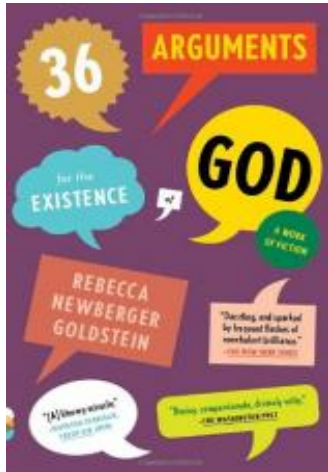


# 36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction

by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein



## About the Book

After Cass Seltzer's book becomes a surprise best seller, he's dubbed "the atheist with a soul," and becomes a celebrity. He wins over the stunning Lucinda Mandelbaum, "the goddess of game theory," and loses himself in a spiritually expansive infatuation. A former girlfriend appears: an anthropologist who invites him to join her in her quest for immortality through biochemistry. And he is haunted by two people who ignited his passion to understand religion: his mentor and professor, and a six-year-old mathematical genius, heir to the leadership of a Hasidic sect. Each encounter reinforces Cass's theory that the religious impulse spills over into life at large.

Through the enchantment of fiction, novelist and MacArthur "genius" Rebecca Newberger Goldstein shows that the tension between religion and doubt cannot be understood through rational argument alone. It also must be explored from the inside --- from the point of view of individual people caught in the raptures and torments of religious experience in all their variety. And that can only be done from the insider perspective of fiction.

Using her gifts in fiction and philosophy, Goldstein has produced a true crossover novel, complete with a nail-biting debate, and an appendix with the 36 arguments (and responses) that propelled Seltzer to stardom.

## Discussion Guide

1. This novel takes the reader straight to the heart of one of the major debates of the present day, the clash between faith and reason. Why do you think Goldstein decided to write about this topic in novel form, rather than non-fiction?
2. A reviewer in Booklist described this novel as being about "love in all its wildness." How is this novel about love? What kinds of love?

3. Do the events in the novel prove Cass right in his claim that the religious impulse spills over into non-religious contexts? How do the various episodes bear out Cass's belief?
4. Do you consider Cass to be, in some sense, a religious man? Is he a spiritual man? Is there a difference?
5. Did Azarya make the right decision, given that his father had died? Had his father not died, do you think his decision would have been different? Should it have been? Do you think that Azarya is a hypocrite, a saint, or something in between?
6. Had you guessed whom the emails were from?
7. Why do you think the author chose to make Azarya a mathematical prodigy?
8. Who won the debate, Cass Seltzer or Felix Fidley? Who do you think had the better arguments? Why do you think the debate came to focus on the issue of morality?
9. Was Lucinda's decision concerning Cass understandable? What kind of a woman was she? Is she a sympathetic character or not?
10. Religion is an immensely serious topic and yet the author chose to write her novel in a mostly comic vein. Why do you think she did that? What role does humor play in the novel? Is her humor sometimes cruel?
11. There are various "tribes" in the novel: the Onuma that Roz studies, the tribe of students around Klapper, the Valdener. How do these tribes compare with each other?
12. Why does Goldstein tell her tale in the third person, rather than Cass's first person voice? Are there any times when she leaves his perspective and enters the mind of other characters?
13. Many of the characters of the novel are struggling with finding meaning in their lives and deciding which paths to take. Do any of them succeed?
14. Which of the 36 arguments, if any, is the most convincing? Why do you think the author included the appendix?
15. Why does Thomas Nagel's idea of the "View from Nowhere" resonate so deeply with Cass? Have you ever experienced anything like the ecstatic sense of getting outside of yourself that Cass describes throughout the novel? Did you know what Cass was talking about with his "Cass here/Jesse there"?

## **Author Bio**

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's novels include **The Mind-Body Problem** and **Mazel**. She was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (the "genius prize") in 1996 and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2005. Her most recent book, *Betraying Spinoza*, won the 2006 Koret International Jewish Prize.

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