

Sarah Manguso's *300 Arguments*: Arguments Against the Self

Sarah Manguso's *300 Arguments* lyrically moves like a stone caught in a washboard—noisily battering between metal edges until it's plopped out at the bottom. The reader, like the stone, is placed between the fragmented aphorisms that make up *300 Arguments* in the hopes of becoming a little smoother and falling into “that particular quiet” and finality of “perfect happiness” (90). Manguso's collection of nonfiction fragments is far from ordinary, yet her writing revolves around the clichéd search for happiness, wholeness, and reconciliation. To subvert these clichés, Manguso explodes binaries—using both imagistic comparisons and intellectual contradictions—and creates an ironic tone that forces the reader into a space where absurdities and truths, realities and dreams, and intimacy and detachment all coexist.

As *300 Arguments* progresses, it is clear that Manguso is a master at mediating intimacy, for she scatters emotional and personal details throughout the fragments and contrasts intimate memories with mundane observations. This contrast creates a chilling, detached tone that begs the reader to make meaning out of these details and learn from the persona's experiences dealing with shame, longing, and grief. She intentionally uses this repetitive pattern and moves between different psychic distances to create a narrative that addresses both the seen and the unseen, the said and the unsaid.

Specifically, Manguso manipulates images and statements to blur the distinction between reality and dream. While the persona's authoritative yet humorous tone demands the reader's trust, the voice in *300 Arguments* depends upon the illusion of progress, perfection, happiness, and reality. Manguso writes about the fine line between thought and action: “My husband thinks these fantasies are absurd. *I just imagine fucking someone I meet somewhere.* But he doesn't

understand. If I imagine fucking someone I met somewhere, before I knew it we might really be fucking” (42). Throughout the book, this idea of fucking or not fucking, existing or not existing, and feeling or not feeling is at the heart of Manguso’s fragmented arguments. Like time, memory, and progress, Manguso structures her book in a nonlinear way and allows the reader to determine what is fact or fiction. Because the text exists within this in-between state, Manguso allows the reader and the persona the time and space to cope with their existential crisis or feelings of shame and grief. As the reader gets pulled into the book, Manguso reveals that nothing is perfectly whole or definite. In titling her work *300 Arguments*, Manguso implies that she will be arguing against something, but after reading her fragmented nonfiction and contrary truths, it is apparent that she has created 300 arguments against the self.

#### Works Cited

Manguso, Sarah. *300 Arguments*. Graywolf Press, 2017.