

REVIEW ARTICLE

Mystery Novels Unlock Doors to Philosophy

Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World* (tr. Paulette Moller), *The Solitaire Mystery* (tr. Sarah Jane Hails), *Hello? Is Anybody There?* (tr. James Anderson), *Through A Glass, Darkly* (tr. Elizabeth Rokkan), All published by Phoenix Books, London.

It was during the late eighties that Jostein Gaarder, a young Norwegian philosophy teacher, felt deeply disquieted on noticing a swelling unconcern towards abstract questions of philosophy amongst his teenage students. As a teacher who cared, devising an effective antidote was the only imperative for Jostein Gaarder. He had to prescript a therapeutic remedy for the epidemic insusceptibility towards seemingly esoteric but indispensable questions. We can escape them, he was convinced, only by forfeiting our claim to any share in our common human heritage. To regenerate the diminishing interest in enduring philosophical questions, he decided to meet the challenge by offering a "strange and wonderful book" for the young readers.

Jostein Gaarder chose to reveal the life of western philosophy from its origins in the form of a mystery novel running into 400 pages. In writing this novel, *Sophie's World*, he accomplished a rare feat — a creative fusion of the crafts of magical fiction, cultural historiography and philosophising. Authoring this novel was, for Jostein Gaarder, a novel way of sharing with the readers his perspicacious retrospections into some of the most difficult and brilliant arguments about the mysteries of life, world and existence.

On reaching home after the day's work at school, a fourteen-year-old Norwegian schoolgirl, young Sophie is surprised to find a mysterious envelope for her in the mailbox. It contained only a slip of paper no bigger than the envelope. It read: *Who are you?* ('Sophy' or 'Sophie' or 'Sophia', as no elementary textbook writer on 'philosophy' forgets to remind the new initiate, is the Greek term for 'wisdom' and 'philosophy' means 'love of wisdom'). Finding odd that she did not know who she was, she goes to the mailbox again and she finds another similar envelope. She tore it open, and found another note of the same size as the first one. *Where does the world come from?* It said.

For the first time in her life, Sophie felt it wasn't right to live in the world without at least *inquiring* where it came from. Putting these strange letters in Sophie's mailbox is the first move by an eccentric teacher, a mysterious hermetic, in giving a unique present to Sophie for her forthcoming fifteenth birthday—an exceptional correspondence course in philosophical issues and arguments. While Sophie is eagerly looking forward to the plans her Mom has made for the celebration of *this* birthday which means so much to her, the unseen source of these unusual letters remains a secret. Many curious happenings are intertwined with Sophie's anxious search for and the eventual encounter with the quaint recondite teacher, Albert Knox.

Magical in its playfulness and delightful in its well-structured explorations, *Sophie's World* achieves an invaluable interweaving of three levels or kinds of mediations related with distinctive human faculties—memory (history), imagination (literature) and reason (philosophy). This novel is an amazing tour, very justly conducted, into the diverse cultural roots of contemporary Western thinking as it has evolved through the last three millennia. Jostein Gaarder very cogently shows that the western philosophical heritage is an integral but a small part of the larger natural history of mankind. It is an invitation for an exciting and fruitful engagement in the discourses that wise sages, from all societies and cultures, have found significant to venture. The novel stimulates a craving for thinking about the meaning and purpose of life, role and place of human beings in the world. It sensitises us towards the potential of our own thinking. The intricacies of the past and current debates about the place and significance of knowledge, culture, science and values in our everyday life are focussed in a very clear, lucid and fascinating form within the narrative web of the novel.

In an earlier popular introduction to the history of western thought, rather ambitiously entitled *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant had chosen to weave his narration around some of the most fascinating episodes from the lives of the great philosophers. In contrast to Will Durant's stress on the personal biographical details from the lives of the great philosophers, Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* focuses on the sources of conceptual and existential perplexities and structures of philosophical arguments in narrating the evolution of western thought from the pre-Socratics to Sartre. Our attention is drawn time and again to our very human condition that humanity has been constantly "faced with a number of difficult questions that we have no satisfactory answers to. So now two possibilities present themselves: either we fool ourselves

and the rest of the world by pretending that we know all there is to know, or we shut our eyes to the central issues once for all. . . . In this sense, humanity is divided. People are, generally speaking, either dead certain or totally indifferent. . . . A philosopher is therefore someone who recognises that there is a lot he does not understand, and is troubled by it." Jostein Gaarder explicates the specific unfolding of human thinking in the Western Hemisphere without any misplaced Euro-centric bias or an unwitting neglect of the local specificity in undue preference for the allegedly global or cosmic universals.

In his subsequent novels, the author of *Sophie's World* continues to pursue his original project of reminding us of the urgency of humanising our sensitivity towards the sources and repercussions of the cryptic and dark dimensions of our circumstances and situations. Jostein Gaarder's more recent novels reveal the possible ways of reaching a graceful reconciliation with the dissonance of our human finitude. There are limits to our knowledge, will and existence. Our aspirations for immortality, omniscience, omnipotence and absolute perfection are beyond reach in the human realm. We must learn to live within human limits and come to terms with our ignorance, imperfection, failures, sickness, death and separation. But the most crucial obstacle to this course of learning is that the boundaries of human limits are so indefinite that the inhuman act of crossing the boundaries, violating the limits, can't be judged beforehand. We have no other option but to live with the constant strain of defining the indescribable limits for ourselves – limits bound to remain beyond our reach forever.

To bring to light the inescapable plight of our being human, Jostein Gaarder spins the narrative structure of his novels around irreparable conditions and circumstances. The themes of belonging and separation, remembrance and forgetting, fantasy and imagination, acknowledgement and recognition, promises and commitments, betrayals and deceptions, solidarity and communion, distancing and disowning, conflict and harmony, alienation, sense of emptiness, riddles of life, creation and death are reenacted anew to bring home the same truths. In literature and philosophy, unlike technology and science, we neither invent nor discover any new truths. We only discern the same truth time and again, whether we are able to restore it as carefully as our predecessors did, this is for others to see and tell.

These universal themes, characteristic of the eternal human condition, have been illustrated with very uncanny narratives closely

drawn from the distinctive historical, cultural and religious contexts of everyday life in the Norwegian and European societies. The superficiality and emptiness of the crowded megalopolises of the post-world war Europe has come under deep critical scrutiny in these narratives. Significant historical events such as the spread and rise of Christianity in Europe, German occupation of Norway during the Second World War, fear of another impending war and nuclear holocaust serve as a setting for the narrative construction of Gaarder's fantastic universe. Marvels of new medical, electronic, communication and spacecraft technologies with all their dark edges form the backdrop of action situations in these dazzling narratives

A father and his young son are in search of the woman lost to them in her fascination to find herself. A mysterious young visitor from the outer space lands in a house where a new baby is expected in the family. An angel converses on the secrets of heavenly and earthly life with a girl lying sick in bed while her family is preparing for Christmas celebrations. These are some of the situations from which Jostein Gaarder has constructed his fascinating narratives of mysterious happenings. Glittering frivolity of the fashion-world, shallowness of tourist industry, hopelessness of aimless consumerism, hubris of modern science, the deep gulf between the external rituals of religion and the inner life of the soul provide the ground for an excavation into the inner depths of human condition. Displaying a very keen eye for the details of location, character, situation, and a rare brilliance in speculating the unforeseen course of events, Jostein Gaarder shows his fine-tuned facility to reach the bedrock of eternal human concerns from very earthy contexts. It would not be difficult for a reader to find some close parallels or resemblance to these settings in one's own socio-historic-cultural context.

In constructing the narrative structure of *The Solitaire Mystery*, the metaphor of the pack of fifty-two playing cards has been very deftly handled for illustrating the magnitude of innovative capacities and powers of the human mind. Its fifty-two chapters, starting with the Ace of Spades and concluding with the King of Hearts, string the adventures of a twelve-year-old Norwegian boy Hans Thomas. This young boy is the son of an "illegitimate" child from a German soldier. Hans accompanies his father on a long journey across Europe all the way from Arendal in Norway to Athens in Greece. The father and the son are on a mission to search for the young boy's mother who 'went away to find herself' when Hans Thomas was just four. Later, it was

learnt that she had been lost in the world of fashion in search of herself. The young boy's "advice to all those who are going to find themselves is: Stay exactly where you are. Otherwise you are in great danger of losing yourself for ever." The young boy couldn't really remember what his mother looked like. But he just remembers that "she was more beautiful than any other woman." And his Dad adds that "the more beautiful a woman is, the more difficulty she has in finding herself."

Hans Thomas is in for a series of bizarre happenings during the journey. A baker gives him a bun containing a miniature book. A dwarf gives him a magnifying glass with which the miniature book can be read. And thus begins a fantastic time-travel into the past along the ongoing spatial journey towards an uncertain future. From the miniature book, Hans learns about Frode, a German ancestor. Shipwrecked in 1790, en route from Mexico to Spain, Frode had been forced to land on a deserted island. Left in total isolation, Frode invests into his pack of playing cards a life of its own. The four different sets of cards, spades, clubs, diamonds and hearts, symbolise the four main seasons. The red and black colours start signifying life and death. The total number of cards represents the fifty-two weeks of a year. Each card in the different sets, excluding the Ace, symbolises the different months of a year. The numerical value or the nomenclatural designation assigned to a card marks its value or status in a hierarchical structure; and so on. In this imaginary creation, once having come to life, every character functions smoothly, like a dwarf, without any ruffle. But a joker's entry disturbs this well organised taken for granted order.

"These fifty-two figures were all different, yet there was one thing they all had in common: none asked any questions about who they were or where they came from. In this way, they were one with nature.' The old man breathed deeply and sighed. 'One morning the joker jumped out from round the corner . . . and said, "There are four families in the village, with four Kings, Queens, Jacks, Aces and Twos to Tens." "That's right." "So there are four of each kind but there are also thirteen of each kind, because they are all either diamonds, hearts, clubs or spades." . . . But "I am the *joker!*" he exclaimed. "Don't forget that, dear master. I am not as clear-cut as all the others, you see. I am neither King nor Jack, nor am I diamond, club, heart or spade. Who am I?" he pressed. "Why am I the joker? Where do I come from and where am I going?" Thus dawns the spirit of questioning with the entry of this joker. A sense of uncertainty sets in the world where

everything had gone on in a tranquil and orderly routine earlier. The questioning spirit of the joker ruptures the bliss of ignorance. (And remember Socrates was one of the greatest jokers!).

The desecration of natural human curiosity by the convenient habit of "taking the world for granted" has been very effectively articulated in a conversation between the young Hans Thomas and his father. ". . . Dad didn't stop there. He gestured towards all the tourists swarming out of the tour buses far below and crawling like a fat trail of ants up through the temple sight. 'If there is one person among all those who regularly experience the world as something full of adventure and mystery. Do you know why most people just shuffle around the world without marveling at everything they see?' I shook my head. 'It's because the world has become a habit,' he said, sprinkling salt on his egg. 'Nobody would believe in the world if they had not spent years getting used to it. We can study this in children. They are so impressed by everything they see around them that they can't believe their eyes. That's why they point here and there and ask about everything they lay their eyes on. It's different with us adults. We have seen everything so many times before that we take reality for granted.'"

In *The Solitaire Mystery*, along with Hans Thomas and his Dad, we are on a constant move between the post-war Europe's world of fashion and tourism, new media blitz, and the ancient Greek world of Delphic Oracles, King Oedipus and Socrates. But this transition is never without passing through the deserted island inhabited by Frode and his animated cards. It is in this movement between the world of the ancient Greeks and the contemporary times that we learn along with them that 'Time doesn't pass and Time doesn't tick. We are the ones who pass and our watches tick. Time eats its way through history as silently and relentlessly as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. It topples great civilisations, gnaws at ancient monuments and wolfs down generation after generation. That's why we speak of the "ravages of time." Time chews and chomps—and we the ones between its jaws.'

Along with Hans Thomas, we also learn from his Dad that 'shapes and masks come and go and new ideas are always popping up. Themes are never repeated and a composition never shows up twice. . . . There is nothing as complicated and precious as a person, my boy—but we are treated like trash. . . . We skip around on earth like characters in a fairy tale. We nod and smile at each other as if to say, "Hi there, we're living there at the same time! We're in the same reality—or the same fairy tale. . . ." Isn't that incredible Hans Thomas? We live on a

planet in the universe, but soon we will be swept out of the orbit again. Abracadabra—and we're gone.'

'If we had lived in another century, we would have shared our lives with different people. Today we can easily nod and smile and say hello to thousands of our contemporaries: "Hi, there! How strange we should be living at exactly the same time." Or perhaps I bump into someone and open a door and shout: "HI, soul!" We're alive, you know, but we live this only once. We open our arms and declare that we exist, but then we are swept aside and thrust into the depths of history. Because we are *disposable*. We are part of an eternal masquerade where the masks come and go. But we deserve more, Hans Thomas. You and I deserve to have our names engraved into something eternal, something that won't be washed away in the great sandbox.' It is this longing, emphatically expressed by Hans Thomas's Dad, for surviving beyond our lives, the human ambition to cross the limit of mortality, which inspires us to try, in whatever ways that we can find for ourselves, going beyond our present reach. It makes us, humans, different from the rest of the living creatures. It makes us what we are.

Hello? Is Anybody There? narrates young Joe's encounter with a strange young boy from another world in the outer space. Joe, left behind by parents gone to a maternity hospital since another baby is expected in the family, is alone in the house. Mika, who has fallen out of his spaceship, lands on an apple tree in Joe's garden. Jostein Gaarder has created, relying on children's natural curiosity and related exploratory activities, a very engaging dialogue between Joe and Mika. Much of what they have to ask and tell each other has been drawn from the recent findings of contemporary astronomy, geo-physics, artificial intelligence, linguistics, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, evolutionary biology and biotechnology. In talking to each other, Joe and Mika discover that their ways of being born into the world, perceiving the world and sense of time are vastly different.

In trying to know more about each other, Joe discovers that very many differences between their thinking are rooted in the different ways in which we categorise our experiences of the world. Notwithstanding so many differences in their evolutionary history and biochemical composition, they also find out how similar they are. Joe learns from Mika that "Nothing in the world is ordinary. Everything that exists is part of a great riddle. You and I are, too. We are the riddle no one can guess." And Mika also underlines the most significant feature that they both share "Maybe asking questions, particularly

questions without answers, is most important of all the likeness we share, said Mika with a big grin". Joe learns from Mika that much times "an answer was worth much less than a question". Readers familiar with the writings of the great philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein may notice very loud and clear echoes from Wittgenstein's writings in Joe and Mika's conversations. It may be relevant to allude here that from the very first novel *Sophie's World* onwards, Jostein Gaarder's writings have consistently displayed a very deep influence of Wittgenstein's way of doing philosophy.

Hello? Is Anybody There? enthralls not only children to be curious about the mysteries of the universe but also provokes the grown ups to think anew about the wonders of the world. This conversation amongst two young people from different worlds raises the most basic questions about the very sources and goals of our lives.

Through A Glass, Darkly carries on the tradition of mystery novels that Jostein Gaarder started with *Sophie's World*. Its setting is a family preparing for Christmas knowing fully well that their young daughter Cecilia is unlikely to recover from her illness. Cecilia is not just mildly ill, for months she has been lying in her bed on the upper floor of the house sensing happenings below from the sounds she could decipher. Her family cares for her and provides her the best possible medical help. But Cecilia feels helpless when she compares her lot with other people in a mood of celebration. In her moments of despair, she feels tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. She picks up a tear with her finger and draws an angel on the windowpane. Realising that she has drawn the angel with her own tears, she wonders about the difference between 'angel tears' and 'tear angels'. She remembers her grandma telling her once that she looks like an angel.

In the middle of the night, Cecilia suddenly wakes up to find that an angel has stepped into her room through the window. The angel introduces himself as Ariel. He is no ordinary angel. Cecilia finds him to be very different from what she had heard or read about the angels. Slowly, Ariel and Cecilia get involved in a series of spirited conversations about heaven, God, life, death and the universe. In some of these conversations, Gaarder's injunction to be forever humorous is manifest very sharply. "Angels don't grow on trees," he said. "In fact, we don't grow at all. So we can't be "grown-up" either." 'D'you mean grown-up angels don't exist?' He went into peals of laughter. For a moment there was silence. Then Ariel stretched out one arm with an elegant movement. "There are swarms of grown-up angels

in heaven"!' he exclaimed. ' "Swarms"! ' She lay staring up at the ceiling. ' My teacher says childhood is only a stage on the way to being grown-up. That's why we have to do all our homework and prepare ourselves for grown-up life. Isn't that silly?' Ariel nodded. 'Because it's really the other way round.' 'What is?' 'It's being grown-up that's only a stage on the way to more children being born.' Cecilia had a good think before she replied. 'But the grown-ups were created first. If they hadn't been, there would have been no children.' Ariel shook his head. 'Wrong again. The children were created first; if they had not been, there would have been no grown-ups.' Continued Ariel. 'Children are the ones who come into the world first. The grown-ups always come limping after. Limping more and more the older they get.'

Talking about the mistake Adam and Eve made in *becoming* grown-up, Ariel tells Cecilia that they were tempted by the serpent to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, 'and then they began to grow. The more they ate, the more they grew. That's how they were gradually driven out of their childhood paradise. The little rogues were so hungry for knowledge that, in the end, they ate themselves out of paradise.' There could be no harsher criticism of the negative character of the self-perpetuating, ever expanding information consumerism generated by modern science.

Ariel tells Cecilia 'The world is created anew, you see, every time a child comes into the world.' 'Because when a child comes into the world, in a way the world is quite new for that child?' He nodded. 'You could just as well say that the world comes to the child. To be born is the same as to be given a whole world—with the sun by day, the moon by night, and the stars in the blue sky. With an ocean that washes in over the beaches, with forests so dense that they are ignorant of their own secrets, with strange creatures running across the landscape. For the world will never become old and Grey. *You* humans become old and Grey. As long as children are put into the world, the world is as new as on the seventh day when the Lord rested.'

It is in her conversations with the angel Ariel that Cecilia learns to accept that human beings are made of flesh and blood, and nothing that is made of flesh and blood can have an eternal life. She recalls later that Ariel said, 'Nobody has "eternal life", not the angels in heaven, at any rate. Because angels don't "live", which is why we can't feel anything, and why we don't grow-up to be adults either.' With these conversations, Ariel shows her the way to prepare for leaving and

Cecilia's winter blooms into spring.

Through these sensitive depictions of moving images of human feelings, concerns and perplexities, bliss of sharing, anguish of unwanted partings, sickness, denial, loneliness, dread, despair, anger and hope, Jostein Gaarder sharpens and enhances our perceptions of our being human. We discover how difficult it is to act with care and concern towards our fellow human beings. By reminding us of the limits of being human, Jostein Gaarder persuades us to think afresh our taken-for-granted assumptions about the aims, methods, range and powers of modern science. We comprehend the essentiality or indispensability of acknowledging, practicing and creating ethical values in our everyday life. And most crucial of all, Jostein Gaarder's novels illuminate for us the worth of suffering for living an examined life, a life examined with care. These novels have been rightly acclaimed as "bedtime stories for grown-ups" in the splendid tradition of *Alice in Wonderland* and St. Exupery's *The Little Prince*.

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