
Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, New York, USA

Rebecca Goldstein left Jewish Orthodoxy and found Plato. In her terrific new book about him, she ingeniously intersperses serious biographical chapters about Plato’s life and times with other chapters in which she imagines Plato has been brought back to life and is living amongst us offering counsel as he confronts the problems of our modern age. It sounds wacky, but in Rebecca Goldstein’s almost scarily brilliant hands, it works! She is somehow able to create a living breathing Plato that allows you to genuinely imagine what he might have been like. But even more importantly, she encourages you to remember the forgotten beauty of seriously and relentlessly questioning all that surrounds us. Why are we here? What makes a life worth living? What are our moral responsibilities to one another? Why is romantic love so hard to maintain? Plato was unquenchable in his pursuit of truth, but equally zealous in his insistence on uncertainty. Questions must bring forth other questions, such as the nature of philosophical inquiry. Goldstein’s Plato comes across as a secular Talmudic scholar of sorts; a wise old man with a gentle spirit who can barely repress his passion for the nobility of his quest. Rebecca Goldstein seems to be equally inspired. One senses she is a relentless searcher for truth and wisdom and a tranquility that seems tantalizingly just out of reach.

Goldstein was born in White Plains, New York into an Orthodox family. Her brother is an Orthodox rabbi and her sister has remained religious. Her now deceased father was a cantor who also taught emotionally disturbed children and Goldstein speaks about him with an almost uncomfortable awe. Her first novel, “The Mind-Body Problem,” addresses the challenges faced by an intellectual woman constrained by ancient Jewish traditions and obligations, and one senses Goldstein’s belated departure from Orthodox life was in part connected to her intense admiration for her father. Goldstein’s mother sensed her daughter’s emotional distress early and tried to hold her in tow by sending her to a more
religiously stringent school, which only heightened Goldstein’s already palpable discomfort. Goldstein still remembers being outraged by a teacher’s muted answers to her serious intellectual inquiries. Yet, she got married at nineteen to an Orthodox math professor, and before having her two daughters, she received a Ph.D. from Princeton in the Philosophy of Science.

Goldstein then began living the next three decades in two universes that co-existed fragiley. She sent her children to Orthodox schools and participated in their activities while preparing Shabbat dinners and keeping a kosher home. At the same time she was incredibly busy teaching philosophy and writing provocative novels that exposed her worldview to be atheistic and in line with the teachings of secular humanism. She never fully explains how she was able to maneuver this edgy dance but describes her early years with quiet anger but also a sense of fascination. Goldstein writes “I was brought up as a child to believe that all my deeds—a nibble for a friend’s (not certified “kosher”) Hostess Twinkee, a donation from my meager allowance to a charity for orphans, a spin-doctored rendition of a quarrel with a sister-get inscribed in a heavenly book, which come the autumnal Days of Awe, will be scrutinized, tallied, and evaluated. Terrifying, yes, but also quite effective in inducing a robust sense of human consequentiality…” But when her belief withered, she found in Plato a virtuous and ethical secularity that allowed her some much-needed breathing room. Plato’s emphasis on reason and the pursuit of higher truths combined with his musings on life and death and friendship and love without God seemed to appeal to her hunger for a paternal figure that was fallible and could no longer frighten her.

Goldstein has Plato visiting Google headquarters in sunny California and speaking with computer nerds about the Internet and its uncanny ability to access massive data at high speeds. But he comes to the conclusion that all it really obtains is information, which is inferior to the hard-won knowledge he seeks. We watch Plato get an MRI and argue with the technician about the meaning of its findings. Plato doesn’t see the value of the modern X-ray machine; viewing it only as a fine-tuned photograph of brain activity that sheds little light on the complexity of human consciousness. Plato confronts a
blowhard cable news anchor that keeps insisting that power, money, fame, and glory are what all men seek. Plato is able to make some headway in convincing the cable news anchor that he has lost his way, and that his preoccupation with material success and public accolades will not ultimately help him find his way in the world. It will simply distract him from the search. In yet another episode, Plato manages to find work assisting a lovelorn columnist and gives out surprising advice on relationship problems that are hilarious; but strangely insightful. One might think these dialogues could skid off the rails into some sort of cartoonish buffoonery, but they don’t. They are sharp, funny, and reflective. They show us how Plato might have really thought.

But Goldstein’s most wonderful rendition of Plato has him on a podium at the 92St. Y in Manhattan with two childcare experts. One proposes strict parenting and the other is an advocate for protecting the fragility of the inner child and his or her natural disposition and inclinations. Plato plays the middle in an uncanny debate where he advocates for music and athletics as an essential part of every child’s development, but also recognizes the uniqueness inherent in all of us that needs to be nourished and protected from assault. Plato personally addresses the specialist who is advocating gentleness by agreeing with him on most points and conceding that “Not only do you know of the personal suffering buried deep in each person’s history, but you are outraged at this knowledge, knowing how wrong is both the child’s suffering and also the stunted life it will lead. You know that it is an injustice for one person to take away what rightfully belongs to one another, and so you judge it unjust for the parent to deprive their children of the possibilities for joy and self-discovery that all people have coming to them.” Although the specialist is flattered by Plato’s kind words and general agreement, he expresses his concern for the elitism that seems to hide beneath many of Plato’s diatribes; an elitism that also troubles Ms. Goldstein. The author is also able to detect other blind spots in her beloved Plato; such as his lack of sympathy for the merely personal, and his sometimes-excessive focus on the impersonal. She also seems aware that Plato himself seemed oblivious to his devotion and reverence for Socrates who held star billing in almost all of Plato’s famous dialogues.
Goldstein has shown us she can be both challenging and absurd, funny and serious, smart and silly, and delightfully rebellious while lifting our spirits. She has created a literary yet accessible reincarnation of Plato; no easy task. The little girl who was once told by her teacher to hush seems to have found a way to speak her mind with a brilliant ferocity that dares us all to do the same.