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Tumbling into the Heart of Genius

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For years, I've been telling my creative writing graduate students that there's such a thing as "too smart" to be a first-rate writer of fiction. A certain kind of penetrating, analytical intelligence, at home in the world of ideas and abstractions, often comes off as lost and flat-footed when entering the realm of human feelings—love, grief, longing, despair, hope, desire—like a brilliant, nebbishy teenager sitting in a corner at the dance. Fiction writers are sensory creatures, I tell my students. We sniff as we go, alert and watchful, grounded in the here and now, attuned to the subtleties of our characters' emotional lives. We need to be smart, yes. But not too smart—not so smart that we think ourselves right out of the picture.

I found myself thinking about this while reading Rebecca Goldstein's *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*. Goldstein is wicked smart. She wrote her first novel, *The Mind-Body Problem*, as a young professor at Barnard, after earning a Ph.D. in philosophy from Princeton. The novel is a penetrating exploration of the ways in which philosophy prepares—or fails to prepare—us for the difficulties inherent in being human. It is, as well, a poignant and provocative coming-of-age story in which the heroine struggles with her Orthodox background. The novel quickly separated Goldstein from the pack of that era's first novelists. She was a thoroughbred—her literary adroitness so suffused with heart and soul that she simply seemed to have arrived fully formed, already at the top of her game. Goldstein continued to teach philosophy while steadily bringing out a series of fine works of fiction and non-fiction set largely in the university world.

The recent *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity*, part memoir, part intellectual biography of the philosopher, solidified her reputation as a writer who can move effortlessly between forms, doing both equally well. She playfully titled another work of fiction *Properties of Light: A Novel of Love, Betrayal and Quantum Physics*. Along the way, she has collected a trophy case of grants and awards: a Whiting, several National Jewish Book Awards, a Guggenheim, and most notably a MacArthur, otherwise known as the "genius grant."

It is genius itself that is one of Goldstein's central preoccupations. When *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* opens, we meet Cass Seltzer, professor of science and religion at the fictional Frankfurter University, a small, primarily Jewish bastion of the liberal arts outside Boston, a school shivering slightly in the imposing shadow cast by Harvard just 12 miles

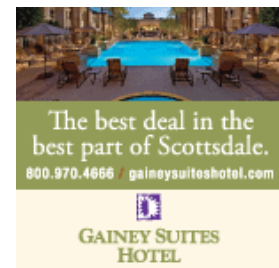


36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction
By Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

Pantheon
2010, \$27.95, pp. 416

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away. (When it comes to names of characters and institutions, Goldstein likes to have fun. Pop quiz: Can you name another small Jewish-leaning liberal arts university near Boston named after a Supreme Court Justice?)

It's four o'clock in the morning, and Cass is standing on the Weeks Bridge overlooking the Charles River in Cambridge, contemplating his future. "His life has become strange to him. He feels as if he's wearing somebody else's coat, grabbed in a hurry from the bed in the spare bedroom after a boozy party. He's walking around in somebody else's bespoke cashmere while that guy's got Cass' hooded parka, and only Cass himself seems to have noticed the switch." The catalyst for this late night reverie is folded neatly in Cass' coat pocket—a letter from Harvard, that Frankfurter nemesis, making him an offer he can't refuse. His new book, *The Varieties of Religious Illusions*, has turned him into an improbable international superstar, soaring to the top of bestseller lists, and has been translated into 27 languages, including Latvian. He has become an intellectual pin-up—his boyish good looks and ability, according to *Time Magazine*, "to write of religious illusions from the standpoint of the regretfully disillusioned" has earned him the nickname of "the atheist with a soul."

That letter from Harvard represents a pinnacle of sorts for Cass and a point of departure for Goldstein, who uses it as the place from which to spin this tale forward and backward and every which way. Take, for instance, Cass' romantic life. Divorced from a mercurial poet named Pascale ("Her brilliant words, counter, original, spare, and strange, had entranced him, but also distracted him, distanced him even as they pulled him in."), Cass is besotted with his live-in girlfriend, Lucinda Mandelbaum, a mathematical genius, author of the *Mandelbaum Equilibrium*, and known in academic circles as "the Goddess of Game Theory." Lucinda is off presenting a paper at a conference in Santa Barbara, which conveniently allows for a surprise visit from Roz Margolis, Cass' sexy old girlfriend from the days when he was a student—two decades earlier—of the esteemed professor Jonas Elias Klapper, who comprised the entire Department of Faith, Literature and Values at Frankfurter University.

It can be a risky proposition for a novelist to move around freely in time—odds are that the reader may prefer the past to the present, or the distant past to the past—but here, Goldstein shows her great strength as a storyteller, as entertaining as she is erudite. The backstory of Cass' complicated relationship with Klapper isn't just an academic send-up (none of Klapper's graduate students ever completes a doctorate) but a deeply moving story of the professor's slow descent into madness.

Cass was Klapper's prize student, not necessarily because of erudition or academic promise but due to a quirk of genetics and fate. Klapper became enamored of Cass' background—a background Cass himself rejected—as a descendant of the Valdener Hasidim, a fictional sect that set down its American roots in a town off the Palisades Parkway that they called New Valden, but in a clerical error was dubbed New Walden instead. Cass' mother was related to the Valdener Rebbe, which in turn meant that Cass could trace his lineage back to the Ba'al Shem Tov, the mystical rabbi considered to be the founder of Hasidic Judaism. Klapper insisted that Cass drive him to New Walden, and there they meet a six-year-old boy—son of the Valdener Rebbe—who is a mathematical prodigy beyond compare, who plays games with prime numbers in his head. As the Valdener Rebbe tells Cass, the angels taught him. "The angels! *Min ha-shamoyim*—from the heavens. This is nothing. He likes to play with numbers. For him they're toys, and we let him play. He can learn a page of Torah or Talmud like *lamdin*—like scholars—three, four, five times his age. The way he learns now, at six years old, most men will never catch up."

If books have hearts, this little boy, this genius with the burden of an entire people on his shoulders, is the beating, thrumming heart of Goldstein's novel, his trajectory the most gripping and surprising. What do we do with the blessings we are given? When the battle is between the heart and the head, who wins? Who should win?

In a later scene, Cass witnesses the boy proving (in song, no less) an infinitude of prime


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numbers during a wedding celebration: “The Valedeners were deep into their ecstasy. They loved their Rebbe’s son, the Dauphin of New Walden, heir to the most royal of all lineages, necessary to the continuity that made their lives worth living, this small, laughing boy who was bouncing on his dancing father’s back, with the Valdeners kissing their prayer shawls and reaching out to touch him as they do when the Torah scroll is paraded among them. The wonderful child was proof more conclusive than Euclid’s of all that they believed. They couldn’t know who it was they were loving. But Cass knew, and his face was as wet with tears as any in the room, his trance as deep and ecstatic as that of any Hasid leaping into dance.”

Genius and faith. Genius and loyalty. Genius and ambition. Genius and madness. Genius and the many varieties of love. Goldstein’s preoccupations may be rarified, and her story may take place within ivy-covered walls populated solely by members of Mensa, but she never loses sight of the fact that one of her many jobs, as a novelist, is to entertain. Just as the six-year old Valdener math prodigy does mental cartwheels and backflips just for the sheer joy of sharing all he knows, Goldstein leaves nothing out. Here, she has taken on some of the deepest, philosophical questions of human existence and shaped them into a page-turner at once funny and heartbreaking and challenging and—yes—proves that there’s no such thing as “too smart” to write a terrifically engaging novel.

Dani Shapiro’s most recent books include the novels Black and White and Family History and the best-selling memoir Slow Motion. Her new memoir, Devotion, is out in February.


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