
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

Philosophy Made Simple

A N O V E L

Robert Hellenga



A conversation with Robert Hellenga

Philosophy Made Simple marks the return of the Harrington family, whom readers first encountered in your novel The Sixteen Pleasures. Why did you decide to bring back these characters?

In the original version of *The Sixteen Pleasures*, Margot's father, Rudy, had his own chapters. These were ultimately deleted, because the editor and I agreed that they impeded the forward movement of the novel. I published these three chapters separately, as short stories, but I never got over the feeling that I still had some unfinished business with Rudy. So I just took up his story where I'd left off — on an avocado grove in Texas.

How did you first learn about elephants that paint, and at what point in the creative process did Norma Jean start to take shape?

Several years ago I heard a spot on NPR about elephants painting and thought immediately of a circus elephant named Norma Jean, who was struck and killed by lightning in Oquawka, an old Mississippi River town not far from my home in Galesburg, Illinois. Once a year or so we drive over to Oquawka to have a look at the river and to stop at Norma Jean's grave, which is in a little park near the center of town, right where she died. I put this elephant information together with the fact that Rudy's middle daughter was already, in *The Sixteen Pleasures*, engaged to an Indian, so Norma Jean appeared in *Philosophy Made Simple*, which was just a rough sketch at the time.



There are elements of King Lear in Rudy Harrington, and you've mentioned that, like Lear, you have three daughters. Is he a favorite classical character of yours?

It's really the archetypal situation of the Lear family that I'm drawn to — the king and his three daughters who are the staple of fairy tales. After *The Sixteen Pleasures* and *The Fall of a Sparrow*, I decided it was time to write a novel that was *not* about a father and three daughters. So I wrote *Blues Lessons*. But then I was drawn right back to the fairy-tale archetype in *Philosophy Made Simple*. Fortunately, the parallel is not exact: my wife is very much a part of the real family constellation, and our two older daughters are not nearly as wicked as their fairy-tale counterparts.

Rudy works in produce, as did your father. Are there other elements of your father — or other people you have known — in Rudy, or do the similarities end there?

My father was also a professional basketball player, though in those days there was no NBA. It was all semipro industrial leagues. The fact is, Rudy is much more easygoing than my father was, but now that I think of it, all sorts of things from my father have a way of sneaking in. For example, Rudy refers to a boatload of black-market avocados from the Cayman Islands. The men who worked for my father told me that he once had a boatload of black-market cement, something he always denied.

Your novels are generously peppered with references to works of art — books, songs, poems, paintings. How important is the role of art and literature in your life? And how do you think that's expressed in your novels?

Literature has always played a very important role in my life. My grandmother read the King Arthur stories to me when I was little; my mother read Dickens to me; and I read to my three daughters every night for years. And of course I read on my own. That's what I do. I feel that I understand literature. I don't have to ask myself, do I like this story or this novel? Art and music are more difficult, probably because they're nonverbal. I don't know how to deal with them. But in a way that's an advantage: they are mysteries that I don't understand, so I keep pecking away at them, trying to get a foothold.

What works of art and what other writers have inspired you and shaped your journey as a novelist?

My favorite novel is Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. I always have a copy nearby. I especially like the momentum of the novel. There's an urgency in the narrative voice, something that tells me that story is so important that I don't need to fool around with narrative tricks or verbal fireworks. Let me just set things down as clearly as possible.

Three contemporary novels that I often return to are Gail Godwin's *Finishing School* and *Father Melancholy's Daughter* and Sue Miller's *Family Pictures*.

In both Philosophy Made Simple and The Sixteen Pleasures, your characters find solace — and guidance — in books. As you mapped out these novels, which came first: your characters or the books that save them?

I've always been a Gutenberg Man, a person whose life has been shaped by books, so it's only natural that my characters are, too. What Woody, in *The Fall of a Sparrow*, finds in the great Homeric



poems is a way to affirm the goodness of life without lying or deceiving himself, without affirming spiritual beliefs that he's not sure about. On the other hand, I like to test the wisdom of the ages against my own personal experience, and that's the task I set for Rudy in *Philosophy Made Simple*.

What's your favorite part of the writing experience?

My favorite part is revising. I think that insight, inspiration, creativity — whatever you want to call it — is more likely to strike in the fifth or sixth draft than in the first.

Are there any persistent themes in your novels?

All my protagonists are torn between the desire to affirm that this world is enough and the sense that there's some spiritual realm that calls to them from beyond this world. They all like to sing "Mr. Jelly Roll Baker," and they all write with expensive fountain pens.

Questions and topics for discussion

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?



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