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

God is in the detail

Melissa Katsoulis

When Rebecca Goldstein, the American philosopher-novelist who looks like Rapunzel but thinks like Wittgenstein, was awarded the prestigious MacArthur Award (commonly known as the “genius award”) in 1996, she was praised for her ability to “dramatise the concerns of philosophy without sacrificing the demands of imaginative storytelling”.

That is putting her achievements lightly. Her most recent book, *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*, is a vast, rambling fiction based on the traditional tenets of the good old university campus novel (eccentric professors, beautiful postgrads, lots of barely repressed sexual tension), but which is nonetheless possessed of a steely intellectual coherence that is frighteningly impressive to behold.

In spinning her tale of floppy-haired Cass Seltzer, a moral philosopher who suddenly becomes a media darling when his gentle version of atheist ethics makes him a prime candidate for magazine profiles and television debates, Goldstein casts her net wide to encompass all the ideas in Seltzer’s bestselling book (its appendix contains canny refutations of the eponymous 36 arguments) and delves into them with no pity for any reader who might be straggling at the back of the class. To read her is to take a crash course in post-theological debate but also to lose yourself in a cast of dazzlingly bright characters and amusing situations.

Seltzer is far too enchanted with life’s beautiful mysteries to be a proper unbeliever; he is a charming guide through the complex field of secular ethics. Equally appealing is his verbal sparring partner Roz, who shows up (after disappearing up the Amazon for several years) to poke fun at his newfound celebrity but also to love him deeply. Then there is the crazy Professor Klapper, a wild-eyed philosopher idolised by all (but none of whose graduate students have actually been deemed deserving of doctorates, no matter how many decades they study under him).

Klapper becomes entranced by Seltzer’s family links to a separatist community of Hasidim called New Walden, and it is on a trip to this enclave that he, Seltzer and Roz encounter a remarkable boy whose life-path teaches them the most important lesson of all. Six-year-old Azarya, despite being completely shielded from the outside world, casually reveals that he has discovered for himself the concept of prime numbers.

Azarya can read and write “only” Hebrew, Yiddish and Aramaic, but when Roz sketches out a map of

the United States for him — he has no idea that he lives in a place called America — her naming of the individual states just once is enough to teach the boy to read English.

Clearly, Goldstein's characters are fantastical. But like the big ideas with which readers are encouraged to engage, their power would be diminished by a strictly or simply logical construction. Her business — like Seltzer's — is to proselytise wonder and openness of thought. That she spins a mighty fine yarn along the way only sweetens the life-saving pill that she is gently, but quite necessarily, ramming down our sorry, secular throats.

***36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction* by Rebecca Goldstein (Atlantic, £12.99; [Buy this book](#); 399pp)**

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