldn't) like to read another book by this author because...

This book made me think...When I finished this book, I still wondered...

This book reminded me of...

I'd like to tell the author...

What happened in this book was very realistic (unrealistic) because...

This book was better (worse) than the movie version because...

When I started reading his book, I thought...

I didn't like...because...

This book made me realize...

If I could talk to (name of character), I would say...

One thing I have noticed about the author's style is...

If I could be any character in the book I would be...because...

I was surprised when...

I think the main thing the writer was trying to say was...

The most important thing about this book is...

I predicted that...

I think the writer must be ...because...

I would change the ending...