

***Sophie's World*, by Jostein Gaarder – A Novel about the History of Philosophy**

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This is a wonderfully original novel, a page-turning mystery story that also operates as a fair and even-handed introduction to 3000 years of philosophy and religion.

While collecting the mail one day, a 14-year-old Norwegian schoolgirl, Sophie Amundsen, finds two pieces of paper on which are written the words “Who are you?” and “Where does the world come from?” Fair questions, indeed. For the first time in her life, Sophie feels that it isn't right to live in the world without at least *inquiring* where it came from. The writer of the questions turns out to be a philosopher, Albert Knox, and his mysterious missives begin an extraordinary tour through the history of philosophy and religion, from the ancients to the present day. In a series of intriguing letters and excursions Albert opens Sophie's mind, as well as ours, to the fundamental questions that have occupied philosophers since the dawn of civilisation. But just as Sophie begins to find her feet on this journey, she and Albert have their world turned upside down. They become caught in a plot (literally), which is itself a kind of philosophical puzzle, echoing the very concepts they have been studying.

Sophie's World was first published in English in 1995, becoming a surprise bestseller. In 1995, it outsold every other book in the world. By 2014, it had sold more than 40 million copies worldwide and been translated into 63 languages. That is extraordinary for what is, in essence, an introduction to philosophy and religion. Initially aimed at students in Norway, and directed to their curriculum, *Sophie's World* has been read and enjoyed by people of all ages all around the world. Somehow, it passed me by until recently. It would have been quite useful to me in university, as it is the very antithesis of the dry lectures I sat through in various subjects. In *Sophie's World*, Jostein Gaarder brings these things to life. He has a real gift for communicating

difficult ideas in simple terms, and for telling stories. Never before has a book about philosophy been described as a page-turner, I suspect.

The story of Gaarder's inspiration for the book is an interesting one. In Norway, the history of philosophy and religion is a compulsory subject for young students, whatever they end up studying. Gaarder taught the subject for 10 years or so, during which he also began writing novels. When his novels met with success, Gaarder decided to stop teaching. But he felt that he could not do so without preserving what he had learnt over all those years and the examples he had had to create. So, he decided to write an easy and accessible introduction to the history of philosophy. First, he tried writing it as a textbook or manual. That was quickly discarded as dry and useless. Then one day an image occurred to him, of a girl coming home from school, opening the mailbox and finding some questions. Now, he had a story. "I simply believe that our human brain is made for stories, more than it is made for digital or encyclopaedic enlightenment," Gaarder says. Jesus' practice would tend to agree.

All of a sudden, the book was much more fun for Gaarder to write – and for us to read. In addition to being a pleasure to read, *Sophie's World* helped me to better contextualise the world of the Bible (particularly my recent study of Acts) and to reflect on it from new perspectives. It added to my understanding of the history of the Eastern Christian church, and of Western Europe. It filled in gaps, and drew together many different threads of philosophy (in the development of law, politics, science, and psychology). It is a remarkable synthesis of thought across many different areas of learning and life, which are usually dealt with discretely.

It is a book that will easily bear rereading, it is so rich.

Jostein Gaarder was interviewed on 5 July 2014 by Harriett Gilbert, for the BBC World Service's World Book Club (available now on podcast). I highly recommend listening to it, as a companion piece to reading the book.