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# BOOK REVIEW

BY MANJULA NANAVATI

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BOOK

## SOPHIE'S WORLD

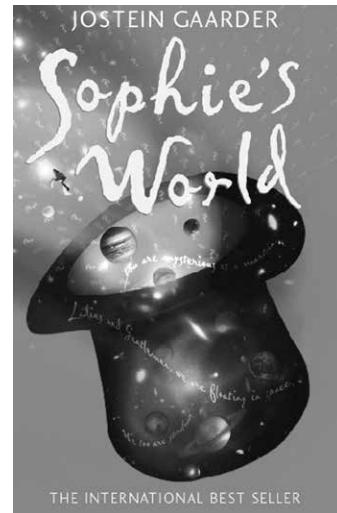
BY JOSTEIN GAARDER

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**In** Sophie's World Gaarder manages to skillfully weave together so many disparate genres that this successively dense, quirky, perplexing and illuminating novel defies even the most basic genre labeling. A comprehensive outline of Western philosophical thought that covers 2000 years from Socrates through Marx, Darwin, Freud and Sartre should deem it serious, scholarly and unequivocally non-fiction. Yet it is also a wondrous fictional fantasy about a 15-year-old girl Sophie Amundsen and her search for eternal and universal truths that takes the form of a well-crafted mystery.

About midway through the book it begins to dawn on Sophie and her philosophy instructor Alberto that they are imaginary characters in a novel being read by another 15-year-old girl Hilde. Their reality is actually an author's fantasy! As they hatch an audacious plan to assert control of their thoughts and actions, Sophie wrestles with questions of the meta physical nature of existence, and the illusion of free will.

The book is elegantly and cleverly structured as a set of matryoshka nesting dolls that constantly remind us that we are studying philosophy while reading a book about a girl (Hilde) who is studying philosophy and reading a book about a girl (Sophie) who is reading and studying... with the implication that this could continue ad infinitum. The parallel personal stories of the girls' growth are artfully correlated with alternating chapter summaries of the growth of philosophy,



and it is here that the book leaps into brilliance. Gaarder's précis that cover all the great ideas of philosophical thought are lucid and insightful as he translates complex abstractions into concepts easily accessible by anyone.

Gaarder uses every means at his disposal - plot, theme, structure, symbolism and in fact the very medium of the book, to imply that we must question what we read, how we think, why we act, and the purpose of our lives.

As the only creatures capable of rational, moral & philosophical reflection, Gaarder urges us to never stop asking questions, and while we may never have precise answers, the very act of asking, searching and introspecting, is what defines our humanity. ★★★

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Jostein Gaarder taught Philosophy to High School Children in Bergen, Norway for 11 years, before he became an award-winning novelist. Sophie's World was his first book to be translated into English and became a runaway best seller in Europe. It has been translated into 53 languages since.

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