

# SOPHIE'S WORLD

A Novel About the History of Philosophy

Jostein Gaarder

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## Reviews:

More praise for the international bestseller that has become "Europe's oddball literary sensation of the decade" -- New York Newsday

"A page-turner." -- Entertainment Weekly

"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

"Compelling." --Los Angeles Times

"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." -- Boston Sunday Globe

"Involving and often humorous." -- USA Today

"In the adroit hands of Jostein Gaarder, the whole sweep of three millennia of Western philosophy is rendered as lively as a gossip column ... Literary sorcery of the first rank." -- Fort Worth Star-Telegram

"A comprehensive history of Western philosophy as recounted to a 14-year-old Norwegian schoolgirl... The book will serve as a first-rate introduction to anyone who

never took an introductory philosophy course, and as a pleasant refresher for those who have and have forgotten most of it... [Sophie's mother] is a marvelous comic foil." -- Newsweek

"Terrifically entertaining and imaginative ... I'll read Sophie's World again." -- Daily Mail

"What is admirable in the novel is the utter unpretentious-ness of the philosophical lessons, the plain and workmanlike prose which manages to deliver Western philosophy in accounts that are crystal clear. It is heartening to know that a book subtitled "'A Novel About the History of Philosophy' was not only a bestseller in France, but for a while Europe's hottest novel." -- The Washington Post Book World

"A rare bird indeed, a short history of Western philosophical thought from Socrates to Sartre, coyly embedded in the wrapping of a suspense novel." -- New York Newsday

"A simply wonderful, irresistible book ... a cross between Bertrand Russell's History of Western Philosophy and Alice in Wonderland." -- The Daily Telegraph

"An exciting trek into, the realm of thought, from the ancient philosophers' school of Athens to the Konigsberg of Kant... and a brilliant success." -- Der Spiegel

"Intelligently written... an enchanting way to learn philosophy." -- Baton Rouge Magazine

"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." -- Columbus Dispatch

"An extraordinary writer." -- Madeleine L'Engle

Sophie's World

A Novel About the History of Philosophy

JOSTEIN GAARDER

Translated by Paulette Møller

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J.G.

He who cannot draw on three thousand years

Is living from hand to mouth

GOETHE

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

... at some point something must have come from nothing ...

Sophie Amundsen was on her way home from school. She had walked the first part of the way with Joanna. They had been discussing robots. Joanna thought the human brain was like an advanced computer. Sophie was not certain she agreed. Surely a person was more than a piece of hardware?

When they got to the supermarket they went their separate ways. Sophie lived on the outskirts of a sprawling suburb and had almost twice as far to school as Joanna. There were no other houses beyond her garden, which made it seem as if her house lay at the end of the world. This was where the woods began.

She turned the corner into Clover Close. At the end of the road there was a sharp bend, known as Captain's Bend. People seldom went that way except on the weekend.

It was early May. In some of the gardens the fruit trees were encircled with dense

clusters of daffodils. The birches were already in pale green leaf.

It was extraordinary how everything burst forth at this time of year! What made this great mass of green vegetation come welling up from the dead earth as soon as it got warm and the last traces of snow disappeared?

As Sophie opened her garden gate, she looked in the mailbox. There was usually a lot of junk mail and a few big envelopes for her mother, a pile to dump on the kitchen table before she went up to her room to start her homework.

From time to time there would be a few letters from the bank for her father, but then he was not a normal father. Sophie's father was the captain of a big oil tanker, and was away for most of the year. During the few weeks at a time when he was at home, he would shuffle around the house making it nice and cozy for Sophie and her mother. But when he was at sea he could seem very distant.

There was only one letter in the mailbox--and it was for Sophie. The white envelope read: "Sophie Amundsen, 3 Clover Close." That was all; it did not say who it was from. There was no stamp on it either.

As soon as Sophie had closed the gate behind her she opened the envelope. It contained only a slip of paper no bigger than the envelope. It read: Who are you?

Nothing else, only the three words, written by hand, and followed by a large question mark.

She looked at the envelope again. The letter was definitely for her. Who could have dropped it in the mailbox?

Sophie let herself quickly into the red house. As always, her cat Sherekan managed to slink out of the bushes, jump onto the front step, and slip in through the door before she closed it behind her.

Whenever Sophie's mother was in a bad mood, she would call the house they lived in a menagerie. A menagerie was a collection of animals. Sophie certainly had one and was quite happy with it. It had begun with the three goldfish, Goldtop, Red Ridinghood, and Black Jack. Next she got two budgerigars called Smitt and Smule, then Govinda the tortoise, and finally the marmalade cat Sherekan. They had all been

given to her to make up for the fact that her mother never got home from work until late in the afternoon and her father was away so much, sailing all over the world.

Sophie slung her schoolbag on the floor and put a bowl of cat food out for Sherekan. Then she sat down on a kitchen stool with the mysterious letter in her hand.

Who are you?

She had no idea. She was Sophie Amundsen, of course, but who was that? She had not really figured that out--yet.

What if she had been given a different name? Anne Knutsen, for instance. Would she then have been someone else?

She suddenly remembered that Dad had originally wanted her to be called Lillemor. Sophie tried to imagine herself shaking hands and introducing herself as Lillemor Amundsen, but it seemed all wrong. It was someone else who kept introducing herself.

She jumped up and went into the bathroom with the strange letter in her hand. She stood in front of the mirror and stared into her own eyes.

"I am Sophie Amundsen," she said.

The girl in the mirror did not react with as much as a twitch. Whatever Sophie did, she did exactly the same. Sophie tried to beat her reflection to it with a lightning movement but the other girl was just as fast.

"Who are you?" Sophie asked.

She received no response to this either, but felt a momentary confusion as to whether it was she or her reflection who had asked the question.

Sophie pressed her index finger to the nose in the mirror and said, "You are me."

As she got no answer to this, she turned the sentence around and said, "I am you."

Sophie Amundsen was often dissatisfied with her appearance. She was frequently told

that she had beautiful almond-shaped eyes, but that was probably just something people said because her nose was too small and her mouth was a bit too big. And her ears were much too close to her eyes. Worst of all was her straight hair, which it was impossible to do anything with. Sometimes her father would stroke her hair and call her "the girl with the flaxen hair," after a piece of music by Claude Debussy. It was all right for him, he was not condemned to living with this straight dark hair. Neither mousse nor styling gel had the slightest effect on Sophie's hair. Sometimes she thought she was so ugly that she wondered if she was malformed at birth. Her mother always went on about her difficult labor. But was that really what determined how you looked?

Wasn't it odd that she didn't know who she was? And wasn't it unreasonable that she hadn't been allowed to have any say in what she would look like? Her looks had just been dumped on her. She could choose her own friends, but she certainly hadn't chosen herself. She had not even chosen to be a human being.

What was a human being?

Sophie looked up at the girl in the mirror again.

"I think I'll go upstairs and do my biology homework," she said, almost apologetically. Once she was out in the hall, she thought, No, I'd rather go out in the garden.

"Kitty, kitty, kitty!"

Sophie chased the cat out onto the doorstep and closed the front door behind her.

As she stood outside on the gravel path with the mysterious letter in her hand, the strangest feeling came over her. She felt like a doll that had suddenly been brought to life by the wave of a magic wand.

Wasn't it extraordinary to be in the world right now, wandering around in a wonderful adventure!

Sherekan sprang lightly across the gravel and slid into a dense clump of red-currant bushes. A live cat, vibrant with energy from its white whiskers to the twitching tail at the end of its sleek body. It was here in the garden too, but hardly aware of it in the same way as Sophie.

As Sophie started to think about being alive, she began to realize that she would not be alive forever. I am in the world now, she thought, but one day I shall be gone.

Was there a life after death? This was another question the cat was blissfully unaware of.

It was not long since Sophie's grandmother had died. For more than six months Sophie had missed her every single day. How unfair that life had to end!

Sophie stood on the gravel path, thinking. She tried to think extra hard about being alive so as to forget that she would not be alive forever. But it was impossible. As soon as she concentrated on being alive now, the thought of dying also came into her mind. The same thing happened the other way around: only by conjuring up an intense feeling of one day being dead could she appreciate how terribly good it was to be alive. It was like two sides of a coin that she kept turning over and over. And the bigger and clearer one side of the coin became, the bigger and clearer the other side became too.

You can't experience being alive without realizing that you have to die, she thought. But it's just as impossible to realize you have to die without thinking how incredibly amazing it is to be alive.

Sophie remembered Granny saying something like that the day the doctor told her she was ill. "I never realized how rich life was until now," she said.

How tragic that most people had to get ill before they understood what a gift it was to be alive. Or else they had to find a mysterious letter in the mailbox!

Perhaps she should go and see if any more letters had arrived. Sophie hurried to the gate and looked inside the green mailbox. She was startled to find that it contained another white envelope, exactly like the first. But the mailbox had definitely been empty when she took the first envelope! This envelope had her name on it as well. She tore it open and fished out a note the same size as the first one.

Where does the world come from? it said.

I don't know, Sophie thought. Surely nobody really knows. And yet--Sophie thought it



was a fair question. For the first time in her life she felt it wasn't right to live in the world without at least inquiring where it came from.

The mysterious letters had made Sophie's head spin. She decided to go and sit in the den.

The den was Sophie's top secret hiding place. It was where she went when she was terribly angry, terribly miserable, or terribly happy. Today she was simply confused.

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The red house was surrounded by a large garden with lots of flowerbeds, fruit bushes, fruit trees of different kinds, a spacious lawn with a glider and a little gazebo that Granddad had built for Granny when she lost their first child a few weeks after it was born. The child's name was Marie. On her gravestone were the words: "Little Marie to us came, greeted us, and left again."

Down in a corner of the garden behind all the raspberry bushes was a dense thicket where neither flowers nor berries would grow. Actually, it was an old hedge that had once marked the boundary to the woods, but because nobody had trimmed it for the last twenty years it had grown into a tangled and impenetrable mass. Granny used to say the hedge made it harder for the foxes to take the chickens during the war, when the chickens had free range of the garden.

To everyone but Sophie, the old hedge was just as useless as the rabbit hutches at the other end of the garden. But that was only because they hadn't discovered Sophie's secret.

Sophie had known about the little hole in the hedge for as long as she could remember. When she crawled through it she came into a large cavity between the bushes. It was like a little house. She knew nobody would find her there.

Clutching the two envelopes in her hand, Sophie ran through the garden, crouched down on all fours, and wormed her way through the hedge. The den was almost high enough for her to stand upright, but today she sat down on a clump of gnarled roots. From there she could look out through tiny peepholes between the twigs and leaves. Although none of the holes was bigger than a small coin, she had a good view of the whole garden. When she was little she used to think it was fun to watch her mother

and father searching for her among the trees.

Sophie had always thought the garden was a world of its own. Each time she heard about the Garden of Eden in the Bible it reminded her of sitting here in the den, surveying her own little paradise.

Where does the world come from?

She hadn't the faintest idea. Sophie knew that the world was only a small planet in space. But where did space come from?

It was possible that space had always existed, in which case she would not also need to figure out where it came from. But could anything have always existed? Something deep down inside her protested at the idea. Surely everything that exists must have had a beginning? So space must sometime have been created out of something else.

But if space had come from something else, then that something else must also have come from something. Sophie felt she was only deferring the problem. At some point, something must have come from nothing. But was that possible? Wasn't that just as impossible as the idea that the world had always existed?

They had learned at school that God created the world. Sophie tried to console herself with the thought that this was probably the best solution to the whole problem. But then she started to think again. She could accept that God had created space, but what about God himself? Had he created himself out of nothing? Again there was something deep down inside her that protested. Even though God could create all kinds of things, he could hardly create himself before he had a "self" to create with. So there was only one possibility left: God had always existed. But she had already rejected that possibility! Everything that existed had to have a beginning.

Oh, drat!

She opened the two envelopes again.

Who are you?

Where does the world come from?