

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

[Printer Friendly](#)
[Format Sponsored](#)
 By

January 21, 2010

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Trying to Paint the Deity by Numbers Against a Backdrop of Jewish Culture

By [JANET MASLIN](#)

In her latest novel Rebecca Newberger Goldstein envisions an intellectually sublime creature who is named Lucinda Mandelbaum, known as "the Goddess of Game Theory" and famed for something called the Mandelbaum Equilibrium, which is one of the non-Nash equilibria in zero-sum games. Lucinda is also a beauty and a triathlete, as long as we're counting glamorous attributes. Ms. Goldstein would be on thin ice with an über-woman like Lucinda if she herself were not a paragon in her own right.

36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

A Work of Fiction

By Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

402 pages. Pantheon. \$27.95.

Though she remains best known for her audaciously brainy debut novel, "[The Mind-Body Problem](#)," the book that introduced her distinctive fusion of narrative and intellectual debate, Ms. Goldstein has also written other fiction, as well as biographical works about Gödel and Spinoza. Now she has written a big, ambitious novel that is nominally about God, although it unfolds on an extremely earthly plane. Overcomplicated yet dazzling, sparked by frequent flashes of nonchalant brilliance, "36 Arguments for the Existence of God" affirms Ms. Goldstein's rare ability to explore the quotidian and the cosmological with equal ease.

Describing this new book is no simple matter. First of all, Lucinda is not its main character. She is the romantic ideal cherished by Cass Seltzer, a fellow academic who has successfully tapped into the current [atheism](#) boom with a book called "The Varieties of Religious Illusion," a title summoning both William James and [Sigmund Freud](#). Although there was already "a glut of godlessness" on the market when Cass's book came along, "atheist books were selling well, sometimes edging out cookbooks and memoirs written by household pets to rise to the top of the best-seller list." So Cass struck it big.

Nobody in Ms. Goldstein's novel thinks much of Cass's book, Cass included. But it has become enormously popular thanks to the book's appendix, which is called "36 Arguments for the Existence of God." That appendix is also the appendix to Ms. Goldstein's novel. And it offers a coherent refutation of each one of the 36 arguments that are listed. Cass became a celebrity because he made the case for atheism so well.

But the rest of Ms. Goldstein's book, the fictitious part, is divided into 36 chapters. And each of those purports to list an argument concerning God too. Since one of the fictitious chapters is called "The

Argument from the New York Times” and another is “The Argument from Lucinda,” it’s clear — or sort of clear — that the narrative about Cass also raises questions about the role of faith. The joke — or sort of joke — is that Cass’s conundrum-filled life illustrates and affirms thoughts of the divine even as his appendix repudiates them.

So much for structure. It is not Ms. Goldstein’s strong suit, and neither is narrative urgency. She begins this story in the middle of a cold night in Cambridge, Mass., as Cass comes to terms with something miraculous: Harvard has offered him a job. He has been marooned too long in a Boston suburb called Weedham at Frankfurter University, which seems to be named for a [Supreme Court](#) justice (as opposed to Brandeis University in Waltham, Mass.). As Cass anticipates at the very start of the novel, the president of Frankfurter will respond to this news by asking, “What do I have to offer you to keep you from deserting us for those shmendriks up the river?”

As the Coen brothers did in “A Serious Man,” Ms. Goldstein takes an aghast yet reverent view of the Jewish culture that gives her novel its best ideas and jokes. (One dislikable literary critic is given the extremely unflattering name Nathan Paskudnyak, and the so-called International Style architecture at Frankfurter is said to owe less to [Le Corbusier](#) than Hadassah.) The book becomes most deeply immersed in Judaism when it uses flashbacks to explain Cass’s relationship with his grandiose mentor, Jonas Elijah Klapper (mother’s name: Klepfish).

Though the timeline can be confusing, the slings and arrows are not: Klapper is a tyrannical pedant who loves alliteration (he once taught a course called “The Manic, the Mantic and the Mimentic”), expounds on Kabbalistic arcana with a level of detail [Dan Brown](#) would envy, and leads this novel to the place where its heart lies: a Hasidic community in the Hudson River Valley. This setting is a place that sounds very like New City, N.Y., where Cass would be living had his mother not left the fold.

When Klapper, Cass and Roz, an old flame of Cass’s who is now an anthropologist, pay a visit to this community, they meet an astonishing little boy whose unmistakable genius exerts a strange force throughout the book. This boy is one of Ms. Goldstein’s walking philosophical constructs, insofar as his destiny will be determined by the Hasidic community unless he insists on independence. She has a far easier time articulating the issues that he raises than she does weaving them into the already-tangled skein of her narrative.

The plotting of “36 Arguments for the Existence of God” is so irrational, in fact, that one of its key events occurs almost by accident. However absentminded Cass may be, he doesn’t seem likely to forget that he will be debating the existence of God with a Nobel Laureate at Harvard—and will remember this commitment only the night before the debate.

Since the debate constitutes one of this book’s big dramatic moments and is so hastily introduced, it’s not surprising to find smaller plot points being treated in equally haphazard ways. On the other hand, give Ms. Goldstein a philosophical case to make about potato kugel, Jewish cuisine and Kabbalistic numerology, and she really does soar. It is only half-surprising to find that her background research includes a scholarly article titled “Holy Kugel: the Sanctification of Ashkenazic Ethnic Foods in Hasidim.”

So the pleasures to be found in “36 Arguments for the Existence of God” are scattershot. But there are a

great many of them, and this novel's bracing intellectual energy never flags. Though it is finally more a work of showmanship than scholarship, it affirms Ms. Goldstein's position as a satirist and a seeker of real moral questions at a time when silly ones prevail.

When Cass witnesses a PowerPoint presentation featuring "brain scans of sophomores, neuroimaged in the throes of moral deliberation over whether they should, in theory, toss a hapless fat man onto the tracks in order to use his bulk to save five other men from an oncoming trolley," this book occupies its ideal vantage point: close to the absurdity of current academic thinking yet just far enough away to laugh.

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)