
Better Than a Bestseller

The most gratifying novel – woman’s, Jewish, American, whatever – the reviewer has read in many a long reading season

Matt Nesvisky

A QUICK SURVEY OF America’s best-seller lists over the past several years will readily demonstrate something that looks suspiciously like a golden age of Jewish women novelists. Their names are legion, their sales are impressive and yet, in the way of the world, it is perhaps unsurprising that the best Jewish woman writing in America today is not among them.

To be sure, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein has not exactly lacked recognition. Her five

previous novels, beginning with “The Mind-Body Problem,” published in 1983 when Goldstein was still an undergraduate at New York’s Barnard College, have generally won very positive reviews. Along the way she has carried off numerous grants, prizes and fellowships, including the Guggenheim and the MacArthur “genius” award. Yet her fiction has never earned her anything like the cash register chiming or the name recognition of an Anita Diamant or an Amy Bloom or a Dara Horn. Indeed, Newberger’s most notable book to date was a work of nonfiction, “Betraying Spinoza” (2006).

This state of affairs results from the fact that Goldstein is arguably a bit too brainy for her own good – or at least her readers’ – and she does not wear her erudition lightly. She holds a PhD in philosophy from Princeton University, has taught philosophy (not creative writing) at a number of top U.S. universities and is married to the renowned cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker.

Goldstein’s vocabulary (splanchnic, epiceratic, noetic, claustrated) is also of the sort to send beach readers – and others – to the dictionary. But let’s not hold any of that against her. Fact is, the woman writes marvelous fiction.

Her latest, "36 Arguments for the Existence of God" is flat out the most gratifying novel – woman's, Jewish, American, whatever – this reviewer has read in many a long reading season.

"36" triumphs in a whole bunch of literary subgenres. As a satire of academia it ranks with the best – Kingsley Amis's "Lucky, Jim," Randall Jarrell's "Pictures from an Institution," and Richard Russo's "Straight Time." Consider Goldstein's hilarious portrait of the Harold Bloom-like literary theorist called Dr. Jonas Elijah Klapper, chairman, Extreme Distinguished Professor and sole member of the Department of Faith, Literature, and Values at Frankfurter (read Brandeis) University.

KLAPPER IS A GENIUS, HAS READ everything, knows everything and, as is immediately evident to everyone outside of his tiny circle of acolyte graduate students, is clinically insane ("...teaching was, for him, an all-consuming fire in which he was, as he put it, the korban, the burnt offering, so that by the end of the two-and-a-half-hour seminar he would be utterly spent, instantaneously passing from inferno to ash."). Klapper is also perhaps the most engaging and enraging fictional academic con-artist since David Lodge gifted us with Morris Zapp in "Changing Places."

"36" is also a very Jewish novel, with a close and measured look at an insular hasidic community north of New York City and at its most intriguing resident, young Azarya, the rebbe's only son and a mathematical prodigy. Herein lies the latest setting for Goldstein's reflections on secular-religious conflict, a matter that has occupied this daughter of an Orthodox household pretty much throughout her writing career.

Goldstein certainly is no enemy of Orthodoxy. Still, the satirist in her often can't help herself, as when she describes two hasidic women: "One was about sixty and one was about eighteen, but they were dressed almost identically, with kerchiefs wrapping their heads as a diaper does a baby's bottom and a little fringe of synthetic bangs sticking out in front, looking as natural as the bristles from a plastic whisk broom."

And "36" is also very much a novel of philosophy and science, laden with ruminations on cognitive psychology, neurobiology, anthropology, game theory and other mathematical constructs. (On this last I am very much in sympathy with the otherwise insufferable



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Klapper, who proudly asserts, "I've always experienced mathematics as a personal affront.") Indeed, Goldstein's humanistic fascination with science put me in mind not of anything by her American-Jewish novelist sisters but by the recent work of Britain's Ian McEwan.

Not least, Goldstein's novel is also a tale of modern romance, which finally takes us to Cass Seltzer, the central character of "36 Arguments for the Existence of God." Seltzer is as central as can be: a longtime student under Klapper, a relative of the aforementioned rebbe, and the lover of several daunting women involved in various academic disciplines.

Seltzer is also very much a celebrated figure in his own right. A sweet-tempered and profoundly likable professor of the psychology of religion, Cass Seltzer has recently achieved fame and bestsellerdom with the publication of "The Varieties of Religious

Illusion," a book that has placed him in the forefront of the so-called "new atheists" such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens.

Dubbed by Time magazine as "the atheist with a soul," it was Seltzer who demolished the double *hai* (the Hebrew letters of the word *hai* have the numerical value of 18) list of arguments for God's existence. (This demolition appears in a 50-page appendix to Goldstein's novel.) Goldstein describes herself as an atheist in the Spinoza mold, and Seltzer is something quite like that – a non-believer who nonetheless recognizes certain utilitarian values in faith and who is not above the occasional frisson of spirituality himself.

Seltzer's cred is put to the test at novel's end when he engages in a debate on God's existence. The debate, sponsored by Harvard University's "Agnostic Chaplaincy," is calculated to be the novel's high point, but to this reader it's a little too calculated and not nearly as compelling as Goldstein intends it to be. At the very least, it is far too sober a denouement in a novel heretofore glittering with comic jewels. (My favorite throwaway is the reference to the editor of the neoconservative journal *Provocation*; his name is Nathan Paskudnyak, which is Yiddish for a horrible person). In any event, it's bad enough when fictional characters exchange undigested hunks of thesis; it becomes even deadlier when they do so formally behind lecterns.

But this, along with a somewhat soft and sentimental conclusion, is a forgivable flaw in a novel whose manifold delights can only be hinted at in a review. "36 Arguments for the Existence of God" is brimming with richly realized characters, brimming with ideas, brimming with life.

May it brim with a life of its own. It may not make the best-seller lists, but it surely deserves to endure.



36 Arguments for the Existence of God
By Rebecca Newberger Goldstein
Pantheon
402 pages; \$27.95