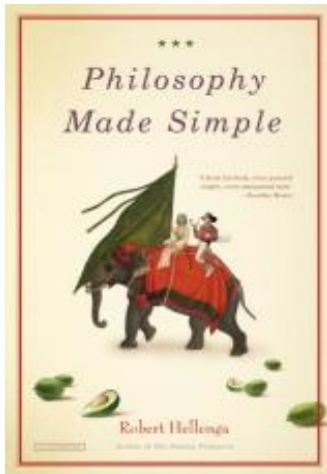


Philosophy Made Simple

by Robert Hellenga



About the Book

Rudy Harrington is ready for a new life. His daughters are grown, his wife has died, and the idea of running an avocado grove in Texas suddenly seems infinitely more appealing than staying in his rambling Midwestern house.

So a new life it is. Rudy heads off for a part of the world where he knows scarcely a soul. But he has a guide: a slender book called *Philosophy Made Simple*, each chapter highlighting the ideas of a different philosopher. No amount of Plato, Schopenhauer, or Sartre, however, can prepare Rudy for the surprises that emerge as he arranges for his daughter's Hindu wedding and gets to know Norma Jean - an elephant with a talent for painting - who is abandoned to Rudy's care and who leads him, ultimately, toward the prospect of a new love.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you think Rudy's decision to make a radical change in his life is motivated mainly by his daughters' having left the family home? Or is his move from Chicago to an avocado farm in Texas more self-motivated, sparked by his first reading of the great philosophers?
2. Is it surprising to you that Rudy, a high school graduate in the wholesale produce trade, would be interested in the wisdom of the ages, searching for something beyond the day-to-day? How is his level of education reflected in both his speech patterns and his skepticism about abstraction? Is his age a factor in his attitude? Is his being a Midwesterner? Is the way he addresses life attractive to you?
3. Is Rudy seriously attracted to any of the formal religious traditions that he is confronted with in the course of *Philosophy Made Simple* ? the radio evangelicals who predict the Second Coming, or Father Russell and his nonexistent congregation, or the Hindu priest (the pandit)?

4. Maria is a prostitute who becomes a florist; Siva Singh is a philosopher who requires the best in food and wine. Do you think that Robert Hellenga is making a point about the universality of human nature, beyond class and profession? Are both Maria and Siva, as well as Rudy and other characters in the novel, in thrall to "the mysterious tug of beauty on the human heart" (page 3)?

5. Do you agree with Rudy's assessment that "for the pandit, everything meant something; for Siva, nothing meant anything" (page 196)?

6. How does Rudy show that he is devoted to his three daughters even though he has moved far away from them? Does his thought "You're only as happy as your unhappiest child" (page 63) strike a chord with you? Do you find his acceptance of his married daughter's affair justifiable?

7. Norma Jean, an elephant, saves Rudy's life. Like Lord Ganesh, the Hindu elephant god, she seems to be able to remove all obstacles. What are some of Norma Jean's human characteristics? Do you believe that elephants can cry? How is Norma Jean's death by a bolt of lightning an extreme example of the workings of fate in the lives of the human characters in *Philosophy Made Simple*?

8. Early in the novel, Rudy realizes that he is a Platonist and that his wife was an Aristotelian who had no use for a Platonic realm beyond the world of the senses. How is Rudy changed and comforted by the Hindu idea that all life is illusion? How is he affected by the existential notion embodied in his wife's blank tapes ? that the meaning of our lives is not something we discover "out there" but something we create for ourselves?

9. What is the significance of Rudy's daughter's wedding having been carried out in the end by a justice of the peace, rather than by the pandit?

10. Do you think Rudy's attraction to Nandini, his daughter's Hindu mother-in-law, is spurred more by her philosophy of life or by her great competence and obvious caretaking instincts? Do you think Rudy and Nandini will meet again? Could Rudy be as content in India as in Texas, considering what he's learned about both change and life?

11. In the end, what Rudy wants is reality ? Kant's "thing in itself, things as they really are." One reviewer observed that, in the ancient quarrel between literature and philosophy, Robert Hellenga and Rudy come down on the side of literature, which is closer to life as we live it than is philosophy. Do you agree with this opinion?

Author Bio

Robert Hellenga was educated at the University of Michigan and Princeton University. He is a professor at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, and the author of the novels *THE SIXTEEN PLEASURES*, *THE FALL OF A SPARROW*, *BLUES LESSONS*, *PHILOSOPHY MADE SIMPLE* and *THE ITALIAN LOVER*.

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