



A Lost Argument

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The summer after her freshman year at all-Mormon Brigham Young University, Marguerite Farnsworth falls in love with philosophy by way of falling in love with an atheist philosophy student. Her search for Truth (with a capital T), God, the meaning of life, and a boyfriend leads her away from religious belief, but along the way she learns there are things even atheists can have faith in.

A Lost Argument Details

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Walt says

Theresa Doucet is a very good writer. I hope she keeps writing, and I look forward to reading more of her work.

Let me first say how I came to this novel, *A LOST ARGUMENT*.

I follow a few Mormon blogs, including some a little more scholarly than others. (I aspire.) Since I do some writing myself, I also pay particular attention to new writers in the Mormon tradition, since that's my background, too. On one of the blogs, I noticed a discussion about this book. I followed some hyperlinks. Consequently, I learned that Doucet is quite capable in the realm of philosophy. (I aspire to that a little bit, too.) I also noticed that she participates in Goodreads, so I sent her a friend request. She graciously accepted. Sometime later, Goodreads sent me some of her reviews, including one of *ANGLE OF REPOSE* by Wallace Stegner. She had given it what, in my opinion, was a less than gracious rating, so I engaged her about that. I found her responses articulate and well-argued, and I was duly impressed. Subsequently, she suggested perhaps we ought to exchange books. I would read hers and she would read one of mine. She sent me *A LOST ARGUMENT*. So now I will attempt to review it and tell you what I think.

The protagonist of *A LOST ARGUMENT* is Marguerite Farnsworth. She lives in Arizona. She's a young LDS (member of the church of Jesus Christ of latter-day Saints) student going to BYU, the Mormon university in Provo, Utah. She has a brother and sister who have other lives and more or less ignore Marguerite. She has a father, a cardiologist, who works incessantly. Her mother, too, seems too busy for Marguerite. That says a lot about her life right there.

The first sentence of the book's prologue sets forth, in my opinion, the book's premise. "Maybe I'm strange and perverse," Marguerite says, "but I've always thought there was something sexy about a compelling argument."

Well, that pretty much wraps up what the book focuses on: Marguerite's need for intimacy (sex) in the context of argumentation. Of course, it all takes some time for her to realize that that's exactly what she wants and needs, so I think it's strange for it to be in the prologue. Also, right off, it seems odd that she would expect to find anything relative to either sex or arguments at BYU. After all, I knew to rescue my fiancé, to whom I've now been married going on forty-one years, from BYU for exactly those reasons. But Marguerite is young and naïve, possibly more than I or my fiancé were, even though it appears she is much more intelligent and knowledgeable, especially as it relates to history and philosophy.

To me, Marguerite is needy. Plain and simple. That is, if it's possible for one committed so lovingly to philosophy to be anything that's plain and simple, she is. And it's probably not. "... I'm ugly and foolish," Marguerite says, "and love beauty and wisdom, his beauty and wisdom, because there's none in me."

Needy. It isn't that she's short of funds; that's not what I mean by needy. It's more that she needs love --- including sexual intimacy --- with someone with whom she can have a serious argument --- serious arguments. Argumentation is central to Marguerite's being. She needs this kind of love so much she is almost tempted to beg for it, to grovel for it, to totally compromise herself for it. Or to die for it, both metaphorically and literally. It relates to her several bouts of depression. The problem, however, is that she thinks that in her traditional Mormon culture the two ideas are anathema. They're not, but that's another matter altogether. But

that's where the central tension of the book is, in her need to have someone she can be sexually intimate with who will help her address her crises of knowledge. She wants it, but she can't legitimately have it. Not and keep her faith and all that goes with it. "I thought about it," Marguerite says, "and after a while said, 'I would be happy if, just for once, someone would come up to me and say, 'You know, Marguerite, I've seen your work, I see what you're trying to do, and it's beautiful.' If only someone saw beauty in me.'" Plus, she asks God, "Why did you make me so ugly and unlovable, so unworthy inside and out?"

I enjoyed Marguerite's trips abroad, especially to Germany, since I spent two years --- yeah, you guessed it -- there. I enjoyed the characters she created. She has a talent for painting characters who have their own voices, who are unique and interesting. Her characters include not only the people she interacted with, her friends and family, but also wide-ranging philosophers and authors and their far-flung works.

I liked this passage in particular: "The day before she left for Utah, Marguerite awoke to the sound of something buzzing and rattling against her window. She peered through the blinds and saw it was a large brown grasshopper that had gotten itself trapped between the blinds and the glass windowpane. It was propelling itself against the glass over and over again, thinking it was moving toward freedom, only to find itself continually blocked and bruised and instead. Marguerite felt instant sympathy for it." I love that Marguerite saved the grasshopper --- I love that it was a grasshopper over against an ant --- and I imagine that there will always be someone there to save Marguerite too.

(One particular peccadillo: Theresa writes "...after I graduated high school..." I know everybody says that now instead of "I graduated from high school." However, I have to ask: how many times can a particular high school be graduated and in what sense are they graduated?)

In today's literary field, this book is an anomaly. The bulk of contemporary readers want something facile, something exceedingly fast-paced and like the hot-and-bothered romances Marguerite alludes to in the prologue. Such readers are impatient and, probably, less educated. However, what Marguerite has to say can't be said that way. It has more depth and takes greater thought than that. In fact, to some extent the novel seems to gloss over interesting details that I wanted to know better. I would have preferred to see segments of Marguerite's transformation more fleshed out, answering more of my questions, giving more dialogue and intimate interaction between herself and others.

As a writer, I would have preferred to see Theresa write segments of Marguerite's stories more focused than trying to cover so much ground so fast. Or, at least, to weed out less important aspects of her story and concentrate more on the pith illustrated in certain scenes. Or, maybe, I just need to go back and read it all again. In any event, this is a book about a young woman trying to reconcile her tradition and religion with truth. In my opinion, truth is a slippery subject. I like what Genly Ai says in Ursula Le Guin's *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS*: truth is a matter of the imagination. I recommend you read the book and make your judgments about it.

Jann says

I tried to like this little book---evidenced by the fact that even though I couldn't enjoy it, I finished it. I love to read of peoples' personal experiences as they seek and find or lose their faith. My problem with this book was just the style of writing. It kept feeling to me to be very very self-conscious and sophomoric. Frankly, I think I didn't believe at all that it was fiction. It read too much like a memoir---and if it had

identified itself as one, I would have enjoyed it better and given it somewhat higher marks. It managed to be missing some elements that would make a good novel. I was disappointed that someone who was on an odyssey of learning deep philosophical thought like the primary character would stop so short and settle for what seemed like shallow thought after all.

Valentina says

This is an intriguing book. It was a fun and thought-provoking story that surprised me with its sharp psychology as well as with its take on philosophy.

I enjoyed the main character, Marguerite, a complex young woman searching for Truth, and, possibly, for love. Her diary entries were my favorite part, since we got an honest look into the psyche of someone struggling with faith and with life in general. She had some moments where her indecisiveness made the reader want to throttle her, but I suppose that's something that we all go through, so in that manner, is portrayed realistically. The rest of the characters are also well-written, especially John, who is just as interesting. I actually wish we'd learned a bit more about him as the novel progresses, but it doesn't really deter from the plot as a whole.

The writing is clear, with very little grammatical mistakes. Although there is a lot of philosophy, it is clearly written, even, I think for a lay-person to grasp without too much problems. I found myself engrossed in the existential crises that Marguerite faces, nodding my head at some of her thoughts and feelings. I can easily recommend this for those of you looking for something that will provoke a very heated discussion with your own head.

Libbie Hawker (L.M. Ironside) says

I'm unsure exactly where I come down on this book, so I'm splitting the difference and giving it a nice, safe middle rating.

There were things I enjoyed and things I did not.

What I liked: it's fascinating to watch the journey out of religion, and for many people/characters, it's also emotionally wrenching to experience that particular journey. This book struck a chord with me since, like the main character Marguerite, I was raised Mormon and eventually left the Church when I was in my twenties. Unlike Marguerite, the leaving was not so traumatic for me, but in my subsequent work with the atheism visibility movement I have met many, many people who suffered trauma far worse than that which Marguerite experiences as they separated themselves from religion. It is an important and very human journey, and a story I like to hear in all its various versions and iterations as often as I can.

What I didn't like kept me from connecting as strongly with this book as I had hoped to do.

First, as Marguerite is a philosophy student, she often couches her understanding of the process in philosophical terms. So often, in fact, that for somebody like me who has only the most rudimentary grasp of philosophy, the frequent reliance on philosophical imagery and reference made the narrative feel too dense and slow-moving, too confusing, and sometimes alienating. Because Marguerite understands herself so well in philosophical terms, the reader risks not understanding her well at all, unless she (the reader) is also very

well-versed in philosophy. (As a side note, if you are a philosophy nut you ought to love this book!)

Unfortunately the two distinct narrative styles also forced a great distance between the reader and the main character. In parts, the book is related from a very distant third-person perspective, where the narrator relays Marguerite's thoughts and feelings to the reader in a "telling" sort of way, which has an apropos academic sort of feel to it, but which doesn't facilitate a deeper understanding of an already hard-to-understand character. In other parts, the book turns to a first-person journaling style, which is interesting, but so faithful to the feel of a real journal, with a filtered relaying of information, with a "telling" style, that once more I found it nearly impossible to connect with Marguerite.

There are two points where I felt I really saw Marguerite's feelings, where I understood not only her struggle with faith but who she was as a whole person (and where I saw what author Therese Doucet was capable of when her creative voice was given precedence over the more academic, philosophical writing.) Both were the parts where Marguerite expressed herself in poetry. In both instances, the writing was colorful, lyrical, an poignant, and allowed me to see, in just a few short lines, what was really going on with Marguerite -- what was really inside her. After the second poem, Marguerite says in her journal, "Sadly, like me, my poems are never opaque enough and lack all subtlety." But that's exactly what readers need in order to connect to a person undergoing such a radical, painful transformation -- not the filtration of narrative distance, but the immediacy of real emotion, no matter how raw or frightening that emotion might be.

All in all, it was an enjoyable book, with its too-accurate depictions of Mormon campus life and the pall of depression such expectations can throw over a young person. Marguerite's constant crushes on usually unobtainable guys were charmingly silly, and very endearing. I remember being a young Mormon woman struggling with how to reconcile my faith and my attraction to various young men. I liked those parts of the book, and I was happy to see that Marguerite does end up with a promising relationship in the end. I just wished I'd understood all the emotional nuances of the path that took her there better.

Angie Hardy says

I received the book for free through Goodreads First Reads. This was an interesting book. Overall I enjoyed this book and found it to be thought-provoking. I think discussions about this book could be fascinating.

Soren Narnia says

This is an unusually sensitive and skillfully rendered portrait of a young woman's search for a way to reconcile her religious beliefs with her yearning for the kind of love she, and anyone her age, craves. It's a universal dilemma and a universal struggle, so the story can be enjoyed by anyone who has ever had any sort of crisis of faith or beliefs, or even just a sense that the world can't provide everything you desire unless you embark upon a profound change within yourself. There's enough humor to keep it light--anyone with a pulse will laugh at and identify with the innocent romantic misadventures the main character endures--but it's certainly a novel for thinking readers.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this review, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

Writing a semi-autobiographical novel, especially as one's first book, can be a cathartic experience but also one laced with challenges, as neatly demonstrated by Therese Doucet's "recovered Mormon" tale *A Lost Argument*, precisely because it can be difficult to for the author to separate themselves from the subject, and to make the sometimes jarring changes from messy real life that lead to a tight three-act fictional story. Because to be clear, the first half of this novel is an *incredibly* charming story, and makes for an almost perfect natural story arc just on its own: mousey yet cute teen spends her freshman year at Brigham Young University studying philosophy, slowly coming to realize what a moral contradiction this is at a Mormon college; teen returns to her Arizona family home for the summer, and takes a pick-up class at the local secular university; teen meets handsome, dangerous fellow philosophy major, oozing sexuality and already adept at quoting Kierkegaard as a way of seducing brainy 19-year-olds; teen has simultaneous crises of faith and conscience, all while experiencing the very first blossoming of lust in her young sheltered life, all of it eventually coming to a dramatic head as the summer comes to a close.

And if Doucet had stuck with just this story, changed a few of the details of the surprising end to the summer, and added a small coda wrapping things up, she would've had a real winner on her hands; but instead, she adds another entire half to this novel that is nothing more than random journal entries concerning the next five years of our gently subversive hero's life, random bits and pieces that almost immediately lose any sense of plot movement or character development, almost exactly as dissatisfying as if you went to a college student's LiveJournal account and randomly plucked out one blog post every ten or twenty pages. And that's a shame, because this is clearly a case of a talented but first-time author who simply didn't know where to finish her story, and didn't have an editor around to help her make that decision; and like I said, this is a common mistake when a person writes about their real life, because real life is chaotic and ongoing, while a great novel has tightly constructed boundaries and follows a fairly rigid structure. I'm still giving the book a decent score, because it's well worth it just for the funny and titillating first half alone; but readers would be wise to stop at that halfway mark, which is why *A Lost Argument* isn't getting a better score than it is.

Out of 10: **8.2**

Hawkgrrrl says

As a memoir (or thinly veiled one), I really enjoyed this and found a lot to identify with from my own young Mormon life at BYU. I didn't relate to the depression aspect as much, but overall, I found her story compelling and told in a way that was intriguing. I didn't find the conclusions inevitable, and the protagonist gets caught up in her head a lot, but I still felt inclined to care.

Geoffrey Kabaservice says

A wonderful intellectual/personal/romantic novel about the narrator's journey out of Mormonism. Beautifully written, funny, and poignant. Highly recommended!

Sindy says

I received this book as a give-away. In fact, I would never have bought it because of the terrible cover... Now I've finished the book, I'm glad I received a copy, because I really liked it.

In Belgium we're not that religious, so it's a bit of an uncommon subject. The first part makes me think of a love triangle with all its difficulties. I think it's pretty comparable.

I also loved the way Margareth discussed with John and her friends about her beliefs and her anxieties.

It was fascinating how, in the second part, she kept hanging on to religion even if knowing that it didn't make her happy at all. It must be a real struggle to grow up and making all these weird commitments (like at BYU).

Of course you can believe in truth and faith without being religious.

During reading the book, The longing by Eels kept playing in my head. And that's a good thing!

Kristen says

Therese Doucet writes an interesting look at a young woman, raised in the Mormon faith, who goes off to college and struggles with her spirituality. Raised in such a strict faith and attending Brigham Young University, founded by the Mormon church, Marguerite struggles with faith, God, and morals while trying to find herself. Marguerite is a smart girl, pushing herself in her studies and trying to learn as much about philosophy and religion as she can. The novel takes place over the course of a few years, where we start at the end of Marguerite's freshman year and following her through to her starting her PhD. Over the course of the novel, Marguerite encounters a slew of people, some trying to help her stay strong in her Mormon faith, some encouraging her to take a step back in order to see if she truly agrees with her religion, and others wanting her to completely abandon faith. All of these people affect Marguerite in different ways and some affect her more than others.

I felt like Marguerite was a likeable character but she seemed melodramatic at times. There were times when she seemed to be going through a funk and her reaction was wanting to end her life. I mean, everyone goes through funks, but I don't think most of us contemplate suicide. Marguerite was very relatable and I found myself identifying with her at times. While I'm not, nor have I ever been, a part of the Mormon faith, I remember struggling with my own faith when I went to college. I think that everyone struggles with the concept of faith and God during their late teens/early twenties and I haven't read any piece of literature that details so clearly the struggle that many people go through quite like Doucet does in this novel.

My one negative about this book is that Marguerite is so introverted that as she deals with her struggles, she seems to repeat herself in her thoughts. I felt like I was rereading a previous chapter at times. It was just a little too much at times. Also, her constant longing for a boyfriend got to be exhausting. I had several friends in high school who belonged to the Mormon church and I understand the strong push to marry, especially to another Mormon. I can understand how Marguerite felt like she was alone and would she ever find her soul

mate, but it just got to be too much. I have also felt the same way as Marguerite, feeling like everyone was paired off except for me, but I never dwelled on it quite as much. I wanted to scream at her, "Get a grip! Live your life and enjoy it instead of worrying about finding a man!"

If you have ever struggled with your faith, then I would definitely recommend this book. It highlights so well the struggles that people go through when trying to discover their spirituality, whether it was with a specific religion or not.

Steven Peck says

Almost an anti-romance, this book follows a young lady's search for love that ends in a love for truth. I found this book with its portrayal of the stark realities of relationships and the challenges of existence a clear-eyed examination of some of life's most difficult questions. What I loved most about the book was that it did not shy away from going more deeply into philosophy than about any book I can remember since *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*. It follows a path that ranges from Kierkegaard to Marque de Sade. I found by the end of this I was so drawn to Marguerite's journey that I was sad when the book was over. The book is very well written and it's clear that the author understands the existential difficulties of a faith journey.

Kristine says

"A Lost Argument" chronicles the intellectual journey of Marguerite Farnsworth from a faithful, if questioning, LDS girl to an agnostic, mature, questing young woman.

I would love to be friends with Marguerite. She's intelligent, well-read, thinks deeply, and cares deeply about those around her. Her flaws are difficulties I have faced (though in miniature--I've never struggled with suicidal thoughts as she does). There was a time in my life this book would have been a life saver just because Marguerite struggles through some of the same relationship issues I did, mishandles them as badly as I did, and still manages to be a good, loving person. I'm not well-read in philosophy at all, so I can't really comment on how well she uses philosophical arguments in the book, but I found the philosophical discussions in the book very fun (probably because I was getting Marguerite's take on them rather than having to wade through the sometimes difficult language). I don't know that I'll ever go out and read Kierkegaard, but the passion Marguerite develops for Kierkegaard makes him at least slightly more approachable.

This book feels very real. As in, especially in the last half of the book I felt like I was reading the real journal of an intelligent young woman. She writes a lot like I do in my journal, which is to say the journal parts lack a distinctive voice, but I really love Marguerite. I want to know more about her life, and especially about where she ends up. The other aspect of the book that made it feel real is the lack of closure for almost every relationship. Marguerite has at least four or five serious romantic interests, which is probably about right for a real person going through that period of life. It's also about right that people just drift out of one's circle of friends with no real closure most of the time. I, unfortunately, am used to novels where some amount of closure is provided for most if not all relationships, so I kept expecting old crushes to show up on Marguerite's doorstep, but they never do.

Lisa says

I enjoyed A lost Argument, especially the 2nd half. This is a great book for discussion. Philosophy and Faith are difficult topics to write about and sometimes harder to read. Therese did a wonderful job. I am sending this book on to a friend so we can have our discussion/debate!

I received this book free through a Goodreads giveaway.

Chris Maroney says

A fascinating look a metamorphosis of faith. Comming from a common background it was interesting to see the path traveled and the ending point of the authors belief and faith in a higher power. The development of the main character and her relationships was, for the most part, well done. I followed her evolving beliefs and could see how they were justified through the events taking place until the last chapter. I would liked to have seen a couple more chapters detailing the path from belief in a undefinable god to no belief in a higher power. There seems to be one last undefined jump there. I would also like to have seen a resolution to the issue of John, but that is just a symptom of my need for closure on relationships, real or fictional. I was inspired to delve into the psychology of religion, particularly Kiekegaard.
