

An unorthodox gem

36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE
EXISTENCE OF GOD
A Work of Fiction
REBECCA GOLDSTEIN

★★★★★

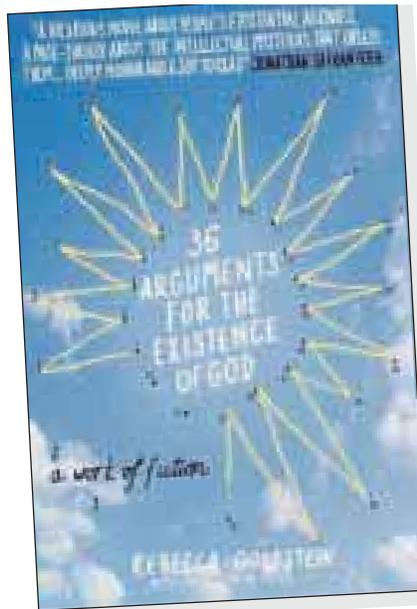
CHOICE is a wonderful thing. Take the question of whether God exists; you can choose either to believe, or not believe.

Of course, you might want to consider a few arguments for and against, before making up your mind; blind faith and blinkered disbelief being pretty much two sides of the same coin.

And when it comes to arguments, novelist and philosopher Rebecca Goldstein has them to spare – a fact which she puts to good use in her latest book.

36 Arguments for the Existence of God impressively succeeds in combining esoteric philosophical argument and laugh-out-loud humour. It makes for a wonderfully-original novel that closely examines the trappings of religious experience whilst poking wicked fun at American university campus life.

The novel's main protagonist is psychology professor Cass Seltzer, whose recently-published book *The Varieties of Religious Illusion* has become a global success, making him extremely rich in the process. We are introduced to him as he is getting used to his moment of fame, and



finding it agreeable.

Less comfortable is his role as an atheistic spokesperson, which has arisen from the appendix to his book. Written almost as an afterthought, it lists his 36 arguments for the existence of God – complete with 36 well-honed rebuttals.

As a result, the media have turned Seltzer into a floppy-haired poster boy for atheists – a body of people who, as Goldstein reminds us, are now America's most distrusted minority. But Seltzer proves himself to be an

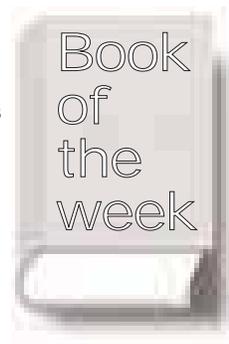
amiable companion, and regular flashbacks to episodes in his life provide a rich source of amusement. So too – but in far different ways – do Goldstein's frequent examinations of the role of religion – and in particular Judaism – in modern life.

The result of all this is that her novel is continually fizzing off on different tangents, each one exploring some new quirk of character, aspect of faith or behavioural absurdity. Although you don't have to be Jewish to enjoy Goldstein's novel, there's no doubt that it helps. Certainly, an atheistic Gentile such as myself frequently ended up stumbling around in the darker corners of Orthodoxy or stranded on the remoter shores of Hasidic tradition.

However, this is a price well worth paying for the cleverest and most entertaining novel I have read for a long time.

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ATLANTIC, £12.99



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