

Sophie's World:

Text and the Modern Student

reviewed by Tom Thibodeau

One of the critical tasks of teaching Philosophy 101 is finding an adequate text. The text must be readable, with sufficient background for the novice philosopher and at the same time engaging. The modern student may well be familiar with the term awesome as the definitive adjective to describe everything from pizza to Madonna but oftentimes they are educated out of their sense of awe and wonder and questioning.

Jostein Gaarder is a teacher of philosophy who has faced the dilemma of text and the modern student and has taken it upon himself to help his colleagues and to engage students in their study of philosophy. *Sophie's World* is a journey into the world of Sophie Amundsen, a 15 year old adolescent whose life is stretched, inflated, and organized by the ideas of western philosophy. Sophie becomes a prism through which the thought of centuries is refracted in questions, mystery, and wonderment. Gaarder is a skillful storyteller who blends ideas, dialogue, and reflection in such a way that without being aware of it the reader is engaged in the process of philosophizing.

One of the ways Gaarder engages the reader in philosophizing is through the development of Sophie. Sophie initially discovers letters sent by a mysterious philosopher. Eventually, Sophie engages Alberto Knox, the mysterious philosopher. As she begins to understand more, more is revealed to her. As Sophie learns more she begins to do philosophy at least to the extent that she begins to synthesize and summarize before moving to the next step.

Granted Sophie is a 15 year old. The age of the "narrator" gives the reader a feeling of oversimplification, but the clarity and simplicity of the approach are also engaging. One Philosophy 101 student commented about the effect of a 15 year old as "narrator":

Everything fits on the subject of the history of philosophy but everything works out exactly the way it's planned. Tome, the author chose the wrong person for the philosopher to write letters to. The letters to Sophie have to be simple to understand because she is a young girl. This makes the points unclear and undeveloped.

In a strange way this is a compliment to the teacher. When is the last time that you were asked by first year philosophy students for more complexity? When was the last time students expected greater complexity from a teacher or a text? Students are also asking for further explanations of the historical ideas of Alberto Knox. Reading and discussing *Sophie's World*, the class has become caught up in the drama of western thought, of what comes when and what comes next. Questions, reflection, dialogue abound; philosophy is breaking out all over the place. I fear that next descriptive adjective used by students to characterize philosophy may be *awesome*.

On the brink of mid-term, we are well into western philosophy. We are being capably led by Sophie Amundsen, Helde, Alberto Knox and the subtle master teacher and storyteller Jostein Gaarder.

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