

The
EXPLANATION
for
EVERYTHING

A Note from the Author

*

Questions for Discussion



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I grew up in a family that was Jewish by tradition, not by faith. We celebrated the holidays, ate the foods, murmured the prayers, but we did so in order to participate in a community rather than to sanctify God. We did these things, that is to say, because our grandparents and great-grandparents had done them. We did them because so many people over the generations had tried to *stop* us from doing them. We did them out of stubbornness and comfort and love. But we didn't do them because we believed in a supernatural deity. In fact, if you'd asked us what we thought about the creation of the universe or the genesis of human morality or the afterlife, what would we have said? Probably nothing—or maybe something pseudoscientific or sarcastic. Then we would have changed the subject.

My atheism has never felt false to me, although at times I've wished it weren't so. After my grandmother was killed by

a speeding car, I longed to imagine her in heaven; I couldn't do it. When my son was born with assorted birth defects, I yearned for the belief necessary to pray for his health—but, again, I found it impossible. It was just me and my husband and the baby in the NICU, with no angels watching over us, nothing but chance determining our son's fate. This truth felt chilly but also rational, and reason has been the guiding principle of my life, even more so than love, or belief in myself.

Yet I've never been particularly strident about or proud of my atheism, nor have I ever felt that others' belief threatens my nonbelief. In fact, I admire believers for their pure trust, for the imagination they have that encompasses the infinite. I don't have this sort of imagination, but I am lucky to be dear friends with people who do. Belief in a supernatural God orders their world the way that belief in empirical evidence orders mine. They do not claim to be better or smarter than I am, nor is their place in the world made less secure by the fact that I am part of it. We are friends, after all. And if I disagree with them about the age of the universe or whether or not Jesus was God made flesh, this disagreement doesn't interrupt our pleasant monthly dinners, or our kids gleefully beating the stuffing out of each other on the rec room floor.

It's fascinating and saddening to me, this strange American split between believers and nonbelievers, as though we needed one more reason to stay separate from one another. Or maybe the split isn't so American—for as I write, people around the

world are being harassed and even killed for their own deepest truths. Why should Americans be any better? But then again—shouldn't we be? Or shouldn't we try?

I was motivated to write my new novel, *The Explanation for Everything*, after reading about the school board members in Dover, Pennsylvania, who tried to insert intelligent design (that is, the idea that a supernatural entity “designed” all living things) into their high school science curriculum. A lawsuit ensued, and the defendants—school board members who shared a profound, evangelical faith—were humiliated in court. The judge's decision said, in part, that intelligent design “violates the centuries-old ground rules of science by invoking and permitting supernatural causation.” Atheists around the world, who had been watching this trial with the avidity of whale-watchers on a three-hour tour, cheered like an orca had just breached over the boat. The defendants, meanwhile, went on to lose their posts and, in several instances, their health and public standing.

I agree with the judge's verdict entirely, yet I couldn't help but feel somehow saddened by the spectacle that assailed the defendants. For while it's true that intelligent design isn't science, and that it has no place in the public school science curriculum, I feel certain these school board members were animated by a true sense of faith, of wanting to share their faith—that they weren't out to trick or undermine as much as they were out to share the truth that was most important

to them. I disagree entirely with what they hoped to do, but my novelist's empathy couldn't help imagining their altruistic motivations, and wanting to write about them.

I wrote this book, then, because I'm certain we all need different things to get through every day: some of us need God and some of us need to share God; some of us need only the ground beneath our feet. I need a glass of wine and my husband and (healthy) son, good books and my students and friends. But *The Explanation for Everything* comes from the urge to investigate the way these differing needs separate us, and the way the human compulsion for understanding can sometimes bring us back together.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In *The Explanation for Everything*, Andy Waite is a confirmed atheist who doesn't believe in the supernatural, yet he's convinced he's being trailed by his wife's ghost. To what extent are these contradictory beliefs shaped by grief? To what extent do we all live with contradictions about our faith?
2. Do you think Andy is a good professor? Why or why not?
3. Andy keeps asking himself, and anyone else who will listen, whether God is a figure of mercy or justice—he doesn't believe God can be both. Are mercy and justice opposing qualities? How do they work to oppose each other in our culture?
4. Why do you think Melissa Potter was so invested in changing Andy's mind about religion? Were her intentions fueled by faith, romantic interest, or a genuine interest in his well-being?

5. Books and letters play an important role in this novel. Why do you think Andy took such solace in the opposing works of Hank Rosenblum and Pastor Cling? Are those works really so oppositional?

6. Throughout the novel, Andy finds purpose in being angry, but he also seems tired of being angry. In what ways does he go about finding peace? What other avenues toward peace do Sheila, Rosenblum, Melissa, and his daughters offer him?

7. At different points in the book, Lionel Shell finds himself equally zealous about creationism and atheism. Why might a person believe so passionately in both sides of the argument? How are both ideologies a kind of faith?

8. Anita Lim is destroyed, in part, by turning from science to faith. Do you think her acceptance of a loving God was responsible for her demise? If not, then what was responsible?

9. Andy's daughter Belle longs to be baptized. What do you think this religious ritual means to her? What does it mean to Andy to witness her baptism?

10. The deeper Andy investigates God, the less charitable his treatment of his neighbor, Sheila. In the end, is it the atheist, Rosenblum, who reminds Andy of his responsibility to his fellow man? Why do you think Andy treated Sheila so shabbily?

11. How does Andy's trip to Florida affect his feelings about his work?

12. Throughout the novel, Andy finds solace in his daughters, in how much he loves them and how much they remind him of Lou. How does parenthood provide Andy reasons to pursue his research, his letters to McGee, and his own isolation?

13. Why do you think Rosenblum wrote to Andy toward the end of his life?

14. What are the different ways that Darwin and Darwinian theory get used throughout the novel?

15. *The Explanation for Everything* is a book about faith and evolutionary theory that doesn't take sides. In the real world, is it possible not to take sides on this debate? What are the consequences of accepting both possibilities?

© NINA SUBIN



Lauren Grodstein is the author of the bestselling novel *A Friend of the Family*, which was a *Washington Post* Best Book Pick, a *New York Times* Editor's Pick, a *BookPage* Best Fiction title, and an Indie Next Pick; the collection *The Best of Animals*; and the novel *Reproduction Is the Flaw of Love*. She teaches creative writing at Rutgers University. Her website is www.laurengrodstein.com.