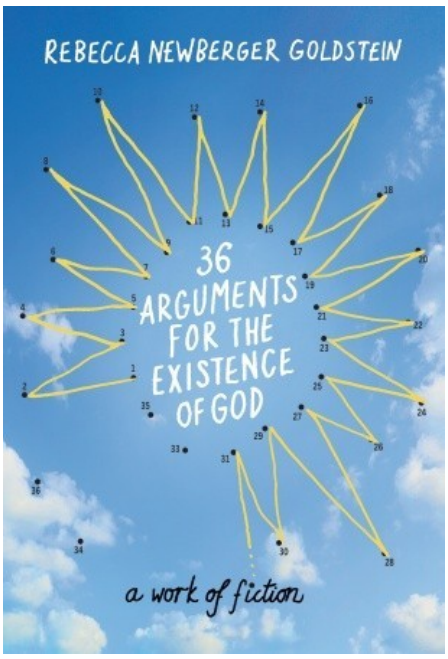

36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction

Rebecca Goldstein

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Equally adept at fiction (a winner of the National Jewish Book Award) and philosophy (a recipient of the MacArthur Foundation genius prize), Rebecca Newberger Goldstein now gives us a novel that transforms the great debate between faith and reason into an exhilarating romance of both heart and mind.
At the center: Cass Seltzer, a professor of psychology whose book, The Varieties of Religious Illusion, has become a surprise best seller. He's been dubbed the atheist with a soul, and his sudden celebrity has upended his life. He wins over the stunning Lucinda Mandelbaum-the goddess of game theory-and loses himself in a spiritually expansive infatuation. A former girlfriend appears: an anthropologist who invites him to join in her quest for immortality through biochemistry. But he is haunted by reminders of the two people who ignited his passion to understand religion: his teacher Jonas Elijah Klapper, a renowned literary scholar with a suspicious obsession with messianism, and an angelic six-year-old mathematical genius, heir to the leadership of an exotic Hasidic sect. The rush of events in a single dramatic week plays out Cass's conviction that the religious impulse spills out into life at large.
In 36 Arguments for the Existence of God, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein explores the rapture and torments of religious experience in all its variety. Hilarious, heartbreaking, and intellectually captivating, it is a luminous and intoxicating novel.

36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction Details

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From Reader Review 36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction for online ebook

Elyse says

Rebecca Goldstein is a very bright woman: NO QUESTION! --- I wanted to love this book (having enjoyed "The Mind-Body Problem" several years ago), ----but this book is a PRETENTIOUS MESS. ----sometimes leaving the reader with an unquenchable desire to scream! At times I HATED Rebecca Goldstein for making me work so hard reading her book...and for what? why? Yet---I kept reading....(with discomforting intensity).....Excruciatingly at times! (but I would not give it up). Much of her style of writing seems like mental masturbation---and after awhile, I want to say, "shame on you, Goldstein"!

Who is she writing her novel for, huh? Why not just write a text book? Seems Goldstein has one foot in both camps: (textbook world--and fiction world). They don't mix well together in this book. It just makes Goldstein look like a show off! She can impress us with sententious vocabulary and embellish a sentence magniloquently---but she lacks real heart---and her story is TOO ALL over the damn place. (lacking needed simplicity).

Brian Bohmueller says

36 Arguments for the Existence of God: a work of fiction

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's novel builds a backbone around the depiction of the life of Cass Seltzer as he rises to become the world renowned “atheist with a soul.” The non-linear plot development creates an intriguing look inside Cass's critical moments along his path as romantic pursuer, academic achiever, and simple human being.

Nontheists will revel in this book's assertive position of godless living. As the title implies there is an underlying plotline that seeks to aver a rational point of view toward the often silly pursuits of religionsists. However, I was most impressed with Goldberg's depth in creating Cass's three primary romantic partners. Each resonates with a different chord at a different time in his life. Also his friendship with a precocious, Hasidic protege, Azarya is quite moving. Each of these relationships swells with emotional and intellectual grit and is the primary lifeblood of the novel.

If there is one weakness that the novel suffers, it is overly academic wordiness. Sometimes the rhetoric becomes more than a bit tangled in the stuffiness of oblique references and deluge of multisyllabicism. Professor Klapper, Cass's PhD sponsor, is at the heart of much of this high-brow gibberish, and serves as a foil for Cass's more straightforward thinking, and is worth waddling through, given Cass's eventual rise

beyond uber-intellectual and uber-metaphorical spiritualism.

The appendix of this novel actually details 36 arguments for the existence of God with commentary on their history and flaws. At first, I had thought the novel itself would more closely include the arguments in the novel. Instead, the novel weaves an intricate world in an academic setting alongside insightful discussion of various forms of rational and irrational thought.

Lena says

Rebecca Goldstein's new novel takes a look at some of the issues raised by the new atheist movement through the lens of fiction.

Cass Seltzer is a psychology of religion professor at an obscure college who has been thrust into the spotlight by the sudden success of his book, The Varieties of Religious Illusion. Both Seltzer's fictional book and this novel contain an appendix, 36 Arguments for the Existence of God. The appendix is not actually an argument in support of god, but rather details the most common arguments believers lean on to justify their faith alongside logical refutations of each those arguments. But though his refutation of believers' arguments is ruthless, Seltzer is that rare atheist who is still capable of understanding the mystical, euphoric side of religion, a capacity that has gotten him labeled by the media as "the atheist with a soul."

The novel opens with a sleepless Seltzer standing on a bridge, pondering the unbelievable run of good luck he has experienced since writing his book. The resultant fame has provided him not only with wealth, but also a teaching offer from Harvard and the attentions of a beautiful and brilliant game theorist.

The story then goes back in time to trace Seltzer's journey from the beginning. He was a medical student when he fell under the sway of a charismatic professor teaching something called "Faith, Literature and Values." Selzter switched from pre-med to become one of this professor's disciples, immersing himself in a much less tangible course of study that ultimately led him to reconnect with his Hassidic roots.

Throughout the telling of this tale, Goldstein alternates back and forth between Seltzer's modern day life and flashbacks of the experiences that led him to it. The journey he takes is a thoughtful and interesting one, and Goldstein portrays it in beautiful prose. But although I was immediately captivated by the start of this novel, I didn't find it as fundamentally satisfying as its premise had led me to hope I might. I suspect in large part this has to do with Goldstein's choice to make her points by contrasting the worlds of insular Hassidic Judaism and elite academia. These are worlds that are primarily foreign to me, and so extreme in their perspectives that I didn't feel I learned much that was new from her portrayal of them.

Still, I did enjoy aspects of this book, particularly the debate at the end between Seltzer and a noted Christian. I also found that the series of arguments for faith collected in the appendix was presented in such a way as to help me see some patterns in those arguments I hadn't noticed before. So I do think it's worth reading, but I think I would have ultimately found it more satisfying if it had addressed the issue less from the extremes and more from the middle.

Clif Hostetler says

I read this book with the expectation that it would provide the definitive, though fictional, wrapping up of the era of "New Atheism" literature (circa 2004-2008). It did that, sort of, but I found it to be even more of an ironic rendering of the academic environment found on a typical American college campus.

This book follows the story of Cass Seltzer, a bestselling author considered an “atheist with a soul.” While he doesn’t believe in God, he takes faith seriously. Before the unexpected success of his book he was a middling non-exceptional professor at an unprestigious liberal arts college. He is now suddenly famous—even Harvard wants him—which congers the jealousy of other academics who perceive their own self worth to exceed that of Cass.

The fictious book that has vaulted the main character to notoriety is titled *Varieties of Religious Illusion* and contains thirty-six arguments for the existence of God. Goldstein (the author of the book that's the subject of this review) is clever with the thirty-six arguments, even going so far as to name the thirty-six chapters after them and then including all thirty-six arguments in an Appendix at the end of the book.

The arguments in this 50-page Appendix are laid out in clear syllogistic form only to be dismissed by equally clear analysis of their flaws. I suppose there are people (i.e. students of philosophy) who will find these proofs of interest and worthy of scrutiny. Other readers will find the Appendix to be a waste of words.

The religious group principally encountered in this book is Hasidic Judaism, and the narrative follows the maturing of a child prodigy who is an apparent mathematical genius. At age seventeen he has the opportunity of an academic scholarship to MIT, but he turns it down because he is heir to Rabbi position of a Hasidic community. He's not all that interested in religion, but decides that it is his responsibility to allow the community's traditions to continue. Here's a quotation of this future religious leader:

> “... why do people the world over and in all times have such strong inclinations to believe what they have no evidence for, and to believe it so strongly that they shape their entire lives around it?” (p358)

At one point in the book the main character Cass gets drawn into a well publicized debate with a headline seeking conservative. The anticipation of this debate leads to the following observation as to why conservatives value tradition over reason:

> If liberals are going in one direction in the religion-versus-reason debates, defending the theory of evolution and secular humanism, neocons feel they have to head off in the opposite direction. (p294)

The author spends a lot of text on this debate which makes me wonder whether the author assembled the whole novel around this debate in order to display the arguments contained therein. The principle arguments for the existence of God are generally along the line that morality can't exist without God. It seems like a weak argument, but some readers may find it convincing.

The author is almost too clever for her own good. She works in subjects such as number theory which I'm pretty sure many readers find baffling. Could mathematics be another example of fundamentalist religion? Can prime numbers lead to the prime mover?

I was first attracted to this book because of the implicit irony of the juxtaposition of the title and subtitle. My

interest in the book was further enhanced by hearing an interview with the author on “Here and Now” radio program on 4/22/10. It was on this program that I heard this comment by the author:

> I think religion is so much more than belief in God. It is about community, it’s about being moved by certain historical narratives, it’s about self identity within the group, it’s a place to bring your existential dilemmas. Although I reject a belief in God I accept the many impulses that bring people to a religious community.

It is apparent from this quotation that the author considers herself, along with Cass of this book, to be an atheist with a soul.

Lynn says

I almost didn’t finish this book, and I wish someone had told me that the chapter on the Harvard debate (toward the end) and the Appendix (36 actual arguments and rebuttals for the existence of God) were the only parts worthwhile. These could stand alone and make a great 5 star book; so I'm glad I finished the book, otherwise I would have missed some great writing.

The best parts of the book were not part of the novel. In the novel, the characters were empty (Azarya is the exception), the dialogue was almost non-existent or at least not memorable, and there really wasn’t a great plot. This goes to show that great writers of non-fiction can be terrible writers of fiction. The main character, like almost all the others, seemed vapid. After 350 pages, I didn’t even know if I liked him. If you are a hostile progressive, you might enjoy the stereotyped characterizations of neoconservatives, but you have to wade through a lot of self-indulgent and tiresome writing to get to these parts, and most of it is in the debate chapter anyway.

I would give the Appendix and the previously mentioned debate chapter an excellent rating, but the novel itself was so appallingly bad I don’t feel justified in giving it anything more than 2 stars, and this takes into consideration the excellent portions of the book. 80% of the book is worthless.

Check this out from the library. Read the chapter, “The Argument from the View from Nowhere”, and the Appendix. It will be one of the best books you’ve read about religion.

I could be wrong, and fiction lovers may enjoy it. I’m not a lover of most popular fiction, and this book confirmed how I much I prefer good non-fiction to uncreative and uninteresting fiction. Fiction seems to require a special talent that doesn't have to be part of good non-fiction.

Jackmccullough says

This novel stands for the proposition that someone who is very smart, and may have very good and clear philosophical ideas, may yet be unable to write good, believable fiction.

The novel centers on Cass Seltzer, a professor of the psychology of religion who has become famous for writing a best-selling book about religious belief, and his relationships with his academic mentor, his

girlfriend, who is also a professor, his university (Brandeis, thinly disguised as "Frankfurter University"), and the Hasidic community his mother abandoned as a young woman.

I freely concede that the author has more inside knowledge of the politics and inner workings of academia, and I have no problem believing the ego and political conflicts present there. What I do have trouble believing is that anyone would take serious Jonas Elijah Klapper, the inflated gasbag Seltzer chooses to be his mentor.

Cass Seltzer, the main character, is well drawn and generally believable. The difficulty I had with him, though, is that until the climactic debate on the question Resolved: God Exists, his life choices and credulity give no hint of the intelligence he displays in the debate. He's supposed to be smart, but it's not good enough for the author to tell us: some evidence would be helpful. The other characters are weak, almost to the point of being props.

There are definite scenes of academic humor, and the god debate is pretty well done, but if Goldstein intended this as a novel of ideas, in which the questions of faith and doubt, religion and disbelief are played out in an engaging and believable way, I'm afraid she's missed the mark.

Carlo says

Hearing about this book being praised for having a unique ability to explore the religious belief "from the inside", and realizing that it was actually the explicit aim of its author, I really can't help but giving it a low rating. I believe it fails as regards its central premise, and apart from that it had a boring story that didn't at all provide me with an enjoyable experience while reading the book.

Apart from the fiction part of the book, there is an appendix that actually examines 36 serious arguments for the existence of God and refutes them beautifully one by one. The most ironic thing about this book is that one of the characters foreshadows that the appendix is much more interesting that the book itself. I would have easily rated the book 4 stars if there was nothing but the appendix. It was honest and showed the limitations of reason and the (low) probability of the existence of some deistic entity though not at all a God who gave us the Bible or its likes.

Also, the conclusion of the story is damnable and very passive. Apart from the fact that it lacks focus, it was as if the author is encouraging us to fully accept the reality of religions and religious beliefs without the least compromise. I believe that is a luxury we can no longer afford given the realities of the world.

No doubt Goldstein is a very intelligent person and one I would be delighted to discuss many questions with. She explores some very interesting questions sideways, like immortality, suffering, mathematics, but the whole is so lacking and trite that I didn't find anything new that hasn't been discussed many times over in much more engaging books by notable authors who Goldstein (though not criticizing them) seems to not be satisfied with. There is an actual debate in this book a la Hitch vs. Dinesh D'Souza that surprised me with its cliched arguments for the existence of God, where the main character demolishes the religious side. I was really surprised at one point to see the religious actually defending the Judeo-Christian morality. I believe there are lots of arguments for the existence of a deity made by people who are near-Deists which though I don't agree with are certainly more engaging and fun to think about and grapple with.

Gerald Camp says

Here are a few things I learned from this book.
1. PhDs only associate with other PhDs (or a child genius that certainly would have been a PhD by the end of the book if he hadn't decided instead to accept his obligatory heritage to become head Rabbi of a Hassidic sect.)
2. PhDs do not say "I love you" without first computing the probability that to do so will result in a) bliss, or b) hell.
3. If you write this year's best selling book on athiesm you may get offered a professorship at Harvard. (But beware, it may cost you the girl if she is smarter than you).
4. Being a professor at Harvard is probably better than being a professor at Frankfurter University. Especially if getting over losing the girl takes only 72 hours!
5. The argument from human suffering is the only argument for the non-existence of God that is necessary to refute all 36 arguments for the existence of God.
6. Reading about characters who only talk PhD to each other can be great fun.
Loved the book!

Ms.pegasus says

36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD pairs philosophy and fiction as if they were conjoined twins. An appendix summarizing both 36 philosophical arguments for the existence of God and refutations performs double duty. In addition to summarizing a branch of philosophical inquiry, the appendix is also the conclusion of the fictional book, “The Varieties of Religious Illusion,” authored by the main character Cass (Chaim) Seltzer, professor of the psychology of religion. The attentive reader should jump to the appendix shortly after being introduced to Cass. (I neglected to do so and suffered from my ignorance of Goldstein's many literary allusions).

Although requiring a shift in mindset, the “Arguments” are far from pedantic. Argument #1, the Cosmological or First Cause argument, will even feel familiar to students of Thomas Aquinas, or attendees of parochial school. Goldstein formulates it as follows:

1.Everything that exists must have a cause.
2.The universe must have a cause.
3.Nothing can be the cause of itself.
4.The universe cannot be the cause of itself
5.Something outside this universe must have caused the universe.
6.God is the only thing that is outside of the universe.
7.God caused the universe

Another familiar argument is her Argument #3, the "Argument from Design" (appropriated by the Creationists). Argument #31, "Pascal's Wager", introduces a decision matrix as an analytic tool. It posits four choices based on parameters of belief and the fact or fiction of God. Goldstein follows her formulation with a witty commentary on the flaws of the argument. Even those unschooled in philosophy (like myself) will delight in her refreshing prose: *“[Pascal's Wager] assumes a petty, egotistical, and vindictive God who punishes anyone who does not believe in him. But the great monotheistic religions all declare that 'mercy' is one of God's essential traits. A merciful God would surely have some understanding of why a person may not*

believe in him (if the evidence for God were obvious, the fancy reasoning of Pascal's Wager would not be necessary), and so would extend compassion to a non-believer. (Bertrand Russell, when asked what he would have to say to God, if, despite his reasoned atheism, he were to die and face his Creator, responded, 'Oh Lord, why did you not provide more evidence?').”

The fictional work is structured into 36 chapters titled as “Arguments...” like the appendix. However, these arguments are a succession of shifting perspectives. Chapter 1, the “Argument from the Improbable Self,” introduces the reader to Cass, a professor in the psychology department at Frankfurter University, an institution forced to glean provender in the shade of mighty Harvard. Seltzer is the improbable author of “The Varieties of Religious Illusion,” a book which has improbably catapulted him to rock star status. Earnest, self-effacing Cass is now a celebrity. The book has risen to the top of the New York Times bestseller list. NPR courts him. His fame is the conduit to a highly improbable relationship with Lucinda Mandelbaum, a colleague at the opposite end of both the personality and scholarly spectrums. Admirers have dubbed her the Goddess of Game Theory; readers will find the appellation of The Fanger, bestowed for her ferocious debating style, a more eloquent fit.

Cass has a history of improbable experiences. Chapter 3, the “Argument from Dappled Things”, relates his romantic misadventures, one of the recurring themes of the book. His first wife, Pascale, was a neurotic, emotionally volatile, self-absorbed French poet. Cass adored her. The reader's own opinion is soon validated by the snarky appraisal of Cass' sympathetic colleague Mona, after Pascale divorces Cass.

Like the dappling effects of sunlight, ironies and shifting perspectives nicitate in this book. When a fellow graduate student, Gideon Raven, mentions the View from Nowhere, Cass mistakes his reference to the nondescript bar and student hangout for a book authored by the philosopher Thomas Nagel. At a lecture on moral choice, Lucinda Mandelbaum argues that the Milgram experiment is an example of escalation game theory. Gideon exemplifies that same escalation game in action. He has spent 12 years and counting as a graduate student and acolyte of famed professor Jonas Elijah Klapper. Gideon advises Cass to cut his losses and go back to his pre-med major. Gideon admits that he is doubling down on the receding goal of a doctorate because he doesn't want to write off the years he has already invested.

Serious symbolism and comic reality collide in Goldstein's description of the Hassidic ritual of *shirayim*, a ritual meant to connect the mystical powers of the Rebbe to his people through the sharing of food. Cass notes: *“They [the congregants] looked like the fans at Fenway Park when a long foul ball was hit into the grandstand. Hasidim had flung themselves onto the gigantic table, squirming forward on their bellies to get a piece of fruit that hadn't made it into the tiers. There had also been pieces of potato kugel that the Rebbe had distributed with his bare hands. The pandemonium of the event — there was shouting and tussling, not to speak of food being flung — had ripped Cass entirely out of the rapture that had seized him while Azarya spoke.”*

Goldstein excels at creating memorable characters. Jonas Elijah Klapper, Cass' charismatic mentor, is a megalomaniac with a penchant for obscure courses with alliterative titles like “The Sublime, the Subliminal and the Self"; and “The Manic, the Mantic and the Mimetic.” Klapper delivers a prestigious lecture entitled “The Irony of Eternity.” Unfortunately, the academic host introduces it as “The Eternity of Irony.” Cass' horrified reaction contrasts with the reader's perception that the transposition is insignificant to any grasp of meaning. Cass' hero-worship is balanced by Roz Margolis' irreverent ridicule. Roz is a free-wheeling anthropology student. She dubbs Klapper “the Klap” and his pontifications as “thunder-Klaps.” Likewise, Sy Auerbach, Cass' literary agent, seems to have Klapper in mind when he derides expounders of “obscure references rendered in dead languages falling from their lips like flecks of food off a messy eater.”

Despite Gideon's warning, Cass is drawn to the brink of the rabbit hole, and the reader is treated to an ever escalating spoof of academic vanity and delusion which climaxes when Klapper learns that Cass is related to the Rebe of Valdener, the head of a nearby Hassidic community called New Walden. After a madcap roadtrip with Roz as chauffeur, the character of Azaria, the 6 year old son of the Rebbe is instroduced. Azaria is a math genius, innocently enchanted with the mysteries of prime numbers, the occasion for Goldstein to launch into yet another tangent.

Despite the array of memorable characters and engaging prose, this book never coalesced into a satisfying novel for me. The “36 arguments” template and the nomenclature of the chapters felt forced. “The Argument From the Longing on the Gate” (Chapter 16) and “The Argument from Fraught Distance (Chapter 22), for example, document a series of email exchanges between Cass and Gideon. The material was superfluous, as if the author was grasping for material to fill a requisite 36 vessels.

Deprived of its philosophical twin the fictional narrative would proceed with a diminished resonance. However, the arbitrary chapters that jump backwards and forwards in time contributed to a choppiness in the narrative. Goldstein unleashes too many variables into her story. The trajectories of Cass' relationships with Pascale, Roz and Lucinda jostle for space with Klapper's paradox shift, Hassidic ritual and genealogy, a philosophic debate with a neo-conservative Harvard economist, Euclid's proof for an infinite number of prime numbers, musings on gematria, the riotous absurdities of academic rivalries, elemental game theory, a riff on the thoughts of Thomas Nagel, an exploration of moral value, and a brush with the technical meaning of the term “rigid designator”. The result is a chaotic narrative which feels overly long.

This was one of my forays outside of my comfort zone. While appealing to a wide spectrum of interests, Goldstein also runs the risk of leaving many in that spectrum, myself included, dissatisfied.

Margaret says

4/5

You wouldn’t know it from the title, but Rebecca Goldstein’s *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* is a novel. True, it carries a 52 page Appendix, also titled “36 Arguments for the Existence of God,” which lists 36 arguments, many of which you may have seen in your intro to philosophy class, then outlines and argues against each.

Even that nonfiction (or mostly nonfiction—I didn’t check but some of those 36 arguments seem pretty new to me) is a part of the novel as it was supposedly written by Cass Seltzer, our protagonist, and attached at the last minute as the appendix to his bestselling book *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*. But the 344 pages that come before that appendix in Goldstein’s book are fiction and they are the heart of the matter here, much as Cass says when talking about which mattered more in his own book, the book or the appendix: Cass would say all along

> That his Appendix was only an appendix, and that it has little to do with the text; and that the text is written not out there but in here, in the emotions that are so fundamental that we spread them onto a world of our imagining . . . .

The novel has 36 chapters with each chapter title beginning with the words “The Argument from . . . .” What

comes afterwards in those chapter titles is not one of the arguments listed in the Appendix (except for Chapter 1, which is argument 13 in the Appendix, an argument I admit I'd never heard of before). Instead, the words following "The Argument from" in the chapter titles have much to do, as we might expect, with what goes on in each chapter. And the sum of those chapters is perhaps more persuasive as a series of "arguments" for the value, meaning, and purpose of our lives than are the 36 arguments in the Appendix all together.

Even as I was caught up in Cass's life story (he's one of the sweetest protagonists I have come across in quite a while), I couldn't help wondering for whom Goldstein intended this book. Not for the reader who is uninterested in philosophy, religion, science, mathematics, psychology, and so on, as this book is full of discussions and arguments about all of the above and more. Goldstein earned her doctorate in philosophy at Princeton and taught philosophy at Barnard. She has written nonfiction books about philosophers Spinoza and Gödel and a third with the intriguing title *Plato at the Googleplex: Why Philosophy Won't Go Away*. It's not a surprise that *36 Arguments* is loaded with all sorts of intellectual discussions. At the same time this novel is not for the person who is so overly invested in all of the above that (s)he cannot stand the perpetual puncturing of pompous professors, grad students, and other academic hangers-on that Goldstein includes in her novel. So it's both: enjoy all the deep talk and laugh at all of the very human foolish nonsense.

The novel itself barely has a plot in present time. The book takes place during the week that Cass's current lady love, Lucinda Mandelbaum, is off giving an academic talk about game theory. Their contact during that week is limited to occasional email exchanges. The novel ends shortly after Lucinda returns to Cass and to Cambridge. All the rest of the novel focuses on Cass's past, especially his years as a grad student of one Jonas Elijah Klapper, Extreme Distinguished Professor of Faith, Literature, and Values. Klapper is the entire department, and he is a kind of overbearing overwhelming sort who knows that he knows all and that all others know little. Klapper reminds me in a way of Harold Bloom, Professor of English at Yale, who in his heyday claimed to be an authority on almost everything, including Jewish texts, Irish poets, ancient texts, etc. (Aside: When I was a grad student at Rutgers, Bloom came to give a talk. I had a good seat, close in and well-upholstered. It took almost no time for me to doze off. Yes, Bloom's sonorous voice helped, but I was a full-time grad student, teaching and taking courses, and my children were still pre-schoolers then. I was always exhausted.) Other characters include Cass's former wife, the French poet, Pascale Puissant; and a former girlfriend and current friend, Roz Margolies, an anthropologist interested in gaining physical immortality. We also meet several family members; my favorite is Azarya Scheiner, who when we first meet him is the six year-old son of an exalted chief Rebbe of the Valdener Hasidic sect. Azarya is an incredibly gifted mathematician and all around genius. And he is also the sweetest child (and later young man) who serves well to make Hasidism clear and sane, even to those who know little or nothing about ultra Orthodox Judaism. Cass's mother had grown up in that sect, but had run away when she was young. Cass was brought up well outside the sect. But the Valdeners are family, even if they are faithful and Cass does not believe.

The book ends with a great debate. To be proven: God exists. Cass is the speaker who argues that He doesn't. Whatever you think of the arguments in this debate, I found them compelling on both sides. We could all learn lots about reasoning and argument by following what both debaters say. At the same time Cass makes his case against the existence of God, he also clearly values The Valdener sect, which knows God exists and would never argue about it. The readers will see very clearly that Cass has earned his sobriquet of the atheist with soul. Enjoy—this book offers food for the mind and the soul.

Kathrina says

There is no point in writing my review, as Mike has already thoroughly and beautifully covered every point I might wish to make. His criticisms are well-justified and true, and his wrestling with the issues presented are synonymous with my own. This is a philosophy text disguised as fiction, and yet the characters do not quite perfectly transport the theme as the author intended, but it is an admirable attempt at a formidable ideal. After a long preamble of establishing its context, the book ends on a crescendo of proof that makes a good case for atheism, but also a good case for lack of faith in any human relationship, as well, and leaves the reader feeling a bit untethered. It's not that the faith we misplace in others is what destroys us, but rather the tendency to have faith in something/someone outside ourselves leaves us too vulnerable, our fates too unpredictable; the only dependable faith we should ascribe is a faith in ourselves and our uniquely human gift to advocate for ourselves and for others, the germ of the human conundrum. Or so I gather. There's a lot of food for thought here, but, like any discussion on the existence of God or the purpose of faith, ends with more questions than answers.

Jason says

1. In the mid-eighties, while becoming strangely entangled with a slightly-older woman, I had a moment of what seemed to be psychic insight. I don't want to say too much about this woman, or said entanglement, but it's crucial to know that she was a fervent believer in Eckankar, a new-agey mash-up of cool stuff from Buddhism, Hinduism, the Judeo-Christian mishegoss--your mind could go anywhere, could do anything, it was all god, and you were god, too, and if you just let go you would be one with all. I was not so secretly in love with this woman, so I was really ready to go anywhere, to do anything, to be one with her at least, if the opportunity arose. We sat at this diner, and a friend of hers comes in--another woman, slightly older, nothing in any way memorable about her appearance or carriage. My crush had been busy talking to skeptical me about Eck and she says, as her friend whom I've never met comes up to the table, "Quick--what does {NAME} do?" I said, "She's a construction worker."

Reader, she was.

I later got even more entangled with this woman, and it messed up my head, and she left her husband, and I graduated from college, and what a mess. The two of us together made about as much sense as Eckankar.

2. That is not a story about faith. It is a story about what I desired in others, which is another way of saying (for the me at that age) what I was worried about in my self, which is another way of saying (for the existentialist in us all) what am I here for, and how should I live, and with whom?

The protagonist of this novel, Cass Seltzer, has three romantic entanglements with women over the course of the narrative, and there is something similarly theological in his embrace of each respective lover. The novel is quite lovely in accepting Cass' entrancement, quite subtle in teasing out how the way we frame our relationships with others is akin to our imagined relationship with the metaphysical Big Other.

3. There are moments where Goldstein's ideas thrum just under the surface of the carefully-structured (and yet never schematic) plotting, the even more deliberately-rendered characterizations.

4. There are other, too-rare moments where the ideas and these shaped identities come most fully and vibrantly alive. Cass writes about the psychology of religion, and his most famous work posits that religious illusions shape so much of the way we organize our lives--it's a really intriguing argument, somewhat realized in the novel's underlying thrum, and somewhat (alas) lost in the crush of information and detail.

5. Many of the characters seem to be, for instance, thinly-disguised public intellectuals. Seltzer bears some relationship to Steven Pinker, Goldstein's real-life paramour, and Seltzer's current love Lucinda Mandelbaum has some (but here the stretching gets most stretchy) intriguing traits linked to the author herself. Other instances seem more determinedly a-ha, where reading of the overweight, arrogant, oracular, endlessly-pretentiously-preening Humanities scholar Jonas Klapper is constantly pointing toward Harold Bloom.

6. Harold Bloom drives me crazy, his blowhard pronouncements and certainties so much of what I've hated about teachers in all kinds of fields all my life, particularly in the Humanities (where I ended up).

7. It was, alas, only occasionally fun(ny) to spend so much time with a character based so intently on a personality I so intently dislike. There were glimmers of wit and fun had at the expense of Klapper, yet he so often got center-stage that stretches of the novel seemed less an incisive satire of such figures than a painful reenactment of their foolishness.

8. I have this problem with many academic novels. I'm pretty sure it's not that I'm an academic, not just hurt feelings and defensiveness. No, it's a deeper narrative problem: telling a story with lots of foolish pretentious people works if a) their silliness is being endlessly gleefully mocked (see, e.g., Kingsley Amis) or b) their silliness is offset by a peculiar generous engagement with their foibles (see, e.g., Richard Russo). But here Jonas K is a pain in the ass, and I can rarely see why Goldstein is so enamored with him (despite occasional barbed derision and occasional empathetic affirmation of his humanity), and I *never* got a handle on why Cass Seltzer became his acolyte and stuck by his side for so long.

9. Cass Seltzer is interesting in the way hapless comic protagonists can be -- he is something of a cipher to himself, and he is buffeted about by the crazier, more outsized personalities all around him. And yet he is less interesting, in the way some hapless protagonists can be, in that his own beliefs and behaviors are largely a cipher to us readers, too.

10. There are long stretches of this book dealing with Hasidism, with deep roots and ideas of the Kabbala, with an astonishing child savant in that shtetl.

11. Even with those long stretches explicating the beliefs, I was mostly at a loss trying to make sense of how and why its people believe. People asserted and affirmed lots of beliefs (and lots of skepticism), but for a novel I'd assumed would be very focused on not just what but why people believe (or not), there remained a disconnect between some of its ideas (the psychology of religion, particularly Seltzer's intriguing ideas about how that explains much of our behavior) and its plotted and empeopled narrative. The story didn't fully reveal and enact such ideas, at least not for me.

12. The book had an ornate, intriguing structure that did keep me reading, and did engage. Yet I am damned if I can really pull together some clear sense of why and how the numbered arguments or just the particular organization of the novel mattered. It had a propulsive narrative momentum, but the logic of its conceptual structure was confusing to me.

13. I'm seeming harsh here, and perhaps I'm complaining obliquely about a book I had really wanted to read, and mistakenly thought this book was that book. It *is* a book about the way people grapple with faith and reason, and about the academy, but it is not a book really revelatory about those things. They are plot elements, perhaps even a bit MacGuffinesque; I guess I ended up thinking it was a book about some characters, who happened to be believers in X or professors of Y -- rather than a book about the concepts, which happened to use these particular characters to reveal those concepts.

The novel closes with a debate between Seltzer, public atheist, and a defender of the faith (a neocon Economics prof, who might be some real-life figure I couldn't place), and while I quite enjoyed Seltzer's rebuttals, I thought the believer got short shrift: his arguments weren't just straw, they were limp sodden straw, and it was way too easy for Seltzer to make hay with them.

The novel then has an appendix, as did Seltzer's scholarly treatise, with a refutation of each of the 36 arguments for the existence of god. These are clear, effective. Of course, they don't fit neatly with the narrative.

14. 14 doesn't seem like a magical number, but what the hey, one more thing: I'm an atheist. I came to my disbelief through much thinking and soul-searching and then soulless-searching. The second least interesting thing I can say about my atheism is to righteously assert that I don't believe in god, 'though I don't (and feel pretty good about that), and the least interesting thing is to say that you shouldn't believe in god. There are way more than 36 interesting things to say about how we all struggle with belief and reason every day, all the time, in hundreds of ways. (She *was* a construction worker! My crush beamed at me in ways that made my heart explode, and only years later did I think I might have had a career in fortune-telling carnival cons, as I had such a gift for reading people and scenes that I could leap to such conclusions from so little evidence. And yet, all that insight feh!, I goofily smiled back and followed my crush out the door and spent another 18 months figuring out what the hell was wrong with my misplaced, misguided desire, and how I had utterly misread my crush and my own self.)

Mazola1 says

For all those who think you can't tell a book by its cover, I offer 36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction as Exhibit 1 against the proposition. Clearly, the title says it all -- logical arguments proving the existence of God are numerous, but are all works of fiction. Tackling that topic is a tall order to fill, and Goldstein gives it a good,although not entirely successful try. Her book is witty, erudite, and clever. It is also at times tedious and a bit too clever. And it drags seriously, and could certainly have benefitted from a good trimming by a ruthless editor.

I will confess that this book left me with mixed emotions. Goldstein almost flaunts her intellectualism, dropping the names of philosophers like a social climber might drop the names of celebrities at a cocktail party. Not a few of these references come across as inside jokes fully comprehensible only to professional philosophers or academics. Still, the book is quite enjoyable to read simply because it is at once the antithesis of mindless entertainment while still for the most part being entertaining and funny, something of a rarity in serious fiction. But somehow, I was never quite able to shake the feeling that the book was one big inside and perverse joke -- an intellectual poking fun at pointy headed intellectuals.

It's true that Goldstein's characters are more stereotypes than people, but for this type of work, that probably works. Through their interactions and verbal jousting, Goldstein is able to examine belief and non-belief in contemporary society. Her book is written in counterparts -- 36 chapters in the real world, together with an appendix stating 36 arguments for the existence of God with refutations purportedly written by the atheistic protagonist. Some of the arguments are historical and real, while others appear to be spoofs, and the refutations often seem as fatuous as the arguments. The message I gleaned was that the real proof of the existence or non-existence of God is found not in academic arguments but in the nuts and bolts of everyday life, and that emotional truth is more satisfying than scientific truth. Probably the joke is on every reader who takes this book too seriously.

Molly says

I hated this book so much I cannot compose a coherent review. It is both tedious and wildly annoying. It made me hate academia. None of the characters were remotely believable and most were unlikeable as well. No thank you to this book.

Greg says

One, this novel needed a few hundred more pages. There is the feeling at the start of the book that something much more epic is about to take place in the book. For the number of interesting characters created and different narrative threads going there feels like there should be more. I had the cynical feeling about fifty pages towards the end of the novel part of the book that at some point the author was told by her publisher to 'hurry the fuck up, this New Atheism trend might not last forever'; or maybe I'm just being unfair and expecting something sprawling and huge from a Pavlovian response to blue covers with clouds.

Two, if you ever wanted to know how to quickly kick the legs out from under just about any argument normally used for God's existence then the fifty page appendix laying out 36 arguments and the flaws of each argument will be like an added little treat. If you don't care about being able to disprove the existence of God, or if you think philosophy is kind of silly then one could safely skip the appendix with no lose to the quality of the book (as for example I would recommend Karen to do if she ever felt the need to read this, which I don't think will ever happen).

Sitting in the living hell that is the break room at work someone started to question me about this book, wondering if I was reading it because I was an atheist and was trying to become a born-again Christian. After this every time I read this book on the subway I was slightly worried about what other people were thinking of me, more worried actually that an evangelical might try to start up a conversation with me, thinking I might be one of them. This is one of my great fears in life.

I don't want to write too much about this point, because it gives away too much of the story, but I can't figure out what the author is trying to say in the way she wraps up one of the narrative threads in the second to last chapter. On a first reading I took the resolution of the narrative line to be straight forward, and there was nothing inherently unsatisfying with the way this story played out and taking the meaning of what happened to be literal; but as I thought more about the book at work I started to think that maybe there is an irony to this resolution.

This is a fun smart book, I could see it as a beach read for philosophy nerds. There is quite a bit of philosophy and other more or less esoteric things thrown at the reader, but the author does a great job of never overwhelming with it all, but maybe I'm biased because I'm the type of person who gets a chuckle out of a character saying "*Adorno*-ment" for adornment.

I don't know what else to say, MFSO should read this so we can have an alienating conversation on other people's comment threads about the book.

Ron Charles says

Are you a person of faith offended by claims that your savior is just another fanciful invention, like an elf or a unicorn? Or are you an atheist singed by predictions that you'll burn in hell?

Or are you just weary of this shrill, fruitless debate that surely hasn't changed a single mortal soul?

Well, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters!" Amid the multitude of bestselling books by atheists and apologists preaching to their respective choirs, here finally is an answer to prayer and reason: a brainy, compassionate, divinely witty novel by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein called "36 Arguments for the Existence of God." A Princeton-trained philosopher and a MacArthur "genius," Goldstein can make Spinoza sing and Gödel comprehensible, and in her cerebral fiction she dances across disciplines with delight, writing domestic comedy about Cartesian metaphysics and academic satire about photoelectric energy. "36 Arguments" radiates all the humor and erudition we've come to expect from Goldstein, and despite the novel's attention to the oldest questions, it has arrived at exactly the right moment, descending like a deus ex machina into our futile hissing match about the reality of God.

The story introduces us to the world's best-selling atheist, a psychologist who toiled away in the field of religious experience for two decades before Richard Dawkins and his legions made unbelief so hip, "edging out cookbooks and memoirs written by household pets." In the opening pages, Professor Cass Seltzer finds himself alarmed, almost terrified by the "indecent amount of attention" that has recently been lavished on him and his new book, "The Varieties of Religious Illusion." But it's not the body of Cass's book, it's the appendix -- added as an afterthought -- that has earned him millions of dollars and made him an international sensation. At the back of "The Varieties of Religious Illusion" (and at the back of this novel, too) can be found a list of 36 arguments for the existence of God, each calmly rebutted to illustrate that the success or failure of these arguments makes "little difference to the felt qualities of religious experience." The sense of spirituality persists, Cass claims, even if "The Argument from the Beauty of Physical Laws" (No. 6) or "The Argument from Answered Prayers" (No. 9) or "The Argument from Sublimity" (No. 34) is demolished.

Leaving aside Sam Harris's condescension and Christopher Hitchens's pugilistic tone, Goldstein has created a kinder, gentler atheist. Cass, she tells us, is the perfect spokesman for "the most distrusted minority," and she weaves him right into the fabric of our contemporary debate. The New York Review of Books calls him William James for the 21st century. Time magazine immortalizes him as "the atheist with a soul." Handsome, congenial and impossibly naive about others' motives, he "has a fundamental niceness written all over him." Even the gods of Cambridge, Mass., have sent their blessings: a lavish job offer from Harvard University.

Contemplating his good fortune on a cold Boston night, "America's favorite atheist" feels "moved by powers beyond himself." In such a transcendent moment, how can he resist "the sense that the universe is personal, that there is something personal that grounds existence and order and value and purpose and meaning"?

Goldstein relishes the devilish irony of this epiphany, and in the odd story that develops, she explores the tumultuous spiritual and intellectual path that brought Cass here. Little happens in the novel's present-tense narrative -- for 300 pages Cass just waits for his brilliant girlfriend to return from a conference -- but a series of hilarious flashbacks takes us through his days as a wide-eyed graduate student. The field of academic satire is crowded with such classics as "Lucky Jim" and "Straight Man," but "36 Arguments" sports so many spot-on episodes of cerebral pomposity that you've got to place this novel among the very funniest ever written. I was constantly snorting at these outrageous characters, from Cass's lupine first wife, a French poet

who repays all his devotion with disdain, to an anthropologist determined to live for 200 years.

But they're all overshadowed by the novel's pièce de résistance, Cass's adviser, Dr. Jonas Elijah Klapper, the sole member of the Department of Faith, Literature, and Values. Here is the oracular professor created to perfection: the grotesque love-child of Harold Bloom and Miss Jean Brodie. Dr. Klapper is a messianic poet-prophet who dazzles young Cass and leads him down a straight and narrow path to lunacy. He speaks all languages, moves himself to tears with his own "divine afflatus" and endures the world's ignorance with long-suffering patience. He is a man aware of "the loneliness of his loftiness, grown weary of the constant burden of delivering himself ex cathedra."

Like God's, Goldstein's ways are mysterious. The intellectual demands of "36 Arguments" are considerably magnified by the novel's convoluted structure and its inability to resist any tangential character or subject. These bright people banter about the philosophy of soul-making, mathematical models of game theory, the psychological benefits of suffering, the contemporary relevance of Maimonides, the poetry of Matthew Arnold. Much of this is parody of gassy intellectualism, but more of it is an exploration of the complexities of religious expression that will provoke and amuse anyone serious about the nature of faith.

Cass's search comes together in the novel's richest section, a comic and moving portrayal of a Hasidic community along the Hudson River. Inflamed -- or unhinged -- by the mysteries of the Kabbalah, Dr. Klapper grows obsessed with this secluded religious group and hopes to use Cass's familial connections to gain favor with its charismatic rebbe. Goldstein plunges into this esoteric material with finesse, explaining the intricacies of the Hasidic tradition while also satirizing its excesses and celebrating its intensity. Yes, the sect seems backward and dangerously anti-modern, a virtual prison for the rebbe's 6-year-old son, who shows signs of being a once-in-a-century mathematical genius. But Cass can't deny that the isolated Jewish community also offers its members a sense of imminent divinity, a kind of joy and communion that modern life rarely provides.

In the end, the novel's thesis seems awfully close to what Cass preaches: Whether or not God exists, in moments of transcendent happiness we all feel a love beyond ourselves, beyond anything. Goldstein doesn't want to shake your faith or confirm it, but she'll make you a believer in the power of fiction.

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Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

As I've mentioned here many times before, it's always a dicey proposition anymore when a modern author chooses to set a novel within an academic environment: get it right, like for example how Michael Chabon does in his early hit *Wonder Boys*, and you end up with a real winner, a deeply moving tale that uses the backbiting minutia of the ivory tower to tell a story greater than the sum of its parts, while get it wrong and you end up with...well, *all the rest* of the million sh-tty academic novels out there that now exist, a million interchangeable stories about whiny, pretentious real-world failures, living in some precocious little town in the Midwest, where they are constantly having affairs with their 19-year-old students and getting into petty fights over tenure with their fellow professors, the product of a million lazy f-cking academic authors who

literally can no longer think of anything to write about other than autobiographical screeds regarding how their farts smell like spring wildflowers. Thankfully, though, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's new novel, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*, falls firmly in that former Chabon camp; and since this tends to be a rare occurrence, I thought I would use it as an excuse today to do a little analyzing as well as critiquing, to examine why in my opinion this book succeeds so wildly when so many other academic novels fail so badly.

But first, to be fair, let's acknowledge the natural strengths of academic fiction, the reason its fans like it in the first place, which can basically be boiled down to two main points: that unlike so-called "genre" fiction, most academic novels don't worry themselves too much with trying to come up with an action-filled plot, spending their time instead constructing complex and rewarding character studies of the people involved, and thus telling us more about the true human condition than most crime or horror or sci-fi novels do; and since they tend to be written by people who study language full-time and are designed for other people who study language full-time, such novels tend to be written at a poetically high level of quality, purposely ignoring the plebes in order to please those instead who demand that their pleasure reading be dense, witty and challenging. And *36 Arguments* succeeds wildly at both of these things, essentially the story of an obscure east-coast academe whose specialty (combining the study of psychology and religion) usually gets poo-pooed by his more focused peers in both departments, until one day he writes a non-insulting guide to the "New Atheism" that accidentally becomes a runaway bestseller, and turns him into a famed pop-culture figure along the lines of Malcolm Gladwell or Richard Dawkins. (Why, he even gets to go on *The Daily Show*, an event that causes no end of jealousy among his peers.)

As you can already see, this is one of the first big ways that Goldstein sets herself apart from so many other academic authors: because even though her novel too is mostly a character study instead of plot-focused, she at least takes the time to come up with some fascinating *situations* in which to place her characters, and makes sure that her occasional big plot turns all count for as much as possible; because what this novel is really about is not the New Atheism bestseller itself but rather all the various relationships in this author Cass Seltzer's life, and the complex ways that both science and religion have ended up defining and shaping these relationships. Like Chabon's novel, then, this gives Goldstein an excuse to introduce a whole series of engaging, unique characters, ones who literally make the book a little brighter merely becuase of their interesting backgrounds: there is his former Hasidic mother, for example, now a modern urbanite who looks back on her youth with intellectual bitterness; Cass's girlfriend Roz from his student days, a "Singularity" obsessed hippie anthropologist who spends the '70s in the Amazon six months a year, and by the 2000s has founded a biochemical tech startup devoted to the quest of achieving human immortality; his next girlfriend after that, the judgmental and perfectionist French poet and rationality worshipper Pascale; then the next girlfriend after *that*, campus bigshot and famed game theorist Lucinda, who dresses like a punk and has a math theory named after her; and the man at the spiritual center of them all, the batsh-t crazy yet revered philosopher and academic mentor Jonas Elijah Klapper, who practically needs an entire book just to describe his wonderfully obtuse, utterly complicated personality.

The second big thing Goldstein does right, then, is to mix all these elements up, presenting a story out of narrative order yet with a "present day" thread of events holding things together -- and I should mention that on top of everything just mentioned, Goldstein stirs into this present-day mix a coming sold-out debate on the campus of Harvard with a Buckley-type neocon over the issue of whether God actually exists; a child math prodigy who happens to also be a sheltered Kabbalah Jew, being groomed against his will to be the island-dwelling community's next rebbe; a nervy and unhappy husband who's been a graduate student under Klapper for literally fifteen years, and who introduces Cass to the pleasures of drinking at dive bars with undergraduates; and a whole lot more, keeping us always on our toes even though ultimately not a whole lot actually "happens" over the course of this brainy, dialogue-heavy novel. Now combine this with Goldstein's superlative prose style, which manages to bridge the highbrow and lowbrow to a remarkably successful

degree; and then add the bigger issues that are ultimately being discussed through this storyline (the purpose of academia, the nature of genius, actual science versus blind faith in science [what Klapper deems "scientism"], and yes, the existence of God), and you have yourself a densely intellectual yet quickly moving book, the exact definition of a perfect airport pick for well-read nerds.

In fact, about the only real criticism I have of *36 Arguments* is at its very end, when Goldstein (an academic philosopher in real life, who is precisely known for using witty novels to explain philosophical issues) goes just a little too far, penning not only a 25-page literal transcript of an academic debate as the novel's finale, but a 50-page appendix afterwards that is literally a stand-alone philosophical treatise, the actual "36 Arguments" of the book's title along with Cass's supposed logical arguments against them all, which is so academically dense that I literally couldn't get past the second page. Like I said, though, these are the very last two elements of the book, and can be easily skipped by those like me with not much of an interest in the actual academic theories behind this book's plot; and in the meanwhile, with the other 350 pages Goldstein exactly succeeds at what she set out to do, humanizing these issues into a funny, charming, yet always intellectually stimulating story about relationships, religion and family. It makes me wish that all academic fiction would be this good, and makes me want to go buy a bunch of copies and slap them into the hands of every working lit professor I know. It comes highly recommended today for that crowd, and will be a keeper among a lot of the rest of you as well.

Out of 10: **9.3**

Sarah says

Christopher Hitchens is a public intellectual whose witty sentences I admire and, frankly, covet, and whose opinions I generally find so inexplicable that I am beginning to wonder if he and Ann Coulter have joined in some kind of rivalry as to who can spout off the most unlikely nonsense before getting caught out as BS artists. So when I read that Christopher Hitchens was publically promoting this novel as a brilliant work of athiest literature, I was almost primed to dismiss it as so much blather, and move on to more fruitful reading territory. But then I remembered C.H. and his beautiful sentences, and that I am such a sucker for beautiful sentences, plus also that I'd just had a run of very earnest books whose ideas I largely agreed with but which were written in such very uninspiring prose-so obviously, what could I do but decide to shake things up a bit and be open to some beautiful atheist sentences.

I'm so glad I did. I thank God (non-ironically!) for C.H's tremendous and envy inducing sentences. This book blew me away.

This was the third book this year that was so fantastic that it made all other possible activities- sleeping, eating, talking to my beloved fiance, taking walks in the gorgeous springtime, spending time with friends, breathing- pale by the contrast of immersing my brain in this book. Ms. Goldstein (I was initially under the mistaken impression that this was her first novel, and was ready to hail her as some kind of literary goddess incarnate, so I was really, really, really relieved to discover she has actually written several works of fiction and philosophy- my monotheism remains more or less unshaken!) writes, first of all, with an enthusiastic, bounding love of the English language, with its wealth of descriptors and strange meagre possession of nouns to articulate states of mind- she writes, second of all, with an apparent love of the world which we live in, a world filled with a plethora of minutia, of items which are each unique and deserving of attention, with strange paradoxes of weather, topography, food scents, clothing textures, etc. etc forever. And she writes, thirdly and most importantly of all, with a benevolent fondness for the ridiculousness of being human.

Ms. Goldstein presents in her opening chapter a world that is rich and layered in detail after detail, a riot of information that confounds the senses, and then she positions her characters- the newly fortunate author of a best selling book proving God's lack of existence in the most benevolent way possible (Cass Seller, the protagonist, dubbed over and over again "the Atheist with the soul"), a vibrant and enthustic anthropoligist-turned early retired professsor-turned anti-aging technology investor and true believer,(one of many, many love interests in Cass's life), a brilliant, gorgeous and ruthless mathmetician (Lucinda, another love interest), a math progeny and reluctant leader of a seperatist Orthodox Jewish community, and an egotistical and charismatic professor of literature who holds his graduate students in as intense a thrall as any cult leader ever has- these characters are placed squarely in a world of increasingly dense detail, noise and complexity, and they proceed to try to make sense of it all.

Basically, this novel follows the characters as they take their internal and external data and spin it into explanations, and there is a lot that is interesting to that- it's worth reading the book just for that. But what i loved about the book was all the moments where the character's found themselves in places where their explanations were hollow or worn out or inadequate, and yet life remained, and the only solution- the only way to move forward- was to accept life, in its pain and its sorrow and its confounding slipperiness- and fall in love with it. This is a novel whose characters, fortunately, seem to come with a rapacious capacity to fall in love with life.

I don't know enough of Ms. Goldstein's prior work or innate motivation to know if this novel is meant to be a definitive refutation of monotheism. As a reader, I found Cass' atheism to be somewhat unlikely- he came across much more as a person who was thoroughly agnostic- he seemed constantly moved and perplexed by what felt to him like threads of connection just beyond the place of his awareness and understanding, but was fiercely resistant to accepting explanations for those patterns which were too easy, too simplistic. Cass to me was a sympathetic character partially because, while he was tireless and fearless in using his brain to attempt to make sense of the world and of the question of religion, he was also willing to accept that there was perhaps a limit to where his brain could go. And as a reader who is also a believer in God, the world so beautifully recorded by Ms. Goldstein was a world that moved and breathed in and exhaled Grace- though it's also probably true that as a reader who believes in God I'm probably inclined towards that perception anyway.

What I do think is that Ms. Goldstein's novel demonstrates, beautifully, wholly, convincingly, brilliantly, and breathlessly, is that the world we live in and move through, and the people we encounter in it, are inately worthy of our love, our attention, our tenderness- and that we are inately worth giving ourselves up in joy and bafflement and gratitude for that all. This is a beautiful thing that transcends our interpretation of the patterns that may or may not run through our existence. It's a beautiful thing to be reminded of in a book I more or less expected to snort at with disdain. I'm so, so glad that C.H. was right about this novel, and I'm so so glad that I was wrong in my dismissiveness of it.

Susan says

How can I resist any book that includes the following sentence in its first page: "It's a tiresome proposition, having to take up the work of the Enlightenment all over again, but it's happened on your watch."? It would be easy to pick this book apart. I can argue that it's plot points are a little too pat, that there is a quality of post-modern cleverness that can be annoying, that the narrative structure is a bit disjoint, that I'm not sure about the philosophy/choice that underlays the conclusion. In the end, these points didn't matter. I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It completely engaged me from beginning to end, both intellectually and emotionally. At times, I laughed out loud, the characters were very real (and recognizable) to me and one of the characters genuinely touched me. Loved the characters and the takes on academia, fame, intellectualism, self-scrutiny, Judaism and the ambivalence which Jews feel about it - all things which I care a lot about. This book reminds me why I so adore Mazel and The Mind Body Problem and confirms to me that Rebecca Goldstein writes from a place and world view that I feel very close to. I feel like her pretensions and preoccupations are mine as well. I am curious what anyone who doesn't know much about Judaism makes of this book. I would love to discuss this book with people from diverse backgrounds.

Msmurphybylaw says

This book is written in two halves, as is my review:
A fantasy of mine is that instead of going back to school for a second degree in advertising, I would have returned and continued my art degree and received my MFA and become a professor.
In this dream, I've painted a perfect postmodern portrait of myself as a feminist art prof spinning pots while Parrish cherub nymphs swirl about me gaily in my academic ivory tower. Butterflies and bees hand me tools as students rap at the tower door below. My office hours are posted, but they know that I'm no stickler for those. I skip to the window, release my rubicund locks and sing down to my pupils “climb catechumen for the lesson's begun.” They begin to tug and crawl as my eyes focus on a regal nude dude bobbing along the mall. He has faculty members kissing his hairy buttocks. Thwarting this ghastly vision, I jerk only to hone in on another naked fellow preening about. Lifting my gaze, I find the entire campus is teaming with featherless peacocks engaging fully clothed entourages. Anxiety floods my system. Simultaneously my hands and eyes feel my breasts. There are no clothes. Poof! My fantasy has been shattered by ego.

My there sure are a lot of naked emperors trotting around Frankfurter U. Well to be fair, huge numbers swarm and strut on most campuses across our beautiful little marble and it's not quarantined to the upper east coast of North America I'm afraid. I was a little timid about reading a book for academia, about academia, by an academian with theological implications and enlightenment thrown in for good measure, but it came highly recommended from a good (book) friend. Who, now that I think of it, works for the University of Texas; maybe I was sabotaged. At any rate, this book was a vapidly tiresome read for me. Intelligent people can be very boring.
All of the main character's worked for the university as professors or board members. The protagonist was the biggest rebel, ooh my! Because he stuck to his guns in the theological department of psychology. Thrills! And he was rewarded aptly for being dumped by his tiny assed wife and given a new and improved smarter girlfriend who dumps him as well. There was a boy genius that pops in as well, but he was kind of an afterthought. As I wound through the story, (yes I skipped lots-o-pages) when there was human interaction, I couldn't help keeping the porcupine joke out of my head.
How do porcupines make love?
They do it very carefully.

And tediously, and quietly and it goes on forever and not much gets accomplished I would gather, much like this book.

Part 2 The actual Argument

My middle child used to rent an apartment next door to this weirdly hip yet dirty cool creepy coffee shop in Austin where conspiracy theorists mingle with university students and photographers. It is next door to an AA hive, a groovy resale store and a new age art shop. It is located next to the state mental hospital which doesn't seem to bother anyone but me, so whenever I used to go visit Cat, (Luna, she has recently changed her name) we would go to Epoch for coffee. I would always try to sit with my back to the graveyard. I just thought it was so depressing that patients had died there and they had no family, hence the creepy factor. I am completely off topic

I love my daughter and wanted to spend time with her and this was her scene and her turf. Perpetual pseudo philosophical and sometimes theological discussions were inevitable with this group and her cohorts were usually deep in debate whenever we would arrive. My daughter would be really pissed to hear that I used the term pseudo, but sometimes the logic certainly wasn't there. They were usually pretty high most of the time from a little weed, but when the mushrooms kicked in, so did the comedy. I would be stuck for hours sometimes listening to the banter. I would smile and occasionally put in my two cents, but mostly just observe my girl growing. I'm a pragmatist and don't really give five bunnies fucking whether someone can prove the existence of an invisible corn cob.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for a healthy debate in something that I'm interested in or something that can be somewhat proven scientifically. Faith is a belief. I'm a faith-based person and belong to the mystical side of spirituality so spending days reading this book made me feel as if I was chasing my tail in a debate that clearly has no winner for me. Trying to prove the existence of God through philosophical argument is akin to proving pigs can fly.

If you love philosophical and theological debate on the existence of God, then this book is for you.

Me, I'd rather fly with the pigs.
