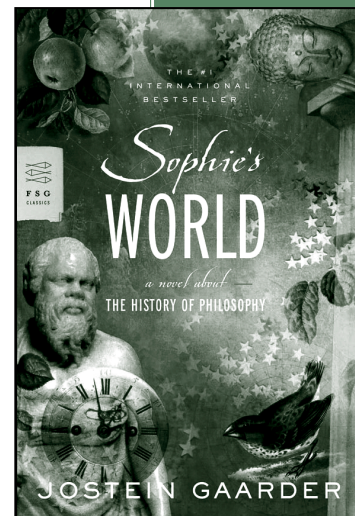


Sophie's World

A Novel About the History of Philosophy

by Jostein Gaarder

Accelerated
Reader



544 pages • 978-0-374-53071-6

“Extraordinary . . . The book will serve as a first-rate introduction for anyone who never took an introductory philosophy course, and as a pleasant refresher for those who have.” —*Newsweek*

“Brilliant . . . Unlike any other novel . . . Its depth of learning, its intelligence and its totally original conception give it enormous magnetic appeal . . . To be fully human, and to feel our continuity with 3,000 years of philosophical inquiry, we need to put ourselves in Sophie's world.”

—*The Boston Sunday Globe*

TO THE TEACHER

With more than 30 million copies in print, *Sophie's World* is a sharp, exciting, entirely different novel that thrives on its contradictions. It's a page-turning adventure that is also a history of Western philosophy—from the discourse of ancient Greece to debates about the Big Bang. It's a refreshingly contemporary and candid coming-of-age tale that's also a sci-fi-like mystery. It's an international bestseller that is also an extended postmodern riff on the very idea of authorship. In short, it's just as engaging as it is imaginative.

As the book begins, 14-year-old Sophie finds two notes in her mailbox. One note asks, “Who are you?” The other asks, “Where does the world come from?” From here, with the quirky aid of an equally devoted and mysterious instructor, Sophie sets off on a fantastic philosophical saga that will take her far beyond her small Norwegian hometown. The letters give way to lectures, the questions give way to quests, and the dimensions of Sophie's world grow ever wider, deeper, and richer.

But who is Hilde? And why does Sophie keep getting her mail? When the enigmatic philosophy instructor starts addressing Sophie as “Hilde” by mistake—or is he doing this on purpose?—things begin to look more complex than Sophie could ever have imagined. Yet the answers can all be found, or so it seems, in the many different philosophies she has been studying.



Kirkus, SLJ,
NCTE High
Interest-Easy
Reading, *The New
York Times*

PRAISE FOR
SOPHIE'S WORLD

“First, think of a beginner’s guide to philosophy, written by a schoolteacher . . . Next, imagine a fantasy novel—something like a modern-day version of *Through the Looking Glass*. Meld these disparate genres, and what do you get? Well, what you get is an improbable international bestseller . . . a runaway hit . . . [a] tour de force.” —*Time*

“Remarkable . . . A whimsical and ingenious mystery novel that also happens to be a history of philosophy.” —*The Washington Post Book World*

“Just as remarkable for its playful premise as it is for its accessibility . . . The essential charm of *Sophie’s World* lies in the innocent curiosity of the young character, and the clever narrative structure Gaarder designed to pique it.” —*The Columbus Dispatch*

“From the opening Goethe quotation to the closing discussion of the Big Bang theory, this is an extraordinary, exciting, provocative book . . . Gaarder presents a didactic history of philosophical thought as part of a fictional mystery story that both pulls readers along and breaks up the ‘heavy’ explanations into manageable parts. Yet the plot is itself a philosophical conundrum, [and this] mystery, like the human mystery, is not really resolved, and leaves readers wanting to know more. Gaarder pulls off the difficult feat of blending philosophy and entertainment in a way that will capture young adults’ interest and make them eager to explore further.” —*School Library Journal*

PREPARING
TO READ

This teacher’s guide consists of three sections, all of which appear immediately below: Reading and Understanding the Novel; Questions and Exercises for the Class; and Terms to Define and Discuss. The first section will help students follow along with *Sophie’s World*; the second will aid in their exploration of, and reflection on, this novel (as individuals and as a group); and the third will sharpen their comprehension of Gaarder’s work via definition, term identification and review, and vocabulary-building. Please note that the words in the third section are presented in the same order as they appear in the book.

READING AND
UNDERSTANDING
THE NOVEL

1. Explain the importance of the title of this book’s first chapter.
2. Why does Sophie’s philosophy teacher tell her that “you are a Martian yourself” (p. 18)?
3. What is a “philosophical project” (p. 63)? Why does the philosophy teacher assert that “no one philosopher concerns himself with the whole of philosophy” (p. 32)?

4. Name the four basic elements (see p. 38) that were identified by Empedocles and other natural philosophers of early Greece, and explain why these particular elements were so labeled. What properties were assigned to each element?
5. Why does Sophie's correspondent call the Lego block "the most ingenious toy in the world" (p. 44)? What is he saying about Legos? Explain the metaphor he's making here. Further, when thinking about Legos in this regard, Sophie wonders, "Why did people quit playing when they grew up"? How would you answer her?
6. When Sophie first starts receiving letters from the philosophy teacher, she finds that each one is slightly damp, having "two little holes in it" (p. 49). Why is this the case? Thinking of *Sophie's World* as a mystery novel, what other "clues" did you encounter over the course of the book? Were you able to use them to solve any riddles? And were there any "red herrings" as well?
7. What does it mean to be "skeptical" of something? Or "cynical"? Or "stoic"? How do these terms echo the thinking of various ancient Greek philosophers (see p. 129)?
8. Socrates, we read, was widely seen as the wisest man in Athens, even though he freely admitted that he "knew nothing about life [or] the world" (p. 69). Is this a paradox? Why or why not? Explain.
9. Regarding the video cassette that Sophie watches in secret, how is Alberto Knox able to bring ancient Athens back to life (see p. 73)?
10. Paraphrase the "Myth of the Cave" (p. 89) that Plato wrote about. What was Plato saying in this allegory? What lessons might we draw from it?
11. Explain how and why Plato goes from describing the human body to describing the ideal government (see p. 91).
12. Why doesn't, or why wouldn't, Aristotle accept the validity of the "gingerbread mold" (p. 107) that Alberto tells Sophie about? Further, how does Aristotle's take on the link between nature and reality differ from Plato's take on this link?
13. What is the "Golden Mean" (p. 114)? How does this concept fit alongside Aristotle's views on the human diet, disposition, and so on?
14. In the "Middle Ages" chapter, Alberto says, "We can say that Aquinas christianized Aristotle in the same way that St. Augustine christianized Plato" (p. 177). Why did these great medieval thinkers aim to apply the teachings of Christ to philosophers who had lived hundreds of years "BC"?
15. Who were Hildegard of Bingen, Albert the Great, and Sophia (see pp. 182-83)? How are they reflected in these pages by more contemporary figures?
16. "You could say," Alberto tells Sophie, "that a process started in the Renaissance finally brought people to the moon. Or for that matter to Hiroshima and Chernobyl" (p. 195). What is this "process"? What is Alberto saying?

17. Later in the “Renaissance” chapter, Alberto says, “Of all the scientific discoveries in the history of mankind, this is positively the most important” (p. 205). What’s he referring to, and why is it so paramount? Furthermore, why did the Renaissance lead to, as Alberto puts it, “a new religiosity” (p. 208)?
18. Why did “the Baroque period [give] birth to modern theater,” as Alberto asserts (p. 225)? What was it about this particular moment in history that led to the likes of Shakespeare?
19. Alberto calls Descartes “the father of modern philosophy” (p. 231)—but why does he make this claim? What did Descartes bring to philosophical inquiry that changed things so considerably, or that moved things forward?
20. What are the advantages of viewing all things, as Spinoza said, “sub specie aeternitatis” (p. 251)? What insights does this provide? What does it tell us?
21. In the “Locke” chapter, Alberto tells Sophie about “the only thing a real philosopher must never do.” What is it? Does Sophie ever do it? Or Alberto, or Hilde? Or did you, as a reader? Explain.
22. “More than any other philosopher,” Alberto says, David Hume “took the everyday world as his starting point” (p. 264). How did Hume do this? And what was the result of such earthbound thought? How did he come to understand the world—and what sort of philosophical thought has followed in Hume’s wake?
23. Things have changed dramatically, from a narrative standpoint and otherwise, when the “Bjerkely” chapter begins. But how? What connections exist between Berkeley and Bjerkely? Between Sophie and Hilde? Between Alberto Knox and Albert Knag? Or even between Albert Knag and Jostein Gaarder?
24. What comparative comments does Hilde’s father make to Alberto and Sophie about the French Enlightenment and the United Nations—and how does he get these comments across (see pp. 309, 337)? More generally, what points about the UN—its mission, its purpose, its politics—are made throughout *Sophie’s World* (see pp. 143, 218)?
25. Explain the “red-tinted glasses” metaphor employed in the “Kant” chapter.
26. In the “Romanticism” chapter, Alberto quotes a character from Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*: “One cannot die in the middle of Act Five” (p. 350). What’s the meaning of this line? What’s Alberto trying to say by quoting it?
27. “In a sense,” Alberto tells Sophie, “Freud demonstrated that there is an artist in everyone” (p. 435). How did Freud’s writing and thinking make this point? And to what extent, in your view, is this point valid?
28. What is the “theater of the absurd” (p. 454)—and how did it come about? What were the playwrights involved in this movement trying to say, philosophically, dramatically, and otherwise, with their work?

QUESTIONS AND
EXERCISES
FOR THE CLASS

29. In the “Big Bang” chapter, we find that stargazing is actually a form of time-travel. How could this be? Explain.

30. Looking back at the beginning of this novel, reread the quotation from Goethe that precedes the first chapter. Explain this quote, and explain whether and how you think it applies to Gaarder’s work.

1. One of the great enigmas of philosophy is the so-called “problem of identity.” How does this novel explore that question in particular? Also, on your own or in a group, research the meaning of the literary term “metafiction”—and then describe how Gaarder’s novel also exemplifies that concept. (Why is it, for instance, that the story of young Hilde does not properly begin until the “Bjerkely” chapter?)

2. Many ideas and societies are addressed in *Sophie’s World*. But what about the customs and background that Sophie herself grew up with? Discuss what you learned about Norwegian (and Nordic) culture and history from reading this novel.

3. Early on, Alberto tells Sophie that various cultures have used myths to explain the happenings or inventory of the natural world (see p. 24). Write a poem or short story or two in which you create a few such myths of your own. That is, pick out a couple of natural phenomena or patterns, and then create original myths that provide narratives as well as “reasons” for them.

4. What is the Socratic method of discourse (p. 66)? Why do you think this form of communicating has remained so popular and influential? And why does Alberto note the “pedagogic responsibility” of Socrates (p. 90)? As a class, discuss or debate a few questions—be they timely or ancient, local or universal—while employing the Socratic method.

5. In the chapter titled “The Major’s Cabin,” this novel starts to take on magical or fairy-tale-like properties, traits that only increase as the story progresses. Looking over the full novel, which characters, themes, or motifs in this fantasy/fable vein were new to you, and which did you recognize? (And what does Alberto mean when he says, much later in the book: “Philosophy is the opposite of fairy tales” [p. 334]?)

6. What is the “party game” (p. 111) that Alberto says Aristotle effectively invented? How is this game played, and what is its goal? Can you come up with another game that might be based on the ideas or aims of any of the philosophers described in this novel? If so, write down the rules, then try to play it with others.

7. Review Aristotle’s views on women (see p. 115). What did he think? Why was he wrong? And why were several other philosophers whom we learn about here likewise so incorrect? As a group, point out a few of the thinkers in Gaarder’s history who missed the mark on womanhood, explaining how each of them did so. But also point out a few who saw women in a more balanced or levelheaded light.

8. Discuss the Midsummer Eve theme that runs through this book. How does it pertain to secondary themes such as personal development, coming of age, and the cycles of life and nature?
9. More than once in these pages, the way in which children think or perceive is mentioned in reference to how philosophers should think or perceive. Talk about the roots, or implications, of this ongoing comparison.
10. Both of the heroines in *Sophie's World* are going through phases of rapid physical, intellectual, and emotional development. Perhaps in Sophie's case especially we see how her ways of thinking and communicating become sharper over the course of the book. After reviewing some key scenes or exchanges, share a few examples of Sophie's mental and verbal development with your classmates.
11. Apart from all manner of philosophical essays, monographs, and so on, several different poems and plays are cited throughout this novel to support, or at least illustrate, the arguments and perspectives at hand. Revisit one of the poems or plays thus referenced, then track down the work itself, read it entirely, and prepare a short paper in which you summarize the work while exploring its philosophical aspects.
12. In the "Darwin" chapter, Alberto tells Sophie: "The key words from the middle of the [nineteenth] century were nature, environment, history, evolution, and growth" (p. 401). After doing some independent research and/or discussing the matter with your classmates, write a short essay in which you both pinpoint and explain the corresponding "key terms" from the twentieth century—or maybe even the twenty-first.
13. Several pages later, Alberto says: "A composition—and every work of art is one—is created in a wondrous interplay between imagination and reason, or between mind and reflection" (pp. 438-39). In a brief personal essay, apply this assertion to one of your own favorite drawings, paintings, sculptures, poems, etc.
14. Early in the book, we read the following about Sophie: "She decided that philosophy was not something you can learn; but perhaps you can learn to *think* philosophically" (p. 42). Having completed the novel, discuss whether you—as a reader, as a thinker, as a student—would agree with her. Explain why or why not.
15. The modern philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Conclude your exploration of *Sophie's World* by applying this notion to Gaarder's book. What were Sophie's limits? Or Hilde's? Or your own, as a reader? How did such limits change? Or didn't they?

**TERMS TO DEFINE
AND DISCUSS**

Sophie's World ranges across so many cultures, countries, and philosophies that it includes numerous words or phrases that are sometimes unfamiliar or complex—or both. See how many of the words and phrases below you can define without a dictionary and discuss with other class members those words that you cannot.

laws of nature (p. 33)
 rationalism (p. 36)
 materialist (p. 47)
 sense perception (p. 47)
 hermetic (p. 62)
 enlightenment (p. 63)
 skepticism (p. 64)
 agnostic (p. 64)
 gadfly (p. 67)
 logic (p. 76)
 Plato's theory of ideas (p. 86)
 totalitarian (p. 92)
 causality (p. 109)
 monarchy, aristocracy, and polity (p. 115)
 Hellenism (p. 126)
 syncretism (p. 127)
 humanism (p. 130)
 Neoplatonism (p. 133)
 Western and Eastern mysticism (p. 136)
 Indo-European and Semitic culture (p. 147)
 Dyaus, Zeus, Iov, and Tyr (p. 148)
 pantheism (p. 150)
 Allah (p. 151)
 Messiah (p. 153)
 St. Thomas Aquinas (p. 177)
 incunabulum (p. 195)
 individualism (p. 197)
 antihumanism (p. 198)
 empirical method (p. 199)
 Galileo Galilei (p. 199)
 Nicolaus Copernicus (p. 201)
 Johannes Kepler (p. 202)
 Law of Inertia (p. 202)
 parabola (p. 204)
 Law of Universal Gravitation (p. 206)
 carpe diem (p. 223)
 memento mori (p. 223)
 cogito, ergo sum (p. 235)
 Descartes's thought and extension (p. 237)
 British empiricism (p. 258)
 Continental rationalism (p. 258)
 tabula rasa (p. 259)
 Locke's simple sensations and complex ideas (p. 260)
 primary and secondary qualities (p. 260)
 Hume's impressions and ideas (p. 265)
 natural rights (p. 314)
 das Ding an sich (p. 323)
 Kant's material and form of knowledge (p. 325)
 duty ethics (p. 331)
 Romanticism (p. 341)
 dynamic and static views of history (p. 347)
 Hegel's dialectic (p. 360)
 thesis, antithesis, and synthesis (p. 361)
 credo quia absurdum (p. 378)
 Kierkegaard's aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages (p. 378)
 Marx's conditions, means, and mode of production (p. 390-91)
 Marx's slave, feudal, and bourgeois societies (p. 392)
 Neo-Darwinism (p. 413)
 psychoanalysis (p. 425)
 id, ego, and superego (p. 427-28)
 parapraxes (p. 430)
 free association (p. 432)
 manifest dream (p. 433)
 latent dream thoughts (p. 433)
 surrealism (p. 435)
 automatic writing (p. 437)
 existentialism (p. 449)
 Sartre's alienation (p. 451)
 absurdism (p. 454)
 Neo-Thomism (p. 456)
 analytical philosophy or logical empiricism (p. 456)
 Neo-Marxism (p. 456)
 ecophilosophy or ecosophy (p. 457)
 contrapuntal form (p. 482)
 linear and cyclic views of history (p. 502)
 stardust (p. 505)
 primeval atom (p. 506)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jostein Gaarder, an award-winning novelist and short-fiction writer, was born in Oslo, Norway in 1952. He taught high-school philosophy for eleven years before becoming a full-time writer. He lives with his family in Oslo and is also the author of *The Solitaire Mystery*, among other books.

Scott Pitcock, who wrote this teacher's guide, is an editor and writer based in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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