



9-1-2010

36 Arguments for the Existence of God by Rebecca Goldstein, Pantheon, 2010

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Recommended Citation

Watts, William, "36 Arguments for the Existence of God by Rebecca Goldstein, Pantheon, 2010" (2010). *LAS Faculty Book Reviews*. 57.
http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/las_bookreviews/57

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Recommended Readings



36 Arguments for the Existence of God

by Rebecca Goldstein, Pantheon, 2010

Reviewed by William Watts

Rebecca Goldstein's *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* has a wonderfully misleading title. It is not a theological treatise or an exercise in piety, but a lively novel. The main character, Cass Seltzer, is a university professor who has just published a book entitled *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*, which refutes each of the 36 arguments he has identified for the existence of god. As a result, he gains national fame as the "atheist with a soul," and is in high demand on the talk-show circuit. The success of Seltzer's book initiates a surprising sequence of events, including a job offer from Harvard, the loss of his long-term girlfriend, and a rediscovery of his Hassidic roots. While the novel does not affirm the existence of god, it is nevertheless organized around the 36 arguments Seltzer has identified, and it has chapter titles such as "The Argument from the Improbable Self" and "The Argument from Cosmic Tremblings." This gives the novel a double reference; it moves gracefully between the mundane realities of day-to-day life and the deeper questions that lie just beneath the surface. While the novel is often comic, it provides a serious exploration of the ways in which religious belief both advances and impedes our search for meaning and understanding. Goldstein manages all of this with a light touch and a humanity that leave the reader wishing for more arguments.

- Willam Watts is associate professor of English at Butler University.