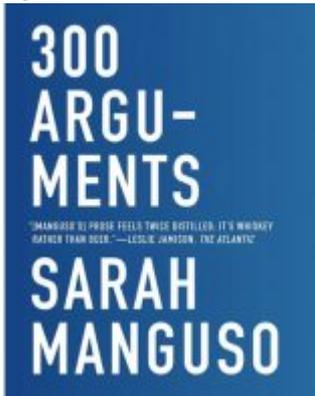


300 Arguments by Sarah Manguso

written by Linda Michel-Cassidy | May 10, 2017



300 Arguments by Sarah Manguso
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104 pages – [Graywolf](#) / [Amazon](#)

“Sometimes a single sentence can be enough to fill the imagination completely.”

300 Arguments by Sarah Manguso is built from precise statements, fragments, or as [one reviewer called them](#), aphorisms. Perhaps they are none of, but also, exactly all these things. The book raises questions, does battle, and reveals truths, but it is not some treacherous guidebook. The reading is at once pleasurable and disturbing. Formally, the book is charming, so handheld and bite-sized, but beware: the content is all sinew.

“You might as well start by confessing your greatest shame. Anything else would just be exposition.”

Manguso, who is known for longer forms, shows that she’s adept at minimalism. Somehow, she manages to write about herself, but also about us, and she does so in spare and poetic language. Each segment is taut, most stand on their own, and all of them push the reader onward.

“Think of this as a short book composed entirely of what I hoped would be a long book’s quotable passages.”

Manguso addresses (in brief) her medical issues, which she writes about at length in [Two Kinds of Decay](#) (Picador 2009). While not necessarily the main theme of the book, the information feels integral to our understanding of the narrator, and in a less direct way, to our appreciation of the form. This bit of backstory explains the sense of urgency, the need to get at things without prelude.

“While I lie on the table, studded with needles, the energy of my body swells beyond my body and into a halo, about four inches out into the room, just barely distinguishing me from the world.”

Manguso also talks about her writing life, love, teaching, aging, death, and dread. She makes the leaps between topics possible by using hard landings. There is not a leading-up to be found; each word is everything.

“I don’t love writing; I love having a problem I might write my way out of.”

“Before the poetry reading starts, I ask the over-grown boy sitting next to me why he likes poetry, what happened to him, and he says, *I went to war.*”

300 Arguments is fueled by its own accretion. The “arguments” prod and accuse. Manguso interrogates her romantic history, her writing practice, and her relationship to her bodily limits.

“The first time you love someone who doesn’t love you back it seems wrong, not morally, but logically, a river flowing up a mountain. How can such a feeling be wrong? You’ll return to that very river, as many times as it takes.”

While some moments point specifically at the narrator, others turn outward, and become universal. It’s impossible not to compare our own wants and failings, to wonder what is thought of us. Then we feel bad for being so self-centered.

“In the morning I wake amid fading scenes of different characters, different settings, all restatements of that first desire, a ghost who haunts me as the beauty he was at sixteen.”

The forms with which Manguso writes, small units, some short paragraphs, others as brief as a sentence or two, could be mistaken for something “lite.” This is the risk that an author takes when writing in these compressed forms, that size could be confused with weight. But here, there’s no evidence of the twee; in fact, some of her shorter pieces are the most searching, perhaps because there is no time for an arc or any type of engine-revving. We are left with solid impact.

“There will come a time when people decide you’ve had enough of your grief, and they’ll try to take it away from you.”

While this is indeed a grouping of so many forceful pieces, it’s the several threads wending through the book that make it a satisfying narrative. Accumulation and specificity are what makes it work.

The author writes about the formal choices she’s made, which may or may not add to the reading. On the upside, she explains what she’s up to, and on the downside, she explains what she’s up to. Fortunately, the parts about the writing life are spiced with humor and gentle pathos.

“To call a piece of writing a fragment, or to say it’s composed of fragments, is to say that it or its components were once whole but are no longer.”

I tend to be against instruction from an author on how to take in their work. Since Manguso does address how being a writer affects her life, it follows that she would investigate her chosen modes. Narratives told in pieces are often written about as if they are some sort of exploded or incomplete form, whereas this work feel quite complete.

Some of the strongest "arguments" are often the shortest. Coming after more descriptive or personal segments, these pieces stapled-gun the narrative down. They are definitive statements amongst the recollections and wonderings.

"I want to shed my fears one by one until there is nothing left of me."

Some segments, if read on their own, might appear aphoristic or too definitive. I find it useful to think of *300 Arguments* not as three hundred units of whatever we'll call them, but rather as a single document presented in the form that happens to look like a multitude.

"When the worst comes to pass, the first feeling is relief."

When taken with the statements prior (the young man who turned to poetry as an antidote to his time at war, and the aftermath of an affair), the brief statement blooms. What if the worst happens? If nothing else, it becomes a thing that has already happened. The attention to order, or maybe the curating of the truths is as important as the size of the "arguments."

"The quality that all last words share: the silence after."