Amazon Exclusive: Rebecca Goldstein on 36 Arguments for the Existence of God

Dinner party hostesses used to be warned to steer the conversation away from politics and religion. I used to wonder why, but I don’t anymore. There are some differences that reveal rifts so deep that dialogue breaks down. Among these are the current debates that have been raging between God-believers and the so-called new atheists. It often seems that people on one side can’t begin to grasp what the world is like, what it feels like, for those on the other side. When the person with whom one is conversing appears utterly opaque, then mistrust and contempt are easily aroused: How can he be saying that when the opposite seems so obvious to me? Is he stupid, dishonest, maybe just a touch evil? These are not the sort of suspicions that the gracious hostess wants intruding at her candle-lit dinner table.

But for me, as a novelist, it’s differences like these, indicating entirely different orientations toward the world, which are the most tantalizing to explore. Arguments alone can’t capture all that is at stake for people when they argue about issues of reason and faith. In the end, I place my faith in fiction, in its power to make vividly present how different the world feels to each of us and how these differences are sometimes what is really being expressed in the great debates of our day on the existence of God.

The title of the book is 36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction. I meant the subtitle to be understood as a sort of joke, but as a serious one, too. --Rebecca Goldstein

My Personal Review:
In 1966, Berkley’s Michael Scriven gave the world Primary Philosophy, with one chapter devoted to presenting, in a clear schematic form, about twenty traditional proofs for the existence of God and their refutations.
Now, in 2010, the fictional psychologist of religion Cass Seltzer has catalogued 36+ proofs and their refutations—the larger list attributable to the overtime efforts of creationists to flog their intelligently designed dead horse. Professor Seltzer's book catches the wave of the "neo-atheist" best-sellers and catapults him from the suburbs of Frankfurter (read Brandeis) University to the Valhalla of Harvard.

Rebecca Goldstein (on whom I've had a slight crush since reading the perfect Betraying Spinoza, even though there's no way I could win her away from rock star cognitivist Steve Pinker) has crafted a novel that explores a few days in Cass Seltzer's life, in which he exults over his academic good fortune and nearly forgets to prepare for the climactic debate with a glitzy theist. (Naturally, this being a contemporary novel, the contemporary narrative digresses into three or four long past narratives, converging on the present.) This "debate"—something like the big sport event at the end of so many movies, with a touch of the "Grand Inquisitor" thrown in—goes to Seltzer. He proves not only that there is no God but, more important, that atheists are just as capable, even more capable, of ethical sensibility and just action as theists.

The debate is not quite the very end, however. Ultimately, the novel resolves its longest subplot involving the intellectually gifted son of a Hassidic Rebbe who is lured away from the reservation to study at MIT. In this it is an odd echo of one of the best novels of recent years, Chabon's The Yiddish Policeman's Union.

36 Arguments is a well-made novel by an engaging philosopher/novelist. She has done what many writers try unsuccessfully to do: embody philosophical stances into characters, without reducing the text to dull speechifying. Zoe Heller also does this well in her recent novel, The Believers. Although Goldstein's prose occasionally lapses into Dan Brown territory ("furrowed brow," "book-lined office"), the dialogue is always crisp and funny.

And the satire is hilarious. I expect that nearly every person, institution, and place with a fictitious name can be mapped onto a real entity. I love Persnippity New Jersey and the ridicule of Commentary and the neocons. (Too bad The Forward assigned a neocon to review this book.) Everyone can recognize the oversized burlesque of Harold Bloom (The Perversity of Persuasion, indeed!) I wish I were enough in the know to recognize the whole Waltham-Cambridge-New York ensemble. (Is Cass Seltzer Steve Pinker, writer of popular best sellers on arcane subjects?)

And then there's the Appendix, Cass's schematic for the 36 arguments. Although the charm of this book is to show that the non-existence of God (what Scriven called the presumption of atheism) is largely irrelevant to living a good life, the Appendix is nevertheless a superior bit of philosophical pedagogy, and should be required reading for every
professor and undergraduate, in every department. And the Internet being what it is, the Appendix will inevitably become universally available. Some day it may even be denounced in religiously-oriented schools, by people who entirely misread her book, much as Spinoza was denounced in the Orthodox school Ms. Goldstein attended as a child. Wouldn't that be delicious!

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