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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **Sophie's World** by Jostein Gaarder

One day fourteen-year-old Sophie Amundsen comes home from school to find in her mailbox two notes, with one question on each: "Who are you?" and "Where does the world come from?" From that irresistible beginning, Sophie becomes obsessed with questions that take her far beyond what she knows of her Norwegian village. Through those letters, she enrolls in a kind of correspondence course, covering Socrates to Sartre, with a mysterious philosopher, while receiving letters addressed to another girl. Who is Hilde? And why does her mail keep turning up? To unravel this riddle, Sophie must use the philosophy she is learning—but the truth turns out to be far more complicated than she could have imagined.

### Discussion Questions

1. The first chapter's title, "The Garden of Eden," underscores the concept of beginnings and origins. How did you first respond to the initial two questions, "Who are you?" and "Where does the world come from?" Did your answers change by the time you reached the end of the novel?
2. When Sophie first starts receiving letters from the philosophy teacher, she finds that each one is slightly damp, having "two little holes in it." Thinking of *Sophie's World* as a mystery novel, what other "clues" did you encounter over the course of the book? Were you able to use them to solve any riddles?
3. As Sophie watched the video tape in secret, what was your understanding of how Alberto Knox was able to bring ancient Athens back to life? What distinctions are made in the novel between reality and the surreal? How do such distinctions play out in your own life?
4. How did you react to Aristotle's views on women? In your opinion, which of the thinkers in Gaarder's history provided admirable answers to questions about gender? What did you make of the fact that a vast majority of the authorities in the novel are men?
5. In the "Middle Ages" chapter, Alberto says, "We can say that Aquinas christianized Aristotle in the same way that St. Augustine christianized Plato." What was the result as these great medieval thinkers applied the teachings of Christ to ancient philosophy?
6. "You could say," Alberto tells Sophie, "that a process started in the Renaissance finally brought people to the moon. Or for that matter to Hiroshima or Chernobyl." What is this "process"? What is the relationship between philosophy, religion, economics, and science? How much of contemporary life is the result of Renaissance ideals?



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7. “Bjerkely” marks the transition from Sophie’s to Hilde’s point of view. Both of the heroines in Sophie’s World are going through phases of rapid physical, intellectual, and emotional development. How do their lives, personalities, and philosophies compare? What makes Berkeley/Bjerkely an appropriate backdrop for putting such dualities in the spotlight?
8. What parallel does Hilde’s father build between the French Enlightenment and the United Nations? How does this parallel compare to the UN analogies in the “Kierkegaard” chapter? In what other ways does philosophy reverberate through-out current international politics?
9. Explain the “red-tinted glasses” experiment employed in the “Kant” chapter. What does Sophie discover about rationalists and empiricists along the way? How do these questions of perspective apply to issues in your own life?
10. In the “Romanticism” chapter, Alberto quotes a character from Henrik Ibsen’s Peer Gyntas saying, “One cannot die in the middle of Act Five.” What is your interpretation of this line? What do the poets and the other philosophers discussed in this chapter say about the nature of life and identity?
11. “In a sense,” Alberto tells Sophie, “Freud demonstrated that there is an artist in everyone.” Is this point of view valid? Compared to other notions proposed throughout the book, were Freud’s the most radical or the most mundane?
12. Discuss the concept of theaters and role-playing as they unfold in the novel. Do you agree with Alberto’s assertion that “the Baroque period gave birth to modern theater”? What were the playwrights involved in the “theater of the absurd” trying to say? How did their motivations compare to those of Shakespeare and his contemporaries?
13. In the “Big Bang” chapter, we find that stargazing is actually a form of time travel. How do these concepts of time shape the novel’s closing scenes?
14. More than once in these pages, the child’s perspective is mentioned as a paradigm for how philosophers should think or perceive. Though they are at an age when they are beginning to leave childhood behind, do Sophie and Hilde possess greater wisdom than their elders?
15. Sophie’s World encompasses numerous time periods, cultures, discoveries, and belief systems. How many of the novel’s terms and references were you already familiar with? Which aspects did you most want to research further?
16. Ultimately, what is a “philosophical project”? Does reading a novel—or any book—constitute a philosophical project? Does language limit or spur philosophical exercise? Can philosophy be learned?



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Summary from Goodreads.com

Discussion Questions from Farrar, Straus and Giroux