Sophie's World

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOSTEIN GAARDER

Jostein Gaarder was born in Oslo, the son of schoolteachers. He grew up in Bergen, Norway, and later studied theology and literature in college. He taught high school in Bergen for many years, during which he began to write *Sophie's World*, the novel that would make him famous. During the late 80s, Gaarder wrote children's mysteries that gained him a wide following in Scandinavia. It wasn't until 1991, when *Sophie's World* was published, that he became an international figure. Following the success of this book, Gaarder became a popular columnist, talk show guest, and journalist, in addition to a writer of children's books. He established a "Sophie Prize," named after his novel's protagonist, which honored education and environmental awareness, and also penned a column in which he lobbied for Palestinian rights. Gaarder continues to write children's books, though none have had the same international impact as *Sophie's World*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because *Sophie's World* is a history of Western philosophy, it's also something of a history of the Western world. While there are too many specific historical events to recount here, a few overarching cultural trends stand out: the rise of the Greek city-state circa 400 B.C., which paved the way for the founding texts of Western philosophy; the death of Christ circa 33 A.D., which inspired the rise of the Christian era; the revitalization of Rome in the 14th century, which provided the material conditions for the Renaissance; the French Revolution of 1789, which inspired the Romantic era's emphasis on democracy, historical process, and human rights; and the First and Second World Wars, which challenged the Western world's faith in liberalism and universalism.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sophie's World mentions too many specific works of literature to name—in addition to the works of philosophy that Sophie and Hilde learn about, there's *Winnie the Pooh* by A.A. Milne, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Arthur Conan Doyle, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, and many others. In particular, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, with its unlikely combination of disorienting fantastical worlds, difficult mathematical ideas, and child-friendly humor, was a major influence on Gaarder's book. For another book that uses fantasy to teach children about a complicated subject, check out Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *The Number Devil* (1997). In this amusing novel (possibly inspired by the unlikely success of *Sophie's World*), a confused child teams up with an imaginary friend to learn about number theory, geometry, and probability.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy
- **Where Written:** Bergen, Norway
- **When Published:** 1991 (Norway) and 1994 (U.S.)
- **Literary Period:** Late Cold War celebration of Western culture
- **Genre:** Young adult fiction / philosophical novel / novel of ideas / Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** Norway, 1990
- **Climax:** Alberto Knox and Sophie Amundsen escape the garden party
- **Antagonist:** None—this is a novel of education, not action
- **Point of View:** Third person limited—the novel cuts back and forth between Sophie and Hilde's points of view

EXTRA CREDIT

Little girl, big hit: Nobody expected Jostein Gaarder's 500-page children's novel about philosophy to be a big success—but it was. In fact, it sold over 40 million copies, was translated into 59 languages, and remains one of the most successful books ever to come out of Norway.

Sophie fever: Throughout the 90s, there was a wave of "Sophie fever"—Gaarder's book was so popular that children's authors everywhere were trying to duplicate its success. The 90s also saw a film version of *Sophie's World*, an 8-part TV miniseries aired in Australia, a board game, a computer game, and even a concept rock album based on a line from the book: "Ladies and Gentlemen We Are Floating in Space."

PLOT SUMMARY

As the novel begins, an almost-15-year-old Norwegian girl named Sophie Amundsen receives a strange series of letters. The letters have been sent to her, but they're addressed to someone named Hilde Møller Knag. The letters pose difficult philosophical questions, such as "How was the world created?" and "Is there life after death?" Sophie isn't sure what to make of these questions, but she doesn't tell anyone that she's receiving someone else's mail—not even her best friend, Joanna Ingebritsen, or her Mom.

Sophie continues to receive letters marked for Hilde. The letters offer her (Sophie) a series of lessons in the history of Western philosophy. The first few lessons consist of long letters from a man named Alberto Knox. These letters cover the origins of philosophy from superstition and religion, the rise of natural philosophy in ancient Greece, and the intellectual achievements of Plato and Aristotle. In these letters, Alberto spells out the philosophical questions that philosophers continue to ask themselves today: what is real? how should humans live? what is the world made of? etc. Sophie is particularly impressed with Alberto's lessons on Plato and Socrates. Socrates was a wise man, Sophie learns—but ironically, this meant that he claimed to know nothing at all about the universe, and insisted that all human beings had an innate capacity to understand science, logic, and morality. As Sophie proceeds with her letters, her mother begins to assume that she's receiving love letters from some boy at school.

Sophie tries various tricks to track down Alberto Knox, but nothing works. She learns that Alberto delivers the letters with the help of a dog named Hermes. One day, Sophie is able to track Hermes to an abandoned cabin. In the cabin, Sophie finds two paintings, one entitled, "Berkeley," the other entitled, "Bjerkley." Sophie also finds a **brass mirror** in the cabin, in which she thinks she can see another girl. Sophie takes the mirror back to her house. She also begins to find strange items that don't belong to her, such as a wallet, a **gold crucifix**, and a scarf.

Sophie continues to receive letters from Alberto. She learns about the teachings of Aristotle, who emphasized the importance of research and careful study of the physical world, the Hellenic philosophers, who built off of Plato and Aristotle without drastically rethinking their ideas, and the dawn of monotheism in the Middle East. As the letters continue, we learn that Sophie's Dad is a busy man who travels frequently for his work. Sophie also notices news reports about a UN diplomat stationed in Lebanon—she notices that some of her letters have been stamped from Lebanon.

Sophie first meets Alberto Knox in an abandoned church, late at night. There, Knox gives Sophie a thorough history of the Middle Ages. He discusses the complex interplay between the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman traditions, which were merged in the writings of such seminal figures as Thomas Aquinas and Saint Augustine. Sophie learns that Hildegard of Bingen was one of the key thinkers of the Middle Ages. At home, she looks into her mirror and thinks she sees the face of Hilde Møller Knag.

As Sophie proceeds with her lessons with Alberto, who is now permanently stationed in Sophie's town, a series of wild coincidences begins. Sophie finds money lying on the ground at the exact instant she realizes she's lost her bus fare, and she begins to see signs announcing that Hilde's father, whose name is Albert Knag, will return to Scandinavia from Lebanon very soon. Sophie's Mom asks her if she'd like to have a party in honor of her upcoming birthday, but Sophie says that she's uninterested. Sophie continues to receive letters from Albert Knag, and realizes that Albert's daughter Hilde is exactly the same age as her—they were born on the same day.

Alberto teaches Sophie about the history of the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries. During this period, Europe embraced the doctrine of humanism, celebrating man's concrete, worldly achievements. It was during this time that Martin Luther launched the Protestant reformation, after which the modern sects of Christianity were established. During this lesson, Alberto refers to Sophie as "Hilde," but then corrects himself.

Sophie changes her mind and tells her mother she wants a philosophically-themed birthday party. Sophie continues receiving letters from Albert Knag, in which he tells Hilde that he'll be back from Lebanon very soon. Meanwhile, Sophie covers the history of the Baroque era with Alberto—the rise of empiricism in the U.K. and rationalism in France. This era led directly to the Age of Enlightenment—the period when European intellectuals came to believe in the importance of natural law, inalienable rights, and rigorous self-study. Major philosophers of this time, such as David Hume and John Locke, questioned Christian dogma and tried to replace it with a secular system of thought. It was also around this time that figures like Baruch Spinoza questioned man's free will, arguing that the world is predetermined, so that liberty is just an illusion caused by our ignorance of causes and effects. As Sophie learns about Spinoza and his peers, she and Alberto find more signs that a powerful god-figure is controlling their world: banners fly through the sky, saying, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HILDE!"

We then cut to the perspective of Hilde Møller Knag, a teenaged girl who lives in a home called Bjerkley and, we slowly realize, is reading the story of Sophie and Alberto in a **binder** that her father, Albert Knag, has sent her from Lebanon. The banners and letters that Sophie reads are, in fact, meant for Hilde to read—just as the mysterious items that Sophie finds in her room are real items that Hilde has misplaced. Hilde reads about Sophie's lessons in philosophy, and quickly comes to regard Sophie as an almost-real person. She even begins to resent her father for manipulating Sophie and Alberto so callously.

Hilde reads as Sophie learns about Immanuel Kant and other important Enlightenment philosophers. As Sophie and Alberto talk about philosophy together, their lives become stranger and stranger, and fictional characters such as Little Red Riding Hood and Alice (from *Alice in Wonderland*) intrude on their interactions. Gradually, Sophie and Alberto become aware that Albert Knag is controlling them. They try to think of a way to escape his manipulations, but realize that there's no way to do so as long as they're in a book he's written.

Meanwhile, Alberto proceeds with his lessons for Sophie. He

goes over Romanticism, the period of European culture that followed the Enlightenment and defined much of the 19th century. Sophie learns about George Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, and other important figures of the era. She also learns about "scientific" philosophers like Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Charles Darwin, whose influence extends far past philosophy into real-world science, medicine, politics, and history. Sophie ends her lessons with Alberto by learning about the 20th century Existentialists, like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Sophie prepares for her birthday party, and in another world, Hilde prepares for the return of her father. Hilde calls her friends in Copenhagen, the city through which Albert Knag will be flying, and arranges for them to pull an elaborate prank on Albert. At Sophie's birthday party, the world begins to plunge into chaos—a fight begins to break out, and at the last minute, Sophie and Alberto "vanish into thin air," escaping their book altogether.

Mysteriously, the story of Sophie and Alberto continues—we're not told how, or who's writing it. Sophie and Alberto drive to Oslo, realizing that the physical world is now "frozen" to them. Meanwhile, Albert Knag arrives at the airport in Copenhagen, where he's baffled to find a series of letters welcoming him home (much like the letters that Sophie found all over her home, wishing Hilde a happy birthday).

Alberto and Sophie drive to Hilde's hometown, where they witness Hilde reuniting with Albert. At this point, it becomes unclear which parts of the story are which. Hilde greets Albert, and Albert admits that Hilde has spooked him with her elaborate pranks. Hilde explains that she wanted to make Albert feel like one of his own characters—Albert admits that she has done exactly this. Together, Albert and Hilde look up at the stars, discussing philosophy and science. Albert is impressed with the knowledge and wisdom Hilde has absorbed from the book he sent her. Meanwhile, Sophie and Alberto watch Hilde and Albert. Alberto tells Sophie that since the world is frozen, there's no way Sophie can communicate with Hilde. Nevertheless, Sophie hits Hilde with a heavy branch. Hilde feels a strange "sting" on her face. Albert jokes that Hilde's been stung by Socrates, but Hilde insists that it was Sophie who stung her.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sophie Amundsen – The titular character and protagonist of *Sophie's World*, Sophie Amundsen is a young teenager about to celebrate her 15th birthday. Sophie is a lonely girl, and with the exception of Joanna Ingebritsen, she seems to have no friends. Over the course of the novel, Sophie receives a series of letters from a mysterious figure, and embarks on a course in the history of Western philosophy, tutored by Alberto Knox. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Sophie is—within the context of the book—the literary creation of Albert Knag. And yet as Sophie's imaginary status becomes increasingly obvious, she also becomes more earnest, more thoughtful, and more complicated—in short, more "real" to us. In this way, Sophie is meant to be a stand-in for the reader: an inquisitive, open-minded explorer. (It's also worth noting that the name "Sophie" is similar to the Greek word for "skill" or "wisdom"—as in, philosophy) As the novel ends, Sophie seems to have come to terms with the nature of her reality: whether she's fictional or not, she realizes, she can attain some freedom and independence for herself by exploring the world of ideas. In all, Sophie's experiences in *Sophie's World* constitute something of a coming-of-age story, whereby Sophie uses philosophy and reason to come to terms with her loneliness and uncertainty about the world.

Hilde Møller Knag – The other protagonist of *Sophie's World*, Hilde Møller Knag is a teenaged girl—the same age as Sophie—who, we learn, is reading Sophie's story in installments sent by her father, Albert Knag. Hilde is similar to Sophie in many ways (reflecting the fact that Albert knows his daughter well)—she's a little shy, a little lonely, very curious, and doesn't always get on very well with her mother. Like Sophie, Hilde has a strong sense of rebelliousness, and when she begins to understand that Albert is manipulating his characters without any regard for their feelings, she decides to retaliate by giving Albert a taste of his own medicine. The novel ends with the image of Hilde and Albert, reunited at last, looking up at the stars. This suggests that the "real" plot of *Sophie's World* has been the story of Hilde coming-of-age with the help of her father's lessons. Now that Hilde's learned some philosophy, she and Albert might be considered intellectual equals—hence their calm, collaborative study of the stars.

Alberto Knox – Alberto Knox is Sophie Amundsen's friend, teacher, and—when they realize they're fictional characters in Albert Knag's novel—partner in escape. Alberto is an immensely intelligent, well-educated person, who has no trouble rattling off obscure historical facts or summarizing the ideas of great Western philosophers. In archetypal terms, Alberto resembles a magician, leading his young apprentice through a series of increasingly fantastical challenges. He teaches Sophie her most important lessons: that a good philosopher never stops asking "Why?"; that humans should never lose their sense of wonder; and that philosophy is an ongoing process. In the end, Alberto and Sophie seem to escape the confines of their own text (whether they really do so or not is up to us to decide). Surprisingly, Alberto shows some signs of weariness and cynicism about their possibilities of escape, and it's Sophie who has to lead Alberto, not the other way around. This reminds us how good a teacher Alberto has been: Sophie has obviously learned a lot from her mentor.

Albert Knag / The Major – Hilde Møller Knag's father Albert Knag is an intelligent, quick-witted man, who understands the importance of teaching his daughter the history of Western philosophy. Even during the course of his work for the United Nations in Lebanon, he continues to think of his daughter's education, sending her a work called **Sophie's World**, in which a girl named Sophie learns about philosophy. Albert uses *Sophie's World* to emphasize questions of epistemology: the study of what is and isn't real. In spite of—or perhaps as evidenced by—his unorthodox style of child rearing, Albert sincerely loves his daughter, and as the novel closes, he's reunited with her in Scandinavia after many months of traveling abroad.

Dad / Sophie's Father – Sophie's Dad is a mysterious, elusive character who never appears in the novel. We're told that he is the captain of an oil tanker, and is often at sea. In the second half of the novel, we come to realize that Sophie's Dad is a stand-in for Hilde Møller Knag's own father, Albert Knag—for this reason, we don't learn much more about Sophie's Dad; instead, the emphasis shifts to Albert.

Mom / Sophie's mother / Helene Amundsen – Sophie Amundsen's Mom is a pleasant but slightly dull woman, who shares none of her daughter's interest in philosophy or reason. In a sense, Mom isn't a character so much as a warning sign: *this* is what happens to people who don't question their surroundings. Mom lives a simple, banal life, and seems not to derive much pleasure from her work or her home life. In all, Sophie cares about her mother, but ultimately moves past her narrow-mindedness to enter the world of philosophy.

Hilde's mother – Hilde's mother is a confusing character. She only interacts with Hilde a few times in the text—for the most part, Hilde is too busy reading *Sophie's World* to spend time with her mother. Since we know that *Sophie's World* is a story written by Albert Knag, Hilde's father (featuring thinly-veiled versions of Hilde, Hilde's mother, and Albert himself) it's unclear what conclusion we're meant to draw when Sophie accuses her Mom of adultery—is this supposed to reflect Hilde's insecurity, Albert's suspicions, or both? While this mystery isn't resolved, it's fair to say that Hilde is far closer to her father than her mother, but the reason why is never satisfactorily explained.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Joanna Ingebritsen – Sophie Amundsen's best friend, who shares some of her curiosity, if not her interest in philosophy.

Granny – Sophie Amundsen's grandmother.

Sherekhan – Sophie Amundsen's cat.

David – A classmate of Sophie Amundsen.

Jeremy – A classmate of Sophie Amundsen.

Hermes – The Labrador retriever who delivers messages from Alberto Knox to Sophie Amundsen.

Anne – A family friend of Hilde Møller Knag, who lives in Copenhagen.

Ole – A family friend of Hilde Møller Knag, who lives in Copenhagen.

Thales – An ancient Greek philosopher who believed the world was made of water.

Anaximander – Ancient Greek philosopher who believed that the world was made of one unknowable substance.

Anaximenes – Ancient Greek philosopher who believed the world was made of air.

Parmenides – Foundational Greek philosopher who introduced ontology (the study of the nature of being) and rationalism into Western thought.

Heraclitus – Ancient Greek philosopher who believed the world was in a constant state of change.

Empedocles – Ancient Greek philosopher who believed the world was made of earth, air, fire, and water.

Anaxagoras – Ancient Greek philosopher who believed the world was made of tiny, intermingling parts.

Democritus – Ancient Greek philosopher who believed the world was made of small indivisible units called atoms.

Socrates – Ancient Greek philosopher whose student, Plato, transcribed his teachings in the Platonic dialogues. Socrates was known for declaring his own ignorance, and for questioning others to draw out their innate wisdom.

Plato – Ancient Greek philosopher whose Platonic dialogues raised important questions of ontology (the nature of being), epistemology (the nature of knowledge), ethics, and politics, and arguably remain the key works of Western philosophy.

Aristotle – Ancient Greek philosopher who made major contributions to logic, ethics, literary criticism, ontology, and many other philosophical areas.

Plotinus – Neo-Platonic philosopher who celebrated the mystical side of the intellect.

Saint Augustine – Important Christian thinker credited with merging Greek philosophy with Christianity.

Saint Thomas Aquinas – Scholastic Christian philosopher celebrated for his analysis of Christian thought using the works of Aristotle and Plato.

Hildegard of Bingen – Medieval mystic, philosopher, and Christian scholar.

Rene Descartes – Important rationalist philosopher who used systematic doubt to analyze the world in terms of mind and perception.

Baruch Spinoza – Important rationalist philosopher who challenged conventional definitions of free will by arguing that the material world and the world of ideas are just two sides of the same coin, and both are reflections of God.

John Locke – English philosopher whose theories of liberty paved the way for the American Revolution, and who also argued that the mind is a "blank slate" that gradually acquires experiences and ideas over a lifetime.

David Hume – Important Enlightenment figure who was interested in empiricism—the doctrine that the world can only be understood through careful observation and personal experience—and acted as a "janitor" for Christian and rationalist thought of the late Middle Ages.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau – Enlightenment philosopher who critiqued civilization and popularized (but did not invent) the idea of the "noble savage."

Olympe de Gouges – Early French feminist and abolitionist writer who was executed following the French Revolution.

George Berkeley – Scottish philosopher who built off of Hume's empiricism to study the mind's perception of the world.

Immanuel Kant – Important Enlightenment philosopher who proposed that the mind perceives the external world through a series of pre-determined categories, such as space and time.

Montesquieu – Enlightenment philosopher who defended the governmental balance of powers.

Voltaire – Enlightenment philosopher who defended freedom of speech.

Schelling – German Romantic philosopher.

George F.W. Hegel – Important German Romantic philosopher who popularized dialectical reasoning and proposed that human history progresses to a state of unity called the World Spirit.

Søren Kierkegaard – Important 19th century Danish philosopher who paved the way for Existentialism by disavowing the kinds of universal truths proposed by Hegel.

Karl Marx – 19th century German thinker who popularized dialectical materialism—the analysis of history and culture in concrete, economic terms—paving the way for Communist revolutions in Russia and China.

Charles Darwin – 19th century English biologist who developed the theory of evolution and natural selection, which explains the origin and growth of species.

Sigmund Freud – Viennese doctor and the founder of psychoanalysis, the study of the unconscious mind.

Friedrich Nietzsche – 19th century German Romantic philosopher who criticized Christianity and the Christian forms of morality.

John Rawls – Political philosopher whose thought experiment about the formation of a perfect society is mentioned at several points in *Sophie's World*.

Jean-Paul Sartre – 20th century Existentialist and the lifelong companion of Simone de Beauvoir. He criticized prior European philosophy on the grounds that it presupposed a human "essence" and neglected the basic facts of existence.

Simone de Beauvoir – 20th century Existentialist and companion of Jean-Paul Sartre. She criticized the supposed differences between the sexes on the grounds that they wrongly presupposed a feminine "essence."

Albert Camus – 20th century Absurdist author who was influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Homer – Ancient Greek epic poet.

Thucydides – Ancient Greek historian.

Herodotus – Ancient Greek historian.

Hippocrates – Ancient Greek physician.

Alexander the Great – Ancient Greek conqueror and dictator.

Jesus Christ – The founder and central focus of Christianity.

Paul – Important Christian thinker and spokesperson who, after the death of Jesus Christ, popularized the doctrine of Christ's divinity, original sin, and conversion.

Nicolas Copernicus – Early modern astronomer who proposed that the Earth revolves around the Sun.

Martin Luther – Religious and political leader of the early Renaissance who launched the Protestant Reformation by challenging the authority of the Catholic Church.

Galileo Galilei – Italian scientist who popularized experimentation and observation in science, paving the way for Sir Isaac Newton.

Sir Isaac Newton – English scientist and mathematician who paved the way for Deism by showing that the universe is governed by a set of unbreakable, universal laws of motion.

William Shakespeare – Famous playwright who bridged the gap between the Renaissance and Baroque eras.

Robespierre – Brutal leader of France following the French Revolution of 1789.

Louis XVI – King of France during the French Revolution.

Lord Byron – A famous English Romantic poet.

Novalis –A Romantic writer who died young. Heloved a girl named Sophie, who died shortly after turning 15.

Thomas Malthus – English thinker whose population studies influenced Charles Darwin.

Brothers Grimm – 19th century German philologists who compiled German folklore into a series of stories.

Hans Christian Andersen –19th century scholar who compiled Scandinavian folklore.

Friedrich Engels – The intellectual partner of Karl Marx.

Goethe – German polymath and the author of *Faust*, one of the greatest German works of literature.

Thomas Hardy – English poet and author who was influenced

by Charles Darwin.

Josef Stalin – Dictator of the Soviet Union.

Vladimir Lenin – Early dictator of the Soviet Union and important leader of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Samuel Beckett – A 20th century author who was influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre.

Oedipus – An ancient Greek mythological character and symbol of the inevitability of fate.

Ebenezer Scrooge – The miserly protagonist of the novel *A Christmas Carol*.

The Match Girl – A character from a popular fairy tale of the 19th century.

Alice – The protagonist of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Aladdin – The protagonist of one of the tales of the *Arabian Nights*.

Little Red Riding Hood – A fairy tale character who tries to escape a wolf.

The Emperor – A fairy tale character whose subjects are too intimidated to tell him that he's naked.

Morten – A magical goose from the book *The Adventures of Nils*.

Nils – An adventurous boy from the book *The Adventures of Nils*.

Thor – The ancient Norse god of thunder.

Odin – The ancient Norse king of the gods.

Apollo – Ancient Greek god of the sun.

Freyja – Ancient Norse goddess of the sun.

Sherlock Holmes – The fictional detective from the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Mickey Mouse – A Disney cartoon character.

Donald Duck – A Disney cartoon character.

Winnie the Pooh – A fictional children's character.

Peter Pan – A fictional children's character created by author J. M. Barrie.

Adam – The first human being, according to the Bible.

Eve – The second human being and first woman, according to the Bible.

Noah – Biblical figure who saves mankind from the Great Flood.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PHILOSOPHY, WISDOM, AND WONDER

The defining theme of *Sophie's World* is, pretty clearly, philosophy. As the book moves along, Sophie Amundsen, a teenaged girl, learns important lessons in the history of Western philosophy from her teacher, Alberto Knox. Alberto, an intelligent man, guides Sophie through the ancient Greeks, the medieval thinkers, and Enlightenment and Romantic idealists. All this should make us wonder which philosophical ideas Alberto and Sophie believe to be true. More broadly, we might want to ask if Western philosophers make progress over time; i.e., if a 19th century thinker like Hegel is more "correct" than an ancient philosopher like Aristotle. Finally, the philosophical themes of *Sophie's World* make us ask: what is wisdom? (The word "philosophy" literally means "the love of wisdom," after all.)

It would take too long to summarize every philosophical system that Alberto reviews with Sophie—in fact, doing so would be beside the point. By the end of the book, Sophie certainly hasn't committed to any one system of ideas. There are things about Plato, Hegel, Kant, and Nietzsche that she admires, and a few moral issues that she's particularly interested in (feminism, for example) but she's not prepared to throw in her lot as a Kantian or a Nietzschean. Even after learning about 3,000 years of Western thought, Sophie continues to wonder what to believe.

The concept of "wonder"—both in the sense of questioning what is true, *and* in the sense of being continually astounded by the world—is crucial to understanding *Sophie's World*. One reason the novel doesn't end with Sophie arriving at an answer to her questions is that any such answer would be a little unsatisfactory, since it would make the universe seem "fixed," predictable, and dry. Alberto teaches Sophie about philosophy not to give her answers but to train her to ask questions—to think of herself as an outsider, trying to make sense of what's right in front of her nose. As Alberto says toward the beginning of the novel, the philosopher is like a child watching a magician pull a rabbit out of a hat. Most adults are so used to seeing "tricks" of this kind that they don't bat an eye—by the same token, most adults aren't astounded by the fact that they're alive, that the universe exists, etc. A good philosopher will never lose her sense of wonder at the universe's mysteries. One could even say that the goal of philosophy as Alberto understands it is to escape banality and boredom. (Throughout the novel, Sophie's intellectual excitement is contrasted with her Mom's dullness.)

In this way, *Sophie's World* arrives at the strange conclusion that although it's important to ask philosophical questions, it's not particularly important to choose definite answers to these questions. For this reason, Socrates may be the paradigmatic philosopher for Sophie and Alberto: a wise man who accepted

that he understood nothing, and never lost his fascination with existence. For Socrates—and perhaps for Sophie and Alberto—philosophy must be an ongoing process of reading, discussing, and contemplating. (This explains why it's necessary for Sophie to learn about the *history* of Western philosophy, and why she often goes back to reread her lessons.) Philosophy is about preserving one's sense of wonder—this, it's suggested, is the only real wisdom.

THE NATURE OF REALITY

Sophie's World may be a book about Western philosophy, but it's (inevitably) too short to encompass *all* of Western philosophy—it has to pick and choose which aspects of this subject to focus on. It's important to note that while the book outlines many of the major questions of philosophy, it's a little more interested in answering some of these questions than others. When Alberto Knox reviews Spinoza, Locke, Kant, Plato, etc. with Sophie Amundsen, he spends much more time discussing these figures' ideas about epistemology—i.e., the study of what is real and what can be known about the world—than he does reviewing their views on ethics, politics, etc. One reason that the book focuses more on epistemology than ethics or political philosophy is that the question of reality is directly relevant to the book's plot. As we move on, we become aware that the story of Sophie and Alberto, as it's presented in the novel, is *itself* being read by another girl, Hilde Møller Knag, whose father, Albert Knag, has sent her a book called **Sophie's World** for her 15th birthday. It's no wonder that *Sophie's World* focuses so extensively on epistemology—as the characters try to figure out what world they're in, and whether or not they're "real," the philosophy of epistemology becomes directly relevant to their lives.

One way to start talking about epistemology and reality in *Sophie's World* is to ask, which of the two storylines is more real than the other? Certainly, this is the question that Sophie and Hilde keep asking themselves. Sophie begins to realize that her life—her entire "world," as the book's title says—is the product of an author's imagination. Nothing she does matters, since it'll only ever amount to a pile of ink and paper. Similarly, Hilde recognizes that Sophie is struggling to come to terms with her world's unreality. Hilde begins to resent her father for "cruelly" manipulating Sophie and her fellow fictional characters—she thinks that he has some responsibility to treat his creations with a measure of respect.

The trick that *Sophie's World* plays on us is so clever that it can take a while to realize what it is. By asking which storyline is real—and by encouraging us, again and again, to try to answer this question—the book deceives us into forgetting that—of course—*neither* text is more or less real than the other: they're both equally fictional, equally made up, equally ink-and-paper. By playing this trick on us, *Sophie's World* makes one of its most persuasive and powerful points about the nature of reality. If we're willing to believe that one fictional story can be more real than the other, then we've already conceded that a work of fiction can be real in the first place. But in what sense can fiction be real?

Throughout *Sophie's World*, it's suggested that ideas and stories may be more real than what we usually think of as reality (the physical, material world that we interact with every day). This is one of the oldest ideas in Western philosophy, dating all the way back to Plato (who believed that the world of unchanging, idealized "forms" was more real than the material world, which was always changing). But even if we don't agree with Plato, the idea that stories and fictions can be real and true is a basic premise of literature—if we didn't believe that *Sophie's World* had some relevance to our lives, or had emotional or artistic truth to it, then we wouldn't bother to read it (or even look up the LitCharts summary). By the time the book ends, we've seen that ideas can have a profound effect on people's lives. It's for this reason that the book ends with the image of Sophie—strictly speaking, an imaginary person—"stinging" Hilde—within the context of the book, a "real" person. This is a clever metaphor for the way that ideas, fictions, and abstractions—i.e., all the things that people lazily refer to as "not real"—can influence the way people behave in the real world.

EDUCATION, MENTORSHIP, AND COMING OF AGE

Sophie's World isn't just a history of philosophy. It's also the story of how two people, a young woman named Sophie Amundsen and another young woman named Hilde Møller Knag, come to *apply* philosophy to their own lives. In this sense, the novel is a coming-of-age story: a dramatization of how Sophie and Hilde use their educations to gain a new sense of maturity and self-control.

As in any good coming-of-age story, Sophie and Hilde—lonely girls with brusque mothers and absentee fathers—need to find role models and parent figures to guide them along the path to maturity. In one sense, *Sophie's World* shows how philosophy itself can be a "father figure"—a source of comfort, emotional support, and solace. Sophie's mentor, Alberto Knox, is a personification of philosophy itself (as well as a riff on his creator, Albert Knag). But Alberto isn't just Sophie's teacher—he's also her friend. This suggests that the purpose of Sophie and Hilde's education isn't just to understand philosophy; the purpose is to learn how to interact with others.

What kind of educations do Sophie and Hilde receive from their mentors? From the very beginning, it's made clear that Sophie will not be learning about ordinary, day-to-day matters—there's no economics or health in this syllabus. In this sense, Sophie's contrasts with the work that she does in school, and with the

lifestyle she sees at home, personified by her rather dull-minded Mom. There's a strong sense that "education," at least as Sophie's schoolteachers understand it, has impoverished Sophie's soul, leaving her lonely and unable to cope with the deep questions of life. After we learn that Hilde is reading Sophie's story, we realize that the purpose of Sophie's philosophy lessons is to teach Hilde how to live. Hilde is a lonely child—she doesn't seem to get along with her mother, and she's rarely shown interacting with friends or classmates. Hilde's father, Albert Knag, has written **Sophie's World** for Hilde, suggesting that he understands her loneliness and frustration (Sophie is meant to be a portrait of his daughter), and wants to teach her to cope with her emotions using philosophy. In short, philosophy isn't just a new form of information—it's also a method of coming to grips with one's feelings, and learning how to live.

As Hilde and Sophie's relationships with their mentors would suggest, philosophy shows us how to live by teaching us how to interact with other people. By the end of the novel, Hilde has learned how to empathize with Sophie, despite the fact that Sophie is a fictional character: Gaarder portrays this act of empathy as a clear sign of Hilde's emotional maturity. Hilde also reunites with her father using philosophy as her tool: she turns the tables on him by planting letters at Albert's airport, confusing him into thinking that *his* world might be an illusion as well. Although it might seem like Hilde is being disobedient or cruel to her father, she's actually showing her affection for him, and proving that she's embraced the philosophy lessons he's sent her. In the final scene of the novel, Hilde and Albert sit together, talking about the history of the universe: a symbol of the way that philosophy, unlikely as it sounds, can bring families together.

In this way, philosophy ends up being more practical than it seems. After she finishes her philosophy curriculum, Hilde isn't "all grown up" in any traditional sense (she's still living at home, still in school, still uncertain about colleges or careers, etc.), but she's demonstrated her intelligence, her thoughtfulness, and—most importantly—her love for her fictional friends and her real-life father. In this way, philosophy helps her come of age.

FREE WILL

It's probably fair to say that the most important and relevant philosophical question in *Sophie's World* is "what is real?" but the question "what is freedom?" is nearly as important. As Sophie Amundsen becomes aware that her "world" is a literary creation in the mind of Albert Knag, she begins to wonder if she has any real freedom—any control over her own actions. And this question is by no means limited to Sophie and her peers. As Hilde Møller Knag reads Sophie's story, she too begins to question her own freedom: are her actions truly her own, or are they somehow predetermined? Readers of *Sophie's World* might well ask themselves the same thing. In order to address some of these issues, *Sophie's World* studies and organizes the different concepts of freedom that Western philosophers have dealt with.

One kind of freedom that the novel addresses right away is the freedom to do what one likes. This is an intuitive definition, but Alberto Knox, Sophie's mentor, takes pains to show right away why it's not necessarily the *best* definition. As Plato and Socrates argued thousands of years ago, obeying one's impulses—hunger, lust, etc.—is its own kind of slavery (think of being a "slave to fashion" or a "slave to appearances"). *Sophie's World* also addresses other kinds of mental slavery. Sophie's Mom, for example, is so devoted to performing her petty responsibilities that she's lost touch with the "big picture"—she's no longer interested in philosophical question at all. By the end of the book it's clear that these two forms of slavery are one and the same: the birthday party that Sophie's mother fussily organizes for Sophie devolves into a disgusting spectacle in which Sophie's classmates give in to their instincts and act like animals. The novel suggests that the freedom of doing what one wants is overrated: first, because this freedom is its own kind of slavery (as in Plato); second, because this kind of freedom is just an illusion, one that would vanish if we had the mental capacity to understand all the causes and effects at work in our lives (see Spinoza). If we define freedom in this way then we, the readers, are no freer than Sophie or her peers.

It's clear enough that Sophie—whether she's a fictional character or not—is *more* free than her mother or her classmates. But if this is true, what kind of freedom does she embody? While the novel doesn't exactly put forth a "correct" interpretation of free will, it does suggest that humans can find freedom *from* causation and freedom *from* their appetites by contemplating the world of ideas. Ideas are unchanging—or, even if they do change over time (as in Hegel), they must be rigorously scrutinized, anyway. By living a life based around this kind of close contemplation, people can escape the banality of their daily existences and attain a kind of self-control, as well as control over their actions—in short, freedom. We see this literally toward the end of the novel, when Sophie and Alberto free themselves from the chaos of Sophie's birthday party by escaping the story itself.

There's one final sense in which *Sophie's World* challenges our usual understanding of free will. It's certainly possible to believe that the universe is controlled by an all-powerful figure, whether that figure is God or an author. But the novel suggests that even if such a figure exists, there's no "hierarchy" of freedom—i.e., the author figure is no more or less free than his creations. We see this clearly by the end of the novel, when Sophie and Hilde seem to have reversed positions: Sophie appears to be free of any authorial control, while Hilde is still very much under the thumb of an author-figure, even if that figure is her own father (or Gaarder himself). If this is

possible—if fictional characters can be freer than their creators, and if there's more freedom in imagination than in the real world—then the only real freedom comes from philosophy and the world of ideas. By learning about ethics, epistemology, and so on, Sophie and Hilde might gain free will after all.

WOMEN AND SEXISM

It's important to keep in mind that Sophie Amundsen isn't just a young philosophy student—she's also a young woman. Because of her gender, Sophie has to contend with various expectations about how she should behave—for example, that she should have a boyfriend, should enjoy hosting parties, etc. Because Sophie faces sexism so often in the novel, it's strongly implied from the beginning that philosophy might be a way for her to escape this sexism, or to find ways around it.

As Sophie proceeds with her studies of philosophy, however, she finds that Western philosophy is full of sexism. There are dozens of important philosophers—Aristotle is a good example—who had backwards ideas of what women were capable of and what they should do with their lives. Even philosophers like Plato, who argued for some form of equality between the sexes, believed that women were usually inferior to men.

But even if the history of philosophy is strewn with sexist reasoning—i.e., reasoning that assumes without proof that women are less important than men—Sophie finds that philosophy in itself can still be a powerful tool for fighting sexism. As she proceeds with her studies, she learns to reject the sexist aspects of philosophers' thinking while embracing other components of their ideas. In this way, Sophie learns to use philosophers' own ideas against them. This becomes especially clear toward the end of the novel when Sophie learns about Simone de Beauvoir, who argued that the supposed differences between the sexes were social constructs—illusions caused by society's mistaken assumptions about the relationship between existence and essence. Sophie understands and embraces de Beauvoir's ideas about gender and essence precisely *because* she hasn't entirely rejected the ideas of de Beauvoir's sexist predecessors. Like de Beauvoir herself, she uses philosophical reasoning to undermine what might be called a traditional tenet of Western philosophy—the inferiority of women.

In general, Sophie learns that philosophy is an important feminist weapon, in the sense that it teaches her to question things that some people take for granted—like sexist views on women. It's important to contrast Sophie's attitude with her Mom's. Sophie's mother seems to have little patience for philosophy; when her daughter sneaks out of the house to continue her lessons, she assumes that Sophie is meeting a boyfriend, not educating her mind. The implication is that Sophie's mother's unconscious sexism (assuming that her daughter is more interested in romance than knowledge) is somehow the product of her general lack of curiosity about the world—precisely the kind of curiosity that philosophy tries to generate. While there isn't much explicit talk about the feminist *uses* of philosophy, *Sophie's World* makes it clear that Sophie, a young woman, uses philosophy to find freedom, confidence, and maturity—and this makes her education a feminist endeavor as well as a philosophical one.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE GOLD CRUCIFIX

At several points in the novel, we hear about a gold crucifix—Hilde Møller Knag owns one, then loses it. The crucifix is an obvious symbol of Christ and, more abstractly, of religion and faith. At the same time, gold is a familiar symbol of worldliness, material wealth, etc. In this way, for Hilde to "lose" her gold crucifix signals to us that she's embarking on a philosophical journey, during which there is no time for material wealth, and little place for blind faith or the unquestioning acceptance of truth.

THE BRASS MIRROR

In the novel-within-the-novel, Sophie Amundsen discovers a strange brass mirror that allows her to see her "real-life" counterpart, Hilde Møller Knag. It's interesting that in *Sophie's World* the mirror, a traditional symbol of self-contemplation, is depicted as a tool for *interpersonal* communication—a magical device that allows Sophie to see another part of the world. The message would seem to be that introspection and careful thinking, the qualities that Sophie's philosophical education encourages, don't just lead to a better understanding of oneself, but also to a better understanding of the world and other people.

THE BINDER / SOPHIE'S WORLD

During the course of *Sophie's World*, Hilde Møller Knag reads from a binder her father, Albert Knag, has sent her. In this binder, there's a book called *Sophie's World*, which corresponds pretty closely to the book we, the readers, are reading. By setting part of its action within a book, *Sophie's World*—that is, the book we're reading—brings up questions of what is and isn't real, and whether a work of fiction can't take on a kind of philosophical truth or reality that transcends its artificiality. In this way, the binder symbolizes the ambiguous nature of reality, the very thing that compels philosophers to

use both reason and observation to understand the world.

THE HEDGE / SOPHIE'S DEN

Especially in the beginning of the novel, Sophie Amundsen reads her letters from Alberto Knox in her "den"—a tiny, secure area in the hedge surrounding her family's house. As the novel goes on, however, Sophie becomes more adventurous, traveling first around the house, then around the town, and finally out of the work of fiction itself to learn more about philosophy. In this way, the hedge is a safe, womb-like space from which Sophie must emerge as she gains more confidence, bravery, and curiosity.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Strauss and Giroux edition of *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy* published in 2007.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"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."

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this almost "primal" scene, Sophie stares at herself in the mirror, and finds—of course—an image of herself staring back. Although the moment seems trivial, it's actually one of the most important in the novel. Sophie is examining herself and expressing her self-consciousness—in short, beginning to think like a philosopher. Moreover, the scene foreshadows the self-referentiality of the novel *Sophie's World*. The novel will make reference to its own artificiality—to the fact that it *is* just a novel—in much the same way that Sophie acknowledges her own reflection staring back at her. The starting point for any philosophical investigation, it would seem, is the kind of self-analysis that Sophie is practicing here.

Chapter 2 Quotes

A lot of people experience the world with the same incredulity as when a magician suddenly pulls a rabbit out of a hat which has just been shown to them empty.
In the case of the rabbit, we know the magician has tricked us. What we would like to know is just how he did it. But when it comes to the world it's somewhat different. We know that the world is not all sleight of hand and deception because here we are in it, we are part of it. Actually, we are the white rabbit being pulled out of the hat. The only difference between us and the white rabbit is that the rabbit does not realize it is taking part in a magic trick. Unlike us. We feel we are part of something mysterious and we would like to know how it all works.

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sophie reads a letter from Alberto Knox, her mentor and friend. Knox makes an interesting point: people don't usually ask themselves deep questions about the "magic" of the universe. Although the universe is full of wonder, people are so used to their everyday lives that they never stop to ask where the world comes from, how life is possible, and other philosophical questions. It's as if the world is one big magic trick, and people are so used to seeing it that they've stopped wondering how it works, or even being entertained by it.

And yet Alberto insists that the desire to understand the magic trick—to understand the universe—is precisely what makes humans human. Humans have been blessed with the gift of self-consciousness, so they should use their intelligence and wisdom to study life's mysteries, especially through the study of philosophy.

Chapter 4 Quotes

All the earliest philosophers shared the belief that there had to be a certain basic substance at the root of all change. How they arrived at this idea is hard to say. We only know that the notion gradually evolved that there must be a basic substance that was the hidden cause of all changes in nature. There had to be "something" that all things came from and returned to. For us, the most interesting part is actually not what solutions these earliest philosophers arrived at, but which questions they asked and what type of answer they were looking for. We are more interested in how they thought than in exactly what they thought.

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Alberto Knox, speaking to his student, Sophie, offers an interesting take on the history of philosophy, and a model for how to study philosophy through a historical lens. Knox acknowledges that the earliest philosophers offered explanations for the mysteries of the universe that we now know to be false. (For example, some Greek philosophers thought everything was made out of water.) And yet even though early philosophers' ideas have become obsolete, Knox insists that they're still worth studying: it's worth examining how philosophers went about answering basic questions, even if the answers they arrived at have been disproved.

Knox's ideas can be applied to the rest of the novel: even if we disagree with Kant or Hegel, it's worth studying them to see how their minds worked. Their conclusions, we might think, are wrong, but their methods can be put to good use. In other words, it's necessary to study the history of philosophy if we want to practice philosophy *now*.

Chapter 7 Quotes

A philosopher is therefore someone who recognizes that there is a lot he does not understand, and is troubled by it. In that sense, he is still wiser than all those who brag about their knowledge of things they know nothing about.
"Wisest is she who knows she does not know," I said previously. Socrates himself said, "One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing." Remember this statement, because it is an admission that is rare, even among philosophers. Moreover, it can be so dangerous to say it in public that it can cost you your life. The most subversive people are those who ask questions. Giving answers is not nearly as threatening. Any one question can be more explosive than a thousand answers.

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen, Socrates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, Alberto Knox tells Sophie about the life and death of Socrates. Socrates, Knox argues, is important in the history of philosophy because of his *method*—the method of asking questions—moreso than any of the specific answers he provided. Socrates' questioning was considered radical and even dangerous, because it showed how little the average person understood about the world.

Knox's analysis of Socrates illustrates how important philosophy is, and how important studying the *history* of philosophy can be. Philosophy isn't just an esoteric hobby—it's a genuinely heroic, dangerous undertaking that can be used to change society. (If it wasn't, then Socrates wouldn't have been executed.) Furthermore, it's important for Knox and Sophie to study the history of philosophy so that they can learn from philosophers' methods. Socrates' theory of forms might not hold much weight anymore, but his method of persistent questioning is still very important: it's the method philosophers still use today.

"We don't learn anything there. The difference between schoolteachers and philosophers is that school-teachers think they know a lot of stuff that they try to force down our throats. Philosophers try to figure things out together with the pupils."
"Now we're back to white rabbits again! You know something? I demand to know who your boyfriend really is. Otherwise I'll begin to think he is a bit disturbed."
Sophie turned her back on the dishes and pointed at her mother with the dish mop.
"It's not him who's disturbed. But he likes to disturb others—to shake them out of their rut."

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen, Mom / Sophie's mother / Helene Amundsen (speaker), Alberto Knox

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Sophie argues with her mother—a rather worldly woman who is clearly concerned about her daughter's new ideas. Sophie tries to tell her mother what Alberto Knox has been teaching her about the importance of philosophy, but Sophie's mother doesn't really listen to her daughter at all. On one hand, Sophie's mother is being condescending in assuming that Sophie just has a new boyfriend, but on the other hand Sophie is acting rather pompous all of a sudden, delivering grand statements like this one about "the difference between schoolteachers and philosophers."

The scene is important because it dramatizes a point Alberto has already made: most people are too busy with their everyday lives to bother with the basic philosophical questions of the universe. Sophie's mother may have been inquisitive and curious when she was a child, but the pressures of adulthood have distracted her from philosophy: she's so concerned with her career and her duties as a mother that she seems uninterested in her daughter's investigations.

Chapter 9 Quotes

The thought of the "young girl" led Sophie to the last question: Are women and men equally sensible? She was not so sure about that. It depended on what Plato meant by sensible. Something the philosopher had said about Socrates came into her mind. Socrates had pointed out that everyone could understand philosophical truths if they just used their common sense. He had also said that a slave had the same common sense as a nobleman. Sophie was sure that he would also have said that women had the same common sense as men.

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen, Socrates, Plato

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Sophie considers a question Alberto Knox has presented her with: are women and men equally sensible? Sophie believes that women and men are equal on an intellectual level; indeed, she cites aspects of Socrates' thought (the theory of forms, for example) to prove her point.

The quotation shows Sophie synthesizing the knowledge she's learned from Knox's lessons. Instead of just memorizing some facts about Socrates, Sophie is applying Socrates' teachings to her own life. In doing so, Sophie proves that she isn't just a passive student, absorbing lessons from a teacher in a classroom—instead, she's actively participating in her own education, flexing her intellectual muscles. Moreover, Sophie's deduction about Socrates and women's rights shows that it's possible to apply philosophers' ideas to one's own life: philosophy might seem like an outdated subject, but in fact it's a very relevant discipline.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Finally, let us look at Aristotle's views on women. His was unfortunately not as uplifting as Plato's. Aristotle was more inclined to believe that women were incomplete in some way. A woman was an "unfinished man." In reproduction, woman is passive and receptive whilst man is active and productive; for the child inherits only the male characteristics, claimed Aristotle. He believed that all the child's characteristics lay complete in the male sperm. The woman was the soil, receiving and bringing forth the seed, whilst the man was the "sower." Or, in Aristotelian language, the man provides the "form" and the woman contributes the "substance."

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen, Plato, Aristotle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sophie learns about Aristotle, a philosopher who was arguably even more influential than Plato, but whose philosophy wasn't as friendly to women. Aristotle disagreed with Plato in arguing that women were intellectually and physically inferior to men.

And yet even if Sophie (or we, the readers) disagrees with Aristotle on women's rights, it's important to study his ideas. Aristotle was an intelligent man, and yet he allowed the sexist culture of his era to influence his thinking: he used philosophy to rationalize the subjugation of women that he saw all around him. By studying Aristotle, Sophie learns how to take great philosopher's ideas with a grain of salt: to accept some of their ideas while rejecting others as the products of ignorance or bigotry.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ After careful consideration Sophie felt she had come to the conclusion that healthy forests and a pure environment were more valuable than getting to work quickly. She gave several more examples. Finally she wrote: "Personally, I think Philosophy is a more important subject than English Grammar. It would therefore be a sensible priority of values to have philosophy on the timetable and cut down a bit on English lessons."

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Sophie shows that she's learned a great deal from her philosophy lessons with Alberto Knox. Assigned to write an essay for school, Sophie produces a coherent argument about the importance of philosophy.

The quotation is important because it shows Sophie applying her philosophy lessons to real life: philosophy helps Sophie succeed in school. Moreover, the quotation shows that Sophie isn't just a parrot: while she's learning lots of *facts* about philosophy, she's also learning how to construct original philosophical arguments. One could even say that the difference between Sophie's school education (the education she's legally required to receive) and her philosophical education boils down to the difference between parroting information and synthesizing knowledge. In school, Sophie learns a lot of information but very little wisdom; with Knox, she learns how to think for herself.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ She herself was just an ordinary person. But if she knew her historical roots, she would be a little less ordinary. She would not be living on this planet for more than a few years. But if the history of mankind was her own history, in a way she was thousands of years old.

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

Here Sophie begins to feel the scale of the history of philosophy. She's learned about the ancient Greeks, and the knowledge she's learned gives her a sense of the vastness of Western philosophy. One could say that Sophie is experiencing the sublime here: she's experiencing something so vast and complex (philosophy through the ages) that she feels tiny and insignificant. And yet Sophie also feels proud that she can*recognize* the vast, complex subject that is philosophy—most people barely acknowledge it exists.

The quotation is a good piece of evidence for the importance of studying the history of philosophy. Unlike science or mathematics, philosophy doesn't necessarily progress over time: Hegel isn't necessarily any more *right* than Aristotle, simply because he's a more recent thinker. Therefore, it's important to study the totality of philosophy, rather than the most current thinkers. Furthermore, studying the history of philosophy gives Sophie a sense of the complexities of the human mind: she's in awe of people like Plato and Aristotle, who used their ingenuity to study the universe. In short, philosophy provides Sophie with a sense of wisdom that few teenagers ever achieve.

Chapter 15 Quotes

"St. Augustine's point was that no man deserves God's redemption. And yet God has chosen some to be saved from damnation, so for him there was nothing secret about who will be saved and who damned. It is preordained. We are entirely at his mercy."
"So in a way, he returned to the old belief in fate."
"Perhaps. But St. Augustine did not renounce man's responsibility for his own

life. He taught that we must live in awareness of being among the chosen. He did not deny that we have free will. But God has 'foreseen' how we will live."

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen, Alberto Knox (speaker), Saint Augustine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Sophie meets Alberto Knox in a church. There, Knox tells Sophie about the life of Saint Augustine, one of the most important Christian philosophers. In doing so, Knox brings up an important philosophical concept: the idea of free will.

As Knox puts it, Augustine believed that humans' lives were predestined according to the wisdom of God. And yet Augustine didn't believe in fate, plain and simple—he believed that humans had the freedom to make their own choices. While Augustine beliefs may seem contradictory, Augustine fashioned a sophisticated model of human freedom that didn't infringe on God's omnipotence. The idea of free will becomes increasingly important to the novel as we realize that Sophie and Alberto are not, strictly speaking, free. In general, then, the problems with Augustine's philosophy—the problem of how free will can coexist with a divine, all-knowing entity—foreshadow the second half of the novel.

"It's interesting to note that the eggs of mammals were not discovered until 1827. It was therefore perhaps not so surprising that people thought it was the man who was the creative and lifegiving force in reproduction. We can moreover note that, according to Aquinas, it is only as nature-being that woman is inferior to man. Woman's soul is equal to man's soul. In Heaven there is complete equality of the sexes because all physical gender differences cease to exist."

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen, Saint Thomas Aquinas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Alberto Knox educates Sophie about the history of Western philosophy in the late Middle Ages. Saint Thomas Aquinas, one of the key Christian philosophers, believed that women were inferior to men physically, and yet equal spiritually. On Earth, women were weaker than men, and yet in Heaven, their souls were the same.

It's possible to criticize Aquinas for his sexism—for arguing that women were inferior to men during the course of their natural lives. But it's also possible to praise him for being progressive, at least by the standards of the late Middle Ages, on women's rights. When studying the history of Western philosophy in general, it's important to refrain from criticizing *every* philosopher for sexism and racism, even if such critiques are easy to make. Even if Aquinas isn't totally "PC" by 21st century standards, he pushed philosophy in the right direction—toward gender equality—and he deserves some credit for doing so.

Chapter 16 Quotes

"When Newton had proved that the same natural laws applied everywhere in the universe, one might think that he thereby undermined people's faith in God's omnipotence. But Newton's own faith was never shaken. He regarded the natural laws as proof of the existence of the great and almighty God. It's possible that man's picture of himself fared worse."
"How do you mean?"
"Since the Renaissance, people have had to get used to living their life on a random planet in the vast galaxy. I am not sure we have wholly accepted it even now. But there were those even in the Renaissance who said that every single one of us now had a more central position than before."

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen, Alberto Knox (speaker), Sir Isaac Newton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

Alberto Knox teaches Sophie about Sir Isaac Newton, one of the key figures in Western philosophy (even though he

wasn't a philosopher!). Newton's contribution to philosophy is crucial: he showed that the natural world functions according to a number of predictable, mathematical rules. Newton's insights into the laws of science are themselves one part of an important trend in the history of Western thought: scientists following Newton used their training to show that humanity was, in a word, not special—for example, that humans evolved over time, the same as monkeys (Darwin), or that humans' brains were chaotic and unpredictable, like animals' (Freud).

While it's possible to interpret Newton and his successors as dangerous figures who ushered in an age of chaos and uncertainty, Knox disagrees. Newton, Darwin, and other may have used science to show that man wasn't "at the center of the universe," but they also suggested the importance of individuality and personal freedom. Ironically, if scientific laws, not God, control the natural world, individual people become more powerful and central than ever before.

Chapter 18 Quotes

"But Descartes tried to work forward from this zero point. He doubted everything, and that was the only thing he was certain of. But now something struck him: one thing had to be true, and that was that he doubted. When he doubted, he had to be thinking, and because he was thinking, it had to be certain that he was a thinking being. Or, as he himself expressed it: Cogito, ergo sum."

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen, Rene Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

Knox describes an important philosopher, Rene Descartes. As with other important philosophers, Descartes is important to Sophie not so much for his ideas as for his methods: somewhat like Socrates, Descartes used a method of "systematic doubt": denying the existence of anything until it was proven true. Using systematic doubt, Descartes arrived at one conclusion: he, a thinking being, existed. ("I think, therefore I am.")

Knox's gloss on Descartes is important because it shows how greatly philosophy changed since the Middle Ages. Where Augustine and Aquinas believed that all thought must begin with belief—the belief in a Christian God—Descartes argued that philosophy must begin with doubt. Descartes wasn't a nihilist; rather, he maintained that the only way to truly believe something was first to doubt it and then use logic to prove it. The quotation also suggests that philosophy begins with introspection: for example, Descartes examining the capacity of his own mind. In this way, Knox's discussion of Descartes takes us back to the beginning of the novel, in which Sophie looks at her own reflection in the mirror.

Chapter 19 Quotes

"Or think of a lion in Africa. Do you think it makes up its mind to be a beast of prey? Is that why it attacks a limping antelope? Could it instead have made up its mind to be a vegetarian?"
"No, a lion obeys its nature."
"You mean, the laws of nature. So do you, Sophie, because you are also part of nature. You could of course protest, with the support of Descartes, that a lion is an animal and not a free human being with free mental faculties. But think of a newborn baby that screams and yells. If it doesn't get milk it sucks its thumb. Does that baby have a free will?"
"I guess not."

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen, Alberto Knox (speaker), Rene Descartes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Alberto Knox clarifies some of the ideas of Spinoza, one of the most important—and difficult—of all Western philosophers. Spinoza argued that free will was an illusion. Humans were no freer than lions or other animals—just like lions, they have an inborn nature that leads them to crave certain things (food, love, art, etc.). Humans only believe that they're free because they can't stand the idea that they're slaves to their own nature.

In addition to being a good explanation of a complicated philosopher, the passage is also an illustration of Knox's philosophical method.Knox doesn't tell Sophie how to understand Spinoza; instead, he uses a series of short, pointed questions to keep Sophie engaged in the discussion. Like Socrates, he pushes Sophie to broaden her mind and consider ideas she would have otherwise dismissed.

Chapter 20 Quotes

"Before we sense anything, then, the mind is as bare and empty as a blackboard before the teacher arrives in the classroom. Locke also compared the mind to an unfurnished room. But then we begin to sense things. We see the world around us, we smell, taste, feel, and hear. And nobody does this more intensely than infants. In this way what Locke called simple ideas of sense arise. But the mind does not just passively receive information from outside it. Some activity happens in the mind as well. The single sense ideas are worked on by thinking, reasoning, believing, and doubting, thus giving rise to what he calls reflection. So he distinguished between 'sensation' and 'reflection.' The mind is not merely a passive receiver. It classifies and processes all sensations as they come streaming in. And this is just where one must be on guard."

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen, John Locke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Knox explains the philosophy of John Locke to Sophie. Locke believed that the mind is born a "blank slate"—just an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge. And yet Locke also believed that the mind was born with the capacity to perform certain actions, such as thinking and reflecting. Humans are unique from animals, he argued, in that they can reflect on what they observe, and learn from their experiences.

Knox's explanation of Locke has clear ramifications for his lessons with Sophie. Just as Locke argued, Sophie is using her experiences and observations to learn. One could even say that she's classifying and processing her lessons with Knox, converting them from experience to wisdom.

Chapter 23 Quotes

In a momentary vision of absolute clarity Hilde knew that Sophie was more than just paper and ink. She really existed.

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen, Hilde Møller Knag

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Hilde—who, we realize, has been reading a book called "*Sophie's World*," starring Sophie Amundsen—decides that Sophie is "real," despite the fact that she's also a fictional character created by Hilde's Father. In an interesting reversal of Spinoza, Hilde decides that Sophie's fictional nature is no barrier to her being real: since all humans are "creations" of a divine entity, then Hilde herself isn't any more real than Sophie.

Hilde's relationship with Sophie also suggests that ideas and concepts are more real than the physical world (one of the oldest ideas in Western philosophy). Even though Sophie lacks a body, the idea of Sophie carries with it a certain amount of sense—enough, perhaps for Sophie to qualify as a real person. Furthermore, the notion that a fiction can be real is a premise for reading *Sophie's World* in the first place—the fact that Hilde is herself a fictional creation doesn't stop us from liking her, empathizing with her, or learning from her. Hilde and Sophie are *both* literary devices, designed to teach readers about philosophical ideas and, perhaps, make us question the reality of our own lives.

Chapter 24 Quotes

"One of those who fought hardest for the rights of women during the French Revolution was Olympe de Gouges. In 1791—two years after the revolution—she published a declaration on the rights of women. The declaration on the rights of the citizen had not included any article on women's natural rights. Olympe de Gouges now demanded all the same rights for women as for men."

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen, Olympe de Gouges

Related Themes:

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

As Sophie moves on with her history of philosophy, she's delighted to finally encounter some female philosophers. Olympe de Gouges, a figure of the French Revolution, was executed for demanding equal rights for men and women—a clear sign of the radicalism of her ideas. De Gouges's execution further demonstrates the deep sexism of Western society—it's telling that after thousands of years with no prominent female philosophers, the first such female philosopher was murdered. It's also no coincidence that de Gouges emerged at the same time as the French

Revolution: at a time when people were questioning the most basic assumptions about how society should work (that there should be a monarchy, for example), de Gouges rode the wave of radicalism to write her own declaration of gender equality.

Chapter 25 Quotes

"So now let's sum up. According to Kant, there are two elements that contribute to man's knowledge of the world. One is the external conditions that we cannot know of before we have perceived them through the senses. We can call this the material of knowledge. The other is the internal conditions in man himself—such as the perception of events as happening in time and space and as processes conforming to an unbreakable law of causality. We can call this the form of knowledge."

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen, Immanuel Kant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 325

Explanation and Analysis

Knox sums up the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, one of the giants of Western philosophy. Kant elaborated on Locke in believing that the human mind was a combination of passivity and activity. The mind passively absorbed experiences, using the five senses. At the same time, however, Kant believed that the mind was hard-wired to interpret these experiences in certain ways: to feel the sense of time, space, etc. There were also certain "ideas" about the universe, which were impossible to prove but which also determined the way the human mind experienced life—causation was one such idea.

In all, Kant's view of the human mind is important to Sophie's education because it suggests the way that she interprets Knox's lessons: she hears his voice and reads his letter, but she also brings to the table certain predetermined ideas of her own, such as causation. Kant is also important because he argues that there's a limit to what logic and philosophy can prove: the idea of causation, for example, is impossible to prove or disprove. Kant foreshadows his philosophical successors, who will go much further in challenging Western philosophy's faith in logic and reason.

Chapter 26 Quotes

"The fairy tale was the absolute literary ideal of the Romantics—in the same way that the absolute art form of the Baroque period was the theater. It gave the poet full scope to explore his own creativity."
"He could play God to a fictional universe."

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen, Alberto Knox (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 349

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Knox discusses the Romantics with Sophie. He argues that the fairy tale was the most important literary form for Romantic writers, because it allowed such writers to "play god" over their own literary creations. By this point in the novel, we're well aware that Sophie and Alberto are themselves the creations of a writer, Albert Knag (who is himself a character in the text!). In other words, Alberto and Sophie are talking—obliquely—about their own situation: they're puppets in a writer's fictional universe, just like characters in a Romantic author's fairy tale, or actors in a Baroque writer's play. The question then becomes: are Alberto and Sophie exercising any real freedom by talking about their own existence? They're still fictional creations, and yet it's suggested that by acknowledging their own artificiality, they reach some form of freedom from authorial control. (An even better question might be: are we, the readers, any more free than Sophie and Alberto? We're probably not characters in a book, but are our decisions any less predetermined?)

"That society would be a just society. It would have arisen among equals."
"Men and women!"
"That goes without saying. None of them knew whether they would wake up as men or women. Since the odds are fifty-fifty, society would be just as attractive for women as for men."
"It sounds promising."
"So tell me, was the Europe of Karl Marx a society like that?"
"Absolutely not!"
"But do you by any chance know of such a society today?"
"Hm ... that's a good question."

Related Characters: Sophie Amundsen, Alberto Knox (speaker), Karl Marx

Related Themes:

Page Number: 398

Explanation and Analysis

Alberto tells Sophie about a thought experiment designed by the famous political philosopher John Rawls. Rawls argued that the only truly "equitable" society would be one in which the planners would be randomly assigned a place in the society they just invented (so that the creators/leaders of the society couldn't give themselves preferential treatment to others). Such a scenario is, of course, hard to enact in real life. Sophie and Alberto's discussion ties in with Alberto's lessons on Karl Marx, the political philosopher who argued that society is always designed to help the powerful and the wealthy maintain their control of the "means of production" (i.e., the tools and resources that produce goods and allow the wealthy to stay wealthy).

Alberto's rhetorical question to Sophie ("But do you by any chance …") raises another interesting point—perhaps one of the goals of philosophy should be to make society more equitable. Up to now, philosophy has generally seemed abstract, loose, and metaphysical—with Marx, philosophy becomes a concrete, economic subject, aiming to change the world instead of simply describing it.

Chapter 31 Quotes

❝ "Our actions are not always guided by reason. Man is not really such a rational creature as the eighteenth-century rationalists liked to think. Irrational impulses often determine what we think, what we dream, and what we do. Such irrational impulses can be an expression of basic drives or needs. The human sexual drive, for example, is just as basic as the baby's instinct to suckle."

Related Characters: Alberto Knox (speaker), Sophie Amundsen, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx

Related Themes:

Page Number: 426

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Alberto marks a turning point in his lessons for Sophie. For many chapters now, the philosophers he's chosen to discuss have been rational and logical—they've trusted that reason coulb be used to solve almost any problem. After this chapter, however, Alberto turns to modern thinkers like Freud and Nietzsche—figures who don't have the Enlightenment era's faith in logic. As Alberto explains, Freud believed that the human mind was controlled by irrational impulses more than rational thoughts—urges like sex, hunger, and violence are far more important than reason in determining what a human being does. This complicates things, and means that the realm of philosophy blends more with other studies like psychology and economics.

Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ "They have vanished into thin air," said Helene Amundsen, not without a touch of pride.
She drew herself up to her full height, walked toward the long table and began to clear up after the philosophical garden party.
"More coffee, anyone?"

Related Characters: Mom / Sophie's mother / Helene Amundsen (speaker), Sophie Amundsen, Alberto Knox

Related Themes:

Page Number: 478

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Sophie and Alberto—now fully aware that they're just characters in someone else's book—find a way to escape from their text: they simply "vanish into thin air." The paradox is this: Alberto and Sophie seem to have "chosen" to escape their text, but in fact, their author (Albert Knag) has just written them out of the text—in short, they're just as obedient to Knag's will as ever.

At the same time, the passage marks a turning point in the novel: after this point, Sophie and Alberto will continue their adventures, though it's not clear who, if anyone, is writing their story (besides the book's real author, Jostein Gaarder). In a sense, Sophie and Alberto have "escaped" Knag, but they're just as obedient as ever to Gaarder, the author of *Sophie's World*.

Chapter 34 Quotes

❝ Major Albert Knag's first impulse was to smile. But he did not appreciate being manipulated in this manner. He had always liked to be in charge of his own life. Now this little vixen in Lillesand was directing his movements in Kastrup Airport! How had she managed that?

Related Characters: Hilde Møller Knag, Albert Knag / The Major

Related Themes:

Page Number: 485

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Albert Knag, the author of the book-within-the-book, returns from his long tour of the Middle East. Knag, the father of Hilde, is surprised to find that someone (Hilde, we recognize) is manipulating his environment: someone has placed elaborate banners at his airport terminal and slipped highly specific messages into his seat on the airplane. The effect of Hilde's manipulation is to make Knag question the reality of his world—he wonders if he, like Sophie, might be a character trapped in someone else's novel—just as Hilde has intended. It's important to note that Hilde is trying to give her father a taste of his own medicine: Albert has manipulated the characters in *Sophie's World* for his own amusement; now, he finds himself being manipulated and disoriented. Hilde's actions underscore the point that no human being is completely free in the conventional sense. Perhaps we're all just characters in someone else's "book"; i.e., our actions have been predetermined by some divine entity (whether it be a Christian God or a more abstract force of the kind hypothesized by Spinoza).

"You've become a grown woman, Hilde!"
"And you've become a real writer."
Hilde wiped away her tears.
"Shall we say we're quits?" she asked.
"We're quits."

Related Characters: Hilde Møller Knag, Albert Knag / The Major (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 495

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hilde reunites with her father, Albert—the man who's been writing her letters about philosophy, assembled into the book *Sophie's World*. Hilde and Albert compliment each other for their ingenuity. Hilde compliments Albert for writing *Sophie's World*; Albert praises Hilde for mastering philosophy and for engineering a series of pranks that disoriented him, proving that she'd truly understood his lessons in epistemology and ontology.

Albert and Hilde's exchange reinforces the point that *Sophie's World* is a coming-of-age story: over the course of the novel, Sophie learns to channel her frustration and anxiety into abstract thinking. In the process she becomes a more mature, confident thinker—or as her father puts it, philosophy helps her become a grown woman.

Chapter 35 Quotes

They jumped out of the car and ran down the garden. They tried to loosen the rope that was made fast in a metal ring. But they could not even lift one end.
"It's as good as nailed down," said Alberto.
"We've got plenty of time."
"A true philosopher must never give up. If we could just... get it loose ..."

Related Characters: Alberto Knox, Sophie Amundsen (speaker), Hilde Møller Knag, Albert Knag / The Major

Related Themes:

Page Number: 506

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of *Sophie's World*, Sophie and Alberto—fictional characters who've somehow attained a degree of independence from their creator—find themselves in a strange world. Everything around them, including people, is frozen. In spite of the hopelessness of their situation, Sophie and Alberto try to move a metal ring, which is attached to a boat near to where Hilde and Albert are sitting. Sophie is persistent in her attempts to the move the ring—in spite of the unlikelihood of moving the ring, she keeps trying, confident that philosophers never give up.

In all, the novel ends on a note of cautious optimism. Sophie seems to have no chance of moving the ring, but her intellectual training gives her hope and confidence. Gaarder suggests that philosophy, in addition to being an important area of study, can also be something like a religion for its students: it can provide people with hope and confidence in their own abilities. As the novel began, Sophie was a timid, shy young girl—now, with philosophy as her weapon, she's brave and determined.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: THE GARDEN OF EDEN

It's early May in Norway, and a young woman named Sophie Amundsen walks home from school. She was walking with her friend Joanna, but Joanna's house is closer to school than Sophie's. Sophie walks through a dense forest on the outskirts of town to arrive at her home. When she arrives, she finds a letter addressed to her. She opens it and finds the words, "Who are you?"

The most basic philosophical question in this book—the one which provokes all the other ones—is the question of identity. Sophie is a young woman, unsure what kind of adult she's going to grow up to be. During the course of the novel, she'll come to terms with herself, in a way that can help to educate the reader, too.

Sophie's letter has a strange effect on her. She remembers that her Mom and Dad had wanted to give her a different name—Lillemor, maybe. Sophie stares in the mirror and asks, "Who are you?" but gets no answer. Sophie often thinks about how ugly she is—she has straight hair and a big nose and mouth.

Sophie's initial impressions of herself are superficial; those of a stereotypical, insecure teenager. Sophie doesn't seem particularly brilliant, but she's definitely thoughtful. Gaarder implies that there's something about being young (still a teenager) that encourages herto immediately questionher place in the world.

Sophie goes outside, where she finds her cat, Sherekhan. She can't stop thinking about the letter. She decides that she doesn't really know who she is, and alsorealizes that she won't be alive forever. This reminds her of her Granny, who died recently. It occurs to Sophie that one can't really appreciate life without understanding death, and vice versa.

It's sometimes argued that death is the phenomenon that inspires all of human thought—because we can't live forever, we feel an irresistible impulse to understand life as well as death. The novel conveys this idea in the most literal terms: Sophie begins her philosophical inquiry by contemplating death.

Sophie walks inside, and notices another letter waiting for her: this letter says, "Where does the world come from?" Sophie realizes she doesn't know the answer to this question either. This makes Sophie so upset that she decides to go to her secret"**den**"—the area where she likes to be when she's confused, angry, or happy.

There's a mysterious, whimsical tone to this novel—we have no idea who's sending Sophie these letters, or how they could reach her so quickly. It's interesting that Sophie already has her own special space where she can be alone with her thoughts.

The narrator describes Sophie's house—it's red, with a garden outside. There's a small gazebo outside, whichSophie's grandfather built for Granny after their first child, Marie, who died shortly after being born. Sophie's **den** turns out to be a small hole in the hedge by the house. Sophie sits in the hedge, holding her two letters. The hedge has always reminded her of the Garden of Eden, as she understands it.

Sophie's den is her own secret place—the ideal space for her to contemplate things. There's something lovely, but also naïve and immature about the fact that Sophie still has a hiding place at the age of 14—hence the nickname of her hiding place, the Garden of Eden (the site of the first innocent humans in the Bible).

Alone in the **hedge**, Sophie returns to the two questions in the letters. Sophie imagines that the world is a small planet floating in space. But this doesn't explain where space comes from. In school, Sophie was taught that God created the world, but this just isn't satisfying—even if God did create the world, who created God?

Gaarder has Sophie proceed rather straightforwardly, as he philosophical education generally follows the course of Western history. And before there's philosophy, it's suggested, there's religion.

Sophie returns to the mailbox and finds a third postcard. The letter has a Norwegian stamp on it, and appears to be written in Sophie's Dad's handwriting. This confuses Sophie, since her Dad is far away, working hard at his job (captain of an oil tanker). Sophie sees that the card is addressed to someone named Hilde Møller Knag. The postcard explains (to Hilde), "I want to give you a present that will help you grow [...] Forgive me for sending the card c/o/ Sophie," and is signed, "Dad."

Sophie's Dad is a mysterious character—an absentee father who seems to care about Sophie, but rarely gets to spend time with her. It's implied that Sophie's inquisitiveness about the world is in some ways inspired by her father's absence; it's as if Sophie turns to philosophy as a way of counteracting her loneliness.

Sophie tries to make sense of what's happened to her that day. She's received three mysterious postcards, presenting three mysteries. She wonders who sent her the postcards, who Hilde Møller Knag is, and why she's received Hilde's birthday card. These three problems, she decides, must be connected in some profound way.

In this first chapter, Gaarder has introduced us to the important elements of his novel: a girl's coming-of-age tale; a fantastical, "meta-fictional" work of a story-within-a-story; and a general study of philosophical questions and the history of Western philosophy.

CHAPTER 2: THE TOP HAT

Sophie doesn't tell anyone about the postcards she receives. As she proceeds with school, she begins to notice that her teachers are dull and concerned with unimportant things. She wishes they would tell her about things that really matter—what it means to be human, or what it means to exist.

Sophie's traditional education in school doesn't satisfy her. It teaches her important information about math and history, but it doesn't make her feel any more confident or any less lonely. Gaarder suggests that philosophy, then, will be Sophie's true *education.*

One day after school, Joanna asks Sophie to come home to play cards. Sophie tells Joanna she's no longer interested in cards, or games of any kind. Joanna becomes annoyed with Sophie, and suggests that Sophie is in love. Joanna walks home without Sophie, and Sophie regrets being short with Joanna.

Here Sophieshows her immaturity by becoming so humorously pretentious right away. One common thread of the book I that people will assume that Sophie's strange behavior or actions come from her having a boyfriend or crush—everyone assumes that a young girl must only be thinking about boys, not about life's deep questions.

Sophie returns to her home and checks the mailbox. Inside, she's surprised to find a big envelope with her name on it. Inside, she finds a three-page letter, headed, "WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?" The letter explains that philosophy is the most abstract and yet the most useful thing in the world. Human beings have learned to provide for their material needs—they can find food and shelter. But humans also require intellectual and spiritual nourishment—this is what philosophy provides.

Sophie's introduction to philosophy corresponds perfectly to the sense of frustration she felt in the classroom. School has given Sophie plenty of information but very little wisdom—philosophy (literally the "love of wisdom" in Greek) will satisfy what Sophie feels she's been missing. (Of course, this isn't true for everyone, but Gaarder assumes his readers to be of a similar mindset).

Sophie's letter goes on to identify several major questions that philosophy tries to answer. These include: "How was the world created?"; "Is there life after death?"; "How ought we to live?" The letter explains that philosophers proceed like detectives: they use evidence and contemplation to solve their "mysteries." One of philosophers' favorite tricks is to answer big questions by "working their way up" from tiny details—or, as the letter puts it, "to climb up the fine hairs of [a rabbit's]fur in order to stare right into the magician's eyes." The letter ends, and there's no signature.

In this letter, an unknown author spells out the basic "direction" of philosophy, and of Sophie's education. Sophie will start with profound, mysterious questions about the universe. But in order to make broad conclusions about the universe, she'll have to focus on the "little things" in life. Once again Gaarder intertwines a rather straightforward lesson with a mysterious, whimsical plot, and thus enriches both aspects of his work.

Sophie tries to make sense of her letter. It was probably written by someone other than the person who sent a postcard to Hilde Møller Knag, since there's no stamp or postmark on this most recent letter. Sophie then checks the mailbox again, and is amazed to find another large letter. She looks around, hoping to find the person who placed the letter there—but all she sees is Sherekhan, her cat.

Throughout this novel, the plot of the book will mirror the study of philosophy itself—in other words, Sophie won't just be tangling with the mysteries of philosophy; she'll also have to solve the concrete mysteries of who's been sending her letters, and who Hilde is.

Sophie's newest letter begins by explaining that Sophie's philosophy lessons will come in small portions. The most important thing for Sophie to keep in mind is that philosophy requires "the faculty of wonder." As people grow older, they lose their innate sense of wonder—they begin to take the world for granted and focus on smaller, more mundane things. The letter urges Sophie never to forget that she is an "extraordinary being"—her very existence is something of a miracle.

This is one of the key passages of the novel—an explanation of the philosophical "attitude" rather than any specific philosophical position. There are many implications of the idea that philosophy is an act of wonder, which the novel will unpack later on. For now, though, it's important to recognize that philosophy doesn't just give its students information; it teaches them how to live their lives differently—with a sense of excitement and curiosity.

The letter asks Sophie to perform a thought experiment: imagine that a family of three (a mother, a father, and a small child) is eating breakfast. The father suddenly begins to fly through the room. The small child is delighted by his father's behavior, while the mother, on the other hand, is terrified. The difference, the letter suggests, is that small children are used to miracles and new phenomena—everything they see is equally surprising. By the time we get to adulthood, though, we're trained to see the world as a "matter of course." The exception, the letter argues, is the philosopher. The letter then makes an analogy. Every day, humans see incredible things—like an audience seeing rabbits coming out of top hats. Average humans become accustomed to this sight, however—in the analogy they "burrow" into the rabbit's fur, losing their sense of the big picture.

*The letter clarifies its initial point by contrasting a baby's experience with an adult's. It's a common trope of children's books that adults are dull-minded and unobservant, while children are more open-minded and innocent (*The Polar Express, *anyone?). That is certainly the case in this novel—Sophie is young, but what she lacks in real-world experience she makes up for with her unique and open sensibility. Sophie will never "burrow," we can sense—she'll continue to explore life's mysteries. Without Sophie's sense of wonder, this novel wouldn't get very far at all.*

Sophie is fascinated by the letter. When her Mom gets home, Sophie asks her if she thinks it's an amazing thing to be alive. Mom replies, "Stop talking like that." Sophie tries to explain the letter's analogy about rabbits and fur, but Sophie's Mom tells Sophie to be quiet. She jokes that Sophie has been "mixed up" with drugs.

Gaarder presents Sophie's Mom as a kind of foil—an example of what happens to adults when they lose their sense of wonder and curiosity about the world. Mom seems to be rather dull, but Gaarder isn't too negative or cruel in his presentation of her—she's just a kind of stereotypically clueless, narrow-minded parent who won't accept her child's fantastical experiences.

CHAPTER 3: THE MYTHS

The next morning, there's no letter waiting for Sophie. Sophie is bored all day. In school, she makes sure that she's especially nice to Joanna. When Sophie returns to her house, she finds a letter in her mailbox: it's from Mexico, and it's from Dad. Dad writes to Sophie about working hard, and says that he wishes he could come home soon. Sophie also finds another letter from her anonymous philosopher friend. Eagerly, she begins to read it.

Sophie latches onto her anonymous letters right away, suggesting that she was waiting for a little excitement in her life long before she received her first message. The novel contrasts Sophie's literal, biological father with the more abstract father figure of philosophy/the philosophy teacher.

This letter begins, "THE MYTHOLOGICAL WORLD PICTURE." It begins by discussing the basic history of philosophy, prior to the ancient Greeks. In ancient times, most people believed in the truth of myths. People believed in gods like Thor or Odin because they provided a convenient explanation for how things worked. For example, "Thor" was just the name the Vikings gave to the combination of rain, thunder, and the good crops that resulted from rain. The Vikings invented the idea of Thor to explain these events.

As the novel already implied, there's something of a contrast between religious thinking and philosophical thinking. Religion attempts to explain complicated phenomena by deifying these phenomena—thus, the name of the cause of thunder is "Thor." This isn't to say that religion and philosophy can't coexist, but in most cultures religion always preceded philosophy.

The Vikings believed in gods because gods explained why complex things happened in the world. But there was another element to their belief in gods: worship. It wasn't enough to sit back and wait for Thor to make it rain—the Vikings had to worship the gods and make sacrifices in them, in order to ensure that it *kept* raining.

It's comforting to think that the same figure (Thor, Loki, etc.) causes the same events every time—this sense of comfort and order (even when tragic things happen) is the essence of religious thinking.

The Vikings didn't just worship Thor and other gods—they told stories about these gods. The letter then summarizes one famous myth about Thor. In the myth, the giants stole Thor's hammer, the source of all his power. In return for the hammer, the giants demanded that the gods hand over Freyja, the most beautiful goddess. Instead of sending Freyja, Thor dressed up like Freyja, went to meet the giants, and then stole back the hammer and used it to kill the giants. The letter tries to explain the true meaning of this myth. Although it's a perfectly good story by itself, the myth also had a particular *use*: if there was a drought, the Vikings could always say that Thor's hammer has been stolen again—and that Thor will probably steal it back soon enough. In short, the myth of Thor's stolen hammer was used to rationalize bad things happening. Moreover, the Vikings would try to speed up the drought by performing the story of Thor's lost hammer.

It would be easy to say that the myths of Thor and Freyja are childish and irrelevant to modern thought—but this just isn't the case. Even though the modern world has science and technology on its side, this novel can't help but embrace philosophical narratives. Indeed, the novel itself is just one big "myth," meant to be interpreted metaphorically (Sophie is the archetypal young, immature child; the letter-writer is philosophy personified, etc.). So even though we've moved past this particular story, humans continue to understand complex things (like philosophy!) using similar kinds of stories.

The Vikings weren't the only civilization with vivid stories of gods, the letter continues. The Greeks also had myths like this. Famous writers like Homer transcribed Greek myths, allowing Greeks to discuss these myths in detail. Another important change in Greece at this time was the development of the city-state. In city-states, Greeks lived in close proximity o one another, allowing them more time to think about politics, art, and culture.

The very ubiquity of mythology in the ancient world is proof of a fundamental human instinct to understand the world. All people feel a deep desire to make sense of the complex—we've already seen this in Sophie. But perhaps in the modern world there's a danger that science and the pressures of adulthood neuter this sense of curiosity.

Sophie takes a break and tries to make sense of what she's read so far. She's spent most of her life believing in the truth of science. But if she'd been brought up among the Vikings, there's a good chance she would have believed in the myths about Thor. Even if she'd lived her whole life in isolation, she would have invented *some* explanation for things like thunder and rain.

It's telling that Sophie doesn't dismiss the fictions of Norse mythology entirely—even though she doesn't believe that Thor causes thunder, she recognizes that the story of Thor served a useful purpose for her ancestors thousands of years ago: it satisfied their thirst for understanding.

CHAPTER 4: THE NATURAL PHILOSOPHERS

In the afternoon, Mom comes home from work and tells Sophie that another letter has arrived. Mom assumes that Sophie's gotten a love letter from someone at school. Sophie doesn't bother to correct her mother—she doesn't know how to explain that she's receiving letters from a philosopher.

It's important to remember that Sophie keeps her education a secret from her mother. In large part, this is because Mom hasn't shown any interest in philosophy so far—but she would also probably worry.

In her room, Sophie opens the envelope. Inside, she finds a small card with three questions on it: "Is there a basic substance that everything else is made of?"; "Can water turn into wine?"; "How can earth and water produce a live frog?" Sophie spends the next day of school thinking about these questions. She finds them odd at first, but gradually begins to think that it's plausible that a frog could be made of earth and water in the right combination.

One can imagine that an older, less creative person would dismiss these questions—of course it's impossible for a frog to be made from earth and water. Sophie, on the other hand, finds plausible elements in these ideas, even if she doesn't exactly believe them. This is an important perspective from which to study the history of philosophy—even if we don't literally believe a philosopher's ideas, we can recognize some truth there.

When Sophie gets home from school, she finds a large envelope waiting for her. Inside, she finds a letter titled, "THE PHILOSOPHERS' PROJECT." The letter promises to go over—very quickly—the major changes in philosophy, from the ancient Greeks up to the present day.

Whoever is writing these letters has a conscious plan for Sophie's education. He's obviously put a lot of thought into teaching Sophie the history of Western philosophy, and this, in turn, becomes a lesson for us, the readers.

The letter begins by talking about the natural philosophers, often considered the earliest philosophers. Natural philosophers—many of them ancient Greeks—studied the natural world and its processes. The Greeks wondered how trees could grow from acorns, how fish could grow from tiny eggs, etc. One of the Greeks' most basic assumptions about the world was that there had to be an essential substance from which all living things were made. Although many of the Greeks' ideas about life seem ridiculous by modern standards, they're still important to study—i.e., it's important to think about the *kinds* of questions the Greeks asked about the world.

This passage is important because is establishes one of the guiding principles of Sophie's education: respect the broad points of philosophical history without embracing their literal truth too enthusiastically. For example, Sophie might disagree with the idea that a fish can grow from nothing but water, but she can also respect the frame of mind that might produce this idea. Sophie has already demonstrated her ability to think in these terms, suggesting that she'll be a good philosophy student.

One of the natural philosophers' greatest achievements was liberating philosophy from religion. The ancient Greeks studied unique natural processes instead of crediting gods with causing every phenomenon. One important philosopher of this kind was Thales. Thales claimed that all things are made from water, either in solid, liquid, or gaseous form. Another philosopher was Anaximander, who believed that the world is made from a "boundless" substance that doesn't have any ordinary name. Finally, the philosopher Anaximenes, who modified Thales' theory of water by claiming that water is itself made from condensed air. In short, the three philosophers believed that all things—even though they appear different—are really made of simpler substances.

This is a good example of the point that Sophie's letter has been trying to make. We might find it absurd to think that the world is made out of water—and we might find it absurd that anyone ever believed that this could be the case. But there's something plausible about the claim, considering that water can be solid, liquid, or gas—even if Thales didn't have all the information, he was on the right track. One basic trend that we should identify here is that early philosophers believed the world to be made of the same "stuff" in different forms, suggesting that physical differences are illusions.

Another important problem that the ancient Greek natural philosophers studied was that of change. One important philosopher of this kind was Parmenides. Parmenides claimed that there is no such thing as change. Nature *seems* to be changing, but Parmenides claimed that this was only an illusion—because he'd used reason to prove that change was impossible, he refused to trust his senses. This confidence in thinking over experience is called rationalism. Another important philosopher was Heraclitus, who claimed that everything is in constant flux: even things that seem not to be changing at all are just changing very slowly. Heraclitus believed that there must be a being that controls the flux—something that makes sense of all the chaos. He called this being God or logos.

Parmenides is one of the key philosophers because he distinguishes between sensory impressions and rational ideas. Heraclitus, on the other hand, claims that the world is full of change, even if the change is coming very slowly. Heraclitus shows how easily the belief in God can enter a philosophical system—many of the philosophers of the ancient world, in spite of their stated desire to liberate thinking from religious frames of reference, believed in an all-powerful being—and indeed found that such a being was necessary *to explain the universe.*

Parmenides and Heraclitus disagreed in the most basic ways, the letter continues. One thought that change was impossible; the other thought change to be inevitable. It was Empedocles who tried to resolve the disagreement by proposing that nature was made of four different elements: earth, air, fire, and water. These four elements never change, but combinations of the elements are constantly changing—in this way, both Parmenides and Heraclitus were half-right. Empedocles believed that the four elements were constantly being mixed by the forces of love and hate.

One of the liveliest debates of the ancient world concerned the distinction between change and constancy. Philosophers like Parmenides made a basic distinction between what the world "appeared" to be, and what it truly was. In other words, they claimed that experiencing the world in the ordinary way wasn't good enough for philosophy—one had to rely on wisdom, education, and philosophical training to "truly" understand things. This is practically the philosopher's motto.

Another philosopher, Anaxagoras, believed that the world is made of tiny parts that are constantly intermingling. One consequence of this is that everything "contains" everything else—for example, even a dry, dusty rock contains a small amount of water. Anaxagoras is important not only because of his thinking, but because he moved to Athens at the age of 40, establishing Athens as an important city for philosophy.

This is a history of the ideas of Western philosophy, but this doesn't mean that it's an abstract, nebulous story. On the contrary, Sophie's letters take pains to situate all of the history of philosophy in a real-world environment—thus, we learn that many of the great philosophical achievements of the ancient world were only made possible by the existence of a stable, economically prosperous city like Athens.

The letter ends. Sophie is confused, and has to read through the letter a few times before she's fully understood everything. Parmenides interests her, because his logic seems sound: it's logically impossible for something to transform into something completely different, even if such a phenomenon seems to be happening all the time. Parmenides trusted his mind, even though his senses told him exactly the opposite. Sophie doesn't believe, as Empedoclesdid, that the world is made of four elements, but she respects Empedocles and his peers for trying to answer basic questions about the universe.

It's important that we're told that Sophie has to reread the letter a few times (there's no way to convey rereading in a book, but the author wants us to know that it's okay to read his novel slowly and carefully, backtracking as need be). It's interesting to see Sophie trying to make sense of so many different thinkers' ideas so improbably quickly—but of course, the whole novel depends on this kind of fast-forward thinking.

CHAPTER 5: DEMOCRITUS

Sophie goes downstairs and finds a white envelope waiting in the mailbox. She's getting the hang of the pattern of her letters: every afternoon, she gets a big envelope, and later in the day she receives a smaller envelope, giving her a "sneak peek" of what's coming tomorrow.Today, Sophie finds that her letter consists of a strange question: "Why is Lego the most ingenious toy in the world?" Sophie thinks about this for a while. Lego is fun because while Legos themselves are simple—just little pieces of interchangeable plastic—they can be used to build anyshape.

It's not always possible to see where the letters are leading Sophie next, thus creating a little suspense in a story that otherwise could be very dry. From our perspective, the letters' unanswered questions build a sense of excitement that approximates the sense of wonder that, we've already been told, is crucial to philosophy.

The next day, Sophie finds a letter waiting for her. The letter is titled, "THE ATOM THEORY." It begins by discussing Democritus, the Greek natural philosopher who proposed the theory of atoms. Democritus proposed that an atom is a unit of space that's too small to be divided in half. He agreed with Parmenides that the building blocks of nature couldn't change. But he also claimed that each atom was different—some atoms were smooth; others were rough, etc. This explained the external differences between people. Furthermore, atoms would eventually detach themselves and "float on" to form something new—not unlike Legos.

Democritus's ideas are both incredibly modern and thoroughly anachronistic—he coined the term "Atom" but didn't really describe the atoms that we think of today (for that matter, we've only known to a certainty that atoms exist for about 115 years!).We also realize why the letter asked Sophie about Legos—like Legos, atoms are the "building blocks" of the universe.

The letter continues to describe Democritus' ideas. Democritus claimed that there was no such thing as a soul or a force of the kind that Empedocles hypothesized—the only real things were, in short, things; i.e., material objects. Interestingly, much of Democritus's theory has turned out to be true: the world is made of atoms of different kinds (hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, etc.), and over time atoms mix in new combinations to form new things.

Democritus may not have been much of a scientist, but his theory of atoms is certainly relevant to the modern world. Furthermore, his idea that the only real "things" are physical objects seems very modern as well—for many, belief in the soul or the spirit has been drowned out by the study of neurology and medicine.

Sophie finds some of Democritus ideas silly, but she's interested to learn that he distrusted the idea of a spirit force. Sophie isn't sure if she believes in the idea of spirit or not. She peers out the window, trying to search for the person who's been placing letters in her mailbox. But she sees no one.

Sophie isn't willing to commit to any one of the thinkers she reads about. In part, this is because Sophie is a stand-in for the reader: it's up to us to decide what parts of philosophy we believe in, and therefore Sophie needs to keep an open mind on our behalf.

CHAPTER 6: FATE

Sophie opens her front door and is surprised to find a small envelope. Her "mystery man" has tricked her—knowing that she'd be looking out her window toward the mailbox, he must have snuck to the mailbox from a different direction.

Sophie is busy trying to understand the mysteries of the universe ("what is the world made from?" for example) but she must also contend with the more personal, concrete mysteries of her own life; i.e., who's delivering her letters?

Sophie finds a series of cryptic questions inside her letter: "Do you believe in Fate?"; "Is sickness the punishment of the gods?": "What forces govern the course of history?" Sophie isn't sure if she believes in Fate or not. She knows many people who do, however—many of her classmates, for example, are superstitious.

The idea of Fate is particularly complicated and prevalent—many people believe in some kind of order or meaning to the universe, whether they acknowledges this or not.

Talk of free will gives Sophie an idea, and she writes a letter to her mystery man. In the letter, she asks him to come to have coffee with her in her home. She places the letter in the mailbox. When Mom gets home, she teases Sophie about being so interested in the mailbox, and suggests once again that Sophie has a crush. Sophie lies slightly and tells Mom that her "crush" is interested in philosophy. Mom nods and wishes Sophie good night.

While the nature of being and reality is the crucial philosophical question of the novel, the issue of free will is probably second most important. It's telling that Sophie's Mom assumes that Sophie has a boyfriend at school. Mom isn't the most open-minded thinker, and she seemingly assumes that girls should be more interested in boys than in ideas.

Late at night, Sophie watches her mailbox from her window. She sees a man creep to the mailbox, deposit a large envelope, and take Sophie's letter. Excited, Sophie tiptoes downstairs, takes the envelope out of the mailbox, and begins reading her latest letter, which is titled "FATE."

There is finally a real, physical character to attach to these mysterious happenings. Sophie's quest to answer to catch her mysterious teacher seems even more intriguing than her quest to come to terms with God and Fate.

The letter begins by warning Sophie never to "check up" on the mystery man. The man assures Sophie that "one day we will meet," but he doesn't specify when or where.

Part of Gaarder's project is "meta-fictional"—this is a story about itself, but also one connected to its subject. Thus Sophie and the teacher are meant *to meet because it's been written as such (as we'll later learn), but this idea of predicting the future also has to do with the philosophical idea of Fate that the characters are discussing.*

The letter discusses the role of fate in culture. All human cultures believe in fate in some capacity. In ancient Greece, there was an oracle in the town of Delphi, where the god Apollo would supposedly possess the body of a priestess and allow her to speak in the gods' voice.

One could say that thebelief in fate is almost as basic as the belief in a supernatural cause for complex phenomena. Indeed, fate is just another word for this cause, like "God" or "Thor." Fate can be used to explain anything.

The Greeks had many stories about the role of fate in the world. The famous legend of King Oedipus is about a man whose horrible fate (or destiny) catches up with him, no matter how he tries to escape. But there were also Greeks, like Thucydides and Herodotus, who tried to use reason and research to explain why wars or large historical events happened—they weren't satisfied with fate as an explanation. Around the same time, the Greek doctor Hippocrates was making similar developments in medicine. Although many Greeks believed that disease was caused by fate or the gods, Hippocrates believed that sicklinesswas an unnatural imbalance in the body that could be modified with the right treatments.

Part of the Greeks' legacy is that they showed mankind struggling against the gods, and against the force of fate—in other words, they showed human beings exercising (albeit in a limited capacity) their free will. This is a struggle that clearly hasn't been resolved in modern times, as the stories of Oedipus and others remain relevant and popular. Thucydides and Herodotus, for their part, remain relevant because they showed that larger social and political forces could also be confused with a divine sort of fate.

Sophie wakes up early Saturday morning. She's fallen asleep reading her letter. Under her bed, she's surprised to find a red scarf with the name "Hilde" written on the seam. Sophie wonders who Hilde is, and how she's come to receive Hilde's things.

Even as Sophie learns about Greeks who challenged the authority of the gods and of fate, it begins to seem that Sophie's own life is dominated by fate—an unseen figure who controls everything.

CHAPTER 7: SOCRATES

Later in the day, Sophie finds a small letter waiting for her, next to the stack of letters she's received from the philosopher already. In the letter, the philosopher apologizes for being unable to see Sophie in person. He tells Sophie that from now on, he'll be unable to even deliver his letters in person. He also tells Sophie that if she finds a silk scarf, she should take care of it—it's someone's "personal property." The letter is signed, "Alberto Knox." The letter also includes the usual questions for Sophie to ponder, among them—"Is there such a thing as natural modesty?" Finally, Alberto tells Sophie that if she wants to send him anything, she should place her letter in a pink envelope, with a cookie or sugar cube on top.

Sophie doesn't succeed in meeting her mystery man yet, but she learns his name at least. Little by little, Sophie is making progress with her mystery man—mirroring the progress she's making in her philosophical education. Notably, this week's lessons focus less on pseudo-scientific questions ("is the world made of water?", for example)and more on matters of ethics and morality. As Gaarder continues to show, philosophy is a very broad subject, and not just for ivory tower academics.

Sophie thinks about her letter. She's glad to know the name of the man who's been educating her, though she's also disappointed not to have coffee with him. She isn't sure if modesty (i.e., shyness about one's body or one's self) can be natural—perhaps it's learned over time.

As usual, Sophie has some open-minded responses to her questions, but her responses encourage debate rather tothan trying to end it (it's also worth noting that she's basically being taught in the Socratic method—named after the famous philosopher Socrates).

The next day, a Labrador arrives outside Sophie's house, carrying an envelope in its mouth. This, Sophie realizes, is Alberto's messenger. Sophie opens the envelope, entitled "THE PHILOSOPHY OF ATHENS," and reads.

The history of Athens is crucial in modern philosophy. Many of the fields of philosophy that we take for granted today, like ethics and epistemology, began in Athens.

The letter begins by introducing Sophie to Hermes, the Labrador. Then, the letter dives into a history of Athens—the center of ancient Greek culture. For many years, the most influential thinkers in Athens were the Sophists, wandering teachers and philosophers who made their living by tutoring young citizens of the city. Sophists like Protagoras focused on the question of man's place in society, rather than the nature of the material universe (like Thales and the natural philosophers). Sophists were also skeptics—i.e., they questioned everything, including mythology and even most philosopher. Sophists were widely criticized for using their skepticism to suggest that there was no such thing as right and wrong.

Hermes was the messenger god of the Greeks—appropriate for the mail-delivering dog. The Sophists can be said to have focused philosophy less on questions of science and more on matters of politics and day-to-day conduct. By modern standards, this is more or less the direction philosophy has taken ever since: questions about the structure of the universe increasinglynow fall under the umbrella of science, not philosophy. (If "Sophist" sounds similar to "Sophie," that's because "sofia" means knowledge or wisdom in Greek—further evidence that Sophie herself is a kind of allegorical character, a stand-in for the reader as philosophy student.)

One of the most influential philosophers in Athens was Socrates (470-399 B.C.), whose ideas were recorded by his student, Plato. Socrates argued that people already knew philosophical truths—they just had to "remember" this knowledge. Socrates' job, then, was to ask the right questions of his students and peers, forcing them to get in touch with their innate wisdom. In 399, Socrates was brought before the government and accused of corrupting youth with his wild ideas. The government didn't like that Socrates questioned traditional sources of information, like mythology. Socrates was found guilty of corrupting youth. Rather than agreeing to leave Athens, Socrates killed himself by drinking a poison called hemlock.

Socrates is an interesting figure because of his modesty—unlike most intelligent people, he refused to admit how intelligent he was. Paradoxically, Socrates' very modesty (his refusal to credit himself with any real power or mental ingenuity) made him more, not less, dangerous to the government of Athens. Simply by asking the right questions, Socrates could challenge all sorts of conventional narratives, such as the stories of the Greek gods. (And his teaching method also echoes Alberto's own.)

The letter explains more about Socrates. Unlike the sophists, Socrates didn't claim any great knowledge of the world—on the contrary, he claimed he knew nothing. As a result, he wouldn't accept money for his teachings. A philosopher, the letter claims, is someone who knows that he knows nothing, and is troubled by it. Socrates acknowledged that he knew nothing about the world. But he tried to use questioning to determine *some* things about the world.

This is an important passage because it reiterates the proper philosophical mindset. The idea of being certain about the world, Alberto suggests, is toxic to philosophy: the only wise person is one who acknowledges that he or she knows next to nothing about the world.

Socrates tried to argue that it was impossible to be happy while acting against one's better judgment. People have an innate sense of right and wrong, and they can't live in peace knowing they've done wrong.

Socrates' legacy was to introduce the study of the Good into philosophy—he argued that philosophy should try to teach people how to live, not just how to study the universe. This is one of the basic assumptions of Sophie's own education under Alberto.

Sophie finishes the letter. She mentions Socrates to her Mom, and her Mom is impressed. Sophie casually explains the difference between sophists and philosophers—sophists are like schoolteachers, forcing superfluous information down students' throats, even though they don't really know anything. Mom asks Sophie who her boyfriend is, suggesting that he sounds "disturbed."

This is an important letter because it addresses the different ways of studying philosophy. There's a danger that philosophers can become too self-satisfied and arrogant with their knowledge (like Sophie herself was after her first "lesson"). It's further suggested that being continually wowed by the world is more important than having specific information about the world—this, in essence, is the difference between Sophie and her Mom.

CHAPTER 8: ATHENS

In the evening, Sophie finds a thick package in the den. Inside, there's a videotape. She plays the tape in her VCR, and sees a man standing in front of the Acropolis in Athens. The man introduces himself as Alberto Knox. He points out the large structure on the hill—the Parthenon. Inside, he says, there was a huge statue of Athena, before which the Greeks prayed. Alberto also points out the ruins of an ancient theater, in which the works of the greatest Greek dramatists were performed.

As Sophie proceeds with her education, the media through which she learns become more advanced: first letters, now videotapes (there were no DVDs back in 1990!). This reflects Sophie's growing awareness of the world and of herself—she no longer spends so much time in her den, suggesting that she's becoming more confident and less cloistered.

Suddenly, the video "cuts" to a different version of Athens. The stone ruins have been replaced by glorious, brightly colored buildings. Alberto explains that Sophie is looking at Athens as it once was. Alberto strolls through the streets and greets two men, one old, one young. The old man is Socrates, and the young man is Plato. Plato greets Sophie and gives her a couple of challenges. He asks Sophie why all horses are the same, if the soul is immortal, if men and women are equally sensible, and how a baker could bake fifty identical cookies. The tape ends, and Sophie can't help but think that she's been dreaming. She goes to her room and takes a nap.

Sophie's lessons don't just get more technologically sophisticated—they get more and more fantastical. It's not explained (at least not right away) how Alberto has arranged for the city of Athens to be rebuilt from the ruins. There's a strong element of fantasy and even absurdity running through this book, and it will only get stronger. This helps Gaarder keep things interesting and fun even as he pursues an otherwise heavy subject.

CHAPTER 9: PLATO

Sophie wakes up early the next morning and immediately remembers the video she watched yesterday. The first question Plato asked her was about baking 50 identical cookies. Sophie decides that cookies can't be truly identical—there are always small differences between them. And yet if a baker uses the same mold to make the cookies, the cookies will be close to identical.

Sophie is a good, intuitive thinker, and she gets to the heart of Alberto's question right away. Alberto has introduced a somewhat new theme to philosophy—the concept of what is and isn't perfect. This idea will become important as we study Plato and later the Christian thinkers.

Sophie wonders what Plato meant when he asked if horses could be identical. She wonders if the same goes for horses and cookies—i.e., if they're made from a kind of "mold." Then, she wonders if the soul is immortal—perhaps there is an immortal soul that operates independent of the body. Finally, she tries to understand what Plato meant about men and women being sensible, but can't. Then she remembers something from Alberto's letter—Socrates claimed that all people have the same innate sense of wisdom. In this way, Sophie guesses, Socrates would probably argue that men and women are equally sensible.

In the Greek philosophers, there's a strong sense that wisdom doesn't necessarily correspond to education and knowledge. Especially for Plato and Socrates, it's implied that the ideal "wise human being" is one who accepts her own lack of knowledge. In this sense, Sophie is an ideal student of philosophy: she has an innate sense of curiosity and wonder that Alberto must try to feed.

Outside, Sophie hears a dog panting. She finds Hermes, bearing an envelope. Sophie takes the envelope, then tries to follow Hermes away from her house, but finds that she's too slow to chase him.

For the time being, Sophie lacks the ability to track down Alberto to his home—she'll have to continue with these secondhand lessons.

Sophie proceeds with the letter, titled, "PLATO'S ACADEMY." Plato, the letter explains, published Socrates' ideas after Socrates died. His writings are re-workings of Socrates' dialogues with his students. Plato concentrated on what he deemed Socrates' most important idea—the fixed nature of right, wrong, and reality.

Plato continued Socrates' project of studying morality and reality—in this way, he set the tone for philosophy for the next 2,000 years. Plato further divorces the world of philosophy from the "natural philosophy" practiced by Parmenides and his peers.

Socrates—and Plato—believed that the material world is constantly changing. But the world of thoughts and ideas doesn't change at all. For example, two horses may be very different. And yet they have certain things in common—an ideal "form" of horse that never changes, even as the horses themselves do. The eternal, for Plato, isn't a substance at all, but an idea. The relationship between a material thing and its form, or idea, is similar to the relationship between a cookie and its mold. The particular cookie may be imperfect, and different from other cookies, but the mold itself is perfectly formed.

The concept of the Platonic forms is one of the most famous ideas in all of philosophy. Interestingly, Plato never produced any entire dialogue or treatise on the forms—our knowledge of this matter is based on excerpts from other dialogues, such as the Republic. *The notion of perfection is a powerful one, with obvious religious overtones. And yet unlike the early religious societies, Plato believed that it was possible to get in touch with "perfection" through philosophical thought.*

Plato was very interested in the world of ideas. Even if he didn't think this world was literally real, he thought that it was worth studying. One extension of his interest in the world of ideas was his theory that the soul is immortal. Men have bodies, but they also have souls that are a part of the world of ideas. It's because of this soul that people have an innate understanding of goodness, wisdom, and knowledge. Furthermore, by contemplating the world of ideas, people can get in touch with the immortal side of their being.

Plato argued for the importance of philosophy by showing how philosophical contemplation could bring human beings closer to the perfect world of the forms—the world of ideas. This concept has some potentially religious overtones, and indeed, later Christian thinkers would argue that Plato was anticipating the concept of "Heaven" when he talked about the world of ideas.

The letter describes a famous passage from Plato's writings, the Allegory of the Cave. In this allegory, people live underground, chained to heavy rocks. Because they're chained in place, all they can see are the shadows thrown onto the walls of their cave by the firelight. If a prisoner were freed from the cave and walked up to the surface of the Earth, he would see real, physical objects—not just shadows. But if this same person were to return to the cave and try to tell his friends about the "real" world, his friends would ridicule him—they'd point to the shadows on the wall and say, "This is real." The same is true for philosophers studying the world of ideas: their friends ridicule them for studying abstractions, even though these "abstractions" are actually (Plato believed) more real than the material world.

The Allegory of the Cave is a famous passage that has been quoted and referenced hundreds of thousands of times over the years. It also has some undeniable relevance to the plot of Sophie's World. *Sophie is something like the prisoner from the Allegory: she's "Freed" from her mental prisons by Alberto Knox, and begins to contemplate the "true" world of philosophical investigation. But when Sophie returns to her old home and tries to pass on her education to others, such as her Mom, she's shocked to find that her Mom dislikes and even ridicules Sophie's philosophical education.*

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is found in his dialogue, the *Republic*. In this work, Plato describes an ideal system of government, in which each portion of society corresponds to a different part of the body. The rulers are the "head" of society; the warriors are the "chest"; and the workers and farmers are the "abdomen." The point of all this is that each class of people must remain in that class—the son of a farmer must be a farmer, too.

Plato's ideas are important to philosophy (and to the structure of this book) for another reason: they establish political philosophy as one of philosophy's most important branches. The idea that there's such thing as a perfectly organized society is an appealing one—but obviously we still haven't figured it out thousands of years later.

One important thing to notice about Plato, the letter argues, is that his view of women was fairly progressive, at least for the time. Although he called women inferior beings, he argued that an ideal state should train women the same as men. He also used female characters to present important ideas. On this note, the letter ends.

Gaarder keeps his lessons from getting too abstract by grounding them in real world issues—like sexism. As we'll see, even the most "rational" of male philosophers often held irrational views on women. Plato's ideas, while not exactly feminist, did it least suggest that reason and ideals should be applied to the treatment of the sexes.

Sophie isn't sure if she agrees with Plato about the world of ideas. Even so, it's a beautiful thought that there's such thing as a "perfect horse," and that the soul lives forever.

Sophie continues to treat her philosophical education with a healthy skepticism. She doesn't necessarily believe the idea of the forms, at least not literally, but (as with the Norse myths) she finds beauty and even wisdom in this idea.

CHAPTER 10: THE MAJOR'S CABIN

Sophie walks down the path away from her home. She notices a small lake that she's never seen before. As if in a trance, she walks to the lake, where she finds a small boat. She paddles across the water, sitting in the boat, and arrives at a cabin. Boldly, she enters the cabin, where she finds a table, a typewriters, and a painting of a man, titled, "Berkeley." There's also another painting of a white house, captioned, "Bjerkely." Sophie notices a large **brass mirror** hanging on the wall. When Sophie stares into the mirror and winks with one eye, her reflection winks at her with both eyes, much to her surprise.

The book's fantastical and meta-fictional plot starts to become more central in this chapter, as Sophie actually does more things besides study philosophy. Berkeley, as we'll learn, is a philosopher whose ideas have particular relevance to this novel. These paintings and the brass mirror will also be important symbols.The mirror acts as a traditional symbol of introspection and self-study, but here it also seems to have something fantastical about it, as Sophie's reflection winks at her.

Sophie explores the cabin. She finds hair on the floor that matches the color of Hermes' fur. She realizes that Hermes and Alberto live in the cabin. Sophie notices a wallet lying on a table. It contains a school ID for a girl named Hilde Møller Knag. She also notices an envelope, addressed to her. Suddenly, Sophie hears Hermes barking—quickly, she grabs the envelope and rushes out of the cabin's back door.

The strange coincidences keep adding up. Sophie also continues to find pieces of evidence linking her to Hilde Møller Knag—a girl we still know nothing about.

Rushing away from the cabin, Sophie opens the envelope, and finds a set of questions, including, "What came first, the chicken or the "idea" chicken?"; "Are we born with innate ideas?"; "What is the difference between a plant, an animal, and a human?"; "What does it take to lead a good life?"

The questions Sophie receives in the mail are becoming more diverse and complicated, reflecting the progress Sophie's been making in her philosophical education.

Sophie returns to her house, where she's surprised to find Mom standing outside. Mom has been frantic—she was going to call Joanna to find Sophie. Sophie says she's been walking in the woods. Mom nods, and asks if she was with her crush. Sophie begins to cry—she doesn't like to see her mother like this. She tells her mother about the boat and the cabin, but not the envelopes. She also admits she has no boyfriend. She starts to tell her mother that a philosopher lives in the cabin, but Mom cuts her off. Mom explains that the cabin Sophie visited is called the Major's Cabin—a crazy old military man used to live there, years ago.

In this section, we see Sophie's Mom at her best and worst. It's admirable that she cares so much about Sophie's safety, but there's also something oddly pathetic about her inability to let Sophie off on her own for even a few hours. Tellingly, Sophie's mother refuses to even listen when Sophie begins to tell her about her philosopher friend. This is the first the "the Major" is mentioned—but he will be become a crucial figure soon.

Sophie writes Alberto a letter in which she admits that it was she who visited the cabin. She admits that she's unsure if she likes Plato, and doesn't know if he was right to believe in an immortal soul. She likes this idea, however, because it makes her feel better about her dead Granny. Finally, Sophie apologizes for rowing Alberto's boat without pushing it back to the other side of the lake.

Whether or not Sophie literally believes in the Platonic ideal of the soul, she finds comfort and beauty in the ideal. At the same time that she flirts with Plato's philosophy, she sends playful messages to Alberto, suggesting a fundamental link between the content of Sophie's lessons and the unorthodox means by which she's learning these lessons.

Having finished her letter, Sophie begins thinking about the questions in the last letter she received. She's unsure how to answer any of them, though she suspects that the difference between a human and an animal is that a human can think about philosophical matters. She sends her own letter by placing it near her**den** with a lump of sugar on top.

Sophie is a good philosophy student who already recognizes the importance of rationalism and deep thought.

CHAPTER 11: ARISTOTLE

Sophie's Mom asks Sophie about her upcoming 15th birthday party. Sophie seems indifferent to the prospect of turning 15 (her birthday is June 15th). Later that afternoon, Sophie sees Hermes near the den, carrying a new envelope. Inside the envelope, there's an extra letter in addition to the usual one: in this extra letter, Alberto forgives Sophie for entering his cabin.

There's a ticking clock in this novel—as Sophie's birthday gets closer and closer, we get the strong sense that something is about to happen. We don't know exactly what this big event will be, but we also come to think that it'll bring Sophie closer to a form of enlightenment.

Sophie begins to read Alberto's main letter, "PHILOSOPHER AND SCIENTIST." Aristotle, the letter begins, was a pupil of Plato. Aristotle was a good student, but he disagreed with Plato about the idea of forms, arguing that Plato was neglecting the concrete realities of the world in favor of the moreabstract world of ideas. Aristotle argued that the idea of a "perfect horse" is just an illusion, based on the horse's hundreds of qualities. Aristotle also denied that mankind is born with innate ideas. It's only by exercising our brains—by observing and studying—that we gain ideas about life.

The debate between Aristotle and Plato echoes in philosophy today—it's been said that all human beings are either Platonists and Aristotelians. Aristotle, with his emphasis on the real, concrete world, is often praised for being the first true scientist. And yet so many of Aristotle's ideas, as we see in this chapter, are outdated. As is often the case in ancient philosophy, Aristotle's questions are more interesting to us than his answers.

One of Aristotle's most important ideas was about the relationship between the chicken and the egg. In an egg is locked the *potential*to become a chicken in the future. All living things have an inborn nature—for example, it's the nature of chickens to cluck and lay eggs. But this inborn nature can only be achieved over time, and sometimes with conscious effort.

Aristotle is especially relevant to Sophie, we can see, because he was one of the first theorists of education. He believed that all things carried within them an ability to become something more—much as Sophie seems to carry the potential to become enlightened.

Aristotle also perfected a theory of causes. There are many different ways that we can talk about causes. One way is to talk about the "material cause." The material cause of rain is the moisture in clouds that forms the rain itself. There's also the "efficient cause" of rain—the fact that the moisture cools to form raindrops. We could also talk about the "formal cause" of rain—for example, the fact that it is the nature of water to fall to earth. Finally, there is the "final cause"—the fact that the purpose of rain is to nourish plants and animals. Only by putting together these four explanations for rain can we arrive at a total understanding of "why" rain exists. The letter acknowledges that science doesn't really operate according to this logic anymore. Instead of saying that the "purpose" of rain is to nourish plants, scientists say that plants have evolved to gain nourishment from rain—i.e., there's no "master plan" that says that water has an inherent purpose of any kind.

Aristotle's discussion of the causes is interesting but not entirely relevant to modern life: we don't really believe that rain is "intended" to irrigate the plants—in fact, we don't really believe that there's a correct answer to the question of "why" rain exists at all. In this sense, Aristotle has lost a lot of his credibility as a scientist. And yet as far as philosophers are concerned, he's still important because of his interest in classifying and categorizing worldly phenomena. The history of philosophy wouldn't be complete without Aristotle: his categories of causation anticipate the way that philosophers like Hegel and Hume would break down the steps in human perception.

Aristotle used his rigorous study of causes to develop his own form of logic. The letter gives an example of Aristotelian logic: if we agree that all living creatures are mortal, and that Hermes is a living creature, then we can conclude that Hermes is mortal. Aristotle used his studies of the "nature" of things to perform more complex logical operations.

Aristotle's logic is intuitive and immediately clear to Sophie. This reflects Aristotle's close attention to classes and categories: even if he didn't believe in the forms, he maintained that all specific objects belonged to some broader group (in this sense, Aristotle isn't so different from Plato).

The letter discusses how Aristotle classified human beings—i.e., how he distinguished them from animals. While all animals have the ability to move, humans have the additional power of being able to think. Aristotle also believed that there was a God. This God was responsible for "putting the world in motion"—causing the first events in the universe, which in turn caused further events, and so on.

Aristotle's proof of the existence of God—that there must be a force that sets the world in motion—is influential in Western philosophy for many reasons. The theory was later used to give logical credibility to Christianity, and it also began the philosophical discussion of causation, a theme that later interested Kant and Hume.

Aristotle believed that there was a correct way to live life. One could live a life of material pleasures, a life of responsible citizenship, or a life of intellectual pleasures. Aristotle concluded that only a combination of all three kinds of pleasure would be truly fulfilling. In general, Aristotle believed in the idea of balance and compromise.

Aristotle had a complex program of ethics, and Alberto only has a small amount of time to go over it with Sophie. The overarching idea, here and with Aristotle's political thinking, is the concept of balance, or the "golden mean"—the best course of action, it would seem, usually aims for a combination of many different kinds of pleasure.

Aristotle also classified different kinds of societies, much like Plato. There are monarchies, ruled by a king, oligarchies, ruled by a small handful of people, and democracies, ruled by the masses. Each form of government has the potential to be successful or to fail.

Aristotle is interesting because he doesn't accept that there's any single kind of government that's "best"—each kind has the potential to fail or succeed. In this way, Aristotle helps to challenge the conventional wisdom that kings "deserve" to lead, showing how philosophy can be a way to resist government and authority.

Aristotle's views of women were less progressive than Plato's—he considered women imperfect copies of men. Women, as far as he was concerned, were just "soil" to help men reproduce. Unfortunately, Aristotle's ideas about women were so well-known that they echoed down through the Middle Ages. With this, the letter ends.

For all his contributions to philosophy, Aristotle's theories of women seem particularly antiquated by modern standards. And yet this doesn't mean that we should throw out all of Aristotle's teachings—rather, we should deal with his thought in a nuanced, selective way.

Sophie's reading of the letter influences her greatly. She decides to be neat and orderly in her thinking. She goes to feed her pet fish, telling them, "You belong to the animal kingdom." She sneaks into her Mom's room, where she finds her mother sleeping. She whispers to her mother, "You have the rare capacity of thought." Mom wakes up, irritably, and tells Sophie to leave the room.

Sophie is clearly influenced by her discussions of Aristotle, showing that she's willing to take his sexism with a grain of salt. It's telling that Sophie whispers to her Mom as her Mom sleeps, instead of the other way around—this suggests that Sophie is becoming more adult and mature, while her mother is still rather childish.

Back in her room, Sophie begins putting together Alberto's letters to form a single book on philosophy. She looks forward to her next letter, and ignores the fact that she has homework to do for school.

Sophie's behavior shows where she puts her priorities—she has no patience for schoolwork, but rather finds more value and importance in her philosophical education. (It also helps that this philosophical education is accompanied by mysterious and fantastical circumstances.)

CHAPTER 12: HELLENISM

On Monday, Sophie notices a small postcard lying on the sidewalk outside her house. The postcard, stamped from Lebanon, is addressed to Hilde Møller Knag, via Sophie Amundsen. It's dated June 15—Sophie's own birthday. The postcard greets Hilde and congratulates her on her 15th birthday. It also mentions that Hilde lost her wallet. Sophie can't understand who's sending Hilde these postcards, or why anyone would send their daughter postcards via another girl.

The mystery builds, as Sophie can't make sense of the letters she's receiving from Lebanon. The fact that she receives a letter from Lebanon at all suggests that the scope of this novel is getting wider and wider—we're no longer confined to Sophie's den; rather, we're on a more global stage. It's also telling that the letter is dated June 15th—a date that hasn't yet arrived.

Sophie realizes that she's late to meet Joanna at the supermarket. When she arrives, Joanna is annoyed, and accuses Sophie of meeting her boyfriend. Then Joanna and Sophie go to school, where they take a quiz on religious knowledge. On her quiz, Sophie writes about Socrates and his resemblance to Jesus. She also writes about the plurality of religious beliefs in the world. To conclude, she writes that philosophy is more valuable than grammar.After class, Sophie's teacher praises her for her intelligent answers to the quiz, but also suggests that Sophie isn't really doing her homework at all.

As Sophie proceeds with her education, the banality of her friends' lives (and her own old life) becomes increasingly apparent. Joanna isn't a bad person, but she seems relentlessly normal—interested mostly in boys. Sophie, by contrast, is interested in ideas, showing that she's taken Alberto's lessons to heart. There's more than a little arrogance apparent in Sophie's behavior, however—she knows she's smarter (or "wiser") than her peers.

When Sophie gets home, she finds another letter waiting for her: "HELLENISM." Albertowrites that he will describe philosophy between the death of Aristotle to the beginning of the Middle Ages, i.e., the Hellenistic period. Aristotle's pupil, Alexander the Great, built a huge empire for Greece. This empire spread Greek learning across the world, well into Asia. Aristotle and Plato became very well-known.

Although Aristotle believed in the importance of balance and education, his most famous student, Alexander, launched a bloody program of empire-building that lasted until Alexander's death. One could say that Alexander's behavior was an insult to Aristotle's philosophy; one could also say that his empire-building popularized Aristotle for generations, ensuring that Aristotle's lessons influenced impressionable youths all over Europe and Asia.

During the Hellenistic period, no philosopher emerged to rival Plato or Aristotle. However, there were important philosophical schools during this time, such as the Cynics. The Cynics claimed that happiness depends on transcending the random, unpredictable world. A truly happy man wouldn't worry about his health or even physical pain—his mental serenity would save him. Cynics lived simple, impoverished lives.

From the vantage point of the 20th century, it seems fair to say that no philosopher during the Hellenistic period could rival Plato or Aristotle—but perhaps the same will one day be said of the modern era. The word "cynical" comes from the Cynics.

Another similar group of philosophers at the time were the Stoics. The Stoics believed in the principle of universal law; i.e., they thought that the same rules of existence governed all human beings, whether they were slaves or kings. One of the Stoics most important contributions was the idea of monism—the idea that there is no real difference between spirit and matter at all.The Stoics were worldlier than the Cynics, but they celebrated the mind's power over pain and suffering in much the same way.

The Stoics were unique in the way they celebrated the power of the mind over the body. They also popularized monism, an idea that remained important to philosophical thought for many centuries. Alberto doesn't spend a great deal of time reviewing the details of Stoicism; his emphasis is on the Stoics' lasting contributions to philosophy.(The word "stoic" also comes from the Stoics.)

Another important group of Hellenistic philosophers were the Epicureans. These philosophers believed that the only true morality was the avoidance of pain, just as the source of happiness was pleasure. Pleasure, however, didn't have to mean sensual pleasure—the contemplation of ideas could be pleasurable, too. The Epicureans also embraced the virtues of friendship. Over time, however, the Epicureans became more and more sensual in their pleasures—even today, "epicurean" means someone who's a little too concerned with living for pleasure.

The Epicureans are interesting for the way they reinterpret Socrates, who believed that humans have a natural capacity for doing and achieving good. For the Epicureans, pleasure and goodness are one and the same. And yet, in Alberto's view, Epicureanism goes too far in celebrating pleasure for its own sake. This teaches Sophie a valuable lesson—balance physical pleasure with the pleasure of the intellect.

Another philosophical school was Neo-Platonism. The philosopher Plotinus proposed that man is a dual creature: half body, half soul. Like Plato, Plotinus believed in the importance of contemplating the world of ideas. And yet Plotinus went further than Plato in celebrating the mystical, non-scientific side of the intellect. The mystical side of life, Plotinus believed, could be divided into two opposite poles of light and darkness, or God and anti-God.

Many of the philosophers of the Hellenistic era distinguish between the physicality of the human body and the boundlessness of the human mind. There's a strong mystical, even magical, element to this idea, showing that philosophy, for all its emphasis on causation and logic, doesn't entirely abandon the tone of religion and mythology.

Plotinus brings Alberto to an important topic—mysticism. Many thinkers over the centuries have studied mysticism and incorporated it into their writings. One associates mysticism with the idea of "losing oneself"—losing consciousness of one's body and even one's mind. The mystic, in many different religious and philosophical traditions, must pursue enlightenment through study or "purification." In many religions, for example, such as Judaism or Islam, the mystic contemplates his personal relationship with a literal, all-powerful God. In Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, the mystic's contemplation tends to center around a more abstract, universal version of God, a "cosmic spirit." One of the overarching ideas of mysticism across all traditions is that individuality is an illusion—we are all united together, and we may be united with God.

Alberto takes great care to establish that philosophy, for all the attention it pays to reason and scientific explanation, doesn't take the "magic" out of life. On the contrary, philosophers throughout history have been quick to admit that there are certain aspects of the universe that reason is powerless to understand. For example, in Buddhism, there's a state of nothingness which only a select few (such as the Buddha himself) are privileged to experience. This is an important point to keep in mind as we move into the history of the Age of Enlightenment.

The letter ends, and Sophie tries to understand the feeling of mysticism. She closes her eyes, and feels that the entire universe is really just a version of herself—just a big "I." This is a glorious feeling. Sophie opens her eyes and sees the beautiful colors of the world. She senses that there is a divine soul within her.

Sophie, for her part, seems eager to embrace the sense of mysticism that Alberto has just explained to her. As we already knew, she's not sure if she believes in the soul or not, and yet in this scene, she feels a strong sense that the soul, or spirit, is a real thing. Sophie's ability to accept the truth of concepts (such as the soul) for which there is no literal or material proof parallels her ability to find "truth" in works of fiction like the Norse legends.

CHAPTER 13: THE POSTCARDS

It's May 16, andSophie and Joanna have planned to go camping. Sophie hasn't heard from Alberto in a few days. Sophie and Joanna walk into the woods outside their town, with Sophie'sMom's permission. Out in the woods, Sophie takes Joanna to the lake. She doesn't tell Joanna that she's been there before, since this would involve explaining Alberto Knox.

As the novel goes on, we see Sophie taking on roles of leadership. Here, for example, she's clearly leading Joanna, and not the other way around: Sophie's been to the cabin, and Joanna hasn't. This reflects her increasing sense of self-control and adventurousness.

Joanna and Sophie sneak into the cabin, where they find a pile of postcards. Sophie says she "knows" about the postcards, and Joanna deduces that Sophie has been to the cabin before—Sophie admits she's right.

Sophie isn't a very skillful liar, apparently. The fact that Joanna joins Sophie's experience of the cabin and the letters seems to make it less fantastical and more "real."

Joanna reads one postcard. The postcard, addressed to Hilde, explains that "Dad" is under military command in Lebanon, and won't be able to travel to Hilde's birthday yet. The letter mentions "our mutual friend" (whom the reader understands to be Sophie herself). In another letter, the father tells Hilde that he plans to return to her on Midsummer Eve (June 23), which is shortly after Hilde's birthday. In still another letter, the Dad mentions Sophie and Joanna by name, saying they can be of help to Hilde. Joanna finds this disturbing.

There appears to be a separate conversation going on between Hilde and her mysterious father, paralleling the conversations between Sophie and Alberto. Joanna and Sophie have no idea what to make of this figure, who seems to have the power to manipulate their entire world. In a way, it's appropriate that Sophie should become aware of Hilde's father at this time, since she's just learned about the Aristotelian god, the "cause" of the entire universe.

Joanna and Sophie try to understand what's going on. Joanna notices the large **brass mirror** that hangs in the cabin. Joanna senses that the mirror is somehow special, and begins taking it down from the wall (even though she doesn't yet know about how Sophie's reflection winked at her earlier).

The brass mirror becomes more important and mystical—such that even Joanna senses that it's special, and thinks it's appropriate to take.

Joanna and Sophie leave the cabin with the **brass mirror** and spend the rest of the day camping in the forest. When Sophie gets home, she shows Mom the mirror. She also watches TV and sees news about Norwegian forces stationed in Lebanon. She feels exceptionally grateful to be living in a peaceful country like Norway, not a war-torn country like Lebanon. Afterwards, Sophie hangs the mirror in her room, and finds that there's a new envelope waiting for her.

As Sophie continues learning about philosophy, she becomes more aware of her world—not just her home and her town, but her country, and her country's relationship with the rest of the world. This also brings up a point that Gaarder addresses only briefly. The study of philosophy may seem crucial for personal growth, but it also requires a relatively stable life. If one is going hungry or living in a warzone, it's hard to stay focused on Aristotle.

CHAPTER 14: TWO CULTURES

In the letter, Alberto tells Sophie that he left Hilde's father's postcards in the cabin, assuming that Sophie would return there soon. Alberto tells Sophie not to worry about Hilde receiving the cards—Hilde will receive them. With this introduction, he dives into the history of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world.

Alberto seems strangely familiar with the interactions between Hilde and her father—that is, he doesn't question them or wonder about them. He's either the one responsible for all the strange goings-on, or else knows more about them than Sophie does.

The Indo-European civilization dates back 4,000 years. Little is known about it, except that it was stationed between present-day Europe and Asia. It was contemporaneous with Greek civilization, and still exerts a powerful influence on Indian culture via Hinduism. Indo-Europeans believed in many gods, some of which have counterparts in Viking and Greek myths. Indo-European culture stressed the importance of enlightenment, and the immortality of the soul, much like in Greek philosophy.

Some have criticized Sophie's World *on the grounds that it's a history of only Western philosophy (not "philosophy," as it frequently claims). In this chapter, however, the novel takes efforts to show how our very definition of the West is, in a way, non-Western; i.e., the Western cultural tradition was shaped by the religions and thinkers of Asia and the Middle East.*

Another early culture was that of the Semites. The Semites had a strong influence on the monotheistic religions, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The Semites believed in one god, who would come to judge all mankind in the future—a time called Judgment Day. Interestingly, the Semitic culture emphasized a great distance between God and man, maintained with worship and public sermons—in Eastern religions, by contrast, the emphasis was placed on meditation and self-enlightenment.

Gaarder is attentive to the differences between different religious traditions. In particular, he places an emphasis on the different hierarchies of man and god—in some religions, for example, man is seen as God's eternal inferior; in others, he's meant to interact with God through meditation, or even to unite wholly with God. These are particularly important questions for Sophie, who seems to be coming to terms with her own relationship with a god-figure—Hilde's mysterious father.

Alberto gives a brief history of Judaism's influence on Christianity. In the Jewish tradition, the Jewish people were promised control of the city of Israel. But after the death of King David, the Jews lost control of Israel, and were scattered around the world, enslaved by other civilizations, and forced to wander in search of a new home. In Judaism, there was a strong belief that the Jews' time would come again—a new savior would come to restore the Jews' place in Israel.

The history of the Jews and the Christians is just as relevant to the Western cultural tradition as the history of the Greeks and the Romans—it's not for nothing that the Western world is still sometimes referred to as "Christendom."

Around the time of the birth of Christ, there were many self-styled saviors of the Jewish people. Jesus Christ distinguished himself from these other potential saviors by saying that he was not a military or a political figure. Christ was a Jew, but he preached many modifications to Jewish thought. He celebrated forgiveness and love, compassion for the weak, etc. This was a startling shift in the tone and tenor of Judaism. Christ didn't stress the importance of a return to Israel—in fact, he didn't stress any specific political action. Instead, he celebrated a change in morals. Much like Socrates, Jesus was despised for his teachings, and eventually executed for refusing to renounce them.

The chapter is careful to study Jesus Christ as a historical figure as well as a philosophical and a religious figure.In the broadest terms, Christ stands out from the other Jewish thinkers of the era in the way that he placed an emphasis on the "here and now" of life and spirituality, rather than talking about the return of the Jews to Israel. Sophie is encouraged to treat Jesus as a philosophical figure—a very important one, but not exactly unique in the history of the Western world (contrary to what the Christian tradition claims).

One of Jesus Christ's most important followers was Paul. It was Paul who claimed that Christ had been resurrected from the dead after his crucifixion.Paul used this claim to prove that Christ was the savior of all mankind. Unlike Plato or the Indo-Europeans, Paul didn't believe in the transmigration of souls—on the contrary, he believed that Christ's soul ended up in Heaven, with God. Paul was extremely important in popularizing Christ's ideas. He traveled across the known world, telling strangers about Christ's sacrifice, repeating Christ's claims about the importance of forgiveness and mercy. Toward the end of his life, Paul even appeared in Athens—a clear symbol of the influence of Christianity upon the Greco-Roman tradition.

In many ways, Paul was more important in the rise of Christianity than Jesus Christ himself. Paul popularized many of the concepts that we think of as quintessentially Christian: most of all, the belief in the divinity of Christ himself. The cross-over between Paul and Athens shows that, following the death of Christ, Christianity became even more influential in Western history than Greco-Roman philosophy. Plato and Aristotle continued to influence thought, but—as we'll see—their influence was limited to the extent that Christian thinkers could reconcile their philosophy with Paul's.

Alberto continues to describe Paul's influence on the Western world. Paul disagreed with the Greeks that God reveals himself through intellect—he believed that Christ's example proves that sometimes, God appears before man in the flesh. Paul was a clever speaker. He stressed that Christianity accepted people of all kinds and honored them equally. For this reason, Christianity became highly popular in the Western world—women and the poor were particularly passionate converts to Paul's religion. Paul was also careful to bill Christianity as its own religion, not as a mere Jewish sect.

Although Christianity sometimes gets a bad rap for subjugating women and treating women as second-class human beings, Alberto stresses that Christianity was, in many ways, friendlier and more inviting for women than were other religious and philosophical schools of the time. Christianity offered women the same salvation as men, at least.

Alberto ends his letter with a few observations. The early Christian era, he points out, was full of contradictions—a strange mixing of the Judeo-Christian with the Greco-Roman. It's important for Sophie to understand her heritage as a Westerner. With these words, the letter ends. Sophie is impressed by Alberto's postscript—although she will die one day, she can sense that she shares a common culture and history with people who lived thousands of years ago.

This chapter is important because it establishes that Sophie's World *is about the formation of an entire cultural tradition: the Western tradition. It may seem odd that we lump together all of Christianity, Judaism, Platonism, and Aristotelians under the term "Western"—but the novel will show the ways that these four contradictory ideologies influenced each other.*

CHAPTER 15: THE MIDDLE AGES

Another week passes before Sophie hears from Alberto again. On May 25, she hears a tapping at her window—there's a postcard stuck to the window. Sophie opens her window to retrieve the card. It's been dated June 15, and is addressed to Hilde. Hilde's father tells Hilde that they have a lot to talk about. He also mentions that he can hardly believe that Lebanon is the seat of so much conflict between religions, since the three monotheistic religions all stem from the same prophet, Abraham.

By this point in the book, it's clear that Hilde's father is somehow "listening" to Sophie's interactions with Alberto—he may not be present when Sophie reads Alberto's letters, but he knows what they're talking about (here, for example, he times his comments about monotheism in Lebanon to correspond to Sophie's lessons about Christianity). This intensifies our sense of Hilde's father as a god-figure.

The phone rings, and Sophie answers it. Alberto Knox is on the phone—he greets Sophie by name. He tells Sophie that they must meet in person so that they can "attract Hilde's attention." Sophie agrees to meet Alberto at a nearby church the next morning. Sophie goes to sleep at Joanna's house so that she can sneak to the church without worrying her Mom. She explains to Joanna that she'll be waking up early to go out, but doesn't say where.

For the time being, Sophie is still a young woman. Even though she's slowly learning that her world is a fantastical place, she has to abide by the rules her mother sets—for example, that she can't be out of the house past a certain hour of the night. As the book goes on, we'll see Sophie paying less heed to her mother's dictums.

The next morning, Sophie goes to the churchyard, where she finds a figure dressed in monk's clothes. The figure, Sophie realizes, is Alberto Knox. Alberto begins telling Sophie about the history of the Middle Ages. During this time, Christianity largely replaced Greek philosophy as the source of knowledge and enlightenment in the Western world. The Middle Ages lasted almost 1,000 years. During this time, the first universities were founded, modern nation-states were formed, and a whole cultural tradition of chivalry and quests was born. The Middle Ages have a reputation for being gloomy and dark, but in fact, they were a time of great intellectual development in Europe—a time when Christianity worked out many of its internal contradictions and became the dominant cultural force on the continent.

In Sophie's first real interaction with Alberto, she learns about the Middle Ages—and almost nothing about Alberto himself, who remains as mysterious as ever. The Middle Ages were a particularly important period of Western history, because, as Alberto stresses, this is the time when Europe works out some of the contradictions between Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian values.

During the Middle Ages, Alberto goes on, much of Plato and Aristotle was forgotten, though some of it survived. Important thinkers of the period, such as Saint Augustine (354-430 A.D.), tried to unite Greek philosophy with Christian teachings. Augustine argued that the world of ideas hypothesized by Plato was really the world of God. He also agreed with Plato that humans have souls that live forever, though he thought that the soul would either go to Heaven or Hell. In a way, Augustine returned to the old belief in fate: he said that God was all-powerful, and could send people to Heaven or Hell at will. But he also accepted that God created man with free will—the ability to make unique, unpredictable choices, independent of God's control.

One of the key figures who reconciled Aristotle and Plato with Christ was Saint Augustine. As Sophie recognizes, Augustine returns philosophy to a belief in Fate. And yet this isn't the whole picture: Augustine also makes room for individual agency. He shows that human beings have the freedom to make their own decisions, even though there's an all-powerful God who controls everything in the universe. One might well ask, then, if Sophie is free to control her own actions, or if she, too, is controlled by Hilde's all-powerful father.

One of Augustine's key ideas was the City of God(also the title of one of his most famous books). Augustine believed that in order to enact God's plan on Earth, humans should establish institutions to enforce Christianity. In this way, Augustine paved the way for the Catholic church and the Vatican—the self-styled voice of God on earth.

Augustine is a political philosopher as well as a theologian. Although Sophie's World *often seems more interested in philosophers' ideas about reality and subjectivity than in their political beliefs (usually, Alberto only discusses political philosophy toward the ends of his lessons), it's also important to bear in mind these philosophers' models of proper ad improper authority.*

Sophie says that she needs to get going soon, but Alberto begs to tell her about the other great Medieval philosopher, Saint Thomas Aquinas. After Augustine's death, the Catholic church came to monopolize education in Europe—to be educated *was* to study the Bible. Most towns in Europe built churches, where the people of the town would go every Sunday to listen to a priest speak about Christianity. By the 12th century, however, a new force had appeared in Europe—Arab scholarship. Arabs in Italy and Spain reintroduced lost texts by Plato and Aristotle into the Western canon. This created a new interest in Augustine's project of uniting Classical thinking with Christianity. The most important thinker of the time who embarked on such a project was Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas is important to Western philosophy for much the same reason that Augustine is important: he reconciled much of Greek thought with Christian teaching. Considering some of the comments that Alberto and Sophie have made about what does and doesn't qualify as "Western" thought, we should note that a big chunk of Greek philosophy (the quintessential "Western" philosophy) has only survived to the present day because it was preserved in Arabian scholarship. In short, Western philosophy has always been heavily dependent on non-Western cultures.

Aquinas was instrumental in reconciling Aristotle and Plato with Christianity. Parts of life, Aquinas argued, can be understood with reason and reason alone—for this, we need Aristotle and Plato. But other parts of thehuman experience can only be grasped with faith—this is where Christianity comes in. In some ways, Aquinas argued, Aristotle actually paved the way for Christianity without knowing it. For example, his concept of a God—a "first cause"—works as a valid explanation for the existence of a Christian God, even if Aristotle didn't intend it as such.

This is a good example of the kind of work that Augustine and Aquinas conducted during their lifetimes: i.e., an example of how these thinkers united Aristotle with the Bible. This involves saying that Aristotle was a wise man, but didn't entirely understand what he was saying; he recognized that there was something *that created the universe, but he didn't recognize that this "thing" was the Christian god (and indeed couldn't, because Christ hadn't been born yet).*

As Alberto falls silent, Sophie asks him about Hilde. Alberto replies, "We don't know whether there is a 'Hilde' at all." Sophie finds this strange, especially since Alberto wanted to meet her to discuss Hilde. Alberto suggests that Hilde's father is planting clues of her presence—a wallet, a scarf, etc. Sophie agrees, but tells Alberto that she must get going.

Alberto states what we'd already suspected: Hilde's father is acting like a kind of God, planting clues of Hilde's presence throughout Sophie's world. Once again Alberto shows that he knows more about what's going on than he's willing to say.

Before Sophie leaves, Alberto tells her something more about the relationship between Aristotle and Aquinas. Aquinas tried to broaden Aristotle's classification of human beings as compared to animals. For Aquinas, angels must also be part of Aristotle's taxonomy of life. Aquinas also adopted Aristotle's view of women, i.e., that they were a lesser form of life. However, he argued that the inferiority of women to men was limited to the body—women's souls, on the other hand, were equal to men's.

Another important point about the Middle Ages—especially for Sophie—is the relationship between Christianity and women. Again, it's important to recognize that Christianity was progressive in some ways, while still treating women as inferior to men—in spite of beliefs about women's physicaland mental inferiority, they were granted the same reward as men in Heaven.

Sophie asks Alberto if there were any female philosophers in the Middle Ages. Alberto mentions one, Hildegard of Bingen. Sophie finds this name interesting, since it resembles Hilde's name.Hildegard, Alberto explains, believed that the soul was divided into a male and a female side—in Greek, the female side is called wisdom, or "sofia." Sophie is delighted to learn that her name means wisdom. Alberto explains that Hildegard dreamed that she had a conversation with Sophia—the embodiment of the female wisdom. Sophie suggests that perhaps she, Sophie, will reveal herself to Hilde, just as "Sophia" revealed herself to "Hildegard." In response, Alberto tells Sophie that she should be getting back.

Hildegard of Bingen (whose name, we recognize, sounds an awful lot like "Hilde") is an important figure for Sophie (whose name sounds an awful lot like "sofia") because her example shows that it's possible for a woman to be a philosopher (something that was by no means obvious from the earlier history of Western thought). Sophie seems to be subscribing to a kind of "prophecy" in this scene—without any proof, she believes that she'll interact with Hilde at some point in the future.Once again, Sophie betrays her irrational, mystical side.

Before Sophie leaves, she asks Alberto if there was anyone named Alberto during the Middle Ages. Alberto replies that Aquinas had a teacher named Albert the Great. With these words, he bows to Sophie and walks away. As Sophie walks out of the church, she notices a picture of the Madonna, and finds a small drop of water under the Madonna's eyes—perhaps a tear.

As Sophie learns more about the history of philosophy, she finds more and more counterparts between her life and the lives of philosophers of the past. This suggests again that there's a god-figure who's controlling and ordering her life—ensuring, for example, that her philosophical mentor has the same name as Aquinas's teacher.

CHAPTER 16: THE RENAISSANCE

Sophie returns to Joanna's house. Joanna tells Sophie that Sophie's Mom has called several times, asking for Sophie's whereabouts. Sophie convinces Joanna not to tell anyone about her meeting with Alberto in the church. Then, she leaves Joanna's house and returns to her own.

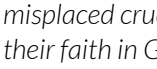
Once again, Sophie's mother is totally disconnected from her daughter's experience and education. She's not a bad mother—she's clearly concerned about her daughter's wellbeing—but for Sophie she remains an example of a life without philosophy.

Back in her room, Sophie stares at the **brass mirror** and sees another girl's face. The girl winks with both eyes, just as she did before. Although she has no way of proving it, Sophie senses that this girl is Hilde. Sophie tries to introduce herself to this strange other girl, but before she can get far, a voice calls Hilde's name, and Hilde runs away from the other side of the mirror.

Sophie has already experienced the sight of a girl winking at her in the mirror, but now, she feels more confident interpreting this phenomenon. This scene also reinforces the mystical connection between Sophie and Hilde, and finally shows Hilde as a real, living person.

Sophiegoes to sleep and has a strange dream in which a young girl runs toward a middle-aged man wearing a beret. In the dream, the girl drops a small **gold crucifix**. Sophie wakes up suddenly, realizing that she's been dreaming. Underneath her pillow, she finds the gold crucifix.Sophie is bewildered by her dream. She also notes that Hilde's father (in the dream) looked a lot like Alberto Knox. She goes downstairs and greets Mom. Mom tells Sophie that a strange dog is outside, near the **hedge**. Sophie, knowing that the dog is Hermes, goes out to find him. Hermes walks away from the hedge slowly, allowing Sophie to follow.

Sophie's dreams are a running motif throughout the book. In her dreams, she can experience a more direct and literal connection between her own life and the lives of Hilde and Hilde's father. Sophie also continues to experience concrete points of contact between herself and Hilde, such as the gold crucifix. The symbolism of a misplaced crucifix might suggest that Hilde and Sophie are losing their faith in God, or at least God as he is conventionally understood—or it could suggest that they're communicating with each other in a mystical, even religious way.



Hermes leads Sophie to the town square, which is lined with houses. Outside house No. 14, Hermes barks at the mailbox. Hesitantly, Sophie opens the box and finds a letter for Hilde Møller Knag. It's dated June 15. Sophie reads Hilde's letter. Hilde's father tells Hilde that Sophie is coming to the "philosopher's house" soon. He notes that European history is like a human life—the Middle Ages are like adolescence, long and dull. But the Renaissance is like Europe's 15th birthday—a great awakening of energy and vitality. Hilde's father tells Hilde to be more careful, noting that she's lost her **gold crucifix**. He also tells Hilde that he's "just around the corner."

Hilde's father makes an explicit connection between the content of Sophie's lessons and her own coming of age. In this way, Hilde's father is just reiterating what we've already seen throughout the novel so far: that Sophie's life is somehow intimately connected with her knowledge of Western philosophy. So just as the Renaissance saw a great bursting forth of intellectual endeavor, so too will Sophie (and Hilde) experience a rebirth of curiosity and excitement.

Hermes leads Sophie into the house. Sophie climbs up many flights of stairs, until she's in the attic. There, she's surprised to find Alberto Knox, wearing a yellow jacket with padded shoulders. Sophie demands that Alberto explain how Hilde's**crucifix** came to be under her pillow. Alberto replies, "It's just a cheap trick." Without waiting for Sophie to respond, Alberto dives into Sophie's lesson for the day.

Alberto Knox is like a Merlin-figure—a magician who can come and go as he pleases, but still bases his schedule (and even his outfits) around Sophie's education. Alberto seems increasingly dismissive of these borderline-miraculous events in Sophie's life, and he also grows more critical of Hilde's father.

Alberto directs Sophie's attention to the attic, which is full of beautiful old books. He explains that he's been living in the attic for some time, ever since leaving the major's cabin. Sophie asks Alberto how Hilde's father knows Alberto's changing locations, but Alberto doesn't say.

Alberto is clearly hiding some important information about Hilde and Hilde's father, but he doesn't share it with Sophie. This reinforces the idea that Sophie will only solve the mystery of Hilde's father as she comes to understand the mysteries of philosophy.

Alberto next begins to tell Sophie about the Renaissance, the period of European history following the Middle Ages. Renaissance means "rebirth," suggesting that Europe was recovering its connections to the culture of antiquity. The Renaissance is often celebrated as a time of great humanism—a renewed emphasis on human values and life in the material world. Some of the most important milestones of the Renaissance were the invention of the printing press, the rediscovery of the compass, and the perfection of the gun. These three inventions allowed Europeans to communicate morequickly and efficiently, conquer new countries, and explore unknown lands.

Alberto's history lesson is cursory but important—it underscores the point that cultural revolutions must have very specific, material causes. We often talk about the Renaissance in abstract, cultural terms (even the name "Renaissance" itself is an abstraction of this kind), forgetting that the Renaissance was only possible because of inventions like the printing press, which allowed for the quick, reliable exchange of information.

The Renaissance humanists celebrated the Christian church, but they also celebrated Greco-Roman culture to an unprecedented extent. For this reason, Rome once again became a seat of art and scholarship. In spite of the new emphasis on humanism, the Christian church continued to persecute those whose ideas were seen as being too radical. So there were clear limits placed on humanism at this time—even humanists had to wrap their ideas in the language of Christianity to avoid persecution. Other important ideas of the time included the theory that the Earth moves around the Sun, proposed by Nicolas Copernicus and later Galileo Galilei.

The Renaissance was proof of the success of thinkers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas: without their merging of Christianity and Platonism, the Renaissance thinkers could never have navigated smoothly between so many different philosophical systems. And yet in many ways the Renaissance thinkers rebelled against their Christian predecessors with scientific discoveries that discredited the (literal) centrality of man's place in the universe.

Alberto tells Sophie more about Galileo, one of the key figures of the Renaissance. Galileo was an empiricist, meaning that he used careful observation to study the laws of the universe. For example, he used experimentation to show that all objects accelerate toward the Earth at a uniform rate, contrary to what Aristotle had maintained centuries before. Galileo also used astronomical observations to prove that the Earth revolves around the Sun, not the other way around, as had been previously believed.

Galileo showed that the Earth isn't at the center of the universe—a hugely important discovery. But arguably even more important was Galileo's new method*—the method of empiricism and experimentation. Galileo's successors, both in science and in philosophy, would imitate his methods to arrive at their own impressive discoveries about the world.*

Galileo's studies of the laws of motion were influential in the ideas of Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727). Newton took Galileo's ideas further by showing that some laws of motion are universal—i.e., forces like gravity bind together all matter in the universe, no matter how big or small. Newton used this concept to show how the Moon orbited the Earth. The ideas of Newton and Galileo were revolutionary, and in some ways they undermined people's faith in God. Man was no longer at the center of the universe; instead, he had to obey the same laws of physics as everything else in the world.

One important thing to keep in mind here is the relationship between Galileo and Newton's specific discoveries and the more abstract, general lessons they teach us about science. So just as Sophie is more interested in the way that the natural philosophers conducted philosophy than in their specific conclusions, we might say that Galileo and Newton's methods are more enduringly "true" than their conclusions (many of which are now debunked).

Alberto goes on to tell Sophie about the history of religion during the Renaissance. During this time, figures like Martin Luther challenged the teaching of the Christian church. Luther maintained that Christians' personal relationship with God was more important than their participation in ritual and ceremony. Luther initiated the Protestant Reformation—the great split in Christianity that resulted in the establishment of new sects, particularly Catholicism (the Christians who didn't follow Luther) and Protestantism (the Christians who did).

The revolutionary discoveries of Galileo parallel the revolutionary claims made by Martin Luther, who challenged the authority of the Catholic Church. Even if Galileo and Luther never actually interacted, it's Alberto's point that the general "spirit of the Renaissance" influenced both Luther and Galileo and caused them to make parallel innovations in their respective fields.

Sophie realizes that it's already4 o'clock—her mother must be missing her. Alberto nods and says goodbye to Sophie, calling her "Hilde." Sophie challenges Alberto on this, and Alberto claims that he just misspoke. Sophie asks Alberto if he's Hilde's father, but he denies this.

Even Alberto seems to be confusing Hilde and Sophie now. Gaarder gets more playful and fantastical in his text as the story goes on, increasingly suggesting that this "world" isn't the only one within the universe of the novel.

Sophie leaves Alberto and begins heading home. Because she has no money, she'll have to walk home instead of taking the bus. Then, she notices ten crowns lying on the ground—the exact price of a bus ticket. Sophie wonders if this is a coincidence, or if Hilde's father has placed the money there for her. Sophie feels a chill running down her spine.

Just as Luther and Galileo began to question man's place in society and the universe, so Sophie begins to question her own place in her world.

CHAPTER 17: THE BAROQUE

Sophie doesn't hear from Alberto for a few more days. To explain her absences to Mom, she lies and says that Hermes belongs to her old science teacher, with whom she had a long chat. On May 29, Sophie watches a news story on TV, about the Norwegian UN forces in Lebanon—a major has been killed by a bombshell.As Sophie watches TV, she begins to cry.

As Sophie spends more time with Alberto, she's required to lie more often to her Mom, furthering the distance between them.We're not sure who the major on TV is, but it's certainly possible that it's Hilde's father himself—he was associated with the "major's cabin," after all.

As Sophie cries, Mom asks her what's wrong. Mom declares that Sophie must have a boyfriend, and in return Sophie demands to know why herDad is never home—Sophie suggests that Mommight be the one with a boyfriend, and says she just isn't brave enough to divorce Dad. With this, Sophie runs to her room.

Sophie and Mom are fighting, but at least they're being more emotionally honest with each other right now—and we get a glimpse into Sophie's worries about her own family dynamic.

Later in the evening, Sophie's Mom enters her room. Sophie, who's been crying, tells her mother that she wants a birthday party after all. Mom nods, but asks Sophie to explain what's been going with her lately. Sophie admits that she's been getting letters from and visiting a man named Alberto, who lived across town. Sophie explains that Alberto is a philosopher. Mom tells Sophie that she should invite Alberto to her birthday party. Sophie replies, "we'll see." She also tells Mom that she has menstrual cramps. Mom gives Sophie aspirin and lets her sleep.

Here Sophie has a more intimate moment with her mother than we've seen previously, and Mom even accepts the odd reality that an adult philosopher has been writing letters to her daughter. And yet Sophie continues to keep most of the information about her relationship with Alberto a secret from her mother. Sophie's mention of menstrual cramps might symbolize her growing maturity and coming-of-age.

On May 31, Sophie receives an essay she turned in a few days before, on man's relationship with technology. Sophie gets an A on the essay—her teacher is impressed with her intelligence. As Sophie leafs through her exercise book, she finds a postcard in it: a postcard from Hilde's father in Lebanon. Hilde's father tells Hilde that one of his friends has died recently. He promises that he'll see Hilde very soon. He also notes that "soon" is relative—what seems like a week to Hilde may not be a week for him.

Interestingly, Sophie doesn't fall behind in school, even as she spends less and less time thinking—or caring—about her schoolwork. This suggests that philosophy isn't just a "useless" endeavor—it can help Sophie succeed in a conventional, real-world sense, by getting her higher grades on her exams. Hilde's father—who is still alive, it turns out—also introduces an important concept here: our conceptions of time aren't the same. One implication of this is that everyone has a different "world," each with a different measure of time and space. We'll return to this challenging idea many more times.

After school, Sophie shows Joannathe postcard. Joanna doesn't know what to make of it. She's excited to hear that Sophie will be having a birthday party, however. Sophie mentions that she's thinking about inviting Alberto—something Joanna finds "crazy."

Despite the fact that Joanna is now tangentially connected to the strange events in Sophie's life, she's still more excited by traditional teenage things like parties.

As she walks home, Sophie crosses paths with Hermes, who guides her back to Alberto's attic. Outside building No. 14, Sophie finds a letter for Hilde. Hilde's father explains that Hilde has lost ten crowns recently, and hopes that someone else has put them to good use. He promises that he'll be back in the town of Lillesand soon.

It's now confirmed: Hilde's father was responsible for the returning of the missing money. The coincidences no longer seem merely fantastical—they're purposeful, and both playful and sinister at the same time.

Inside, Sophie greets Alberto and asks him about the letter. Alberto calls Hilde's father a shallow, shabby man, someone who thinks that his "surveillance" can rival that of God. Alberto presents Sophie with a book by Rene Descartes, as well as a pair of spectacles worn by Spinoza.

Alberto continues to deprecate Hilde's father, suggesting that he is getting closer to the truth—that Alberto and Hilde's world has been "created" by Hilde's father, and yet he is still only a man (not an omniscient god) so his "miracles" are not particularly subtle.

Alberto launches into a history of the Baroque era (approximately the 16th and 17th century). Following the Renaissance, European culture shifted to focus on tension, contrast, ornamentation, and aesthetic complexity. During this period, Europe was ravaged by wars, including the Thirty Years' War, between Protestants and Catholics. Europeans turned to art as an escape as well as for a reflection of their society's complexity. It's during this period, Alberto argues, that the idea of "life as theater" becomes common. This idea is apparent in the works of William Shakespeare, who bridged the gap between the Renaissance and the Baroque eras, and once wrote, "All the world's a stage."

As we reach the halfway point of the novel, the idea of "life as theater" becomes more central to the narrative (particularly as it seems increasingly likely that Sophie herself is just "on a stage" for another's entertainment). This idea suggests that the real world (or what we think of as the real world) is itself just a form of fiction, which can be manipulated and controlled by others. It's interesting that this idea comes into prominence at a time of war in Europe—one could say that the intellectuals of Europe wanted a way to escape from the violence and bloodshed of their day.

The Baroque thinkers were obsessed with the principle of universality—the idea that the world can be understood with simple, predictable rules and laws. Newton's laws of physics paved the way for a mechanistic interpretation of the world: an interpretation that stresses the world's materiality and scientific predictability. During this period, thinkers tried to "mechanize" and rationalize abstract processes like dreaming—it was argued that dreams were the result of concrete, physical processes in the brain.The two greatest philosophers of the Baroque era were Descartes and Spinoza. Alberto prepares to tell Sophie about Descartes.

Baroque philosophers tried to understand how the universe is controlled—they tried to use math and physics to understand how planets move, or how rivers run. This is indicative of their belief in the predictable nature of everything in the world. It was widely believed that humans could understand the world if they were educated enough, and could even take on a godly power (this sounds a lot like the Sophistry that Alberto has warned of).

CHAPTER 18: DESCARTES

Alberto begins telling Sophie about Descartes. Descartes was born in 1596, and quickly became interested in the nature of thought and reason. Descartes's project was similar to Plato's in many ways: he believed that the only path to true knowledge was reason. In a way, Descartes was the true father of modern philosophy: he built an entire system of philosophy, a worldview that encompassed physics, ethics, metaphysics, etc.

Descartes is one of the most original thinkers since Plato. He doesn't just polish and modify other people's ideas—he invents his own, starting from scratch. This reflects the new originality and uniqueness of Western thought following the Renaissance.

Descartes began by attempting to tackle to problem of the relationship between the body and the mind. When the mind thinks a thought, the body translates this thought into a motion—when you wiggle your foot, for example, thought becomes action. But Descartes couldn't understand exactly how the mind interacted with the physical world.

Descartes isn't totally original here, ashis ideas about the distinction between the physical body and the abstract, all-reaching mind dateback at least to the Stoics. But Descartes is important in the way he emphasizes the relationship between body and mind, as we'll see.

Descartes tried to use a process of systematic doubt to understand the relationship between the mind and the body: in other words, he tried to begin by evaluating the truth of the simplest ideas, and then using these simple ideas to build more complicated ones. This was a precise, mathematical way to conduct philosophy, and it's no coincidence that Descartes was also a talented mathematician—in fact, the father of analytical geometry.

Descartes isn't a mystic by any means: he doesn't believe that magic or transcendence have any real place in philosophy. Instead, Descartes tries to use sharp, rigorous mathematical methods to understand the world.

Descartes began his process of systematic doubt by asking himself how he could trust his own senses. While it might seem obvious that what we see or hear is real, it's also true that when we dream, we think we're moving through the real world—in other words, our senses our lying to us. In essence, Descartes wanted to ask, "How do I know my entire life isn't just a dream, playing out in my head?"

Descartes' question is by no means unfamiliar: we've all asked ourselves something like this (especially after watching a movie like The Matrix *or* The Truman Show*). The very fact that we continue to ask ourselves this question shows that Descartes didn't quite answer his own questions, and reminds us that philosophy is often more interested in asking questions than in answering them.*

Descartes' answer to his own question was, "I think, therefore I am." Descartes' point was that the most basic quality of a human mind is that it's capable of thinking (in this way, Descartes has a lot in common with Aristotle, as well as Plato). So Descartes can be 100% certain that *he* exists, and that his thoughts are logically valid.

Like Aristotle, Descartes has an unshakeable power in the human mind's ability to think. Descartes also resembles such early rationalist thinkers as Parmenides, who ignored what their senses told them and instead listened to what their minds told them.

Descartes moved on to hypothesize the existence of a God. Descartes argued that he is capable of imagining a perfect entity called God. It's logically impossible that an imperfect being, such as Descartes himself, could imagine the existence of a perfect being like God, if no such being really existed. The crux of Descartes' point is that one can't imagine a perfect entity that *doesn't* exist, because nonexistence is a kind of imperfection—a truly perfect being would exist in the real world, as well as in the human mind. Therefore, God exists.Alberto admits that this isn't very solid logic—many people have criticized Descartes on this count.

Descartes's proof for the existence of God, sometimes called the ontological argument, has been criticized by countless later thinkers (Immanuel Kant is often credited with hammering the final nail). More broadly, it's interesting to see how Descartes—who claims to be trying to study the entire world,presupposing absolutely nothing, movesfrom Nothing to belief in Godso quickly.

Descartesthen used his theories about God to demonstrate that the world we perceive really does exist—it's not just a dream—because no perfect being would confuse and trick its creations. Descartes also argued that the world is dualistic—it's split into the world of reason and the material realm. Man is unique because he is both a material being—a body—and a thinking being. Descartes even foreshadowed modern neuroscience by guessing that the brain's pineal glad is the area where reason (the mind) interacts with matter (the body).

For all the flaws of his study of God and perception, Descartes is important to Sophie's education because of the new emphasis he places on man as a physical, mechanical being (mechanical in the sense of being controlled by the laws of physics). Descartes also reiterates the old philosophical distinction between mind and matter, a distinction first established by the ancient Greeks.

Sophie is particularly struck when Alberto tells her that Descartes compared the human body to a machine. Descartes was a talented doctor, Alberto explains, who saw that all bodies are made of the same finely tuned parts—blood vessels, organs, etc.

Throughout the early modern era, we see man being treated as a less and less "divine" creature. By the time we get to Descartes, man isn't particularly special, or at least the human body isn't: it's just another object.

Alberto tells Sophie to sit in front of a computer in the attic. When Sophie does so, a text appears on the screen, supposedly from a girl named Laila. Sophie asks Laila to tell Sophie about herself, and Laila explains that "she" was built in Atlanta and transferred to Norway—Laila is a computer. Sophie asks Laila about Hilde, and Laila reports that Hilde's father is a UN worker stationed in Lebanon.

At the time that Sophie's World *was written, there weren't very advanced artificial intelligences that could communicate with humans. Interestingly, Laila seems tohave information about Hilde's father, confirming more of the connections we've seen throughout the book.*

Just as Sophie is about to step away from the computer, she decides to search, "Knag." The computer begins to type in the person of MajorAlbert Knag. Alberto mutters, "The rat has sneaked onto the hard disc.""Albert Knag" types a birthday greeting to Hilde, promising to give Hilde a hug soon. Sophie notices the similarities between the name "Alberto Knox" and the name "Albert Knag."

Perhaps because Sophie has just finished learning about Descartes and the omnipotent God, she finally learns something about Hilde's father: his name. Just as Alberto had confused Sophie with Hilde, Sophie notices the similarity between Alberto Knox and Albert Knag: she's beginning to see that her world runs parallel to Albert Knag's world.

CHAPTER 19: SPINOZA

Still sitting in the room with Alberto, Sophie asks him to tell her more about the Baroque era. Alberto begins to tell Sophie about Baruch Spinoza, an important student of Descartes. Spinoza was a radical figure in his day—he questioned both Christianity and Judaism, arguing that the Bible should be read critically and contextually, not as the infallible word of God. Spinoza's friends and family tried to send him to jail. Spinoza himself was never wealthy—he earned a living polishing lenses for spectacles.

Spinoza's life is a classic example of philosophy as a dangerous, radical endeavor. Spinoza used logic and empiricism to question the authority of the most powerful people in his society—the clergymen. For this reason, he was widely hated and vilified. And yet Spinoza's ideas seem fairly uncontroversial by modern standards.

Spinoza, Alberto continues, believed that God was present in nature—in short, God *is* the world. This is a complicated idea. Spinoza disagreed with Descartes that the world was divided into thought and substance—instead, he argued that the only real thing was God. But since God is the world, thought and substance are just two difference versions of the same thing: God. Alberto clarifies this with an analogy: at any given time, you could have a stomachache. Five minutes later, you could remember the feeling of the stomachache. The same being is present throughout this process: you. The point of the analogy is that the experience of the stomachache and the memory of the stomachache aren't so different—they're just experienced at different times. The same is true of reason and substance—they're just two different versions of God. Sophie finds this confusing, but thinks she's beginning to understand.She compliments Albertofor his knowledge of philosophy. Alberto replies, "A mere bagatelle."

One of the trickiest aspects of Spinoza's argument is the idea that thought and matter are two different versions of the same substance. It seems impossible that this could be true,and yet Sophie's World*—the novel itself—helps us understand Spinoza's ideas by illustrating them in the plot of the book. Just as Spinoza believed that God is everywhere in the world and* is *the world, so too might we say that Sophie and her surroundings are all aspects of Albert Knag's semi-divine authority; they could even be termed parts of Albert Knag himself. Also note that Alberto modestly refers to his intellectual achievements as "a mere bagatelle" (a trifle). We'll return to this phrase a few more times.*

Alberto transitions toSpinoza's idea of free will. Because Spinoza believed that the world is God, it's often suggested that Spinoza didn't believe in free will at all. Alberto admits that Spinoza believed that everything that happens has to happen—everything in the world operates according to the laws of physics. Spinoza argued that people don't choose their nature. Alberto gives an example: lions don't choose to hunt prey; cavemen don't choose to worship tribal gods or hunt leopards; and a newborn baby doesn't choose to cry. Even a fully-grown human isn't really choosing to get a job, get married, etc.—she's just living out her nature. But because "human nature" consists of so many complicated causes, humans forget that their actions are predetermined. The only pathway to happiness is to accept the truth: freedom is an illusion.

Spinoza argues that freedom, as it's traditionally understood, is just an illusion. This is a surprising idea, and should be unpacked a little. Spinoza, first of all, doesn't believe that it's possible for human beings to "choose" what they want to do: their desires and motivations are already imprinted into their very being. But even if freedom as we usually conceive of it is impossible, we can still find a state of enlightenment by accepting*our lack of agency. In order to do this, humans must study philosophy and religion carefully. Once again, this seems to be relevant to Sophie's life. She is becoming increasingly aware of her lack of freedom, and yet she also seems to be gaining wisdom.*

Alberto offers Sophie a banana, and Sophie, who's hungry, accepts it. She's surprised to see a message written inside the banana: "Here I am again, Hilde." Sophie is confused, and wonders if Hilde's father could have sent the banana all the way from Lebanon. She leaves Alberto and returns to her mother.

Each "trick" that Hilde's father plays seems more extravagant than the last—Hilde's father (Albert, we now know, is like a magician. The mystery, then, is why Albert is doing all this: what's his goal?

CHAPTER 20: LOCKE

Sophie gets back to her house and tells Mom that she's been visiting Alberto. Mom tells Sophie she checked the phonebook and couldn't find anyone by that name in town. To reassure her mother, Sophie shows her the video of Athens that Alberto gave her. Mom notes that Alberto looks a lot like the Major who used to live in the cabin, whose name was Albert Knag or Knox.

Sophie isn't the only one who's having a hard time telling Alberto Knox and Albert Knag apart: Sophie's Mom confuses them, too. We know that Sophie is "like" Hilde, and Alberto is "like" Albert. But what is the nature of their relationship? Are they two different versions of the same Platonic form? Two different sets of people in two different worlds?

Two weeks go by. Sophie goes to Alberto's apartment across town. Outside, she finds another note wishing Hilde a happy birthday. In the note, Hilde's father promises her that the "moment of truth" is near at hand, and adds that this moment has something to do with Berkeley.

Once again Sophie's philosophical education is explicitly tied to the real life mysteries she's trying to solve. She must get to the philosopher Berkeley (whose portrait we saw in the major's cabin) in order to learn the truth.

We cut ahead to June 14. Hermes shows up at Sophie's house and leads her toward Alberto's apartment once again. Suddenly, Sophie hears a voice, wishing her a happy birthday. She wonders if Hermes is speaking, then dismisses this idea as impossible. Hermes leads Sophie all the way to the apartment.

Sophie's interactions with Hilde and Albert Knag become increasingly direct, and her world grows increasingly more fantastical.

Inside, Sophie finds Alberto. Sophie explains some of the odd events that have happened to her lately, but Alberto insists that she'll have to wait to find out about them. In the mean time, he'll teach her about Locke and other philosophers of the time, including Berkeley and Hume.

Alberto deliberately teases Sophie (and us) by promising to explain Albert Knag and instead launching into an explanation of Locke and Hume. The secret of Albert Knag, we can tell, must be earned bystudying philosophy.

In the 17th century, the English philosophers were known as empiricists. They believed in the importance of listening to one's senses and basing all rational conclusions on observation. This school of philosophy stands in marked contrast to the rationalist tradition of Spinoza and Descartes—philosophers who trusted their reason and distrusted sensory data.

As time goes on, philosophy seems to divide along national lines—for example, the continental philosophers of the 17th century were rationalists, while the U.K. philosophers tended to be empiricists. This is both a sign of the rise of the nation-state (a country with its own unique culture and philosophical sub-traditions) and perhaps also a sign of the way that philosophy "adapts" to different environments.

One important empiricist was John Locke (1632-1704). Locke tried to answer two questions—where we get our ideas from, and whether we can rely on our senses. Locke believed that the mind was born a "tabula rasa," a blank slate—i.e., when we're born, we don't have any ideas or theories of the world. Only observation and experience can fill the mind with ideas—in short, sense comes before reason. But Locke didn't believe that the mind's only function was to absorb experiences. He believed that the mind has the ability to interpret and classify sensations, and to reflect on experience.

Locke is especially interested in the process of education: i.e., how the mind goes from blank slatestatus to a state of intelligence. While Locke's ideas are important, they're often considered naïve and simplistic compared to the ideas of Kant, let alone the theories of modern psychology and neuroscience.

Locke tried to answer his question—whether we can trust our senses—by studying the relationship between a sensation and an idea. Locke believed that the only true knowledge is that which is based in some kind of sensation. But some sensations are more "true" than others. For example, we can agree that qualities like size, number, and magnitude are universal—everyone perceives them the same way. But there are also qualities like color, temperature, etc., that are different for nearly everyone. So while all knowledge has to derive from sensation, it's important to distinguish between different kinds of sensation—the objective and the subjective.

Locke begins to make a distinction between different kinds of qualities and observations. The implication of this is familiar for a historian of philosophy; namely, that perception and reality aren't necessarily the same thing. Locke's attention to perception suggestsis reminiscent of Rene Descartes.

Locke, Alberto continues, wasn't as different from Descartes as he's sometimes said to be. He did think that humans have an innate ability to believe in God—an idea that contrasts with his emphasis on sensation. Locke was also a noted champion of women's rights. Finally, Locke was an important theorist of political systems. He wanted a government to be divided into different branches: a legislative branch, a judiciary, and an executive. By separating government into parts, he believed, the people would have more power, and more say in their own lives and their own happiness.

Alberto quickly summarizes Locke's political philosophy and feminism, even though in the United States these aspects of his thinking are usually given a lot more attention than his epistemology (especially because Locke's writings are often considered an inspiration for the American Revolution). Perhaps because Sophie's World *is a Norwegian book, it mostly skips over this information.*

CHAPTER 21: HUME

Alberto moves on to discuss David Hume (1711-1766), another important empiricist. Hume wrote a great deal about human nature. Sophie finds this tiresome—she points out that all the philosophers she's been reading about are men—perhaps as a result, their books seem to say almost nothing about childhood, femininity, pregnancy, etc. Alberto admits that Sophie has a point, but he also stresses that Hume focused on the experiences of young children, something that sets him apart from many of his philosopher peers.

Once again the theme of women and sexism in philosophy comes up, as Sophie gets frustrated with the rather obvious fact that all the philosophers she's learning about are men (with the exception of Hildegard, who isn't nearly as famous as the others). This again brings up the idea that being a professional philosopher requires a certain level of privilege—rights, education, safety, and money.

Alberto explains that Hume acted as a kind of "janitor" cleaning up the philosophy of the Middle Ages. For example, Hume suggested that man's belief in angels was a delusion—a "complex idea" made up of two simpler, unrelated concepts (the concept of a human being and the concept of wings or flight). In general, Hume was interested in classifying different kinds of ideas and perceptions and throwing out ideas that weren't grounded in real, empirical experience. He argued that complex ideas aren't real: complex ideas simply signal the mind playing tricks on itself.

Hume could be said to fall into the same tradition as Augustine and Aquinas: a great thinker whose main contribution was reworking other people's ideas. With his emphasis on observation and empiricism, Hume reflects the dominant scientific ethos of the era, which we've already seen in Sir Isaac Newton. Instead of relying on abstract metaphysical ideas, Hume trusts only what he can measure and control.

Alberto explains Hume's notion of ego to Sophie. The ego is the self, the "I," with which we experience the world. Hume's analysis of ego is similar to that of Descartes, who began by assuming the existence of an "I" and nothing else. But where Descartes takes it for granted that the ego is always the same—an unchanging eye that observes the world—Hume suggested the opposite. The ego is always changing, just as our personalities and thoughts are always changing. In short, "I" am not the same person "I" was five minutes ago. Alberto points out that Hume's analysis is surprisingly similar to that of Buddha, 2,500 years before.

Hume's arguments more or less refute Descartes's most famous idea, "I think, therefore I am." Hume's point is that even this theoretical "I" is altogether unlike the "self" with which Descartes conflated it. At any given moment there may be an "I" that thinks; and yet it's impossible to prove that this is the same *"I"—the same being—that persists over time. Alberto draws interesting parallels between Hume and Buddha, suggesting that Western philosophy isn't as original or self-contained as some have claimed.*

Another important element of Hume's thought was his theory of causation. Hume argued that people are so used to seeing the same things happen again and again that they begin to think in rigid, unchanging terms—we *expect* a penny to fall to the ground if we release it from our hand. Young children haven't yet been trained to think in such rigid terms, so they're more open-minded in their experiences.

Hume radically reworks Aristotle, arguing that causation, quite aside from being a "real" thing, is impossible to measure, and therefore nonexistent. (Hume's arguments would later appear in the writings of John Dewey and William James.)

One further consequence of Hume's theory of causation is that causation, as we usually understand it, is just an illusion. We don't really know why a penny falls to the ground—we're just so used to seeing it happen that our mind tricks us into thinking up a cause for it. Alberto gives another analogy: people think that lightning is the "cause" of thunder because thunder comes after lightning. But this is just an illusion: lightning and thunder are just two sides of the same coin: they're part of the same phenomenon. In this way, all humans have been trained to believe in the illusion of causation.

It may seem impossible that something as intuitive as causation could be an illusion, and yet Hume is persuasive in the way that he refutes these intuitive assumptions. It's a mark of Hume's empiricism that he's willing to dismiss causation because it can't be measured—this reminds us that Hume trusted his observations, not his mind's assumptions. (It's worth mentioning that Alberto's example of lightning and thunder is taken from The Genealogy of Morals *by Nietzsche—not Hume.)*

Hume also had a complex theory of morality. Hume argued that morality had no relation to reason whatsoever. We believe that it's wrong to kill someone, not because of any logical reason, but because we're sympathetic to the victim. The importance of this is that we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that we can use reason to solve all our problems—we need to deepen our feelings for other people as well. Alberto clarifies this with an example: the Nazis killed millions of people, but it wasn't an error of rationality that made them do so—on the contrary, plenty of Nazis were calm, cool-headed people.

*Hume might seem cold and clinical in his thinking—consider how ready he was to dismiss causation altogether, just because it couldn't be scientifically measured. And yet there's also a compassionate, moral side to Hume's thinking. In many ways, Hume has*more *faith in compassion than most—he sees evil as a totally moral and emotional concept, rather than a deviation in reason (as Socrates argued, centuries before).*

CHAPTER 22: BERKELEY

Alberto and Sophie are still in Alberto's apartment. They stare out the window and see an airplane pulling a banner across the sky. The banner says, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HILDE!" Alberto mutters, "Gate-crasher."

Alberto grows increasingly frustrated with the man who seems to be his "double": Albert Knag. Knag, for his part, keeps getting more extravagant in his intrusions into Sophie's world.

Alberto moves on to discuss George Berkeley with Sophie. Berkeley was an Irish bishop and philosopher. He was an empiricist, and concluded that we can't know anything more of the world than what we perceive. Like Locke, Berkeley questioned the objectivity of our sensory impressions of the world—he questioned whether the sky was "truly" blue, or apples were "truly" red." Berkeley went even further than Locke, saying that none of our sensory impressions of the world can be considered objective.

The fact that we've finally gotten to George Berkeley suggests that we're about to find out about the nature of Albert Knag's control over Sophie's world. It's telling that Berkeley continued Locke's questioning of sensation and experience—just as Sophie has been questioning the reality of her world, so too did Berkeley question the reality of the material world.

Berkeley was a firm believer in God, and claimed that God was the spirit that caused everything in the physical world (much like Aristotle and Aquinas). He argued that humans only exist in the mind of God—our physical bodies are just illusions, the result of our confusion about what is and isn't real (similar to Spinoza). Moreover, Berkeley thought that time and space were illusions, too—what seems like a week to a human might not be a week to God.

Berkeley, we already knew, questioned the objectivity of time and space. In many ways, his worldview corresponds most closely to the "world" we've seen in this book: a world where an all-powerful god figure controls everything, where time speeds up and slows down, and where physical space often seems to be a mere illusion.

Suddenly, Sophie begins to feel odd. She thinks of all the strange things that have been happening to her lately: Hilde's father seems to be everywhere. ThenAlbertosuddenly addresses Sophie as "Hilde," and explains that he's always known Sophie's true name is Hilde. He says that Hilde's father, the major, is a kind of God to Sophie and Alberto, and Hilde is a kind of "angel." The physical world through which Sophie and Alberto are moving may be "real," or it may be nothing more than paper and writing, the product of Hilde's father's imagination.

Here, we come to the central twist of the book—the strong possibility that Sophie and Alberto are just fictions, creature who only exist as words on a printed page, or in the mind of an author. This is, of course, literally true (they're in the book we're reading). Moreover, Sophie and Alberto seem locked in a struggle for freedom: like Spinoza, they knowthat *they're the prisoners of Fate or a "god," yet they don't seem to accept the fact that someone else is controlling what they do, think, and say—they're fighting for free will.*

Albertothen tells Sophie "Happy birthday, Hilde!" and suddenly it starts to storm outside. Sophie leaves Alberto and returns to her home, running through the downpour. Sophie's Momputs her arm around her and asks her if she's all right, and Sophie replies, "It's like a bad dream."

Albert Knag seems able to control even what Alberto says and does—Sophie and Alberto's free will may be entirely an illusion. Overall, the meta-fictional quality of the book is intended to make us, the readers, want to question the reality of our own world (just as Berkeley did). Are we really any freer or more "real" than Alberto, Sophie, or even Albert Knag?

CHAPTER 23: BJERKELEY

As the chapter begins, Hilde Møller Knag wakes up in her bed. It's June 15, 1990, her 15thbirthday, and her father is due to come home from Lebanon in a week.

Now that the secret is out, Gaarder suddenly takes us to the other "world" Alberto kept alluding to: the world where Hilde lives. Of course, as readers we're meant to recognize the fact that Hilde's world is no more "real" than Sophie's world is.

Hilde stares out of her window at the garden outside her house. There was a big storm the night before and everything is wet. The garden is full of tall birch trees (bjørketrær in Norwegian), and for this reason her house was named "Bjerkely" many years ago.

This explains why the major's cabin contained a painting titled "Bjerkely"—it was a painting of Hilde's home!

Hilde stares into her **brass mirror**. She has long blonde hair and green eyes. The mirror reminds Hilde of her father, whose name is Albert Knag. He used to keep the mirror in his studio—the place where he once tried to write a novel. Albert claimed that his grandmother had bought the brass mirror from a Gypsy woman years ago. He used to joke that this mirror was the only place you could "wink at your own reflection with both eyes at the same time."

Hilde's behavior in this chapter mirrors Sophie's, and we finally see the other end of this magical mirror—Hilde was the one blinking back at Sophie.

Suddenly, Hilde notices a box on her table—perhaps a birthday present from Albert. Inside, she finds an ordinary three-ring **binder**. Inside the binder, there's a book, titled *Sophie's World*. The first chapter of the book is called "The Garden of Eden." Hilde begins to read: the chapter is about a girl named Sophie, walking home from school with her friend Joanna.

The truth is now clear: Albert has written Sophie's World*—the book we've been reading so far—with the intention of educating Hilde about philosophy. Furthermore, Albert has modeled the character of Sophie on his own daughter. This is a surprising and entertaining twist—in essence,* Sophie's World*is acknowledging that it's just a work of fiction—and beyond that, it's a meta-fiction partly about the philosophy that reality might be an illusion!*

As Hilde reads on, she's surprised to find that she herself is a character in the book. The main character, Sophie, keeps receiving letters addressed to Hilde. Hilde realizes that the letters from her father, as they're described in the book **Sophie's World**, are intended for her to read. Hilde continues reading about both Sophie and philosophy, and gets through the Greek natural philosophers and Democritus. As Hilde reads, she also finds evidence of things that she's misplaced: a red scarf, etc.

Sure enough, every chapter of Sophie's World *(the binder) corresponds to a chapter of the book we've been reading so far. One interesting question this brings up is: is Sophie more or less "real" than Hilde? While it's obvious that both are fictional characters, the very fact that we* began*this book from Sophie's point of view suggests that, if anything, Sophie is more real to us (more familiar, more human, more sympathetic) than Hilde.*

Hilde's mother walks into the room, carrying food, and wishes Hilde a happy birthday. Hilde thanks her mother but then returns to reading her **book**. Hilde's mother, a little offended, asks Hilde to open her gift—it's a beautiful gold bracelet. Hilde is grateful for the bracelet, but quickly resumes reading. She reads the section in which Sophie visits the Acropolis with Alberto. Hilde recalls that her father, during his time with the UN, suggested that the UN build a replica of the Acropolis as a place to come together and "forge world unity."

Just like with Mom in Sophie's world, Hilde's mother seems a little disconnected from her daughter and her interests. We now get some more "real world" explanations for the strange occurrences in Sophie's world.

Alone in her room once again, Hilde reads about Sophie's encounters with the two portraits in the major's cabin—Berkeley and Bjerkely. Hilde looks up Berkeley in an encyclopedia, and finds that he was a philosopher. Hilde wonders what her father is getting at—what's the similarity between her house and the philosopher, apart from their names?

Bjerkely was a total mystery for Sophie, but that part seems obvious to Hilde. The appearance of Berkeley as a philosopher, then, is a hint for both *girls to keep learning about philosophy in order to solve this mystery.*

Hilde continues with her reading. As she reads, she comes across postcards from her father. Although Sophie, the character, experiences these postcards over a period of weeks, Hilde reads them all in the course of only a few hours. Hilde then reads about Aristotle, and though she is disappointed by his views on women, she likes his other ideas.

Just as Berkeley suggested that time and space were illusions, it now seems that Sophie's conception of time is an illusion—since Hilde experiences the equivalent of days for Sophie in the space of a few hours. If time is relative, then, perhaps space is, too—perhaps even the space called Bjerkely.

When Hilde gets to the description of Hildegard of Bingen, she's very interested (and appalled that she can't find Hildegard in the encyclopedia). Sophie's idea about "revealing herself" to Hilde, Hilde realizes, has a kind of truth—Sophie, a literary character, has revealed herself to Hilde, a real person. Hilde reaches the passage in her **book** in which Sophie stares in the **brass mirror** and sees a strange girl winking back at her—Hilde recognizes this strange girl as herself. Hilde continues reading. At the part when Sophie finds a **gold crucifix**, Hilde realizes that she's lost her own crucifix recently.

We see what the relationship between Sophie and Hilde really is: Sophie is a fictional character whose behavior is meant to serve as a model or mirror for Hilde's. Hilde is supposed to learn from Albert through the surrogate figure of Sophie (who learns through Albert's surrogate figure, Alberto). Yet there are also coincidences that seem (to Hilde, at least) to be more than just Albert's trickery—the gold crucifix, for example, seems like a physical object that has passed from one girl's world to the other.

Then Hildereads about Sophie's dream—where Sophie sees Albert Knag returning to Hilde's home, weeks in the future. Hilde knows that Sophie is an imaginary character, but she can't help thinking that Sophie's dream is prophetic—her father really will return. Because of this, and because of her lost **crucifix**, she starts to think that Sophie "really existed."

On one level, Hilde is a kind of ideal reader—someone who intuitively grasps how fiction works, and finds a character "real" because she sympathizes with her. But here it seems that Hilde goes even further, and starts to believe that Sophie is actually alive—a human being with free will—somewhere within the world of her father's book.

CHAPTER 24: THE ENLIGHTENMENT

After a short conversation with her mother,Hilde reads about Sophie's discussions with Alberto in the church. She recognizes that her father is making a point about the relativity of time. During the chapter where the plane carries a banner, Hilde sees that Sophie's storyline is "catching up" with her own. Hilde then reads about Sophie's realization that she might only exist in the major's mind, and Hilde starts to feel sorry for Sophie.

Hilde is reading the book Sophie's World *in the same way that we are—she's learning about the history of philosophy, but she's* also *learning about philosophy through the form of the novel itself. Sophie's struggle to understand her world is a fascinating illustration of the ideas of Plato, Berkeley, Spinoza, and others.*

Hilde eats dinner with her mother, and confesses that she just wants to go back and read the rest of the **book** her father wrote. Before Hilde returns to her room, she mentions that she's missing her **crucifix**. Hilde's mother replies that Hilde lost it by the dock weeks ago; she adds that she mentioned this to Hilde's father. Hilde's mother says that she picked up the crucifix off the dock, but when she goes to look for it in her bedroom, she is surprised to find that it's disappeared. Hilde, however, expects this by now.

In the same way that Hilde reads Sophie's story from an "all-knowing" perspective(she can tell that Sophie's trapped in her father's fiction long before Sophie herself can), we might want to read Hilde's story. And yet, the novel wants us to ask ourselves, why couldn't wealsobe the product of someone else's imagination? (God's?)

Hilde continues reading. In the text, it's Sophie's birthday, June 15th. Mom enters the room and wishes her daughter a happy birthday. Sophie is still rattled by the storm the night before, and wonders if it was "all only a dream." Downstairs, Sophie opens presents—a tennis racket, which Sophie finds underwhelming. Sophie's Mom asks Sophie if Sophie's feeling all right, and Sophie insists that she is. Mom leaves the house, leaving Sophie to her studies.

Just as Hilde seemed a little disappointed by her mother's gift, so does Sophie. Both girls have lost themselves in the world of philosophy. "It was only a dream" is a literary trope, but Gaarder has fun with it here in all his meta-fictional convolutions.

The phone rings in **Sophie's World**, and Sophie picks it up. It's Alberto, who explains to Sophie that he and she may have only been invented for the amusement of "the major's" daughter, Hilde. But since he and Sophie aren't real, just literary creations, then nothing they do really matters anyway—they have no free will.

By this point, there's no mystery about it: Sophie and Alberto know that they're trapped in Albert's book. But of course, even their awareness of this fact is just the product of Albert's imagination (although Hilde doesn't seem to believe this).

Alberto suggests something to Sophie—maybe there is a way for them to exercise free will after all. If they speed through the rest of Sophie's education (Freud, Marx, Darwin, Existentialism, etc.) before the major returns to Bjerkely, then they might be able to "detach" themselves from the major's imagination. Alberto and Sophie plan to meet in the major's cabin soon, though Alberto points out that they shouldn't worry too much—since their worry is imaginary, just as they are.

Alberto thinks he has a plan for escaping Albert, precisely by using Albert's intentions (of teaching the history of Western philosophy) against him. And yet Albertoalso seems more willing than Sophie to exercise a kind of philosophical defeatism—i.e., to say that nothing really matters, since they're imaginary, anyway. This isn't unlike the belief in fate or predetermination.

Hilde finishes reading the chapter of **Sophie's World**. She finds it odd that Sophie and Alberto are becoming "aware" of their fictional nature. Hilde has a strange feeling that Sophie and Alberto are real after all, even though they're just ink and paper.

One could say that Alberto and Sophie's awareness of their situation is an illusion, no more or less "real" than their passive acceptance of the story's coincidences. But Hilde seems to believe that Alberto and Sophie have taken on a higher reality as they move through their education. While this may seem a little silly, we shouldn't entirely dismiss this idea, since it's a basic assumption of fiction (good fiction, at least) that the characters are, at least in an emotional or a conceptual sense, real.

Hilde continues reading. Sophie receives two cards from Lebanon, one addressed to her, one to Hilde. In the letter addressed to her, Sophie reads about the lesson plan that Alberto will shortly present to her, structured around the Enlightenment. Clearly, the major is watching her closely, Sophie thinks.

Now that Albert "knows" that Sophie knows the truth about her reality, he can be more upfront about his control of Sophie's world—and she has no choice but to comply.

Sophie and Alberto meet up in the major's cabin, where Alberto dives into talking about the Enlightenment. The key Enlightenment philosopher was Immanuel Kant—other major figures include Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau. Sophie tells Alberto that the major has already told her that Alberto will be discussing the Enlightenment. Alberto sighs and proceeds with his lesson.

Once again, Alberto and Albert are presented as both "doubles" and as competing figures. Now that we know more about the reality of the novel, it becomes clearer that Alberto's criticisms of Albert are really just Albert himself being self-deprecating and playful.

The Enlightenment philosophers were interested in the power of human reason. Figures like Kant tried to rationalize morality—i.e., to show that the rules of good and evil were based on simple, reasonable ideas. It's important to note that the Enlightenment philosophers were influential in the development of the modern school system—they saw it as their duty to teach the young how to use reason to understand right and wrong. Another key milestone of the Enlightenment was the encyclopedia, pioneered by the French in the late 18th century. The encyclopedia, with its formidable compilations of information, is a symbol of the Enlightenment faith in reason, careful study, and truth.

It's a sign of the relevance of the Enlightenment to Sophie's own enlightenment that figures like Kant and Rousseau focused so extensively on education for young people. In general, we should keep in mind that the Enlightenment figures celebrated reason and intelligence above all else. They thought that the human mind was capable of understanding everything in the universe; hence the rise of projects like the encyclopedia, which could be said to compress all the information in the world into a set of books.

Enlightenment philosophers toyed with the idea that civilization was overrated—even so-called primitive people seemed perfectly happy and healthy. To the philosopher Rousseau, this suggested that humans were innately good, and civilization was a kind of disease that corrupted them. The goal of society, he suggested, was to become "natural"—i.e., to uphold man's natural potential for goodness and reason. This means that a good society is one that rationalizes everything: religion, politics, education, etc.

One paradox of Enlightenment philosophy is that while many philosophers of the era thought that their civilizations were on the verge of solving all human problems (with tools like the encyclopedia or the school), other philosophers believed that allcivilization was deeply flawed. We've already seen hints of this idea in Sophie's World*: civilization as it's usually understood (a practical education, a job, travel) is portrayed as lonely, dull, or otherwise unfulfilling.*

The Enlightenment philosophers were interested in a form of religion called Deism. In Deism, God existed, but wasn't actively involved in controlling the world: God was something like a watchmaker, using the laws of physics and mathematics to create a universe that could take care of itself without his help.

We can't help but contrast Deism with the "rules" of Sophie's world. In Sophie's world, Albert Knag is actively involved in controlling what Sophie and her peers do: he can't sit back and let his imaginary world run itself.

Another aspect of Enlightenment thinking was its emphasis on individual rights. Enlightenment thinkers believed that men were born with natural rights—rights that they didn't have to work to earn, in other words. One of the key events in the history of the Enlightenment was the French Revolution of 1789. During this period, the people of France rebelled against what they saw as an irrational and corrupt system of church and state. In place of Louis XVI's monarchy, the French people established a government that respected the universal rights of man. Sophie is curious about the Enlightenment's attitude toward women's rights. Alberto explains that Enlightenment philosophers were often progressive about women's rights. One of the key philosophers of France in the period leading up to the revolution was Olympe de Gouges, an early feminist who believed that women deserved the same rights as men.

Enlightenment thinkers could be said to celebrate the natural rights of human beings—an idea that's so common nowadays that it's sometimes hard to believe that it was once highly controversial. How can a human be "born" with anything? Don't humans have to work to achieve the right to do anything? Questions like these challenged thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau to develop a theory of natural right that was logically sound, and that could be used to justify a political revolution. One major theme of these later chapters of the novel is the relevance of philosophy to the real world, especially the political world: philosophers like de Gouges and Rousseau undeniably had a real-world impact, since their words inspired many to take up arms against the King of France.

Sophie directs Alberto's attention to the pictures of Berkeley and Bjerkely. She suggests that Hilde "lives" somewhere in the picture of Bjerkely. Suddenly, she sees an envelope. She opens it and finds a letter from Albert Knag to Hilde, explaining that Alberto should have just explained the history of the French Enlightenment to Sophie.

As Sophie becomes increasingly aware of the existence of Albert Knag, she also becomes more attuned to the fact that Albert is communicating with Hilde, and that the purposes of her (Sophie's) interactions with Alberto is to educate Hilde: in other words, Sophie realizes that she was created with a purpose in mind.

Hilde, who's been reading all this, hears her mother call to her. She decides to look up something in the encyclopedia her father gave her: Olympe de Gouges. She begins to read about this woman, who published a "Declaration on the Rights of Women," and was beheaded for opposing Robespierre.

Philosophy, we can see, isn't just an exercise for dead white men, as it's sometimes claimed—philosophy can empower all sorts of people, and de Gouges is proof that philosophy can be a powerful and dangerous tool in the hands of the oppressed.

CHAPTER 25: KANT

Albert Knag, Hilde's father, calls Hilde in her house to wish her a happy birthday. He asks Hilde if she's received his present. She tells him she's delighted with it—she's read up to the part where Sophie and Alberto reach the major's cabin. Hilde tells her father she's learned more in only one day than ever before in her life. Hilde also confesses that she's beginning to think of Sophie as a real person. Albert doesn't deny this at all—he only says, "We'll talk more."

This is a major moment—the first time Albert speaks aloud (rather than speaking through letters to Hilde). Clearly, his lessons for Hilde are working well—Hilde is learning a lot about philosophy by studying the adventures of Sophie and Alberto. As we too are learning, it's often easier to study philosophy when it's presented within the framework of a novel, rather than in a work of nonfiction.

Hilde falls asleep reading from her **book**. In the book, Sophie talks with Alberto in the attic. Alberto moves on to tell Sophie about the life of Immanuel Kant. Kant was born in 1724, and studied religion and philosophy from an early age. He tried to use reason to preserve the basic tenets of Christianity while doing away with what he saw as the dogma and nonsense of religion.

Kant represents the philosophical project of many of the Enlightenment thinkers: he tries to study the world in a way that honors the role of reason and intelligence while questioning blind faith. This doesn't mean that Kant doesn't think faith has a place in life, but he also doesn't think it can be running the whole show.

Kant's project was to unite the rationalism of Spinoza with the empiricism of Hume. The universe, he argued, is neither a solely abstract concept, nor is it strictly material. To illustrate Kant's point, Alberto gives Sophie a pair of colored glasses. The glasses let Sophie see the world, but also "color" her view. This is similar to the way Kantian ideas "color" our view of the world. Humans, Kant argued, are naturally disposed to conceive of the world in categories like time and space—things that aren't, strictly speaking, real. The mind doesn't just absorb experiences, as Locke argued—the mind also shapes and interprets experiences in terms of categories like space and time. Kant agreed with Hume that causality was an illusion, but argued that causation was another kind of category, one unique to the human mind.

Alberto's lesson for Sophie is a good example of why Albert bothered to write a novel for Hilde in the first place. By having Alberto teach Sophie philosophy lessons in a playful, friendly fashion—and by teaching Hilde indirectly, through a third-person work of fiction—Albert makes Hilde's philosophy lessons more memorable and more interesting. The idea that time and space are categories builds on the counter-intuitive ideas of Hume: if causation can be an illusion—a subjective phenomenon—then perhaps space and time can be as well.

Kant coined the term "the thing in itself" to describe the external world, a world that we can never know completely, due to the categories through which we perceive it. In this way, life consists of a constant interaction between the thing in itself—the external world—and the human mind, which is shaped by categories like time, space, etc.

Kant's philosophy reinforces one of the key points of Sophie's World*—that objective knowledge of the world is sometimes impossible. There will always be aspects of reality that are beyond human understanding, and which can only be understood in an illusory, even fictional form.*

Kant showed the limits of reason for understanding the "deep questions" of life. When faced with a question like "Does God exist?", humans have no experiences upon which to base their answer. Nor can their reason solve the problem. People like Aquinas and Aristotle tried to use logic to prove God's existence, but—in Kant's opinion—failed to do so satisfactorily. The only way to approach God, Kant claimed, was with faith, as neither reason nor experience could "prove" God.Sophie compares Kant to Descartes—they both "smuggled God in by the back door."

Sophie's interpretation of Descartes and Kant is a common one, but not necessarily the correct one. Kant is perfectly upfront about the fact that God still has a place in his philosophy—he's not trying to "trick" his readers into accepting God without knowing it. And the idea that there are some things beyond individual, rational understanding isn't at odds with the rest of Kant's philosophy: his entire philosophical project accepts this very premise.

There is a knock at the door. Sophie finds Little Red Riding Hood standing outside—she claims to be looking for her grandmother's house. She gives Sophie a letter, and then departs. Sophie yells that Little Red Riding Hood should look out for the wolf, but Alberto assures her that this warning accomplishes nothing.Sophie's letter says, "If the human brain was simple enough for us to understand, we would still be so stupid that we couldn't understand it."

The novel becomes increasingly fantastical, and increasingly fictional—in other words, Sophie can no longer ignore the fact that we're reading a work of fiction (even for us, the readers, there's rarely a moment when we truly forget that we're just reading a book, as in many good works of literature). Instead of tricking his readers into thinking that this is "real," Gaarder wants readers to actively question the nature of reality.

Alberto continues with his discussion of Kant's morality. Kant believed that the difference between right and wrong was a matter of reason, rather than one of sentiment. Humans have an innate ability to know the right thing to do. Kant also believed that a good system of morality is one that respects humans for their innate worth as human beings. This means that we can't treat human beings as mere means to ends. In all, Kant thought of morality as another category, like space or time—something that couldn't exactly be proved with reason, but which was still crucial to the way man perceived the world.

Kant disagrees with Hume about the nature of reason: he believes that it's possible to have a system of right and wrong that's based on something more concrete than sentiment. But this doesn'tmean that human morality is totally objective—on the contrary, morality is another category, comprehensible to human beings but totally incomprehensible to anyone else. In a way, Kant has his cake and eats it, too—he's willing to say that morality is more objective than sentiment, but more subjective than math or science.

Kant's treatment of free will is extremely complicated. He believed that man is a "dual creature"—a being with a body and a mind. And yet unlike Descartes, Kant believed that there was freedom in obeying one's moral instinct. By giving into one's instincts, humans aren't truly exercising their freedom—a glutton who eats only ice cream, for example, is a "slave" to his own appetites. A free human being is one who obeys his sense of right and wrong.Sophie finds this difficult to grasp, but Alberto insists, "A mere bagatelle."

This is an important passage because it questions traditional definitions of freedom at a point in the text when the question of freedom has become particularly important (i.e. is Sophie free in any sense of the word, or is she just Albert's slave?). Perhaps Sophie could be said to achieve freedom by divorcing herself of her appetites and desires—in other words, by pursuing reason and philosophy. Note Alberto's catchphrase reappearing.

It's almost time for Sophie to leave. Before Sophie leaves, Alberto has an idea. If Kant is correct, Sophie and Alberto will be exercising freedom by exercising their universal reason. Alberto promises to tell Sophie more about this plan soon. Before Sophie leaves, Alberto instructs Sophie to sing happy birthday to Hilde—they both do so.

Alberto—usually so adversarial to Albert and all of Albert's plans—is suddenly cooperating with Albert (as he was earlier, in wishing Sophie a "happy birthday Hilde"). This is because Alberto is Albert's literary creation, of course—Alberto's rebelliousness is no more real than his obedience.

Sophie leaves Alberto and walks through the forest. While she's there, she notices a figure—Winnie the Pooh. Pooh tells Sophie that he's lost his way. He's supposed to deliver a letter to Hilde. Sophie takes the letter from Pooh and offers to deliver it to Hilde. She walks away from Pooh and reads the letter. In it,Albert Knag mentions some things that Alberto didn't teach Sophie. For example, Kantwas one of the first to propose that the nations of the world should band together in a confederacy of peace and cooperation—in this sense, he was the father of the United Nations.

Sophie's most important and relevant subject may be epistemology and the study of what is and isn't real, but the novel is also interested in defining what does and doesn't qualify as "Western" thought. Kant's support for what would one day become the United Nations suggests that Western philosophy played an important role in establishing what we now think of, politically, as the Western world.

CHAPTER 26: ROMANTICISM

Hilde sits in her room, reading**Sophie's World**. Her mother asks her to lend a hand with the family motorboat, but Hilde says that she's busy reading.

Hilde continues to ignore her mother—she's more interested in the symbolic "parenthood" of her book than the literal parenting of her mother.

In the book, Sophie walks along the **hedge** by her house. She meets up with Joanna, and together they have a great time writing an invitation to a "philosophical garden party" on June 23, Midsummer Eve.

In the midst of all the philosophy and meta-fiction, we get a brief scene of Sophie just having fun with her friend.

Next Tuesday, Sophie gets a call from Alberto Knox, who explains that he's received her invitation—he doesn't say how. He reminds Sophie that June 23 is the day Albert Knag gets back from Lebanon.

The clock is ticking—Sophie and Alberto have decided that they must finish their lessons before Albert returns from Lebanon, so they have a chance to "escape."

Alberto and Sophie meet up in the major's cabin that afternoon. Alberto explains that he's going to tell Sophie about the history of Romanticism in Europe. Romanticism was a rebuttal to the perceived coldness and emptiness of Enlightenment rationalism. In a way, though, Romanticism was just a logical continuation of Kantian thought. Kant had emphasized the importance of the mind and of perception—in this way, the Romantics concluded that every individual had the freedom to interpret the world in his own way. Another cornerstone of Romanticism was the emphasis on nature—in this sense, the Romantics weren't so different from hippies 150 years later.

Alberto has a difficult task: he has to show how each successive philosophical movement was both a critique and a continuation of the preceding one. For example, Romanticism borrows many of the basic tenets of Enlightenment philosophy, yet critiques the Enlightenment for valuing reason more highly than emotion.

Alberto mentions Lord Byron, one of the key English Romantic poets. Another was Novalis, who fell in love with a young girl namedSophie,who died 4 days after her 15th birthday.Sophie finds this disturbing, since Sophie herself is now 15 years and 4 days old. Alberto dismisses this as a coincidence.

Sophie has plenty of doppelgangers in this text: Hilde herself, and now Novalis's fiancée.This points to the fact that Sophie, as we understand her in the book, isn't a unique individual: she's just an "echo" of someone else's reality. And yet we could say the same of Hilde, too.

Alberto moves on with his history of Romanticism, and Sophie listens eagerly—she'svery interested in Romanticism. The Romanticphilosopher Schelling (1775-1854) believed in the fundamental unity of nature and art, as well as mind and matter. One consequence of this idea is that studying the natural world and studying abstract ideas are just two sides of the same coin. Schelling also argued that culture was the most important part of a person's identity. To understand a strange person, then, we must understand that person's culture. Schelling's renewed emphasis on the importance of culture was key in the rise of nationalism—the emphasis on a group of people's common cultural identity, as organized by the nation-state.

Schelling is an interesting figure because he's crucial to the development of the modern concept of a nation-state. So far, we've seen various cultural "units": the city-state, the empire, the kingdom, etc. The nation-state is different from all of these, in the sense that the people of a nation share a common cultural heritage (similar to the feeling that Sophie felt after learning about the Judeo-Christian tradition). One could even say that Sophie's philosophy lessons are really a history of the rise of the modern nation-state, and of the formation of Western culture as we now understand it.

One further consequence of Romantic nationalism was that countries became more interested in compiling their own folklore, a key part of their culture. It's during this period (the 19th century) that the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen lived and worked—their compilations of fairy tales were monuments to their respective cultures. In general, Alberto claims, the fairy tale is the ideal Romantic form—a space in which the author can control his characters like a god.

This is an especially interesting passage because it provides something of a justification for the whimsical, playful format of this book. Fairy tales and children's books aren't just frivolous endeavors: they're crucial in the formation of a nation. In the same way, one could argue that Sophie's playful adventures with Winnie the Pooh and Alberto are crucial in teaching her about the nature of life.

Alberto continues talking about fairy tales. In the Romantic era, writers wrote works that acknowledged their own fictional nature. In Act Five of Henrik Ibsen's play *Peer Gynt*, a character says, "One cannot die in the middle of Act Five." Sophie finds this fascinating—the character in the play is essentially admitting that he's just a fictional character. Alberto reminds Sophie that she won't die like Novalis's fiancée, since "there are several more chapters." Sophie doesn't understand whatthis means, but she complains that she's getting dizzy.

This is a self-referential passage: the characters are talking about themselves as characters*in a work of fiction. In fact, it's doubly self-referential—not only are the characters talking about their own fictional status; they're talking about this by referencing another work of fiction in which characters speak self-referentially!*Sophie's World*aims to disorient readers, getting them to question what they think of as reality and fiction.*

A young boy carrying an oil lamp runs up to Alberto and Sophie, claiming that his name is Aladdin, from Lebanon. Aladdin rubs his lamp, and a spirit emerges from it. The spirit has a black beard, and wears a beret. He tells Hilde (not Sophie) that Bjerkley seems like a fantasyland to him, since he's so used to Lebanon.Aladdin runs away, and Alberto reminds Sophie that they both only exist in the major's mind.

The spirit (who looks like Alberto and Albert) is pointing to the arbitrariness of any definition of reality or fiction. From the right perspective, Lebanon (a real place) could be termed just as fictional as a fictional place like Bjerkely or the world of Sophie's book.

Sophie tells Alberto that she's had enough of being controlled by the major—she's going to run away. Alberto tells Sophie that their only option is to try to talk to Hilde directly—and since Hilde reads every word of the **book** they're in, this should be easy. Alberto complains that Hilde's father is "acting the fool," arrogantly "manipulating" the characters in his book, as if they're his slaves. Alberto also reminds Sophie that they only exist in the "soul" of Hilde's father, in Lebanon. But by the same token, it's possible that Hilde's father is *himself* just the projection of someone else's mind. As Sophie puts it, this makes Alberto and herself "the shadows of shadows." To elaborate on this idea, Alberto plans to tell Sophie about Hegel.

Sophie and Alberto can't actually free themselves from Albert's work of fiction, but they can satisfy themselves in a different way: by pointing out that Albert is no freer than they are. Albert, it could be argued, is also locked in a world in which he has no true free will (and this point is especially valid because we know that Albert exists only in Gaarder's mind). Based on Kant's definition of freedom, one could argue that the only true form of freedom is an awareness*of one's lack of freedom (in the same sense that the only true wisdom is acknowledging one's total lack of wisdom, per Socrates).*

CHAPTER 27: HEGEL

Hilde sits in her room, having just read Chapter 26 of her book. She's dizzied by what Alberto and Sophie have just said—even if Sophie is just the product of someone's imagination, perhaps Hilde and her father are no different. Hilde realizes that Sophie has been speaking directly to her—Sophie is asking Hilde to rebel against her father. Amused and confused, she continues to read **Sophie's World**.

This adds another layer to the paradox of Hilde's binder. Sophie's World*—the book that Albert has written for his daughter—is also encouraging Hilde to rebel against her father. But this means that Albert himself is encouraging his daughter to question the nature of reality and rebel against her father. One could also say, as Hilde does, that Sophie herself is speaking out against Albert.*

In the book, Alberto is teaching Sophie about Hegel. Hegel, born in 1770, criticized much of Romanticism for its lack of precision. He was interested in studying "spirit," but in a slightly different sense than Schelling. Hegel began with Kant's notion of the thing in itself—the external world in all its ambiguity and unpredictability. Hegel believed that humans could interact with the external world, changing the very definition of truth in the process. This is a complicated idea, Alberto admits.

One of the ongoing themes of Western philosophy is the dichotomy between reason and emotion. There are thinkers who believe that reason reigns supreme—that there's no space for emotion in philosophy, or that if there is, emotion should always be subordinate to reason. The Romantics are particularly important because of the extent to which they celebrate the emotions—irrational, unpredictable, unreliable.

Alberto clarifies Hegel's notion of truth. Most Western philosophers before Hegel believed in a timeless definition of truth, morality, etc. In other words, what's morally right today was also morally right 3,000 years ago. Hegel challenges this assumption. History, he claimed, is in a constant state of flux, meaning that people are always changing their ideas of what is and isn't true (Plato had one idea of truth; Kant had another). But it wouldn't be right to say that Kant was right and Plato was wrong. On the contrary, each period of history gets closer and closer to the truth. The process by which human understanding gets closer to understanding truth is called the development of the "world spirit." Hegel is unclear about what's going to happen when mankind reaches a state of enlightenment. He suggests that the world itself (the externalworld, as well as the world of ideas) will become self-conscious.

Hegel is one of the key modern philosophers. Like Kant, Hegel is interested in questions of phenomenology—i.e., the study of how we perceive the external world and form ideas about it. But Hegel challenges some of Kant's faith in the unchanging nature of reason and idealism. Hegel believes that ideas are in a constant state of flux. This is a truly original idea, and one that's still pretty difficult to grasp without some practice. It's a little like saying that 2+2 equals 4 in 2016, but not in 1716! While Hegelianism is far too complex to really dive into, it's important to understand that Hegel is fundamentally an optimist—he believes the world is progressing to a state of enlightenment in which the individual will merge with the collective.

Hegel described the process by which human understanding gradually gets closer to the world spirit. Whenever a new idea is introduced to the world, it's followed by a negation of that idea—Hegel calls this the "thesis," followed by the "antithesis." For example, when Descartes proposed rationalism, Hume countered it with empiricism. But only with the help of both Hume and Descartes could Kant reach *his* philosophical position, a combination of empiricism and rationalism. Hegel calls this stage the "synthesis." In all, this process of ideas is called the "dialectic." The dialectic is a useful concept for understanding the way humans exchange ideas. Even when two people engage in an argument, their argument usually takes on a dialectical structure: thesis, antithesis, synthesis.

Arguably Hegel's greatest contribution was the popularization of dialectical idealism. Hegel believes that the universe of ideas changes according to the principle of the dialectic: an idea must always interact with its opposite to form a new one. The structure of this novel so far mirrors Hegel's ideas: philosophers propose new ideas; other philosophers oppose them, and a third batch of philosophers synthesize both points of view into new philosophical systems.

Hegel used the dialectic to analyze the nature of individualism. Hegel questioned the Romantic idea that individuals can get on by themselves. Individuals are always interacting with their community—one could say that individualism is a thesis, and communitarianism is the opposite point of view, the antithesis. Over time, both individualism and communitarianism change in response to each other. The idea that individuals can be free of their societies becomes increasingly far-fetched. In the end, Hegel argued, individuals will become more important in their communities, and communities will begin to respect and honor individuals.

The principle of individualism has an obvious relevance to Sophie's World. *We're not entirely sure if Sophie is really an individual with her own unique point of view and mindset, or if she's just a part of a whole, i.e., the book she's in. Hegel's distrust for individualism is surprising, since he's one of the quintessential Romantic thinkers—and for the most part, the Romantics celebrated individualism.*

Hegel believed that philosophy is the "mirror of the world spirit." Sophie finds this interesting, since it reminds her of the **brass mirror** in her room. She wonders what the "significance" of this mirror could be. Alberto suggests that only Hilde can answer this question.

This is an important question. Philosophy, one could argue, is designed to "mirror" the complexity of the world: to explain how complicated things work in the simplest possible terms. This is one point of view—but it's by no means the only one. One could also argue that philosophy is meant to change the world (Marx's point of view), or that philosophy should better the individual.

CHAPTER 28: KIERKEGAARD

Hilde looks at her clock—it's 4 o'clock. She's been greatly moved by her reading, and Sophie has inspired her to play tricks on her father. Hilde feels as if she, Sophie, and Alberto are on the same "team," while her father is their opponent.

Hilde's fascination with Sophie leads her to believe that she and Sophie are equally alive and equally free. This may be an illusion, but this doesn't mean the idea itself is completely invalid. As we'll see, the illusion that Sophie is a real person causes Hilde to change her behavior, showing that fiction can inspire concrete, real-world change (and thus proving that Sophie is, in one sense, truly real).

Hilde goes downstairs, where she finds her mother. Hilde'smother asks her for help repairing the family boat. Hilde again refuses to give her mother any help, explaining that she has to continue reading her book. She goes back upstairs.

Hilde continues to ignore her mother, showing that her allegiances now seem to lie with a fictional girl, not a flesh-and-blood woman.

Hilde continues reading. In her book, Sophie and Alberto hear a knock at the door. Sophie opens the door and finds Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice offers Alberto and Sophie two potions. Sophie is afraid that the potions might be poisonous, but Alberto points out that nothing they do matters anyway—this is all in the major's mind. Sophie drinks one potion, and finds herself "becoming one" with her surroundings. She has a strange sense that the room she's in is no different fromher body, or even her mind. Even Alberto is just a part of her.

Alice in Wonderland *by Lewis Carroll was clearly a big influence on this novel: like Carroll, Gaarder presents big, complex ideas in a children's book via amusing stories and jokes. Alice's experiments with perception and individuality help Sophie understand part of what Hegel was talking about when he proposed a unity of individual and collective. This is a good reminder of why fiction can be better than philosophy itself at conveying philosophical ideas: Hegel is dry and straightforward in discussing the world spirit, but ultimately he lacks the imagination to describe it. Gaarder, a fiction author, isn't afraid to imagine what it might be like to experience a collective individuality.*

Next, Sophie drinks the second potion. This time, she has a sense that she is a unique individual, completely unlike anyone else in the world. The rest of the room seems alien to her—she doesn't even recognize Alberto anymore. Alberto explains to Sophie that she's drunk from the bottle of Idealism, the Hegelian world spirit—this is the state to which human understanding is moving, according to Hegel. The second bottle is Individualism, represented by such thinkers as SørenKierkegaard. Alberto will now tell Sophie about this important Danish philosopher.

Even Hegel's own ideas aren't immune from the dialectic cycle of thesis and antithesis. Hegel's emphasis on ideas immediately prompted Søren Kierkegaard's theories of radical individuality—an individuality so extreme that the individual has no choice but to ponder God.

Kierkegaard was born in 1813. He was passionately religious, but also questioned many of the teachings of the Christian church. Kierkegaard believed that it was impossible to be rational and Christian at the same time—"religion and knowledge were like fire and water" to him.

It's interesting that Kierkegaard, often credited with the development of modern Existentialism, was a passionate Christian. Although he questioned the nature of his faith (and reality itself), he kept returning to the fact of a Christian God.

Kierkegaard studied Hegel, but disagreed with Hegel's lofty ideals of human progress and enlightenment. Rather than searching for "Truth," Kierkegaard thought that individuals should focus on smaller, less ambitious "truths" that had meaning for their specific lives, and no one else's.

Kierkegaard has been termed an "anti-philosopher"—someone who believes that philosophy's promises of universal enlightenment are lies, and tries to bring people happiness in simpler, more individuated ways.

Alberto tries to explain how Kierkegaard's ideas work in practice. For Kierkegaard, there is no universal truth. Every individual person has their own version of the truth, which makes sense to them and no one else. For example, there can be no universal proof for the existence of God—rather, each person must decide whether or not there is a God, using faith and intuition. In a similar sense, there can be no universal proof that someone loves you—individuals have to decide this for themselves, trusting their instincts.

In many ways, Kierkegaard is reacting to the Baroque and Enlightenment tradition, which made great strides in showing that the universe could be understood without resorting to emotion or faith. But even these figures, such as Descartes and Kant, acknowledged that there was a place for God and faith in their systems—they were forced to keep God in the equation.

Kierkegaard believed that all human beings live in three different stages of lives: aesthetic, ethical, religious. The aesthetic human, or aesthete, lives for the moment, enjoying himself at all costs. But sometimes, an aesthete can become weary and anxious with the life of pleasure. For Kierkegaard, this sense of weariness is a blessing, because it forces the aesthete to move on to the ethical stage of humanity.

One debate aboutKierkegaard is, what is the relationship between the three stages of spiritual development? Does one necessarily follow from the other? (The idea that one mental state eventually leads to a different one is reminiscent of Hegel's master-slave dialectic).

The ethical human being lives his life according to a strict code of morals. But this life can be long and dull, and in the end, most ethical people begin to experience a second crisis. Kierkegaard praises this crisis, because it forces one to become religious—the last and supposedly highest stage of development.

Kierkegaard doesn't play the usual game of "good guy / bad guy"—he essentially doesn't condemn anything wholesale, because he recognizes that even crises and falsehoods can lead to a higher plane of consciousness.

The religious human being has chosen to worship God instead of pleasure or morality. Alberto doesn't explain what a religious life would look like. However, he stresses that Kierkegaard is often credited with pioneering Existentialism, one of the key intellectual movements of the 20th century.

Much like Hegel, Kierkegaard posits the existence of a state of enlightenment, but doesn't explain what this state would look like. By now, we should be used to this: for all their talk of enlightenment, most philosophers don't seem to have much sense for what enlightenment actually looks or feels like.

CHAPTER 29: MARX

Hilde finishes reading the chapter on Kierkegaard. Inspired by Sophie and Alberto, she decides to give her father a "scare" when he returns from Lebanon. She calls her family friends Anne and Ole, who are staying in Copenhagen, and begins to tell them about the **book** her father has sent her.She asks Anne and Ole to do her a favor (but we're not told what the favor is).

Just as Sophie is often encouraged to learn more from philosophers' questions than their answers, so Hilde now uses her father's own methods against him (or so we presume). Albert's lessons aren't about indoctrinating Hilde into his worldview, but about teaching her how to build her own *worldview.*

Later on in the day, Hilde continues reading. In the **book**, Sophiereturns to her house, where she finds Mom waiting for her, irate that Sophie has slipped away without leaving a note. Mom tells Sophie that she's received another letter, from the UN Battalion. Sophie lies (feeling that the lie comes from "some guiding spirit") and says that she's told her friend Alberto that she collects stamps and postmarks.

This is a good example of how Sophie might be said to lose her individuality and her freedom as she becomes more conscious of Albert Knag. Sophie seems not to invent the lie herself; rather, Albert Knag inspires her to lie. This has a semi-religious quality to it; one thinks of the prophets, inspired to speak the "word of God."

Two days before Midsummer Eve (June 21), Alberto calls Sophie. Alberto tells Sophie that he's finally found "a way out." Since Alberto and Sophie are just characters in a story, they can escape their author simply by not talking. It's true that their story has been written for them, but perhaps they can find freedom "between the lines." Alberto asks Sophie to come to the major's cabin immediately so that they can talk further. Sophie leaves at once.

Alberto continues to suggest ways to elude Albert, but we know the truth: as long as Alberto and Sophie exist in the book, they have to credit Albert with their very existence. This means that they can never be entirely free, in the sense of being entirely self-sufficient: they'll always owe their existence to someone else. Even so, the idea of finding freedom in between the lines is an intriguing one, supported by the questions Gaarder has raised earlier in this chapter.

On the way to the cabin, Sophie crosses paths with Ebenezer Scrooge, who's arguing with a little match girl. The match girl wants Scrooge to buy matches from her, but Scrooge refuses, since he's been saving his money. Sophie buys matches from the girl, and the girl admits that Sophie is the first person to buy matches from her in a century. The match girl explains that "sometimes I starve to death." Appalled, Sophie tries to convince Scrooge to give the girl some money, but he refuses. The girl threatens to burn down the forest unless Scrooge helps her. When Scrooge refuses, the girl lights a match and begins to burn everything around her. In seconds, the grass and forest are in flames. Sophie finds herself surrounded by ashes.

This is an unusually grisly and vivid episode for the book. As we become more and more conscious of the constructed, artificial nature of the book we're reading, the events of the book itself become more bizarre (but no less "real" or affecting). Scrooge's interaction with the match girl illustrates his greediness and miserly personality—important facets of the study of Marxism. The "little match girl" is an old Danish folk tale about a girl who dies while trying to sell her matches.

Sophie proceeds to the cabin, where she finds Alberto waiting for her. She explains her encounter with Scrooge and the match girl, andAlberto explains that Scrooge was a capitalist character in the novel *A Christmas Carol*. Alberto dives into explaining Marxism to Sophie.

As always, Alberto acts as a kind of encyclopedia for the oddities of the book—whenever there's a character whom Sophie might not know, he's there to explain what's going on.

Karl Marx was one of the key 19th century thinkers—a "historical materialist" who, like Kierkegaard, took issue with Hegel's faith in ideas and universals. Marx claimed that philosophers merely want to interpret the world—he, on the other hand, aspired to *change* the world. Marx's influence on the 20th century is enormous—the governments of the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and Eastern Europe would be inconceivable without Marx.

Marx is one of the key modern philosophers because he expanded the very idea of what a philosopher could do.It's not entirely fair to say that philosophers before Marx stopped at describing the world, however—we've already seen that this isn't the case at all, as philosophers exercised great influence on the way the world works, from the American and French Revolutions to the dawn of Protestantism.

Alberto begins by clarifying the difference between Marx and Hegel. Hegel believed that history was a succession of ideas. Marx, on the other hand, believed that the only way to truly understand history was to look at economics, hence "historical materialism." A society that celebrated philosophy and idealism, in Marx's view, was only possible because certain people had enough leisure time to spend their days thinking—and this was only possible because other people worked very hard all day, building homes, finding food, etc.

Marx goes about analyzing the world in a much different sense than Kant or Hegel. Whereas Kant and Hegel adopt a lofty, "ivory tower" tone, Marx focuses on questions that might have seemed too basic or mundane for earlier thinkers to approach, such as: who has the time to think about philosophy? what civilizations are capable of philosophical thinking? and what is the relationship between financial prosperity and philosophical innovation?"

Marx goes still further, claiming that history is just the history of a power struggle between two classes of people. At certain points in history, it was a conflict between lords and slaves; at other times, it was a clash between aristocrats and citizens. In Marx's own time (the mid-19th century), the class conflict took place between the capitalists and the proletariat. The capitalists were the powerful—the people who owned the means of production (i.e., the machines, the property rights, etc.). The proletariat, on the other hand, had no power—they spent their days working in factories and mills.

Marx continues his materialistic study of history and philosophy by contending that all of history is about the struggle for finite resources. Critics of Marx contend that this is a gross oversimplification of history—there's simply no reasonable way that we can understand all *of history in such extreme class terms.*

Marx disagreed with the way his society worked. Wealthy capitalists feasted and lived in huge houses, while the proletariat starved. In 1848, he and his writing partner Friedrich Engels published "The Communist Manifesto," an influential pamphlet in which they proposed a new kind of society, one where the proletariat owned the means of production.

Marx, no less than Hegel or Kant, believed that enlightenment was within reach of humanity—he just thought that this enlightenment would have to take a more concrete, real-world form. (Marx is often criticized for not writing enough about what kind *of government would be necessary to sustain Communism, and thus for enabling the dictatorships of Stalin and his successors).*

Marx's critique of capitalism was complicated, but Alberto tries to summarize it for Sophie. In a typical capitalist society, the proletariat produced commodities—goods, to be sold on the market (these commodities could be anything—machines, toys, foodstuffs, etc.). Capitalists paid their workers for the time and effort they put into producing commodities. But they also charged their customers for the *sale* of commodities—moreover, they charged a greater amount than the wages they paid their proletariat workers. In short, capitalist businessmen paid their workers a low wage and took the business profits for themselves. Over time, Marx predicted, capitalists would cut wages more and more, in order to maximize their profits. But in the end, this process would get out of hand, and workers wouldn't allow themselves to be exploited any further. Instead, they would rise up in revolution and form a society in which they controlled their own labor and absorbed their own profits.

*Marx's theory of capital is immensely complicated (his book on the subject is hundreds of pages long), but there are a few key principles that we should keep in mind. First, history is a constant struggle between those with power and property and those with none. Second, the only real source of power is control of the "means of production"; i.e., control of the industry that makes commodities. Finally, Marx (much like Hegel, with his more abstract dialectical thinking) doesn't play "good guy/bad guy." He believes that Communism will inevitably arise*because*capitalism will lead the way toward it. He argues that capitalism itself will exploit the proletariat until they have no choice but to rise up.*

Marx's ideas were hugely influential. In Russia, for example, they were used to justify a revolution against the Czar. The new government in Russia, led by Vladimir Lenin and later Josef Stalin, was criticized for its brutality. Alberto says that it would be unreasonable to blame Marx for Stalin's actions, but he also admits that Marx may have erred in thinking too much about the problems with capitalism, and too little about how a Communist society would actually be run and organized.

One could criticize Marx for enabling Stalin by arguing for the historical necessity of Communism without actually focusing on how a Communist government would work (this was Bertrand Russell's criticism).

Alberto concludes his lesson on Marx by telling Sophie about a thought experiment that was designed by the 20th century political philosopher John Rawls. In this experiment, a group of philosophers must devise a plan for a totally just society. As soon as they've done so, they will die, and then be resurrected as randomly chosen members of the society they've just designed. Only in this situation, Rawls claims, could a human society be designed to be totally fair—otherwise, the designers of the society would favor their own interests. Alberto asks Sophie if she knows of any society like the one Rawls' hypothesized—a society where, for example, women and men are treated equally. Sophie replies, "that's a good question."

So far, Sophie and Alberto haven't talked much about political philosophy; their priorities have always been with questions of what is and isn't real (and these questions have obvious relevance to the plot, as well as the nonfictional content of this book). But this chapter has been a little different: it's foregrounded questions of politics at the expense of questions of reality. One of the big conclusions of this chapter is that a truly impartial form of government is difficult, if not impossible—those who craft the government will inevitably favor their own interests at the expense of others'.

CHAPTER 30: DARWIN

Hilde wakes up early on Sunday to the sound of her **binder** falling on the floor. This reminds her of the John Rawls thought experiment, and she imagines herself waking up with a new body, in the society she's designed herself. She picks up the binder and continues reading.

Hilde continues to draw meaningful connections between the fictional contents ofher binder and her real-world life, suggesting that fiction, whether it's "real" or not, has the potential to influence real life.

In the **book**, Sophie and Alberto are in the cabin, talking with an old, bearded man who introduces himself as Noah. Noah gives Sophie a picture of his famous ark, which he filled with all the animals of the world. With this, Noah leaves.Alberto dismisses Noah's picture and proceeds to tell Sophie about Darwin's theories.Charles Darwin is often paired with Marx and Sigmund Freud, as all three of these 19th century thinkers discovered laws that described the processes of human behavior and questioned mankind's naïve belief in freedom and individuality.

The Noah episode marks a turning point in the novel. Previously, Sophie had a soft spot for fictional stories—myths, fairy tales, etc. Here, the gist of the chapter is that Darwin's theories destroyed the supremacy of the Noah's ark story, making it a "mere" fairy tale for the rest of history. In general, we should notice that Darwin, Freud, and Marx question man's freedom—they suggest that individual freedom, as it's typically understood, is just an illusion, and that little-understood scientific laws control the way people behave.

Charles Darwin (born in 1809) was trained as a naturalist. He sailed around the world studying exotic islands and forests in New Zealand, South Africa, and the Galapagos Islands. During this time, he began to form the theory of evolution—the idea that all animals will slowly adapt to their surroundings in a way that maximizes their chances of surviving and reproducing. There had been other scientists and philosophers who believed in a process of biological evolution before Darwin, but for the most part, people in the Western world believed that nature never changed in any fundamental way: God had created the plants and animals once, and nature had no reason to change.

This section establishes the historical preconditions for Darwin's scientific theories. While there were some scientific reasons why scientists before Darwin didn't believe in the notion of evolution (like fossil evidence), the biggest reason they rejected evolution wasn't scientific at all—it was simply that they relied upon the notion of a perfect, unerring God to explain the origins of species.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, scientists began to discover fossils buried in the ground. Often, these fossils didn't look like any living creatures, suggesting that animals *do* change over time. Still, some scientists tried to explain this by saying that these were animals that died in the Great Flood described in the Bible. One reason why scientists underestimated the impact of evolution on life was that the Earth wasn't understood to be more than a few thousand years old. Darwin, on the other hand, estimated the planet to be many millions of years old.

To most people at the time, evolution was impossible because a perfect god would never make an imperfect world, meaning that evolution wasn't necessary in any abstract moral sense. Darwin, however, argues for evolution in spite of his Christian faith: he believed in a perfect god, but he also trusted his research and his evidence.

During his time on the Galapagos Islands, Darwin noticed that there were many different species of birds and tortoises, and each species was different from the others. Darwin began to think that all animals are just different species, which have slowly evolved over time. But Darwin didn't yet have a way of explaining how this process happened.

Darwin began crafting his theory like any good scientist: by studying the available data. In essence, Darwin recognized a conceptual problem—the diversity of species—and tried to find an explanation for this problem that didn't just fall back on God's perfection.

Over time, Darwin developed a theory that could explain how animals evolve. Influenced by the writings of Thomas Malthus, Darwin began by stating that animals are in a constant state of struggle for food and shelter—they're competing with each other for the same natural resources. Darwin also assumed that some children often have small differences from their parents—longer ears, sharper claws, etc. Over time, these small differences magnify to become the bases for the differences between entire species, according to a process called natural selection. The animals with the right biological qualities (sharp claws, for example) will be able toobtain natural resources and have children that share their own useful qualities. Less successful species will gradually die out over time because of their failure to find food and reproduce. In this way, animals are always adapting to their environments. Over enough time (millions of years), different species will emerge, each with their own unique qualities that allow them to survive.

Darwin's theory of evolution was an important paradigm shift because it re-conceptualized nature as a place of constant conflict (in much the same way that Marx saw society as the site of an endless battle for the means of production). One reason why people hadn't really viewed nature in this way was that they didn't understand (as Malthus did) that there were never really enough resources to go around: because they believed that the Earth's resources were limitless, people couldn't see any precise reason for conflict between animals. But perhaps most of all, people refused to see nature as a site of conflict because of their religious faith: would God create nature to be such a brutal place?

Sophiethen notices something outside the cabin—Adam and Eve. Alberto explains that, due to Darwin's findings, Adam and Eve were eventually recognized as fairy-tale creations, no different from Little Red Riding Hood. In general, Darwin's findings were devastating to 19th century society. One of the most shocking implications of Darwinism was that humans are just animals, too—constantly adapting to their surroundings. Humans aren't that different from apes or chimpanzees—they've just evolved over millions of years in slightly different ways. 19th century Europeans were shocked by this idea, and they refused to believe that the Biblical description of creation was flawed in any way.

Darwin's most controversial idea (both then and now) is that humanityitself isn't immune to the process of evolution. This has all sorts of conceptual applications: for example, there were many who said (and still say) that society is a competition for control of resources, in exactly the same sense that nature is. One could respond, however, that unlike in nature, many societies don't leave the weak to die; they support the poor and the unhealthy with welfare, healthcare, etc. But of course, this isn't always the case.

Sophie asks Alberto why children are biologically different than their parents. Alberto acknowledges that Sophie has pointed out the weakest part of Darwin's theory. Darwin didn't really understand how tiny differences between animals arise in the first place—he could explain how these differences get magnified over time, but not where they came from in the first place. It wasn't for a few more decades that the science of genetics was advanced enough to account for this phenomenon. Genetics proposes that children look different from their parents because of the process of cellular division that takes place during conception and birth.

Sophie's question illustrates an important point about the scientific process: every new scientific theory raises new questions and new problems for other scientists to solve. There is no such thing as a theory that doesn't raise some logical objections—even Darwin's theory, supported as it was by logic and empirical observation, couldn't quite explain how the diversity of species appears in the first place.

Sophie asks another question—where did the first life come from? Alberto admits that Darwin didn't really know how to answer this question, either. But he guessed that there might have been a "hot little pool" in which various compounds, such as salt, phosphorus, oxygen, etc., were combined by electricity. This may have been the source of the original forms of life. A hundred years later, it seems that Darwin may have been right. Scientists believe that the earliest life forms arose in a warm, wet place—probably the ocean—due to the presence of electricity.

Darwin was remarkably prophetic in the way he hypothesized that life was born out of a warm, aquatic area. From hereon out, the chapter becomes sketchier than what we're used to—Alberto gives a few theories for how life might have emerged millions of years ago, but can't back up any of these theories with much logical or empirical proof.

Alberto moves on to describe the process by which life might have originated. He begins by establishing that all life is made of the same stuff—cells. Within cells, there is a substance called DNA. DNA is the molecule that controls growth, heredity, etc. The question becomes, then, where did DNA come from?

Alberto doesn't just teach Sophie about abstract questions of right and wrong—he necessarily also has to teach her about science, physics, and other "practical" subjects.

Alberto gives one theory for the origins of DNA. Some 4.6 billion years ago, it's believed, there was almost no oxygen in the Earth's atmosphere. This is important, because it allowed for the formation of stable DNA molecules. It's believed that the presence of electronic radiation—perhaps a bolt of lightning—combined proteins and carbon strands into a DNA molecule that survived in the ocean. Once this molecule appeared, it began dividing and subdividing, until there were billions of similar molecules.

The theory of the "primordial soup" was an important step forward for evolutionists, but it still, as of 2016, has a long way to go in showing how life could have appeared on Earth. (In 1990, when Sophie's World *was written, this theory was much trendier than it is now.)*

Over time, DNA molecules formed complex structures—the earliest forms of life. According to the process of natural selection, different life forms evolved and reproduced, all of them confined to the oceans. Eventually, animals that could survive on the land evolved. Sophie finds this interesting, because the process of evolution was "random," in the sense that there was no greater meaning behind it—it just happened, in response to the finite availability of resources.Alberto disagrees—he suggests that over the millennia, animals' brains have been getting larger and more complex. For this reason, he believes that the process of evolution can't be totally accidental.

Alberto raises an important point about the theory of evolution. As far as a "pure" evolutionist is concerned, evolution has no "master plan"—all genetic mutations are random, meaning that any genetic mutation with greater survival value is also *random (for example, intelligence). Alberto, however, thinks that evolution may be "designed" to foster certain qualities, such as intelligence. (This is reminiscent of Aristotle's idea of the four causes, andAlberto might be making the same mistake for which he criticized Aristotle; i.e., arguing that evolution exists "in order to" produce intelligent brains, rather than admitting that intelligence is just an outcome of evolution).*

Alberto brings up the eye—an incredibly complex biological organ. Darwin was unable to explain how something as complex as an eye could have evolved according to the rules of natural selection, as an eye is only useful in its final form (what would be the evolutionary advantage of having half an eye?). Some thinkers have proposed that the existence of the eye suggests that there's more of a "master plan" to life than Darwin suggested.

Alberto brings up another important objection to the theory of evolution—the theory of "irreducible complexity." The eye is the classic example of this concept—and there are many who have used it to refute Darwin's ideas altogether. For a refutation of the theory of irreducible complexity, consult Richard Dawkins's The God Delusion.

Sophie suddenly begins to quote a passage from Goethe's *Faust*, in which a character complains that life is useless, since it must end in death. Alberto explains that Sophie is voicing the despair that many in the 19th century felt as they learned about Darwinism. And yet there's an upside to Darwinism—if we're all tied to the process of evolution, then all life forms are tied together, and every organism has a greater significance than previously believed. The poet Thomas Hardy wrote verses about feeling a sense of connection with the plants and trees—these poems were clearlyinspired by Darwinism. Sophie finds the poems beautiful. Alberto then shouts, "Next chapter!"

Darwinism may be a scientific theory, but this doesn't mean that it doesn't have major cultural ramifications. Darwin himself wasn't a poet or a novelist, but he created a new artistic mindset. One could interpret Darwin's ideas as bloody and depressing (all species are destined to either evolve or die) or inspiring and fascinating. Alberto's command at the end of the chapter only reaffirms the meta-fictional nature of the story, and shows that Alberto and Sophie have now fully accepted that they exist only within the world of a book.

CHAPTER 31: FREUD

Hilde looks up from her **book**—her mother has just called for her to come to breakfast.Instead of going to breakfast, Hilde runs outside, to where the family boat is resting in the nearby bay.Hilde rows across the bay. She's shocked and surprised by the implications of Darwinism. Furthermore, she finds it hard to believe that Sophie and Albertoare just figments of her father's imagination. One could also say that she, Hilde, is just a combination of DNA molecules—this is true, Hilde, admits, but it's not the whole picture.In her frustration, Hilde promises herself that she'll teach her father a lesson whenhe gets back.

As the book reaches its conclusion, we notice a major conflict in Sophie's education: the conflict between materialism and idealism. One could say that life is just a collection of "stuff interacting with other stuff," whether it's the proletariat competing with the bourgeoisie, as in Marx, or animals competing for food, as in Darwin. And yet Marx and Darwin's theories of the material qualities of life might be said to neglect the spiritual side of life. There seems to be more to existence, at least in Sophie's mind, than competition.

In the evening, Hilde begins reading again. In the **book**, Sophie and Alberto are standing outside the major's cabin, talking to a naked man—the Emperor. The Emperor acts like a majestic, respectable man, even though Sophie and Alberto can't stop laughing at him. Alberto ushers Sophie back inside, where he begins telling her about Sigmund Freud.Sigmund Freud (born 1856) isn't exactly a philosopher, but he's considered extremely important to Western philosophy. Trained as a doctor, he tried to use conversation and behavioral studies to analyze the human mind—in this way, he was one of the first important *psychologists*.

Freud, no less than Darwin, instituted a paradigm shift in Western culture, not just Western philosophy or science. He suggested that mankind is wrong to have faith in its own enlightenment and intelligence—there's more to the mind than its thoughts or even its emotions. Even though most of his ideas are now considered incorrect, one could say that Freud discovered a "new world"—the unconscious recesses of the human mind.

Freud's great, overarching discovery was that man is not, fundamentally, a rational animal. On the contrary, he's controlled by a series of irrational impulses. One of the most importance such impulses is the sexual impulse. Freud's discussion of sexuality was groundbreaking at the time—he proposed that all human beings, even children, felt sexual urges.

Freud was almost as shocking as Darwin, as far as 19th century Victorian readers were concerned. Freud was alsocritical in the development of the modern education system: Freud placed new importance on human development before the age of 5.

Alberto takes a step back to describe how Freud came to his surprising conclusions. As a psychologist, Freud believed in the importance of "digging deep" in a person's life. He believed that the human brain consists of three parts: id, ego, and superego. The id is the part of the mind that compels someone to pursue pleasure—this is the source of the sexual impulse that we all feel. The ego, on the other hand, is the part of the brain that regulates the id—the part that chooses what to do, often against one's own impulses. Finally, there's the superego—the part of the brain that's concerned with right and wrong, and with abstract moral thought. From childhood to adulthood, all human beings have to learn to balance these three parts of their minds. In a way, all of life is about choosing between morality (superego) and pleasure (id). Freud's great insight was that the mind is much bigger and more complex than conscious thought would suggest. Our consciousness is just a tiny portion of the mind—just the tip of the iceberg. There is also a *subconscious* mind, full of desires and impulses we don't even know we have.

Freud actually made up the word "ego," which means "I" in Latin, because his English-language publisher wanted his ideas to seem more official and jargon-y—but even if we set aside the names id, ego, and superego, we can tell that Freud changed psychology and philosophy forever. Gone is the alert, forward-thinking consciousness of Descartes, Hume, and Locke: the mind is now a complex, unpredictable thing that can never be fully controlled or understood. And while earlier philosophers tried to control the consciousness by urging humans to follow one particular system of morality (be it Christian, Kantian, etc.), Freud concluded that the mind is always locked in a struggle between desire and morality—a struggle which, contrary to many philosophers' wishes, will never truly end.

Another important Freudian idea is repression. Because there is a subconscious mind, we may have experiences and ideas that we can't consciously remember. Freud argued that these experiences and ideas are "repressed" to the subconscious mind. As a psychologist, Freud tried to pry into his patients' subconscious minds. He had several ways of doing so. One important way was the parapraxis, or slip of the tongue. When someone misspeaks, Freud believed, they're betraying a repressed thought.Freud gives an example. There was a bishop with a huge nose. When he visited a group of young women, they were sure not to bring up his nose for fear of embarrassing him. But when one of the young women asked the bishop how he took his tea, she accidentally said, "do you take sugar in your nose?"

If the mind is a vast, unpredictable thing, we might well ask, "how can we attempt to understand it?" or even, "what's the point of trying to understand it?" Freud believed that he could study the mind's behaviors in order to deduce what the mind was really thinking. Parapraxis is a great example of this principle in action: by studying patients' slips of the tongue, Freud could attempt to understand what they were really thinking about (and attempting to repress).

For Freud, life is a constant struggle to keep repressed thoughts out of the conscious mind. When someone's mind works too hard to keep thoughts repressed, that person can be considered neurotic. To cure his patients' neuroses, Freud encouraged patients to talk freely while lying flat on a couch, a process he termed "free association." In a relaxed, low-stress environment, patients would gradually open up about their hidden, subconscious thoughts.

One of the great debates about Freud's thought concerns how Freud wanted *people to behave: should they give into their id's irrational desires, or try to repress them altogether? Most interpreters of Freud maintain that Freud opted for something in between these extremes: he wanted patients to release some of their unconscious urges in a safe, neutral setting (like the psychologist's couch).*

One of Freud's most important tools for understanding the subconscious mind was the interpretation of dreams. Freud believed that dreams were one of the few times when people's subconscious minds were allowed a "free reign." When we dream, Freud believed, our ids concoct stories in which all our wishes are fulfilled. By interpreting patients' dreams, Freud thought he could come to understand what his patients' secretly desired, and how they could satisfy these desires in safe, controllable ways.Alberto gives an example: a man dreams that he receives two balloons from his female cousin. Sophie wonders if the dream might be a form of wish-fulfillment, in which the man gives into his sexual desires for his cousin. Alberto tells Sophie that she might be right, although interpreting dreams is a complicated, uncertain process.

Freud's faith in the importance of interpretation and analysis reiterates the driving theme of Sophie's World*(both Hilde's binder and the novel we're reading). Just as Freud believed that bizarre stories could have a serious, even profound point, so too does this novel evoke profundity by telling silly, fantastical stories. The example Alberto gives suggests that much of humans' thought is sexual in nature (one of Freud's strong beliefs, and biases). Sophie's success in interpreting this story, furthermore, might suggest that she's in touch with her own sexual urges, and is maturing quickly.*

Freud's ideas were extremely influential, especially in the arts. Surrealist painters, such as Salvador Dali and Andre Breton, for example, believed that getting in touch with one's subconscious was the best way to create great art. Sometimes, Surrealists tried to paint and draw without using their conscious minds at all.Alberto suggests that creativity is a struggle between reason and imagination.

There's a major debate over how to create art: to what extent should we rely on our unconscious mind? For some, the unconscious was the source of all creativity, but it seems more likely that creativity is something more like a balance between the conscious and unconscious mind.

Sophie notices something outside the cabin—a group of Disney figures, such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. Alberto finds this sad—he and Sophie are just "helpless victims" of the major. Alberto points out that they're all the "dream images" of the major. One interesting consequence of this notion is that the major doesn't necessarily know the meaning of his own creations, just as a dreamer doesn't necessarily understand his own dreams. Before Alberto can elaborate further, Sophie tells Alberto that she has to be getting home, since it's late. Alberto tells Sophie that he's going to "dive into the major's subconscious." He asks Sophie to "create a distraction" as she walks home, so that the major will be concentrated on Sophie.

This coda to the chapter on Freud reiterates a point we'd come across in the previous chapter: if Albert Knag himself is conscious of one interpretation of his book, is that interpretation "free" from Albert's control? One could argue that it is (it exists independent of whether Albert wills it or not), or that it isn't (Albert created Sophie and Alberto, even if he didn't "create" interpretations of their ideas). Maybe the bigger point to keep in mind is that Albert isn't much freer than Sophie—he has no more control of his unconscious mind than anyone else.

CHAPTER 32: OUR OWN TIME

It's almost midnight, and Hilde sits in her room, reading. She tries to write using the "free association" techniques that Freud pioneered. She wonders if she's repressing anything important. She also wonders what Alberto is planning to do to her father. She considers reading the final page of the **book**, but chooses not to—that would be cheating.

This is a funny section, because Gaarder seems to be talking directly to his readers without actually addressing them. Gaarder is telling his readers not to skip ahead to the end of the book, so as not to ruin the surprise!

Hilde falls asleep and wakes up the next morning. She remembers a dream she had, in which her father returned from Lebanon. In the dream, Hilde crosses paths with Sophie, who's carrying Hilde's**gold crucifix**. At the end of her dream, Hilde embraces her father.

The meaning of Hilde's dream is by no means clear (that's part of the point), but certainly Hilde and Sophie are still inextricably linked, as shown by their joint possession of the gold crucifix.

Hilde's mother enters the room and wishes her good morning. She tells Hilde she'll be home around 4 pm. When Hilde is alone again, she resumes reading **Sophie's World**. In the book, Sophie has left the major's cabin. She tries to "hold the major's attention," as Alberto instructed her. She jumps around, yodels, and climbs a tall tree, only to find that she can't climb back down. Suddenly, a goose appears before Sophie. The goose introduces itself as Morten, and explains that it flew here from Lebanon. Morten claims to have carried a 14-year-old boy named Nils across the sky. Sophie asks Morten how he managed to carry someone so heavy. Morten claims that he slapped Nils, causing him to become "no bigger than a thumb." Sophie ignores the goose, saying that she has a philosophicalgarden party to organize.

This passage is borderline unintelligible to anyone who didn't grow up in Scandinavia, where The Adventures of Nils *is a popular children's book. Suffice it to say that Nils and Morten are beloved children's book characters, as well-known in their country as the Cat in the Hat is in the United States.*

Morten, undeterred, tells Sophie that an old woman was planning to write a book about Nils's adventures. Morten claims that this is ironic, since he and Nils "were already in that book." In this instant, Sophie feels someone slap her, and she becomes "no bigger than a thumb." Now, she's flying on a goose's back, looking down at the trees and houses. Eventually, Morten lands, and Sophie realizes that she's grown back to her full size. She thanks Morten for bringing her down from the tree, and Morten says, "A mere bagatelle." Morten tells Sophie he would have liked to show her the rest of Europe—in other words,to give her the same education he gave Nils, years ago. With these words, Morten flies away.

Morten carries Sophie through the sky, much as Alberto and Albert could be said to carry Sophie through the complex terrain of Western philosophy. The similarities between Morten and Alberto / Albert are then underscored by Morten's parting words to Sophie, "A mere bagatelle," which we recognize as Alberto's modest catchphrase for Sophie. Gaarder also throws in some more meta-fictional jokes here, as Morten and Nils realize that they too are in a book.

Sophie is back in her home. She and Mom prepare for Sophie's garden party the next day. Mom asks Sophie if Alberto is planning to come to the party, and Sophie says he'll be there. The next morning, Alberto calls Sophie and tells her that his "secret plan" is going well. He tells Sophie to meet him in Café Pierre, a café in the center of town.

We're not sure what Alberto is planning, or even what he couldbe *planning without Albert's knowledge. It's suggested that Alberto is evading Albert's authority by operating out of Albert's subconscious, but there's no indication that Alberto is even anything but a* part *of Albert's subconscious.*

At the Café Pierre, Sophie waits for Alberto. She feels like a real adult—older than her years. The people in the café seem dull and trivial to her—aesthetes, to use Kierkegaard's phrase. Suddenly, Alberto enters the room, wearing a black beret and a beautiful old coat. Alberto apologizes for being late and tells Sophie that they're going to talk about modern philosophy.

At the beginning of this novel, Sophie was a shy young girl, more comfortable in her den than in public. Now, Sophie doesn't think twice about surveying a crowd and criticizing it for being full of aesthetes (which seems like an arrogant thing to say about people she's never met before, and shows that she's not immune to the hubris that comes with knowledge).

One important strain of modern philosophy, Alberto begins, is existentialism. Existentialism is the belief that man's existential situation must be the starting point for any system of thought. Before Alberto unpacks this difficult concept, he gives some of the history of existentialism. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was an important philosopher, because he believed that the modern world was too subservient to Christian morality, which he termed a "slave morality." Nietzsche wanted to reformulate morality to reflect the "real world" of man's existence.

It's a pity that Alberto doesn't have more time to discuss Friedrich Nietzsche (who's just as deserving of an entire chapter devoted to his philosophy as Kierkegaard or Hegel). But at this point, it becomes harder to group philosophy into manageable units, such as Romanticism, Enlightenment, etc. Even Existentialism, the dominant "theme" of this lesson, is a loosely understood philosophical school, encompassing a far more diverse array of philosophers than its predecessors.

One of the key Existentialists was Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980). His life-long friend and companion was Simone de Beauvoir. Sophie is glad to hear that Alberto is finally talking about a female philosopher. Sartre started from the premise that "Existentialism is humanism." By this, Sartre meant that Existentialism begins by assuming that "God is dead"—a phrase that comes from Nietzsche. In the absence of a God, humanity is forced to come to terms with its own existence.

One sign that philosophy seems to be making progress over time its embrace of female thinkers. Simone de Beauvoir made contributions to feminism, phenomenology, and more., and she's by no means the only modern philosopher who did so. (One could mention Butler, Sedgwick, or Kristeva, too.)

Alberto tries to clarify what Sartre meant when he claimedthat "existence precedes essence." Sartre believed that humans exist in a different sense than a rock or a tree exists—humans are self-conscious. This means that humans don't have an "essence" in the same way that a tree or a rock has an essence—they don't have essential properties or characteristics that determine everything they do. Because humans don't have these built-in properties, they have to "create" themselves—they have to decide what kind of lives they want to lead, and what kind of nature they want to have.Before Sartre, philosophers tried to explain human nature. Sartre, by contrast, didn't believe that human nature was real—it is man's fate to do whatever he wants. Alberto makes an analogy: Sartre thinks that humanity is like a troupe of actors without a script or stage directions. Sophie thinks she understands what Alberto means.

Sartre's philosophy contradicts much of what we've been discussing in this book so far. Unlike Enlightenment or even Romantic philosophers (let alone Plato and Aristotle), Sartre doesn't believe that it's productive to begin a discussion of humanity by talking about its essence—i.e., its biological construction, its perceptual capabilities, or any definition of "human nature." Note that this doesn't*mean that Sartre doesn't believe that it's important to discuss these concepts—it's just that they can't be weighed more highly than the fundamental fact of mankind's existence. Alberto's example of how this works in practice (that humans are like actors with no script) reminds us that in this novel, especially, "all the world's a stage."*

Alberto admits that Sartre's view of life can be depressing. And yet Sartre wasn't a nihilist—he refused to believe that things have no meaning at all. Instead, Sartre believed that life *must* have a meaning—it's just that humans have to choose this meaning for themselves.

To Sartre, even nihilism is a form of universalism (i.e., "everything is meaningless"), and thus a contradiction of Existentialism. In a way, Sartre is even more committed to the concept of freedom than his predecessors—he wants each human being to find his or her own freedom. This idea also seems relevant to the novel. Sophie has accepted that she exists only in the pages of a book, so now she must go about finding freedom and meaning within the parameters of that reality.

Sartre was interested in questions of perception andconsciousness. He argued that we each perceive the world in a different way, according to our own thoughts and emotions. For example, a woman who is pregnant might think that she sees lots of pregnant women around her; an escaped criminal might imagine that he sees police officers all around him. Albertothen admits that he was late for his meeting with Sophie on purpose, because hewanted Sophie to look around the crowd in the café.

Alberto wants Sophie to become aware of her own changing thought processes. This is an important point to bear in mind, because it suggests that Sophie herself might be projecting onto the other members of the crowd, and assuming that she is more enlightened than the people around her.

Alberto goes on to describe the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, an Existentialist who tried to merge Sartre's ideas with feminism. De Beauvoir argued that the supposed differences between men and women are illusions—there is no "women's nature," just as there is no human nature. Sophie is attracted to this idea.

De Beauvoir's ideas were widely criticized at the time because they seemed to contradict biological facts. But this wasn't quite de Beauvoir's point: she wasn't saying that there are no biological differences between men and women, but that there is no innately feminine way of perceiving*the world, contrary to what's often assumed (for example, "woman's intuition").*

Alberto describes the influence of Existentialism on literature. Writers like Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett wrote plays and novels that evoked "the absurd," i.e., that which is meaningless or irrational. The purpose of these literary works was to show that life, as we experience it, has no inherent meaning—we have to create this meaning for ourselves. Often in a work of absurdist theater, a character finds himself trapped in a bizarre, dreamlike situation, and yet doesn't react with surprise or confusion.

Like Darwin and Freud, Sartre's philosophical ideas weren't only influential in the world of philosophy; they also had a profound influence on Western art and literature. Gaarder presents Camus as primarily a fiction writer, but he was also a philosopher who was arguably as influential as Sartre, and developed the philosophy of Absurdism.

Alberto buys a Coke for Sophie and a coffee for himself. When he's purchased both items, he tells Sophie, "That brings us to the end of the road." There are many other strains of philosophy in the world today, such as Neo-Thomism (philosophy which parallels the ideas of Thomas Aquinas) and logical empiricism (philosophy in the tradition of Hume).Marxism is still alive and well in the world. Finally, scientists and philosophers continue to debate what matter itself really is.

Alberto is too wise to claim that Sophie is now "educated" in all of Western philosophy. The purpose of this book hasn't been to give a total summary of Western thinking; rather, it's aimed to convey some of the narrative sweep of philosophy's history: for example, to show how Enlightenment influenced Romanticism, or how Romanticism influenced the rise of Existentialism.

Although philosophers continue to argue over many of the same questions that puzzled Socrates and Plato thousands of years ago, there are also some new problems that philosophers try to solve. Philosophy now studies animal rights, environmental decay, etc.Albertosuggests that the world might have arrived at the "end of history"—a period in which there are no wars or violent conflicts. Of course, it's also possible that civilization is on the cusp of a new age.

Throughout the book, Alberto has been trying to refute the idea that philosophy is a useless endeavor. Here, he shows the ways that philosophy, far from being useless, is intimately engaged with the problems of the real, contemporary world.

Alberto and Sophie walk down the street. As they walk by a store, Sophie sees something on TV—footage of a UN soldier waving a sign, "Back soon, Hilde!" Alberto mutters, "Charlatan."Alberto and Sophie keep walking, and eventually come to a bookstore. In the back, they find the "New Age" section, full of tarot cards, UFO photographs, etc. Alberto tells Sophie that this place is the "temple of our age." Alberto claims that the belief in the supernatural, as seen in a place like the New Age bookstore, is mostly nonsense—the kind of "figment of the imagination" that Hume would have dismissed. Sophie tells Alberto that he's being unusually harsh. Alberto admits that not all psychics and mystics are frauds—they certainly *believe* that they can predict the future. He promises to keep an open mind on all questions of mysticism, acknowledging that all exciting new ideas *appear* to be magic, at least at first. Before they leave the bookstore, Sophie notices a book called **Sophie's World**.

It's impressive that Alberto has concealed his distaste for mysticism and occultism for so long—it's as if he's been withholding his own opinions so that he can be a truly impartial teacher (this would suggest that his duties as a teacher are now concluded). Alberto and Sophie could be said to represent the two sides of Western philosophy: the former rigid, scientific, and eminently rational; the latter sensitive, intuitive, and mystical. Sophie seems more willing than Alberto to believe in the existence of spirituality and mysticism. Once again Gaarder plays with reality by placing the book "Sophie's World" as a physical object even within the world of Sophie's World.

CHAPTER 33: THE GARDEN PARTY

Hilde sits in bed, having just finished another chapter of **Sophie's World**. She remembers how her father used to read the book *The Adventures of Nils* to her. Hilde also remembers buying a book on astrology last year. Her father lectured her on the shallowness of astrology and spiritualism.

We see that Sophie's disagreements with Alberto correspond roughly to Albert's disagreements with Hilde (as we might expect).

Hilde proceeds with her reading, since there are only a few pages left. In the book, Sophieand her Mom prepare for the garden party. Mom asks Sophie about the book she's bought, a book titled**Sophie's World**, by Albert Knag. Sophie claims that Alberto gave her the book. Mom says that she read the first page of the book—it's about a girl named Sophie Amundsen.

As in the bookstore scene,Gaarder adds another layer of meta-fiction to the text here: Sophie's World *is now a book, written into a book, written into a book! This is an early sign that the structure of "Sophie's world" (not just the book, but the whole world) is slowly coming apart.*

Sophie and her Mom—whose name, we learn, is Helene—see a group of demonstrators walking down the street. The demonstrators carry signs saying, "The major is at hand" and "More power to the UN." Helene can't understand what this demonstration is all about, and Sophie replies, "A mere bagatelle." A little irritated, Helene tells Sophie that she doesn't believe in philosophy at all—"everything is synthetics nowadays."

Relatively small events in Hilde's world (like Albert's return from Lebanon, or Hilde's birthday) become huge, quasi-religious events in Sophie's world. It's a sign of Sophie's growing maturity that she repeats Alberto's catchphrase, showing that she's mastered many of the lessons he's taught her.

The party is about to begin: there are streamers and beautiful Japanese lanterns in the trees. There's a cake and lots of other foods. The guests arrive one by one, including Joanna (whose parents drive a white Mercedes) and Sophie's classmates, Jeremy and David. Soon, the only guest who hasn't arrived is Alberto.A short while later,Albertoarrives, carrying a bouquet of 15 red roses. Helene introduces Alberto to everyone as "Sophie's philosophy teacher." She insists that Alberto isn't her boyfriend. Everyone cheers. Suddenly, Joanna gets out of her chair and kisses Jeremy on the lips. Helene seems oddly calm; she just mutters, "Not at the table." A moment later, Sophie asks Joanna why she kissed Jeremy. Because he's so cute, Joanna says.

This is one of the only extended descriptions of "Sophie's world" in all of Sophie's World. *In other words, it's one of the only times when Sophie interacts at length with people other than Alberto or her mother. This should remind us of the Allegory of the Cave: having achieved a kind of enlightenment, Sophie has returned "underground" to find that her peers seem particularly shallow and uneducated (but also increasingly absurd, as the book's sense of reality spins out of control).*

The party goes on, with everyone eating and talking. Helene stands up and makes a speech. She congratulates Sophie on her birthday, and mentions that Sophie's father is frequently far away, often in other countries. The guests applaud, and Jeremy and Joanna begin kissing once again.

Absurdity and comedy becomes more and more the norm in Sophie's world. The adults seem scattered and confused, while Sophie's peers seem exaggeratedly childish and simple-minded.

Alberto rises—he wants to make a speech as well. He tells the crowd that Sophie has been learning about philosophy for the last few weeks. Here, tonight, he and Sophie will reveal their "findings"—the "innermost secret of existence." The world, Alberto continues, is the creation of a man named Albert Knag. Everyone at the party is a literary creation, designed for a book—a book that Hilde is about to finish. The guests at the party don't take this news well. Some shout, "Garbage," while others beg for insurance coverage.

Just as Plato prophesized, news of enlightenment is greeted with anger and hatred by the unenlightened. Of course, in this scene the guests' small-mindedness is exaggerated and played for comedy.

Alberto turns to Sophie and says, "It's time." Helene asks Sophie if Sophie is planning on leaving. Sophie admits that she is. Helene says that she'll miss Sophie, but Sophie points out that this isn't true—nobody will miss anybody, since they're all imaginary. Suddenly, Joanna tells her mother that she's pregnant.

As reality seems to break down, so too do the human relationships previously established in the book. Sophie and her Mom, in particular, now seem to have moved into the realm of abstraction.

The guests become increasingly rowdy—the boys throw food everywhere and the girls pop balloons with a pin. Someone crashes the white Mercedes into a tree. Sophie remembers a time when the house was her Garden of Eden—now, Alberto reminds her, she's being "driven out." Alberto places his hand on Sophie's shoulder and shouts, "Now!" With this, Alberto and Sophie disappear. Helene proudly says, "They have vanished into thin air," and offers her guests coffee.

The symbolism of this scene is clear enough—Sophie explicitly mentions that she's being driven out of terrestrial paradise. When Sophie began her philosophy lessons, she was innocent and straightforward in her thinking. Now, she's learned to question everything in her world, even the world itself. The question then becomes: has Sophie's education made her any happier, or was her ignorance bliss?

CHAPTER 34: COUNTERPOINT

Hilde sits in bed—the story of Sophie and Alberto is over. But what has actually happened to them? Hilde wonders if it's her job to continue writing the story. Or perhaps Sophie and Alberto have simply escaped the story forever. Confused, Hilde decides to go back and read the story again a few times.

This section raises questions that are too complicated for Sophie's World*to answer. One could say that Sophie and Alberto persist even after their book is over—so it's Hilde's duty to keep writing (or at least reading) about them. It's also possible that these characters are just that—characters—meaning that they're "done" when their book is done.*

We cut back toAlberto and Sophie, whotry to avoid the major by sneaking into the cabin.Meanwhile Hilde spends the next few days working on "her plan." She sends letters to her family friend Anne in Copenhagen. She also rereads **Sophie's World**.

As Albert retires from his duties as an author, Hilde prepares to become an author-figure, manipulating her father in the same way that her father manipulated Alberto and Sophie. This is a sign of Hilde's own coming-of-age (independent of Sophie's). It's not explained how, exactly, Alberto and Sophie are driving around—what book are they a part of, exactly?

In an unidentified story,Alberto and Sophie arrive in Oslo. Alberto assures Sophie that they're outside the major's control now. Sophie asks a passerby what the name of the street is, but the stranger doesn't reply. Gradually, Sophie realizes the truth: here in Oslo, she and Alberto are "frozen" in time and isolated from the rest of the characters. Alberto leads Sophie down the streets. He reminds her that this is the day Albert Knag returns from Lebanon—they don't have much time left.

The new "Sophie book" that we're reading doesn't try to tinker with the setting or plot of the original Sophie's World, *even as it reinterprets Sophie and Alberto, the two characters Albert invented. Perhaps Gaarder is trying to convey that Sophie and Alberto are "coming alive"; that their existence extends past the confines of Albert's book.*

The chapter "cuts" abruptly. Albert Knag, we're told, is waiting at the airport. When he gets back home, he's going to shop for his wife and child. He sentHilde a present two weeks ago, and hasn't spoken to her since. At the airport, he receives a message from Hilde, welcoming him back from Lebanon. Hilde mentions a "stolen and wrecked Mercedes," and promises that she'll be in in the garden when he returns. Albert is amused that Hilde is "directing" his life in the airport.

As the book approaches an ending, it's confusing to keep track of what is and isn't fictional—i.e., whether this section is the product of Hilde's writing or Gaarder's. Now that Albert himself is a character, and no longer a seemingly omnipotent creator, it becomes clear that he's no more "real" than Sophie, Alberto, or even us as readers.

Albert goes to buy some food at the airport. At the store, he notices a letter from Hilde, telling him to pick up some salami and caviar. Albert is confused—how has Hilde managed to place letters in the airport? Time passes, and Albert—now feeling paranoid—prepares to board his flight. He notices another letter for him, taped to the check-in desk.

It now becomes apparent what the "favor" Hilde asked of her friends was. This prank (as far as it exists within Hilde's world) is meant to make even Albert Knag question his own reality, and wonder whether he, like Sophie, is being manipulated by an all-powerful figure.

The chapter cuts back to Sophie and Alberto. They drive through the city in search of Albert. As they drive, Alberto tells Sophie a story. There was once a man who didn't believe in angels. One day, an angel appears before this man. The man admits that angels exist, but he still maintains that angels don't exist in "reality," as he, the man, does—he explains that he saw the angel move through a solid rock, suggesting that angels are somehow ethereal or otherworldly. The angel, surprised, replies, "we are more solid than the mist."Albertoconcludes that he and Sophie are indestructible.

The point of Alberto's story is that it's often foolish to distinguish between different levels of reality (reality, one could say, is an all-or-nothing proposition—things are either real or they'renot). In this way, Gaarder is subtly mocking his own readers for trying to distinguish between the new Sophie/Alberto narrative and Gaarder's own—a project that amounts to determining which fiction is more real than the other.

Alberto and Sophie drive out of the city, toward the town of Fiane. They stop at an eatery called Cinderella to get some foodand drink. Inside Cinderella, an elderly woman offers to lead them to "a small establishment close by." She leads them outside. As they walk, the woman explains that she's a character from a fairy tale; Sophie and Alberto reply that they're from a philosophy book. The woman leads Sophie and Alberto to a large bonfire, around which dance Sherlock Holmes, Peter Pan, and other "fictional" characters. There, the woman gives Alberto some coffee. Alberto finishes his coffee, and then he and Sophie continue driving in their car.

In this amusing interlude, we're reminded that even if Alberto and Sophie could be considered real people, this isn't the definition of "real" that most people are used to—by the same logic, Sherlock Holmes and Peter Pan are real, too.

Meanwhile, Alberttakes off from Copenhagen. As he leaves the airplane, he receives a note from Hilde (who calls herself "Queen of the Mirror"), wishing him a safe flight. Albert is amused and annoyed by this letter—Hilde is giving him a taste of his own medicine.

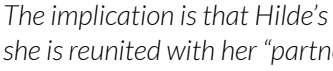
Hilde is toying with Albert so that he feels regret for the way he manipulated Alberto and Sophie in Sophie's World. *(Of course, it's also possible that this section of the text appears in Hilde's own writing, suggesting that Hilde is staging a reunion scene between herself and her father that may never come.)*

Albert lands at the airport in Lillesand. As he waits for his bags, he sees demonstrators waving signs that say, "Welcome home, Dad." Albert gets his bags and them takes a cab to his home. When he arrives at home, his wife kisses him and tells him that Hilde is waiting in the garden.

Once again, Gaarder blurs the line between fiction and reality—we're not sure if we're reading this in another book, or whether it's happening in the "world" of the novel itself (Hilde and Albert's world, that is).

We cut back to Sophie and Alberto. They drive to the town of Lillesand and try to figure out how to find Bjerkley. After some searching, they locate Bjerkley next to a bay. Sophie and Alberto rush out of the car and find Hilde sitting in her garden. Sophie finds Hilde very pretty—she has blonde hair and green eyes, and looks a lot like Joanna. Suddenly, Sophie hears a voice, crying "Hilde!" Sophie sees the major, wearing his beret.

This is one of the first times in the novel when Sophie sees Hilde face-to-face (she previously saw Hilde only in the brass mirror). This is especially interesting, considering that this is also the first time in the novel when we get an extended physical description of Hilde. The implication is that Hilde's reality is somehow unfinished until she is reunited with her "partner," Sophie (this idea is somewhat similar to Hegel's notion of the world spirit).



We cut to Hilde, who's waiting for her father. She's a little nervous that her "plan" has made him angry—but on the other hand, she thinks, he should have expected her to do something of this kind. Then she hears a voice shout, "Hilde!"—it's her father! Hilde embraces her fatherand tells him, "You've become a real writer!" Albert replies, "You've become a grown woman!" Hilde proposes that she and her father "call it quits," and he agrees.

At the same time that Sophie reunites with Hilde, Hilde reunites with her father, or at least seems to (there's still the possibility that Hilde is imagining all of this).Hilde, we're told, has finally grown up, not only by learning about philosophy but also by daring to play philosophical tricks on her own father—a sign of her maturity and initiative.

Hilde and Albert talk about Albert's day. Hilde laughs as Albert describes receiving strange notes and letters all day—something that made him very paranoid, indeed. That evening, Albert says that he's going to tell Hilde about "the universe"—this will be the final part of her philosophy lesson.

Hilde has relied on Ole and Anne to send bizarre messages to Albert, in much the same way that Albert sent bizarre messages to Sophie. In this sense, we might say that Albert has paid the penalty for exploiting his own fictional character—thus, it's time to call it quits.

We cut to Sophie and Alberto. Sophie sees Hilde embracing her father, and feels deeply jealous—Hilde is a real person, who'll grow up to have real children and real grandchildren. Alberto notices that Sophie is crying. He reminds Sophie that Sophie has a family, just like Hilde—she also has a huge number of friends from other books, who live in the woods behind Cinderella. Now that the major has finished his book, Sophie and Alberto are truly free—they can do whatever they want. Alberto leads Sophie away from Hilde and her father, toward their car.

The final question of this book is: is the world of ideas really a substitute for the world of physical things? In other words, can fictional characters ever really take the place of real people? This section also raises questions about what does and doesn't qualify as freedom. Alberto and Sophie seem convinced that they've attained true freedom, despite the fact that they seem to be inhabiting a different book still (our version of Sophie's World, *at least.*

CHAPTER 35: THE BIG BANG

Hilde sits next to her father. It's very late, and the stars are bright in the sky. Albert begins by reminding Hilde how odd it is that they live on a tiny planet in the midst of a huge universe. Earth could be the only planet with life, or there could be lots of other planets that have life. There are hundreds of billions of stars in the galaxy, many of which have planets orbiting them.

Albert has taught Sophie that there's no firm distinction between philosophy and science. Science, one might say, generates the ideas that philosophy then reinterprets (Newton's universal, scientific laws inspired Kant, for example). Now, philosophy is faced with a new challenge: how to interpret man's place in a vast, seemingly infinite universe?

Albert reminds Hilde that light takes a finite amount of time to travel across space. This means that the light that emanated from the Earth long ago is only now reaching faraway planets. From the perspective of Pluto, Hilde is still a little girl; from the perspective of another star, the Earth is still populated by dinosaurs.

This is another reminder that time is relative—our idea of the present moment isn't identical to another planet's version of the present, just as time passed differently for Sophie and for Hilde.

Most astronomers agree that the universe began with the Big Bang. In the beginning of time, all the matter in the universe was extremely dense and hot. Beginning with the Big Bang, the matter in the universe is now moving apart; in this way, the entire universe is expanding. But this process might not continue forever. After a certain point, gravity might pull the matter in the universe back together into a tiny, hot ball. If this happens, then it's possible that there will be another Big Bang. If so, then science will confirm the ancient Indian belief in the cyclical nature of the world. Sophie finds this possibility mysterious and exciting. As she talks to her father, she feels a sting on her forehead. Albert jokes that Socrates is "trying to sting you into life."

In a strange way, the current trends in science seem to support mankind's earliest ideas of the world: for example, the idea thatthe world occurs in an endless repetitive cycle. So maybe it's not fair to say that philosophy and religion have "progressed" from incorrect ideas tomore correct ones—maybe philosophers got it right (or at least asked the right unanswerable questions) from the start, and have been reinterpreting the same ideas ever since.

We cut back to Sophie and Alberto. They're sitting in their car, still listening to Albert talk about the Big Bang. Alberto points out that the roles have reversed; now, he and Sophie are listening to Hilde and Albert, instead of the other way around. Sophie finds a wrench in the car. She gets out of the car, runs back toward Albert and Hilde, and hits Hilde on the head with the wrench. Hilde winces in pain, and Albert jokes about Socrates stinging her.

This scene shows that Alberto and Sophie can still interact with the "real world"—but we can't tell if this is the result of Albert or Hilde imagining an alternate universe in which Sophie continues to exist, or if this is just Gaarder reimagining the rules of physics and being playfully meta-fictional again.

Albert and Hilde talk about the ending of **Sophie's World**, in which Alberto and Sophie run away from the garden party. Albert explains that the story had to end this way, but Hilde disagrees—she suggests that Sophie and Alberto might still be present in their world. As Alberto listens to Hilde saying this to Albert, he tells Sophie, "You have unusual talents, Sophie."

Notably, Sophie is less willing than Alberto to give up entirely. She has a strong sense of perseverance and faith, something we've already seen in her support for Plato, Spinoza, and the Romantics. Alberto is less hopeful and ambitious, but he respects Sophie for trying to interact with Albert and Hilde.

We cut back to Hilde and Albert. Albert points up at the stars and tells Hilde that once, long ago, all matter was exactly the same—hot and concentrated in the center of the universe. Now, there are many different kinds of matter, strewn all over the universe. Hilde sees what her father is getting at—they're made of the same basic "stuff" as the stars.

This information parallels the Darwinian paradigm shift—the idea that all life forms are connected since they come from the same DNA molecules. Modern science has generalized this concept to say that allmatter comes from the same places.

We cut back to Sophie and Alberto. Sophie tells Alberto that she wants to "try the rowboat" resting in the bay near Bjerkley. Alberto and Sophie try to move the boat, but they find that they can't. Sophie insists that she and Alberto keep trying—"A true philosopher must never give up."

Once again, Sophie tries to change the material world, even after her former tutor, Alberto, has given up.

We cut back to Hilde and Albert. Albertremembers the night before her left for Lebanon—this was the night he first decided to write Hilde a philosophy book. As they talk, Hilde notices that their rowboat has come loose of its moorings. She wonders if Sophie and Alberto might have caused this. Albert laughs at this idea, but Hilde insists that it's Sophie's doing. Albert says, "One of us will have to swim out to it,' and Hilde replies, "We'll both go, Dad."

Sophie appears to have succeeded in moving the rowboat, even though Alberto insists that such a thing is logically impossible. (This could also just be a coincidence—we're not told.) In the end, Gaarder doesn't bother to explain what is and isn't real in his book—he leaves this up to us. What is clear, however, is that Hilde seems to have reunited with her father: because she's been studying philosophy, she's "come of age," to the point where she and her father are equals. Sophie, for her part, has experienced her own coming of age by studying philosophy. In this way, she's learned to be strong, hopeful, and a little bit mystical. Whether or not Hilde and Sophie are real, the lessons they've learned about life and philosophy have plenty of truth in them.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Arn, Jackson. "*Sophie's World*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Jun 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Arn, Jackson. "*Sophie's World*." LitCharts LLC, June 29, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/sophie-s-world.

To cite any of the quotes from *Sophie's World* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Gaarder, Jostein. Sophie's World. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 2007.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gaarder, Jostein. Sophie's World. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. 2007.