

ARTS&ENTERTAINMENT

Meet one half of the
USA's brainiest couple

Writer and thinker
Rebecca Goldstein
talks to **Ariel Kahn**
about religion, egos,
and living with
Steven Pinker

REBECA Goldstein was in London last month to launch her new book, *36 Arguments For The Existence Of God: A Work Of Fiction*. Accompanying her was her husband, popular psychologist Steven Pinker. They have been dubbed "America's brainiest couple", and not without reason. A professional philosopher, Goldstein has taught at Princeton, Harvard and Brandeis universities in American, and was a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation grant, nicknamed the "genius" award, in 1995.

An intimidating CV, but in person Goldstein launches immediately into animated conversation, peppered with laughter, about the personal journey behind *36 Arguments*.

The novel explores, among other things, the possibility of being a spiritual atheist. Its central protagonist, Cass Selzer, is an academic who has achieved popular success almost by accident with his runaway bestseller, *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*. Most people, it seems, have only read the appendix to his book, which list 36 proofs for God's existence and then disproves them one by one.

Goldstein found the inspiration for his character close to home. "I began to think critically about the new atheism movement, and I was involved in it because of my book on the philosopher Spinoza, who is a hero to freethinkers. I got drawn into it, and felt that the nuances, messiness, were being left out, and I thought, I should write a novel about this. I did want it to be about a person who was a psychologist of religion, who understands religion from the inside, and was very ethical, because one often hears: 'Without God, how can there be any morality?'"

Cass's empathy for the religious grows from Goldstein's own background in a strictly Orthodox community in New York, an experience that gave her a useful critical distance on some of the more sweeping pronouncements of her atheist colleagues in academia. She makes Cass a crucible for the apparently contradictory forces of faith and atheism.

"One of the things I'm trying to demonstrate in the novel is that, well, I get a little irked when my atheist friends act as if the religious have a monopoly on irrationality. Irrationality is just too big, it spills out into secular context — romantic love is one of the places."

Cass is not just a walking paradox, he thrums with emotional life, partly because of Goldstein's feelings for the man he is based on. "I love Cass — he becomes a celebrity by accident. I love that because I'm a little puritanical when I watch intellectuals going after public fame, trying to become public intellectuals. Sometimes, it just happens. I'm married to a famous

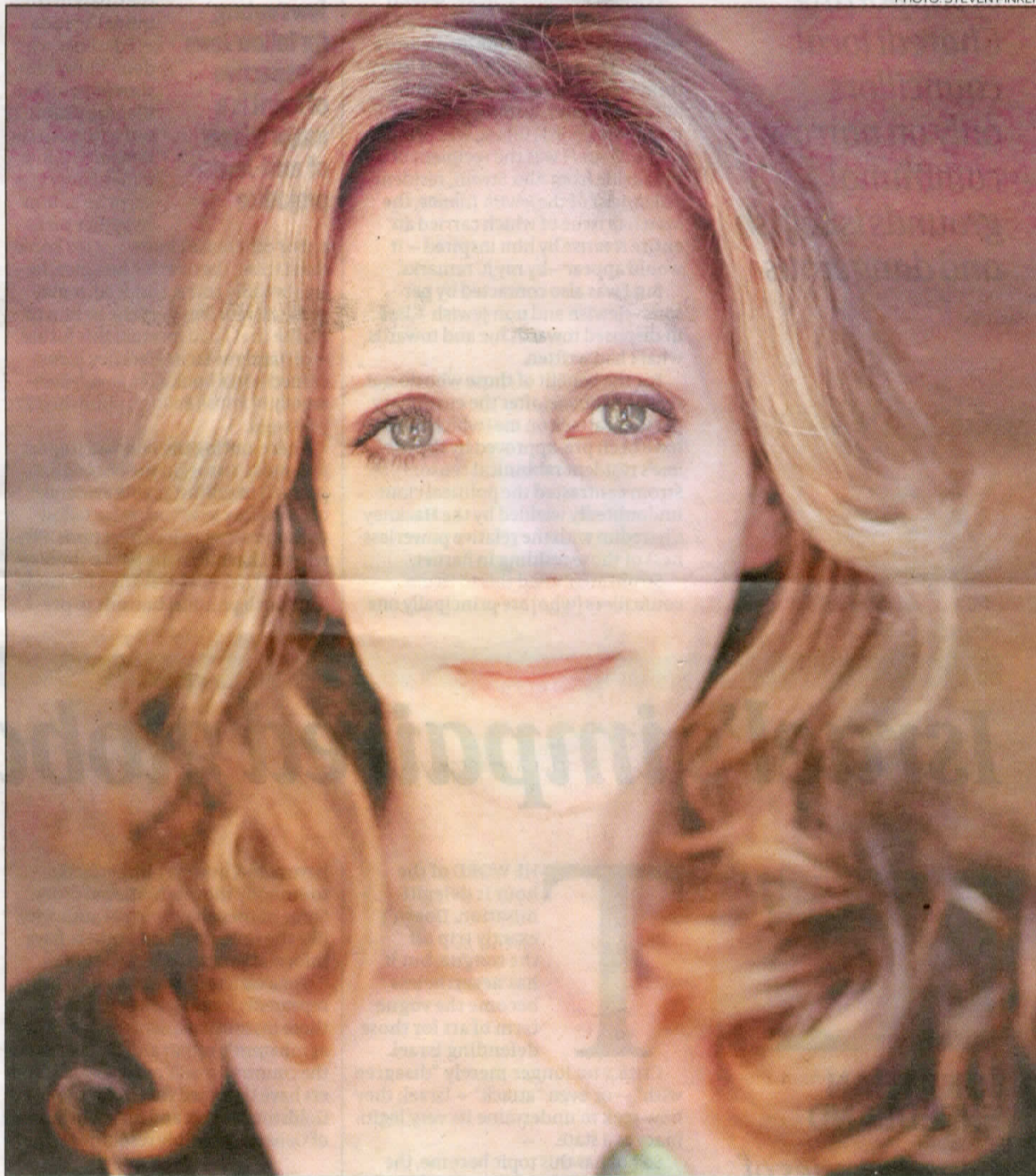
public intellectual, but he was just pursuing his ideas, trying to share them with people — there were no compromises made. I respect him. There's a lot of him in Cass."

The ethical, spiritually sensitive Cass is starkly contrasted with Jonas Klapper, "extreme professor of faith literature and values", who Goldstein sends up as the kind of pretentious, pompous intellectual often found in universities.

But she is keen that her message should not be confused. "I should say that for all of my scoffing and satirical impulses which I direct towards academia, I respect it tremendously. I respect the life of the mind tremendously. When I get satiric, it's often because I feel betrayed that these large egos become paramount. It's just such a travesty of the life of the mind."

"People have compared my writing to David Lodge, and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*. I love their stuff, but I'm not interested in the kinds of hollow academics they write about. I'm interested in people who are interested in ideas. I aspire to a kind of ethics of the intellect; I think I might have transplanted some of my religious passion to this."

Goldstein says that Jewish history bears heavily on



Rebecca Goldstein says she dislikes academics whose pursuit of fame gets in the way of "the life of the mind"

PHOTO: STEVEN PINKER

SNAPSHOT

BORN: 23 February 1950

FAMILY: Married to second husband, cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker. She has one daughter, the novelist Yael Goldstein, from a previous marriage

CAREER: Novels include *The Mind Body Problem* and *Mazel*. She has written philosophy books on Spinoza and Kurt Gödel. In 2008, she was designated a laureate by the International Academy of Humanism. Currently she is a research associate in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University.

WHAT SHE SAYS ABOUT BEING JEWISH: "When I write fiction, it often comes out Jewish, because that's where my emotions lie."

her as an author. "I don't like to identify myself as a Jewish writer, but it's hard to be, let's say, a writer who, occasionally, more than she anticipates, writes about Jewish themes, and not place your characters in a historical narrative.

"It's a great gift to those of us from our heritage, but it can also often feel like a trap, something you have to rebel against. I think it's a creative tension — to be Jewish is to locate your individual story within a historical narrative, whatever you think of that narrative.

"In America, and I would imagine in England too, what happened in Europe, it looms. I have terrible fights with some of my best friends who write only about the Holocaust, and who want to identify the meaning of Jewish identity in the Holocaust. I just fight against that with every neuron I have. That's not us — to identify oneself with victimhood is just such a diminishment of this history, which is heroic, moving."

After the playfulness of *The Mind Body Problem*, her own novels became dark and often anguished. Until *36 Proofs* in which she returns to a lighter mood. So what changed?

"It's extremely urgent, this question of science and religion, faith and reason; this moment we're feeling it very keenly, everyone is thinking about it, there's a great deal of heaviness around it. It did seem to me that playfulness would be a good idea.

"The thing about fiction is that you can lure people into points of view that they couldn't entertain otherwise. Showing this religious community in a favourable light, and also showing this atheist in a favourable light, all of that seemed like a good thing to do, and I knew I needed a lot of humour to carry it off, as its serious stuff.

"Of course, I learned that from teaching philosophy. The stuff I teach is so hard, and there's such a tendency for kids to phase out, so I knew that if I kept the patter coming, the kids would be listening, and something goes in. I turned into a stand-up comic."

'36 Arguments for the Existence of God: a Work of Fiction' is published by Atlantic at £12.99. Ariel Kahn is a senior lecturer in creative writing at Roehampton University

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