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36 Arguments for the Existence of God

This clever novel manages to blend existential ponderings with humor and sharp writing.

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Next to Linus, Cass Seltzer may be the most approachable philosopher in pop culture.

Cass, a college professor at Frankfurter University (a thinly disguised Brandeis), has become an unlikely celebrity. The new atheists were in need of a less unpleasant spokesman, and Cass, “the atheist with a soul,” has become the go-to guy for sound bites. His floppy auburn hair, boyish looks, “and the sweetest, most earnest smile this side of Oral Roberts University” don’t hurt, either.

It’s still January, but **36 Arguments for the Existence of God** by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein is without a doubt the funniest work of existential philosophy you’ll read all year.

Thoughtful, witty, and – I cannot stress enough – really entertaining, “36 Arguments” is part campus comedy, part romantic farce, part philosophical treatise. It is also, without question, the smartest kid in class. (Goldstein was a recipient of a MacArthur “genius” grant, and it shows. She includes mathematical proofs, poetry, and snatches of game theory throughout her tale. Sometimes these weigh down the narrative, but its natural buoyancy soon rebounds.)

In a pleasant departure for these strident times, Cass embraces paradox and seems most happy when he is least sure. In an era when opposing sides scream at each other and call it debate, Cass is so genial and accepting a presence that no one would be afraid to sit next to him at a dinner party.

For the prior two decades, Cass had “all but owned the psychology of religion, but only because nobody else wanted it.” He’s an atheist who contemplates the nature of soul. His favorite poem is “Glory Be to God for Dappled Things,” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. (That’s the Reverend Hopkins, for those of you who escaped English lit.) “Sounds like there’s a whole lot more soul than atheism going on in there,” remarks an old girlfriend, Roz, who stops in for a visit after 20 years.

The novel's title comes from an appendix Seltzer tacked onto his bestseller, "The Varieties of Religious Illusion," looking at popular arguments people cite as proving God's existence and rebutting them. His point, which seems to have been lost in the sound bites, was that the "most thorough demolition of these arguments would make little difference to the felt qualities of religious experience." (Goldstein includes the appendix in the back of the novel.)

Cass looks at the need people have for spiritual experiences in their lives, arguing that a desire for transcendence exists apart from organized religion. In her novel, Goldstein asks: What do you believe in, if you discount the presence of the divine? Her characters, even the most strident atheists, still have faith – some in medical advances, some in romantic love, some in the beauty of a mathematical proof, and some in their own brilliance. (Cass's ability to wholeheartedly believe in something for which there is no tangible evidence is kind of touching. Take his absolute assurance in the kindness of his ex-wife, a monumentally self-absorbed French poet. "Romantic infatuation can be a form of religious delusion, too," an older, sheepish Cass tells a friend.)

While Cass ponders life, the universe, and everything, he also reflects back on the people who inspired his desire to understand the nature of religion: a 6-year-old Hasidic mathematical prodigy and a renowned scholar. Jonas Elijah Klapper's specialty was messianism. While that should have been enough of a warning signal to send grad students scrambling for the door en masse, instead, Jonas collected acolytes. " 'I sense the aura of election upon you,' he would pronounce in a hushed voice to some severely young person, who, unsurprisingly, rarely disagreed."

And then there is Roz. An anthropologist whose tribal name means (she claims) "a whole lot of woman," Roz Margolis is without question a whole lot of character. Whenever she strides onto a page, glee follows. (Roz, by the way, is planning to live 500 years, and you kind of hope she succeeds.)

Cass doesn't believe in trampling on the faith of others, but his current live-in girlfriend, "the goddess of game theory," has no such compunctions. "It was touching how sincerely Lucinda believed in reason. It was difficult for her to get her mind around the fact that believers weren't all high school dropouts who used their fingers and toes to add and subtract."

While the religiously inclined among us may beg to disagree that the truly intelligent don't believe in God, the novel, and Cass's character himself, are utterly disarming.

But it must be said that the defenders of the faith in "36 Arguments for the Existence of God" are an unappealing lot. They range from the humorless to the barking mad. The one exception is a Hasidic rabbi who sincerely devotes his life to caring for his people. And the novel's big climax – sponsored by Harvard's "Agnostic Chaplaincy" (Holy oxymoron, Batman!) – unfortunately fizzles. In one corner, we have floppy-haired Cass and all his sweet goodwill. In the other, a Nobel Prize-winning Christian economist wearing an expensive shirt and a perma-sneer. A battle for the ages requires a worthy opponent, and one ends up wishing for a Marilynne Robinson, G.K. Chesterton, or C.S. Lewis to craft a real theological cage match.

But how many works of fiction can tackle thorny questions such as theodicy and still make you laugh? Not since "The Tao of Pooh" has philosophy been so much fun.

Yvonne Zipp regularly reviews books for the Monitor.

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