

Sophie's World

A Novel Ambivalence...

Sophie's World: A Novel

About the History of Philosophy

Jostein Gaarder

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and Giroux 403 pages, \$19 (U.S.)

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reviewed by Marjory Lange

Two features of Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World: A Novel about the History of Philosophy* stand out immediately. One is the unusually ambitious sub-title: the other is its index. Few novels come equipped with so detailed a map of their ingredients. These two aspects are a good measure of the novel's ambivalence. Gaarder has structured an investigation into the twentieth-century roles of character and author around a history of philosophy-or has he disguised a tale of uncertain realities by surrounding it with a skeleton course in philosophy?

Sophie Amundsen, who is nearly fifteen, finds in her mailbox upon her return from school an envelope addressed to her containing a question: *Who are you?* Shortly thereafter, she again looks in the mailbox and retrieves a second letter, a second question: *Where does the world come from?* Sophie ponders these two questions, growing increasingly dissatisfied with the only answers tradition and her school have taught her. Once more, she journeys to the mailbox, this time to discover a postcard addressed to Hilde Moller Knag c/o Sophie Amundsen. It is a 15th-birthday greeting from Hilde's father. Sophie doesn't know anyone named Hilde Moller Knag, so this card adds to her confusion. Thus, within the first chapter (appropriately entitled "The Garden of Eden") Gaarder has laid out various components of his sleight-of-hand structure: mysterious missives, two eternal philosophical questions, and an enigmatic girl-and-father.

As the story continues, Sophie meets, first by letter and on video, finally in person, the teacher of philosophy, Alberto Knox, who sent her the two questions. Under his tutelage, she embarks on a course in the history of [western] philosophy, beginning with the natural philosophers predating Plato, and ending with Sartre and Freud.

Concurrently, Gaarder fashions a mobius-strip sub-plot that explores the nature of fiction and ambiguity. Paralleling the course in philosophy, the narrative's reality becomes less reliable, less secure, both to the characters involved, and to the reader. The characters find their world shifting before their eyes; the reader is invited to a novel level of imaginative consciousness.

Sophie's World is an engaging tour *de force* of nuances in authorial deconstruction worked out within the framework of a novel. The double plot is masked by the philosophical lectures which simultaneously illustrate and subvert it. The narrative challenges the reader to follow a puzzle of no little fascination. Language, ultimately, is the only dependable feature in *Sophie's World*. Properly understood, all of its ambivalent communications disclose their meaning. One must ask the appropriate questions, as Knox continually reminds Sophie. The novel's plot structure is its strength. Through its weavings, Gaarder goes beyond the threshold of the philosophers he describes, to subvert and reaffirm their logos. None of the characters is psychologically complex; in fact, none of them is even fully dimensional-nor need be for the novel to be effective. Sophie's banal ripostes to Knox's instruction are impertinent but not disruptive, adding little except the reminder that she is listening. Of all the characters, Hilde Knag comes closest to being a 'real' person, which is fitting to her role in the story. In Sophie's world it is not personalities, but philosophy that engages the attention. The double plot brings the abstract ideas to life.

The novel's philosophical content is pretty banal, neither fish, nor fowl, though perhaps good red herring. Gaarder interprets the history of philosophy under a patriarchal, traditional history-of-ideas rubric. He does not offer a single conflict of opinions. There is no instance where two dissenting ideas meet in the whole history as

he portrays it. Instead, what he offers is the *evolution* of orthodox philosophy, and a mighty sterile evolution at that, an unchallenged development and growth to the truths we now hold self-evident. There are no minority opinions-no Abelard or Bonaventure to challenge Aquinas, no Occam, no Ramus. Although it is accurate, the account is simplistic, even for an introduction to philosophy, implying as it does that no breath of contention has ever marred philosophical enquiry.

At the same time, however, the philosophy is certainly more than adequate to its function in the narrative. It raises various popular responses to the eternal questions that humans have traditionally raised. It is uncritical. Gaarder has gone on record as declaring he is less interested in debating with professional philosophers than in inspiring an interest in philosophy-an interest based always on wonder. The history of philosophy he presents serves to draw the reader's attention away from the sub-plot, enabling the inversion/switch that makes the narrative work.

Sophie's World has enjoyed a wide, and to Gaarder, unexpected, popularity since its appearance. He intended it for an adolescent audience, believing that at that age, people are ready to ask appropriate questions in a fitting state of wonder. That adults have found it entertaining does seem a bit surprising. *Sophie's World* is clever, its structure intricate enough to hold a reader's attention through to the end, but its substance is, in the final analysis, thin. Without its history of philosophy, what remains would be sufficient for a good short story. The philosophical content is well-addressed, but rudimentary. In short, *Sophie's World. A Novel about the History of Philosophy* is a good read, and also a disappointment. It neither lives up to the promise of its title nor to the implications of its index. One feels rather like saying, with Hamlet, that 'there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in thy philosophy.'

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