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A Cartoonist Goes to Town

Roz Chast didn't realize how splendid life could be until she moved to Manhattan

By RALPH GARDNER JR.
Updated Oct. 20, 2016 10:33 p.m. ET

With no disrespect to Brooklyn, where she grew up, the cartoonist Roz Chast didn't realize how splendid life could be until she moved to Manhattan.

Now known for her work in *The New Yorker* and her award-winning memoir "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?," just published in paperback, Ms. Chast moved to West 73rd Street after college.

"I have no nostalgia for Brooklyn, I really don't," she said when we got together at the Broadway office of her publisher, Bloomsbury. "It sounds enormously corny, but moving to the

Upper West Side when I was 23 was really the first time I thought my life would not be a complete f-- disaster."

The year was 1978 and the rent was \$250 a month. "My apartment did not have a stove," Ms. Chast said. "I cooked on a hot plate."

She lived there until 1987, then returned to Brooklyn with her husband, the humor writer Bill Franzen, while pregnant with their first child. They stayed until they were priced out of Park Slope, then moved to Ridgefield, Conn.

But Ms. Chast's ties to the big city remained strong, inspiring her new project, a homage called "Going Into Town." "Town" was how her family referred to Manhattan, and the book's cover will feature a photo of her when she was around 4 years old.

"We're in front of a token booth," she said. "I have memories of the subway. I remember the rattan seats."

"Going Into Town" began as an urban guidebook when Ms. Chast's child, raised in Connecticut, was preparing to move to Manhattan to attend the School of Visual Arts.

"We sat down, and I said, 'Most of New York is laid out like a grid,' " Ms. Chast said. "I said, 'It's very easy. If you're on 43rd Street and you want to walk to 47th Street, you walk four blocks uptown.' And she said to me, and maybe she was pulling my leg: 'What's a block?'"

Ms. Chast realized a pocket-size map might come in handy. She embellished it with neighborhood descriptions and, knowing her, more than a little humor. "She gave it back to me at the end of four years, and she said, 'This has been really helpful,'" Ms. Chast said.



Roz Chast in her home studio. Her memoir 'Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?' has just been published in paperback. Photo: Bill Hayes

The cartoonist sent it to her agent, who also thought it was funny. "The heart of it is still this guidebook, but it's also about my relationship with the city and how much I love Manhattan," she said.

Ms. Chast, as anyone familiar with her work in *The New Yorker* can attest, has a talent for identifying our collective neuroses, both large and small, and rendering them if not harmless, at least manageable.

Self-deprecation seems baked into her genes. She said she suspected she had a sense of humor early on--"it was very internalized"--but her anxiety spoke to her just as deeply.

Despite her success, Ms. Chast seems to have no problem summoning those demons. While she breathed a sigh of relief whenever she arrived at Grand Central Terminal from the suburbs, and welcomed her weekly visits to *The New Yorker*, she doesn't miss the face-to-face meetings with the cartoon editor. These days she submits her work by email.

"Why would I want to be there on purpose?" Ms. Chast said. "It's so embarrassing on both sides. You are looking at my stuff. And I'm sitting there with my needy little face."

She never lost her love for the city, nor for the subway. "It's fast, and I like to look at the people," she said.

When we parted, Ms. Chast boarded the uptown train to a studio apartment she recently bought on West 71st Street. "It's amazingly unchanged since '78," she said of the area. "It's like coming back home for me."

Why Roz Chast Makes Fun of White Middle-Class New Yorkers

By KEN JOHNSON SEPT. 1, 2016



"Roz Chast: Cartoon Memoirs," at the Museum of the City of New York, displays some 200 works by Ms. Chast. CreditHiroko Masuike/The New York Times

A cartoon by the brilliant, widely beloved visual humorist Roz Chast has the title "Einsteins on the Beach" drawn above a family of three camped out on the shore: Dad, listening to the gurgling coming from his wristwatch, remarks, "Guess I shouldn't have worn my Rolex." Mom, sitting in a beach chair and observing a large, transparent bag of food on the blanket at her feet, reflects, "Maybe it's time to move the sandwiches out of the sun." Their young daughter, emptying a bag of snacks onto the sand, says, "I wonder if sea gulls like Cheez Doodles."

It's one of the funniest of more than 200 works in "Roz Chast: Cartoon Memoirs," a delightful, frequently laugh-out-loud exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, and it's illuminating to consider just what makes it so. First, it's the drawing itself. The people Ms. Chast renders in fine, nervous lines look funny. They are lovably cute, ugly and pathetic, like clowns. "Einstein" is a word sometimes used as a synonym for genius, often sarcastically, as when you reply to a friend's obtuse idea with "Nice theory, Einstein." Ms. Chast here uses the term in the second, ironic sense: When it comes to beachgoing, her hapless characters are not the brainiest people on the shore.

A theory of humor dating back at least as far as Plato's lifetime has it that laughter expresses our satisfied feelings of superiority over others who appear and behave in substandard ways. It's not nice to laugh at other people, but we do so all the time, even if only in mental privacy. Ms. Chast makes fun of people publicly. That could be a problem considering sensitivities inflamed by identity politics these days. But the targets of her

affectionate mockery are usually white, middle-class New York City dwellers. If they say and do dumb things, well, isn't it to be expected? The joke is on her.

Jokes, however, are rarely universal. A gag that some find funny may mystify others. The humor in the title of "Einsteins on the Beach" may go over a head or two: It evokes "Einstein on the Beach," an avant-garde operaby Robert Wilson and Philip Glass. The leap between portentous high art and the lowly cartoon is humorous. People who get that are the sort of folks who regularly read *The New Yorker*, which has been publishing Ms. Chast's cartoons for nearly 40 years. (Organized by the Norman Rockwell Museum, the exhibition includes many original drawings that have appeared in and on the cover of *The New Yorker*, and some that have never before been published.)

Born an only child in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, Ms. Chast, now 61, has described herself as once a "shy, hostile and paranoid" teenager who found early inspiration in the underground comics of R. Crumb. But as a grown-up cartoonist, Ms. Chast has avoided the sorts of taboo-breaking weirdness that made Mr. Crumb a countercultural hero in the 1960s.

As you can see and read in selections from her 2011 book, "What I Hate: From A to Z," Ms. Chast's aversions are not toward anyone or anything that people would be roused enough to defend. They include alien abduction, balloons, heights, rabies and quicksand. The joke is that such passionate animosity could be felt toward such trivial, rarely encountered or imaginary things. It's on us, too, for who can deny being regularly infuriated or frightened by entities that don't matter much or that don't actually exist?

This goes to the heart of Ms. Chast's idiosyncratic genius. People like her, which is to say like some of us, often feel inundated by mundane things, circumstances and obligations. Minutiae take up most of our lives. Yet, there is always the redemptive possibility of imaginative transformation, however ridiculous. "Subway Sofa," a mural-size painting on canvas that Ms. Chast made for this show, depicts a motley array of passengers sitting on a homey couch that has replaced the train's usual hard, plastic seats. Some people spend so much time on the subway that it's like a second home; wouldn't it be great if the trains were furnished accordingly?

For her 2014 book, "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?," Ms. Chast plunged into deeply personal waters while keeping alive her keen sense of absurdity. In comic book format, it tells the story of her efforts to deal with her aging parents, who, much to their daughter's exasperation, would rather talk about anything but their declining health and impending deaths.

Selected pages from the book in the exhibition follow the parents' transitions from their home to an assisted-living facility to their final ends. "They were a tight little unit" is Ms. Chast's narration above one image of husband and wife sitting together on a sofa and strenuously smiling. "Co-dependent?" Mom asks rhetorically. "Of course we're co-dependent." To which he agrees, "Thank GOD!!!" It's a hilarious and profoundly moving story, especially for readers who have had geriatric progenitors of their own to contend with.

You might suppose it unnecessary to go to a museum to see Ms. Chast's works since they've been so widely published. But it's good to study her lively drawings and delicately hued watercolors in the flesh rather than as magazine reproductions. It's informative to observe, for example, how she makes corrections by pasting revisions made on small scraps of paper over redacted areas. But most important, you can see and feel the mind-to-hand connection in these many soulfully wacky renditions of scenes from the surrealistic human comedy of modern life.

Roz Chast's Dark Humor at The Museum of the City of New York

By David D'Arcy • 04/14/16 1:14pm



Roz Chast. (Photo: Andy Katz)

Roz Chast is on the third floor of the Museum of the City of New York, at work on a larger-than-life mural that will greet visitors to “Roz Chast: Cartoon Memoirs,” the exhibition of 200 of her drawings that runs through October 9.

It’s a picture of a subway car, decorated like a frumpy living room with six people on a couch facing outward. Paintings of birds and flowers adorn the car walls. Ms. Chast, 61, seems to be saying that people carry their histories and their family lives with them wherever they go. And for New Yorkers, a lot of that drab, everyday journey is on the subway.

Art is on the subway living room wall, the Brooklyn-born Ms. Chast said, “because it’s so bee-yoo-tee-ful,” extending the word as she drew with a deadpan focus. “What could be more bee-yoo-tee-ful than birds and flowers?”

Asked if the work has a title, she simply retorted, “No,” without any inflection. (The museum lists the title as *Subway Sofa*.) She also won’t identify the blondish woman with a frazzled expression who looks a lot like her many cartoons of herself. Nor will she say whether the lady on the couch with the pink purse is her mother, who worked as an assistant principal in a public school.

At this scale, there’s a vague sense of longing in Ms. Chast’s mural, a surprise for a woman who makes her living by getting to the point instantly as readers of the *The New Yorker* flip pages.

‘I get rejected all the time. Whether it’s rejected because it’s too dark, too stupid or it doesn’t appeal, I don’t know.’ — Roz Chast

Ms. Chast is the cartoonist who gave us the wry image of a gravestone, on which is carved, “Tuned In, Turned On, Dropped Out, Dropped In, Worked Out, Saved Up, Dropped Dead.” Echoing *Charlie Hebdo*, she created burkas for “AFGHANIGAP” in another cartoon—they came in classic, cargo and slim fit (with Lycra). In her book-length memoir about her parents’ final years, *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, she imagined a purple tombstone-inspired assisted living residence with the chillingly realistic name, “Last Stop.”

“Death is such an unacceptable thought it sort of lends itself to comedy,” she said on the phone from her studio two weeks before the show’s opening.

As a girl, Ms. Chast was drawn to the ghoulish humor of Charles Addams. “He was jolly—dark, and cheerful at

the same time,” she said. “I liked any kind of dark humor—Edward Gorey, Gahan Wilson, Sam Gross. I read the *National Lampoon* when it was just starting to be published.”

Mad magazine was a crucial influence. “*Mad* was one of the first places that made fun of American pop culture, made fun of the ads, made fun of the stupid movies and the stupid television shows,” she said.

Her favorite *Mad* cartoonist was Don Martin, whose characters were unhinged and looked it with huge jaws hanging from their faces and feet folded in two as they walked. “Sometimes the visual details will crack me up more than the joke,” she said. “You know George Booth, of *The New Yorker*?” she asked, referring to the long-time cartoonist at the magazine who specialized in scenes of comic urban squalor with malevolent dogs and cats and improvised cords bisecting the space like telephone wires. “There would be an electric light in the ceiling that was attached to a light bulb, and so the electrical cord would go all across the room. It cracked me up.”



Ms. Chast in the studio. (Photo: Jeremy Clowe)

“Cartoon Memoirs” also includes a section that Ms. Chast calls “When You Live in New York,” an ensemble of pictures of eccentric New Yorkers in modest apartments and ordinary streets, plus “We Are Now Leaving New York,” visions of those urbanites adapting, awkwardly, to life in suburbia and beyond. Ms. Chast, a Brooklynite transplanted to Connecticut, is a frequent bewildered presence in those scenes.

All the show’s drawings, selected from the last four decades, range through experiences that turn futility into a punch line. Many of those appeared in

the massive *Theories of Everything: Selected, Collected, Health-Inspected Cartoons 1978-2006* (2006).

When Ms. Chast started out, cartooning was largely a man’s craft, even though *The New Yorker* did have women cartoonists in an earlier era—Helen Hokinson, Mary Petty and Barbara Sherman and Nurit Karlin in Ms. Chast’s days there, which began in 1978.

Ms. Chast said she was put off by the renegade underground comics of her generation—“too misogynistic, too male”—yet she found no strong gender barrier at *The New Yorker*, where she has been drawing since 1978: “I felt like there were so many other issues, that it was just one more thing. I was a lot younger than everybody there. Aside from Nurit, I was the only woman there. My stuff really looked different, my jokes were different. It was one of a constellation of things that somebody might get bent out of shape about.”

She admits that her style can be “a lot rougher” than that of other *New Yorker* cartoons. Ms. Chast sends her editors six or seven cartoon ideas each week. “Sometimes they take one, sometimes they take nothing. That’s just how it works,” she said. “I get rejected all the time. Whether it’s rejected because it’s too dark, too stupid or it doesn’t appeal, I don’t know.”

Dark is the right word for Ms. Chast’s last book, where nothing is off the table—not incontinence or senility, not even talk of the burdensome expense of keeping aging parents alive.

“I hope no one is thinking that I want to put anybody on an ice floe,” she said. “It’s a topic that does not get better by sticking your head in the sand about it.”

That topic becomes more endurable for the cartoonist and her readers when a dutiful daughter satirizes it. “If something’s funny, I’ll do it,” she said.

Satire doesn’t work unless it offends someone. “Sometimes I do what one should not do, and that is to read Amazon reviews,” Ms. Chast said. “Occasionally there’s going to be somebody who would say, ‘THIS IS VERY DISRESPECTFUL,’ ” in high-pitched indignation, as if by a character in one of her cartoons, she said.

She paused for a moment, addressing her internet critic: “You write YOUR OWN book.”

New Yorker's Roz Chast stunned by \$250,000 Heinz Award for her 'uncompromising' work

By Michael Cavanaugh April 23 at 12:01 AM



Roz Chast and friend. (photo by Kelly Campbell; courtesy of Heinz Family Foundation)

TWO MONTHS AGO, Roz Chast got the call. The person on the line was phoning on behalf of some group called Heinz. Hmm. As if by reflex, the New Yorker cartoonist thought perhaps these folks wanted her to donate a drawing.

“The truth is, I hadn’t heard of the Heinz Awards before,” Chast tells The Post’s Comic Riffs on Wednesday. “I guess I’m pretty much in my own little world. When I first heard from them — from the Heinz Foundation — I was sure they were going to ask me to contribute a drawing for a charity of some kind.”

“We were on the phone, and I had my pen and paper handy to write down what kind of cartoon they were looking for, when they needed it by, to whom I should send it, etc.,” Chast continues. “So, as the saying goes, ‘Imagine my surprise’ when the conversation went in a whole different direction.”

That whole different direction led toward the startling news that the foundation was looking not to receive, but give. Seems Chast had been chosen to receive one of six Heinz Awards, which regularly go to “exceptional Americans, for their creativity and determination in finding solutions to critical issues.”

Oh, and the Heinz Award comes with an unrestricted \$250,000 cash prize.

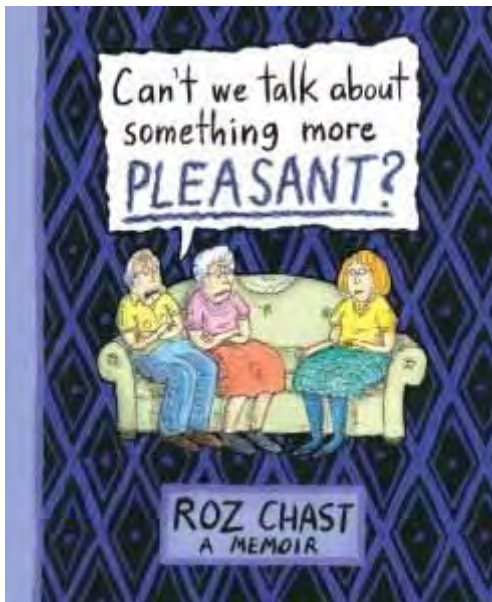
“‘Floored’ does not begin to describe it,” Chast says of her reaction. “I don’t think I’ve fully absorbed it yet.”

The Heinz Family Foundation is announcing Thursday the winners of the 20th Heinz Awards, which total \$1.25-million in cash awards. Besides Chast, the recipients include a bioengineer, a geoscientist, an environmental scientist and two former Marines.

“These remarkable men and women come from different fields and diverse backgrounds, but they share a bedrock conviction in their ability and responsibility as individuals to make a transformative impact on the world and the lives of others,” foundation chair Teresa Heinz says today in a statement, by way of announcing the news. “They offer an inspiring reminder that the most precious kind of change always comes from those who see past today’s limitations to a world of new possibilities and discoveries.”

In the case of these six recipients, Heinz praised their “ingenuity and persistence.”

The Connecticut-based Chast, 60, has drawn for the *New Yorker* for more than 35 years. Four years ago, she told me she was working on a graphic memoir about her parents, and their collective journey through the eldercare system. Chast said that to write an emotionally honest and insightful memoir, she necessarily waited till her parents had died.



Chast's debut graphic novel won the first-ever Kirkus Prize. (courtesy of Bloomsbury)

The creative result, “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?” (Bloomsbury), was released a year ago, and is a soulful masterpiece of personal storytelling and social illumination. Ever since, her bestselling memoir has been on a marathon victory lap, receiving the first Kirkus Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for autobiography; becoming the first graphic novel to be named a finalist for the nonfiction National Book Award; and just yesterday, being named an Eisner Award finalist for best reality-based work.

“The book provides an unflinching look at the increasingly common struggles faced by adult children caring for parents as they age and lose their health and independence,” said the Heinz statement, noting that Chast “details the realities of aging and end-of-life care—from dealing with the tragic effects of dementia to managing the high costs of elder care to reconciling her own personal feelings of guilt, exhaustion and love.”

Chast says she has witnessed the degree to which her memoir’s themes strike a universal chord.

“I think there were — are— more people going through caring for elderly parents, navigating that journey, than I knew,” Chast tells *The Post*. “But there’s also another aspect: that while we go through it, and even more afterwards, we know that unless something unusual happens, that’s where we’re going, too. As far as I know, life only goes in one direction.”

In selecting Chast for its Arts and Humanities award, the Heinz jury cited her “uncompromising body of work,” which brings “wry humor and wit to some of our most profound everyday anxieties, brilliantly translating the mundane into rich, comical observations that reflect her acute observations of the human experience.” The Heinz Awards also noted: that “in her articulation of our unspoken fears and dilemmas, she offers empathy and courage to confront them head on.”

The foundation accepts anonymous nominations, by a system of pooling the categorical expertise of hundreds of people, as it choose the recipients of the Heinz Award, which was created two decades ago to honor the memory of U.S. senator John Heinz.

The awards will be presented May 13 at a ceremony in Pittsburgh.

2015 Reubens: Roz Chast's big award caps a winning event for women creators

By Michael Cavanaugh May 24, 2015

A SEMI-CIRCLE of women cartoonists sat talking in the lobby of Washington's Omni Shoreham Hotel as Saturday turned into Sunday, all of them dressed in formal attire from the just-concluded Reuben Awards ceremony to salute their industry, and several noted that the evening's honors felt special.

It felt, in fact, historic.

For decades, the National Cartoonists Society, like so many American professional organizations dating back to midcentury, was an old boys' club, a reputation and legacy that some members say the group is still trying to shake off.

On Saturday night, in a ballroom holding hundreds of top cartoonists, the organizers might as well have piped in Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off," because for only the third time in the event's six-decade-plus history, a woman — the New Yorker's Roz Chast — received the group's big honor, the Reuben Award for Outstanding Cartoonist of the Year. And her trophy capped what may well be the event's winningest night ever for female writers and artists, as six women won in the 16 competitive categories.

As the ceremony turned to the awards presentations, male illustrators and animators, as happens most years, won the first half-dozen trophies. But then something apparently unprecedented for this organization happened: Women proceeded to win five of the next seven awards, and suddenly it felt as though the NCS — which in its earliest, postwar years barred women from even joining the club, and which infamously used to feature nude renderings of well-known female comic characters in its program bill — was taking strides toward more closely representing, and recognizing, the larger community of cartoon art. And toward looking more like a world in which Raina Telgemeier absolutely dominates recent New York Times bestseller lists for graphic novels, and "Saga" artist Fiona Staples receives multiple 2015 Eisner Award nominations at San Diego Comic-Con — and where even Chast herself, since last year, has won a groaning shelf of trophies and laurels, some groundbreaking, for her first graphic memoir, "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?"

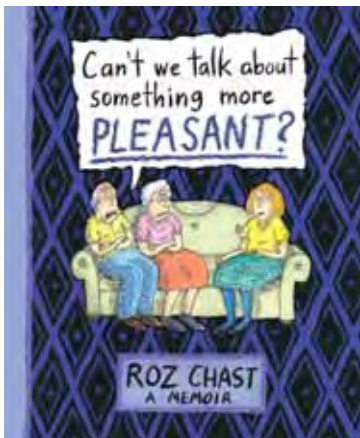
It was just a couple of years ago that Chast received an NCS divisional award (now dubbed a Silver Reuben) in the Gag Cartoons category — one of only several women in nearly 60 years to win that award. But then, Chast — who began drawing for the New Yorker in the late '70s, prompting some critical backlash then from even some intra-magazine male colleagues — has long been a cartooning trailblazer. So when, in her Reuben



Roz Chast continues her winning season with the 2015 Reuben Award, presented Saturday evening in Washington.

acceptance speech via video, Chast cited not only her diverse influences but also her crucial early editorial supporters (including Lee Lorenz and William Shawn), it reflected just how high many of her hurdles had been. Now, she shines like an inspiration to many, including to women who have followed her at the New Yorker itself, including Liza Donnelly.

And only a couple of years ago, just up the road in Washington, it was Donnelly — gag cartoonist, political cartoonist and editor, author of “Women on Men” — who helped emcee the Small Press Expo’s Ignatz Awards evening at which all the presenters were women. Of course, SPX, as a festival, draws a much-younger crowd than a Reubens industry convention, but in doing so, it also points toward the very future of comics, as roughly half the SPX exhibitors are women (as are a high percentage of the reading fans roaming the showroom aisles).



Chast's debut graphic novel won the first-ever Kirkus Prize. (courtesy of Bloomsbury)

That stands in stark contrast to what you see on the newspaper comics pages, as well as on most of the nation's editorial pages. From its very inception, the NCS has been a newspaper-centric professional organization, and largely as a result, the group's representation has been as male-dominated as the newspaper pages where cartoon art appears. But there are encouraging signs for the NCS: Both of the only two women who appear on The Post's funny pages, for instance — “Rhymes With Orange” creator Hilary Price and “Reply All” creator Donna Lewis — were in attendance Saturday night at the Reubens, with Price (also a Reuben Award nominee, like Chast) winning the Newspaper Panel Cartoon category.

Price's prize, in fact, capped that 5-of-7 run of category wins by women, kicked off by Marla Frazee's win for Book Illustration, for “The Farmer and the Clown,” and continued by Donnelly's honor for Magazine Gag Cartoon.

(Also notably in attendance, to spearhead Saturday seminars: Post political animator Ann Telnaes, who was moderator-turned-debater for an especially lively free-speech panel, in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo massacre; and artist/author Juana Medina, who in 2009 was the inaugural recipient of the NCS's Jay Kennedy Memorial Scholarship.)

Outgoing NCS president Tom Richmond has worked to help the slow-to-adapt event better reflect the times, and current marketplace, for cartoonists, and one of the smartest moves during his four-year term has been the addition of Reuben categories to recognize long- and short-form online comics, where creativity and diversity are booming, free of institutional gatekeepers. Last night, those two categories were swept by women.

In the Online Short Form division, Danielle Corsetto won for her recently wrapped strip “Girls With Slingshots.” And it was genuinely great to see Corsetto — who tends to be withdrawn at industry events — respond so warmly to the love in the room toward her work; in her acceptance speech, she graciously cited older newspaper strips (including “Garfield” and “Luann”) that she enjoyed reading as a young girl.

Her win was followed by that of Minna Sundberg, who won the Online Long Form category for her feature “Stand Still, Stay Silent.”

The last two honors of the night ahead of the Reuben Award went to two frequent nominees: Investor's Business Daily political cartoonist Michael Ramirez (who has won this honor four times in seven years — a head-turning dominance not remotely seen with other major Editorial Cartooning awards); and to 2015 Reuben nominee Stephan Pastis, whose “Pearls Before Swine” took home the Newspaper Comic Strip honor for the third time.

And if the ceremony had a particular feel-good moment besides Chast's win (as the first woman ever to win the Reuben, Lynn Johnston, looked on), it was the presentation of the first NCS Medal of Honor to legendary MAD

caricature artist Mort Drucker, whom Richmond — in quoting his MAD magazine predecessors, called “everybody’s hero.” And perhaps fitting given the growing diversity of the NCS honorees, Drucker told me in an interview a day earlier that he advised his children, as they matured, not to forsake their life passions in choosing a partner, but rather to follow the path of what they love.

As his daughter Laurie beamed from near the stage Saturday, it was obvious she has found happiness in part by listening to her father’s advice, born in the spirit of creative equality.

Roz Chast: a born cartoonist

Story by Don Stewart

Wednesday, August 19, 2015

(Published in print: Thursday, August 20, 2015)

“When I’m drawing I’m thinking ‘What do I think is funny? What is making me laugh? What’s getting to me?’”

— Roz Chast July, 2015

With a range of vocal intonations and a conjuring of brilliantly imaginative drawings, “The New Yorker” cartoonist Roz Chast is a master storyteller. Speaking recently to a sold-out audience at Stockbridge’s Norman Rockwell Museum, she created tsunamis of laughter every time she screened a new drawing. Employed by the magazine since 1978, she has produced some 1,200 cartoons for the publication.



As an introduction, she noted that an editor had once asked her for a childhood photograph. She asked if she could instead draw herself as a child.

“They said ‘Knock yourself out,’” she recalled.

She depicted herself lying in bed surrounded with literature — “The Big Book of Horrible, Rare Diseases,” “Lockjaw Monthly” and the very real “Merck’s Manual.”

Her overbearing mother and anxious father raised her to see the specter of catastrophic illness behind every sniffle.

“I knew that leprosy was very, very rare in Brooklyn,” she said. “But, rare wasn’t the same as nonexistent.”

Her father expressed concern anytime she was out-of-breath, even as she raced to the telephone.

“He got very, very scared,” she said. “He had this feeling that you only had a certain number of breaths ... you didn’t want to use them up.”

Her mother, loathing doctors, was encyclopedic as to what could do you in. Sitting on cold ground could lower the temperature of your kidneys. Death.

Stretchy watchbands? Chast took on the stentorian voice of her finger-wagging mother "Take it off ... your hand is going to get gangrene and drop off."

Playing the oboe? Flirtation with an explosive death.

Her mother knew people who had succumbed to such frivolity.

Her father, dedicating his life to fretting, was addled by technology, finding toasters forbiddingly complex and never driving their car.

"Being happy? That was for modern people or movie stars, i.e. degenerates," Chast said.

Roz' parents, Elizabeth and George, were educators. Her mother was a vice-principal in the New York school system while her father taught languages.

Nevertheless, this duo, who were born within two weeks of one another and raised within a couple of blocks of each other, lived in their own world. They'd never dated anyone else prior to their marriage, became parents in middle age and lived in the same apartment for 48 years.

"Aside from World War II and going to the bathroom, they did everything together," Chast said.

Quirky families are catnip for creative types. Their bittersweet decline and passing is explored in Chast's most recent work "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" (Bloomsbury; 228 pages; \$20.05).

A photograph of Roz's somewhat ruffled and smiling parents appeared on the screen.

"They were very old-fashioned people," she said. "This is like, the 1960s and my parents dressed like it was the 1930s ..."

The quirkiness traveled through generations. One of Roz's grandmothers was convinced that characters on TV could see you. She always dressed formally before turning on the set.

Early influences

As an only child of a mother and father who were a full generation older than the parents of her schoolmates, the experience was isolating. Her parent's friends generally didn't have children Chast's age, so she was often left alone with crayons and drawing paper. When her parents made annual summer hegiras for seminars at the woodsy, suburban landscape of Cornell University, Chast would be left alone to wander the library. While there, at age 9 she discovered the spooky work of New Yorker cartoonist Charles Addams in such books as "Drawn and Quartered" and "Addams and Evil." She'd struck an offbeat, creative wellspring that would strongly influence her later illustrations.

"I could just read these books over and over and laugh and laugh," she said.

In an introduction to one of the Addams' books the critic Woolcott Gibbs wrote that the cartoonist's work displayed "essentially a denial of all spiritual and physical evolution in the human race."

The cover of a little-known Addams' book "Dear Dead Days" appeared on the screen.

"It's a compendium of images that delighted and inspired him," she said. Photographs ranged from weird architecture and the late, great Johnstown Flood of 1889 to creepy hotel rooms.

Among the images she noted "two baby chairs so complicated that the patent office couldn't figure them out."

She was later to be influenced by New Yorker veterans such as William ("Shrek!") Steig and Saul Steinberg, best known for his map "View of the World from 9th Avenue."

With a bedroom window that looked out upon a brick wall a few feet away, Chast grew up pretty much like the rest of us: "shy, hostile and paranoid."

An ideal profession?

As a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, she submitted drawings to the student cartoon magazine "Fred." They were rejected.

Upon graduation, she was back in Brooklyn, living with her parents and dreaming of creating cartoons for "The Village Voice."

On a whim, she dropped off 60 drawings at The New Yorker.

The cartoon editor, Lee Lorenz, was taken with Chast's eccentric whimsies, bought a drawing, sent her \$250 and welcomed her aboard. The magazine's cartoonist clique, however, was male-dominated and she was barely tolerated.

"When they first started using my stuff, (Lorenz) told me a lot of the older cartoonists were angry, angry and one of them actually asked him if he owed the family money," she said.

Chast said that her friends thought she had an ideal profession. Just submit a cartoon or two every week and receive a big check.

She then took on a comically sardonic voice and said "That would be great on another planet — NOT THIS ONE!"

Chast explained that she was one of 40 contract cartoonists for the magazine, each submitting 10 or so drawings weekly.

Added to that there are another 400 cartoons sailing in "over the transom."

From "the batch" of some 800 drawings, the cartoons are winnowed to perhaps 100 to be picked over before 25 are chosen.

"It's a lot of rejection," she said. "I've said to many people, if you can do anything else, do it. Seriously."

Chast used to travel into New York with her work, standing by as an editor pored over it.

Over time she realized it wasn't a character-building experience.

"I didn't want him to see my needy little face," she said.

She said she has eliminated that anxiety, mailing her drawings by computer. Taking on a dreamy, high-pitched voice she said slowly "I send them into cyberspace."

Rejections? There have been a few. She screened a photograph of six metal file drawers where the drawings are entombed. Chast noted that she frequently recycles cartoon ideas with fresher drawings. After four rejections, a drawing enters the morgue. Many of these orphans appear in "Theories of Everything" (Bloomsbury; 400 pages; \$20.93).

Compulsive creativity

Chast's parents, who lived into their mid-90s, were proud of her numerous books and her status at The New Yorker.

"They were as surprised as I was to see my cartoons in there," she said. "They got very good at working into the conversation what their daughter did."

She wasn't sure if they got all the jokes. In a 1986 magazine cover, Chast depicted a bespectacled man in surgical whites standing before a genealogy chart of the evolution of ice cream, from banana splits to frappes.

Her dad thought the cartoon was showing all the frozen stuff that was bad for you.

Chast said that in his wallet her father carried a dog-eared cartoon from "The Saturday Evening Post." A man is lying on a psychiatrist's couch saying "I feel inferior because I don't understand the cartoons in The New Yorker."

The laughter from the audience was virtually unending as Chast screened each new cartoon. Drawings ranged from a family, their cats and furniture all adhering to a wall ("The Velcros at Home") to "Gifts From The House of Low Goals" (Congratulations on Your New Easy Chair!)

Chast has a smorgasbord of peeves ranging from cartoons that take place in an unidentifiable "Nowheresville" to unreal everyone-is-a-quipster TV situation comedies. Balloons? Explosions waiting to happen.

The exhibit also displays little-known details of Chast's artistry. She gifts friends with illustrated storybooks no larger than a pack of chewing gum. She also paints intricate Ukrainian Pysanky eggs with imaginary characters looking much like her favorite R. ("Keep on Truckin'") Crumb characters. These characters also appear much larger as images in her colorful hook rugs.

Chast, a mother of two, now lives in Connecticut with her husband, the humor writer Bill Franzen.

As she concluded her talk, she told the story of a woman who'd met her mother and was well informed of Chast's magazine work and career. Before the woman departed her mother leveled her gaze and asked a question.

"Tell me the truth. Do you think she's funny?"

Exhibit information

"Roz Chast: Cartoon Memories" continues at the Rockwell Museum through Oct. 26.

Open August through October, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission: adults \$18; college students with ID \$10; ages 6 to 18, \$6. Directions: The museum is less than three miles from downtown Stockbridge. Signs direct motorists to Route 102 west and then Route 183 south. The museum is a half-mile on your left.

Don Stewart is a freelance writer who lives in Plainfield. He has written for The Recorder since 1994.

Just In: Roz Chast wins Best Autobiography award from National Book Critics Circle

By [Michael Cavanaugh](#) March 12



IT IS a story that Roz Chast refused to tell till after her parents had passed.

It is a tale not only of eldercare, and the realities of aging, but also a poignant look at what we say (and don't say) to our loved ones when death looms near.

Some years back, Chast told me at a comics convention that her folks had died fairly recently, and that she could now process their deaths through writing, and drawing, about the experience. It would be an eldercare memoir, and it would be a deeply personal account of how a middle-aged child can no longer deny the challenges and emotions and even industry of death.

Ever since Chast published “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?” (Bloomsbury) last year, the accolades have poured forth. For her first graphic novel, she has picked up the first Kirkus Prize, and received recognition from the National Book Awards and the National Cartoonists Society (which just named her as a finalist for its Reuben Award as “outstanding cartoonist of the year”).

Now, yet again, Chast is in the winner’s circle.

Tonight, Post critic and fiction editor Ron Charles reports that Chast has just won the 2014 award for Best Autobiography at the National Book Critics Circle ceremony in New York.

The NBCC jury consists of working critics and editors of book reviews.



Ron Charles
@RonCharles



Roz Chast: "I told my agent that I would bet the lives of my 2 parrots that I wasn't going to win." #NBCC.

4:13 PM - 12 Mar 2015 📍 Manhattan, NY, United States

Patricia Sheridan's Breakfast With ... Roz Chast

April 13, 2015 12:00 AM

By Patricia Sheridan / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Roz Chast, credit Bill Franzen

Award-winning cartoonist Roz Chast takes an unflinching look at aging, dying and death in her illustrated memoir, "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" (Bloomsbury, \$28). The book deals with the care of her parents and their things before and after they died. The 60-year-old grew up in Brooklyn, the only child of older parents. She will be in Pittsburgh April 23 for the Family Hospice and Palliative Care Center's "An Evening With Roz Chast" at Rodef Shalom. For tickets, call 412-572-8812 or visit www.familyhospicepa.org.

Your mother's journey was at times very entertaining. She bounced back from the brink many times. How did it make you feel about your eventual demise, mortality?

Oh, she did, she did. It was a lot of ups and downs [laughs]. The experience of going through this with my parents, especially with my mother, was such an eye-opener for me, the drawn-out nature of it, the up-and-down nature of it. I really had the impression, probably from books and movies, that you got to a certain age where you got sick and weak and then you took to your bed for a few weeks and your relatives and friends would come around and say goodbye. It never occurred to me that that

final chapter was not just three weeks long. It was like a whole other set of chapters.

Who knows what the ending for us will be like? [With] medical science, we have gotten better at prolonging these last chapters. Sometimes it is good because people recover and they actually have another couple of years of relatively good quality of life. Other times, it is just a couple of years of basically lying in bed, sleeping and drinking Ensure and having your diaper changed by some underpaid woman. It's terrible.

There was so much vigilance on your part during your parents' decline. Did it bother you that you were not at the bedside when they died?

You mean like that I missed a crucial scene in a movie or something? Not really. I just sort of accepted it for how it unfolded. The hospice person, who was with my father, said something so interesting. She said when they are dying, they choose when they actually die. She has seen this again and again. When my father was passing and my mother was by his bedside, she went to the bathroom for two minutes and that is when he passed. So in some ways I thought it wasn't entirely surprising that I wasn't right there. Maybe it would have been harder for them.

You sketched your mother while she lay dying. How did that help you?

I don't know how to put it into words exactly. It was something to do and it is what I do. I draw. I like to look at things and draw things. I think it was a way of keeping my mind on the present rather than reading. Those last few months, she wasn't talking. She was sleeping mostly. So when I would visit her, rather than knit or check my email, I would draw.

When you were drawing as a child, were you making up stories in your head to go with what you were drawing?

Oh yeah. When I am drawing people, I am hearing them. I am hearing them say it. The drawings [of her mother] are very quiet. She was very quiet. It was just a very quiet time.

What traits of your mother do you see in yourself?

Sort of a complete inability to dress myself in any stylish sort of way [laughs]. You know, an inability to flirt in any sort of coherent normal way. I can take any stylish thing and make it look like I got it at Macy's basement. I could take an Armani gown and make it look like I got it off the rack at Kohl's or something.

So, thanks, Mom!

[Laughing] Exactly. It's a real talent. I don't want to brag but not everybody has that ability.

Because your parents were such a unit, you said you felt a little disassociated at times. You had the chance to be closer to each as they were dying. Do you wonder what would have happened had they gone quickly? Would there even be a memoir?

Possibly not. There were so many aspects of the experience that were so new and surprising to me — everything from the long lastingness of my mother's last couple of years to those stories she told at the end. I told my editor that really this should be placed in the travel section because I felt like I had gone to a country that had always been there but I had never known was there and spoke a language that had words like "health care proxy." I had no idea what they were talking about and I had to learn these things.

I am sure you didn't go into this thinking "I see a book here." But they did give you a lot of fodder.

Yes, yes, and some of the cartoons in the book were things I had done all along, not thinking I would be putting them in a book. I submit every week a group of cartoons to The New Yorker, most of which are rejected. The cheese danish one, the patched oven mitt and the sex talk one — these came out of real conversations [while] shopping with my mother for stockings.

You spent so much time disassembling their lives. How did that impact the way you live now?

Well, the book has had an effect. I mean, I am still talking about it and it seems to be a topic that a lot of people are interested in and possibly going through themselves. I wrote the book so that I would not forget. When I write down stories or things that happen, a lot of times it's because I want to remember. I don't keep a journal and sometimes I am afraid if I don't write stuff down, everything will fade. My parents will fade, the

conversations they had will fade. I am glad I wrote it because sometimes I can still hear them very much in my head, which I like.

Are their cremains still in your closet?

They are, but they won't be for that much longer. It turns out there is a cemetery in Brooklyn where my mother's parents are buried. So I will be taking the two boxes and burying my parents there. I am going to write about it when it happens.

Did any of this change your feelings about life after death?

No, it is still a mystery to me. It is like the biggest question mark there is, I think, for everybody, anybody who is alive. It definitely opened my eyes to a lot of issues that come in the months or years leading up to that and how badly we do as a society even acknowledging that people not only get old but that they need a lot of help. It takes a lot of money. I just feel we could do a lot better.

My parents had insurance they paid into their whole lives in Brooklyn and when they moved to Connecticut that insurance stopped.

That is crazy.

It's totally crazy. Their insurance no longer was valid because they moved from New York state to Connecticut. They had Medicare, but that was it.

What a rip.

It was such a rip! It was so stupid. I mean how is that allowed? Of course, the places that exist to take care of the oldest old, they know the children are sort of over a barrel and can't take their parents into their houses for different reasons. It was like a black comedy. My parents, who were not rich people, scrimped and saved, and thank God they did, but it all went.

This is repeated millions and millions and millions of times. I have gotten hundreds of letters saying this is exactly what happened with us. I have heard crazy stories about people in their 80s where they set it up to go into multitiered assisted living and you sign over everything. Maybe they sell their house [and] they put everything in, but if your parents both die within a year or a couple of years, that place keeps the entire thing. We are in the wrong business [laughing].

It's funny you sort of became an expert on this topic.

[Laughing] I am such not an expert. The only two pieces of advice I would have is if you don't know anything about anything, get an elder lawyer and keep a notebook to write down all of the stuff like your parents' social security numbers and what medication they are on. You are going to be asked all of those questions again and again.

I loved your idea of extreme palliative care — all the sweets you want, morphine, movies, whatever.

Yes, yes, why draw it out? I just turned 60 and I hope if that anvil — as a cartoonist I feel it would be an anvil from the sky — doesn't fall that is what I would like. You know, opium or morphine or heroin — something to look forward to that is pleasurable.

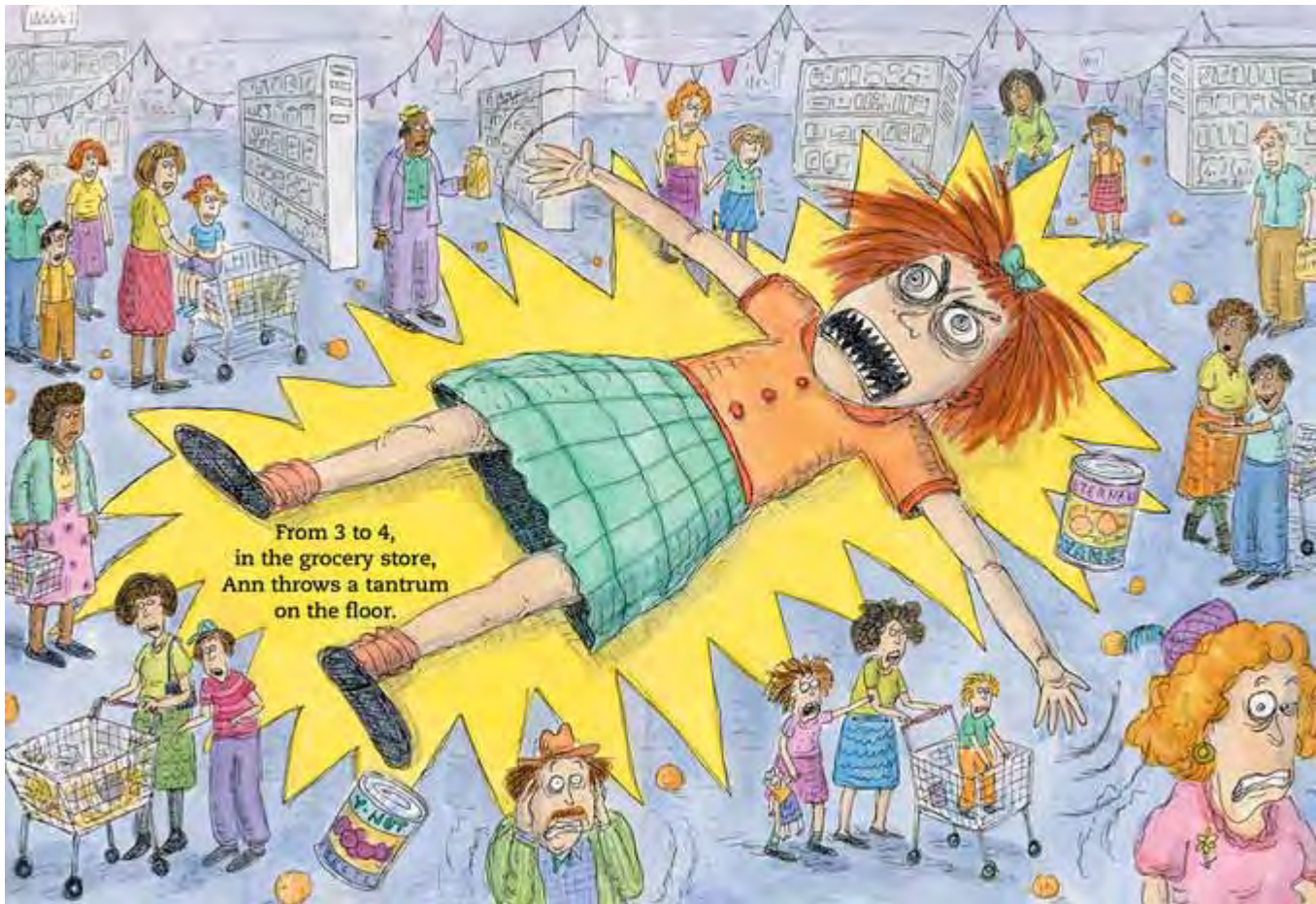
But I don't know? Maybe you feel different when you are at that point. That is where it all becomes very nebulous. What do I know? I know nothing. I am looking at it from the point of view of a 60-year-old. Maybe when you are 90 you look at it very differently.

Crazy All the Time

Roz Chast's 'Around the Clock!'

JAN. 14, 2015

By MARIA RUSSO



Credit From "Around the Clock!"

After reading aloud to my children virtually every night for over a decade — my daughter just turned 12, and my sons are 9 and 4 — I have, of course, many book recommendations, but I also have some strategic suggestions. The first is, if you can't picture yourself reading a particular book nightly for, oh, *two straight months*, don't even bring it into the house. Small children have a huge appetite for repetition, and you never know what will catch their interest. So be wary. I recently brought home "Hello Kitty Goes to Camp," which comes with postcards to send home, thinking it would be an opportunity for "ironic" bonding with my frighteningly culturally sophisticated preteenage daughter. She didn't bite. Then the 4-year-old found it and, fascinated by his sister's two recent sleepaway camp disappearances, has demanded to hear it for many, many nights now.

A corollary to the above: Be selfish. There's nothing wrong with pushing on your little ones, say, the growing genre of dark-humor picture books by funny, acerbic authors of grown-up books like those by Jenny Offill (author of the exhilarating, heartless "While You Were Napping"), even if part of you suspects that most of the

fun will fly right over their heads. Reading these books aloud will bring you joy, and joy is a good thing for adults to “model,” as the parenting experts say, for children.

The latest candidate for this is Roz Chast’s new picture book, “Around the Clock.” It’s a rhyming walk through the hours of the day with a cast of the New Yorker cartoonist’s usual hilariously anxious, socially challenged degenerates, only child-size. We begin at 6 a.m. when we meet a red-haired, wide-eyed looney-tune in dinosaur pajamas. He’s sitting on the kitchen floor holding a dinosaur mug. The place is a total mess, the fridge wide open, dinosaur toys strewn among mounds of flour, broken eggs everywhere, other mini-messes including a pool of maple syrup and a can of ultra-gooey yellow “Goo.” “From 6 to 7 / Pete is up, / drinking from / his favorite cup,” the text deadpans.

From there, it’s on to settings including school, where we witness an unapologetic, full-on daydreaming session against a backdrop of wholesome educational posters: “From 9 to 10, Deb has forgotten: / Are unicorns real, or are they notten?” In Chast’s world, the emotions that most picture books aim to help children manage are given gloriously subversive free reign. From 3 to 4, for example, we’re in the grocery store, where “Ann throws a tantrum / on the floor.” The child appears several times larger than life, sprawled out over a two-page spread with furiously spiraling eyes and jagged teeth. The other shoppers are fleeing in terror. But guess what, Chast seems to be saying — a child made an embarrassing scene, and time did not stop!

The grown-ups who appear are, of course, horrible. From 6 to 7 p.m., the smiling parents of Sophie serve her “Liver Surprise” for dinner and insist she try it. Lynn’s mother, from 9 to 10 at night, can be seen forcing her daughter to wear some bizarre and obviously scratchy pajamas. The mom, hands on hips, says, “Your great-grandma Clara worked for TWO YEARS on these pajamas, and you’re going to wear them! END OF STORY!!!



Credit From "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?"

Overbearing mothers will always be with us, and as Chast knows, if you don’t find a way to laugh at them, you’ll end up buried in your own rage. But it made me wonder: Does anyone talk to their children in just that language anymore? That page sent me straight back to Chast’s funny, profound, heartbreaking graphic memoir, “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?,” in which she details her parents’ decline into old age and their final years. It turns out poor Lynn’s mother is a ringer for Chast’s own, the formidable Elizabeth, who drove her daughter nuts until she died in 2009 at 97. “My mother did not ‘pick her battles,’ as parents nowadays are advised to do,” Chast writes. “The few fights I dared to have with her, she won. She *always* won.”

Other moments in “Around the Clock” evoke the real-life Chast family that we come to know in the memoir (is that her kindly, bespectacled, worry-wart father, George, fetching a smiling little Emma, who’s “dying of thirst,” a glass of water at 10 at night?). These make the picture-book reading experience especially rich. As we do our beneficial-to-the-children nightly reading, we adults can enjoy a complex and very adult world view captured in what would seem like the simplest, most straightforward children’s book form. As for the child listeners, I can only report that the first time we finished the page about the noon hour, involving a girl talking loudly in the school cafeteria to her imaginary friend, my 4-year-old said with delight, “Oh, this is getting *weird!*”

AROUND THE CLOCK!

By Roz Chast

32 pp. Atheneum. \$17.99. (Picture book; ages 4 to 8)

SPEAKEASY

Roz Chast Discusses the National Book Award Longlist

By ELLEN GAMERMAN



Roz Chast / Associated Press

It'd be fun to see how **Roz Chast** would draw publishing people all aflutter.

Today, the 59-year-old cartoonist finds herself right at the center of their chatter as the only woman to make the **National Book Award's** 2014 nonfiction longlist. Her book, "**Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant?**," was one of ten works on the list released yesterday.

Her first memoir, a chronicle of her experience at the end of her parents' life, is told largely through cartoons. She applies her zany world view to the most personal subjects, moving from her parents' refusal to talk about the end of their lives while they were still spry enough to do so—"Just like a normal adult, but with SILVER HAIR!" reads one panel—to depicting them as two separate sacks of cremated remains, her father in a blue drawstring bag inside a Channel 13 tote, her mother in a maroon velvet bag. "Until I figure out a better place for them," Chast writes in the book's final panel, "they're staying in my closet."

The longtime **New Yorker** cartoonist spoke with the Wall Street Journal from her Connecticut home while her two parrots

squawked in the background. An edited transcript:

Why do you think there aren't more women on the nonfiction list?

Yeah. Weird, right? I don't know. Who knows? It seems very strange.

Between you and Alison Bechdel (a graphic novelist who won a MacArthur "Genius Grant") it's a good day to be a female cartoonist.

I totally agree. Actually my first thought was just it's good for cartoons, for the graphic form.

Why do you think grief and old age make for good cartoons?

Death has always been a subject, at least in the New Yorker cartoons. I think about all those end-of-the-world guys, and of course the classic death figure—cartoons with the hood and the scythe—and the cartoons about people ascending to heaven or going to hell. I guess it's one way of dealing with the anxiety of the unknown.

How did you remember the details you put in this book?

I have a little pad and I write things down, usually. With this book, I had written emails to a lot of people about specific things that were going on, and so, thank God for gmail searches, I could just put in a term and that helped me.

Can you talk about the impulse to start drawing minutes after your mother died?

I had done drawings at the end. Most of them were done, aside from the very last one, they were all done in the last few months of her life when I was visiting her and nothing almost was being said. The last one was, the person who was with her 24 hours, I call her "Goodie" in the book, called me and said my mother was passing. By the time I got there she had already passed. It was one of those things that is so surreal, it's like, "Oh my gosh, my mother is gone." And then there's all this bureaucratic stuff that has to happen. And I was just left with my mother's body, and that was my instinct, to draw her.

Did your parents ever show up as characters in your New Yorker cartoons?

I used aspects of them. Every once in a while something would happen that was very specific to them, but most of the time the people that were sort of like them were parent types.

What are you working on next?

There's a book coming out that I illustrated for Stephin Merritt of the Magnetic Fields. I love his music so much. He wrote a book called, "101 Two-Letter Words," and if you play Words with Friends or Scrabble, these are words you pretty much have to know. Like "aa" is a type of lava—it comes up, like, five, six times a day. And so he wrote these little couplets for 101 of these two-letter words and I illustrated them. It was so much fun.

Have movie producers or others shown interest in adapting your work?

I did do a pilot, I guess it was about eight years ago, for an animation thing. It did not work out, but I learned a lot. I'm kind of feeling out some things right now.

Would you want to see your memoir as a movie?

I'd like to feel that I had a lot of say in it, but I think it would be interesting.

This article has been updated from its original version.

Life drawing to a close: my parents' final year

Cartoonist Roz Chast's graphic memoir of the decline and death of her parents was an attempt to record a hard and messy experience



Emma Brockes

The Guardian, Friday 13 June 2014



Roz Chast: 'I wanted to write about the entire experience, including my mixed feelings about my parents. I didn't want to write with a fake, rosy glow.' Photograph: Bill Franzen

The first indication Roz Chast had that her elderly parents weren't coping was when she noticed the level of grime in their apartment. Not ordinary dirt, she writes, in *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, a graphic memoir of the decline and eventual death of her parents, but "a coating that happens when people haven't cleaned in a really long time. It covered everything."

In her professional life, Chast, 59, was a highly successful cartoonist for the *New Yorker*, at the top of her career and in control of an orderly life in leafy Connecticut. The moment she stepped into her parents' tiny apartment in Brooklyn, however – site of her unhappy childhood and where they had lived since 1959 without, apparently, throwing a single item away – she was transported back into a raging and impotent teen, "filled with dread, guilt and a weird kind of claustrophobia".

Those who know and love Chast's work think of her as the queen of family angst, a brilliant chronicler of domestic strife, and the account of her parents' last year – as they move from the apartment, to hospital, to a care home in Connecticut – is an extraordinary record of the love, fury and ambivalence that often characterises these experiences.

"Of course, there's always someone who writes in to say, 'I found it cruel,'" she says. "But mostly people are glad that I've said it was really hard, and really messy. I wanted to write about the entire experience, including

the parts that were gross, and funny, and including my mixed feelings about my parents. I didn't want to write with a fake, rosy glow."

We are in the kitchen of Chast's house, overlooking her garden. She works in a sunroom, surrounded by artwork, or in an armchair in the living room, where one of her two pet parrots sometimes perches on her shoulder. (The sofa is pecked bald in places, as is the parrot, who has an anxiety disorder and plucks his own feathers, a detail so apt as to seem taken from one of Chast's own cartoons.) The biggest problem, she says, was getting her parents to face up to the fact that they were sliding into chaos. This was not a family that talked about things, certainly not about death, or money, or intimacy, except in the most general and apocalyptic terms.

George, Chast's father, was terminally anxious, while her mother, Elizabeth – "built like a fire hydrant" and with a personality to match – ruled the home with an iron will. "Her emotions were very primary colours," says Chast. "When she was angry, she was really angry. And if she felt sad, she would just be sad." She took her job as an assistant school principal extremely seriously and had no time for what she saw as the sappy self-indulgence of her husband's approach to things. "My father was the introspective one. And she would yell at him, 'George, you're walking around with your feelers out!' Well, yeah, that's what we do as people on earth. We're not all made of metal."



They were an odd pair, utterly devoted to each other and not like other parents: "My mother quoted Shakespeare and used words like 'interstices'. 'The dust will get into the interstices!' Or 'metatarsal'. Most of my friends' parents did not use that kind of language." They were also remote from Chast, not particularly nurturing, and very much parents, not friends. When she visited their apartment that time and noticed the grime, she hadn't set foot in the place for 11 years. "Aren't I the worst daughter?" (They visited her a few times a year in Connecticut.) On some instinct, however, she drove to Brooklyn that day and saw that they were in trouble. As she writes ominously in the book: "Something was coming down the pike."

George and Elizabeth Chast had saved all their lives. They didn't have a mortgage, not trusting the banks and believing that borrowing money was wrong. They made do and mended, even patching up an old oven glove to make it go the distance. They were classic products of the Depression. And so, when Chast's mother

injured herself in a fall and her father started showing signs of dementia, Chast moved them to a care home near her house, where the contrast in weekly expenditure was so horrifying, she says, you could only laugh.

Me at 12.

Roz Chast explores her relationship with her parents in her graphic memoir. Photograph: Roz Chast

It was a terrible time. The Chasts had medical insurance, but, incredibly, it wouldn't transfer from New York to Connecticut. And so they were thrown into a world of almost unthinkable financial burden. "To go from a patched oven mitt and a washcloth full of soap slivers, to \$14,000 a month?" says Chast. "You have to look at it as a black comedy. Scrimp and save, scrimp and save, and then it all goes to Sunset Acres in two years, at the end of your life."

Chast did all the things one has to do; she put them somewhere decent and clean. She got them a lawyer and, despite their horror of such things, forced them to sit down and talk about their finances. As they inched into their late 90s, she arranged for round-the-clock care. And she kept a horrified eye on their dwindling savings, all the while thinking: "There goes my inheritance."

"It's a terrible, terrible thing and you look at yourself in the mirror and think: I'm a worm. I'm a lowly, shitty, crappy, horrible worm to be thinking about this. But everyone does think about it. Because you want to be able to leave some money for your kids."

What she inherited, instead, was a world of junk. As her parents lay dying, Chast dragged herself back to their apartment and started the grim task of sifting through a lifetime of worthless possessions. "You would open a drawer, which my father had jammed full of newspapers, and the bottom would drop out. There were buttons and screws and nails and bottle caps and jar lids – the drawer of jar lids! Why? Because they're made of metal and maybe there'll be another war and we'll need the metal. A friend of mine – I quote him in the book – says, 'You have found the source of the river eBay.'"

Her father died first, aged 95, and as Chast's relationship with him had been closer, she was less riven by guilt than she was during her mother's last days. The most painful part of the book is when she tries, at the 11th hour, to ask her mother if she regrets the fact that they hadn't been closer.

"That was bad. She sort of shut it down. She didn't really want to talk about it. It was too late. I think that's when I started to realise that you don't always get what you want. You don't get closure, or understanding. It just doesn't always happen."

Chast had done right by them, but she was still sick with regret after they were gone. "Should I have taken them into my house? Should I have seen them more? Why didn't I love them more? You know? Am I a disgusting person? I mean, I really loved my dad, but is there something that I'm missing here, in all this?"

The final sketches of her mother on her death bed are terribly poignant and, despite the sometimes lacerating honesty of the book, the impression one takes away from it is tenderness: the tenderness of a story truthfully told, and to that extent, a fine tribute to her parents. Their deaths made Chast look at her own two children, both in their 20s and with whom she has great relationships, and "feel so sorry for my mother. That she missed out on something that to me is the most important thing in my life."

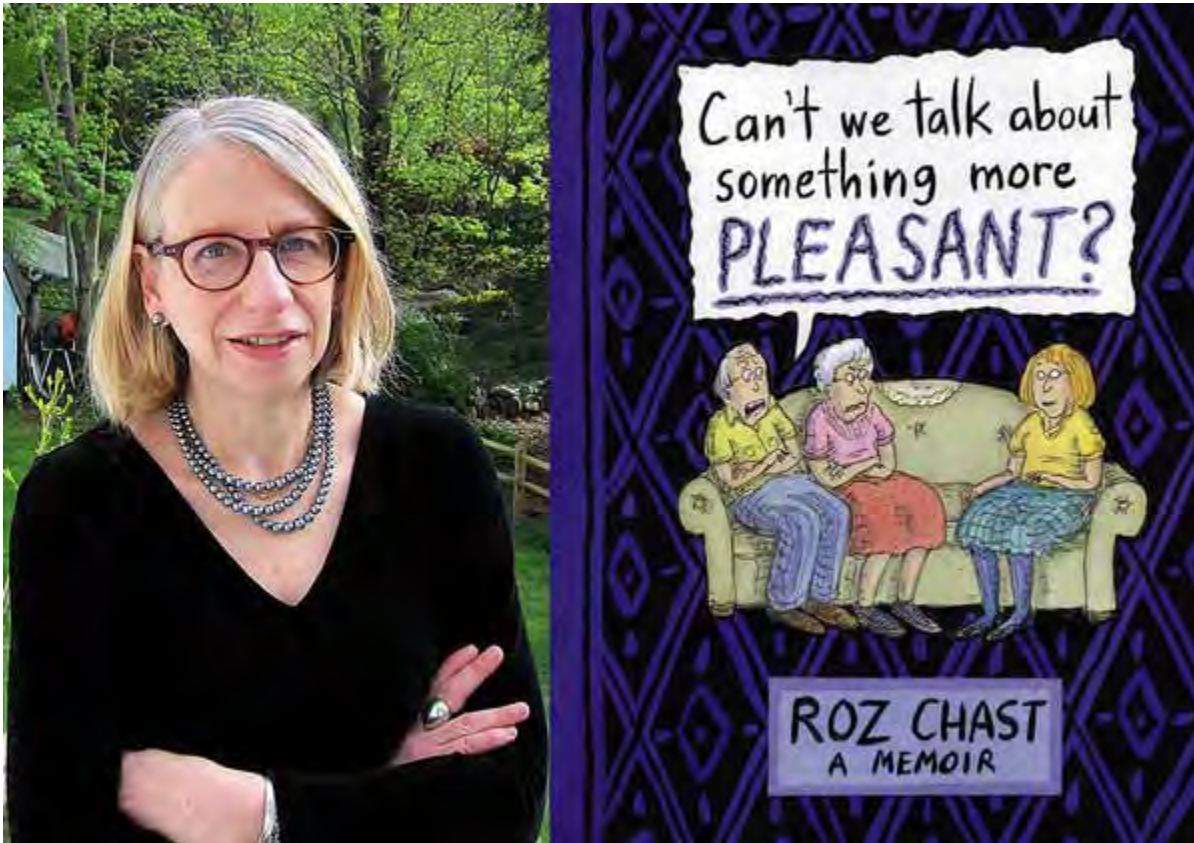
In the wake of publication, people have written to Chast to ask for advice on how to deal with their own super-elderly parents, and she is at a loss as to what to say. That people live too long? That it is absurd to spend so much on sustaining lives it is hard to see the value in? At the end of the day, there are no profound insights; just horror, and sadness, and grim amusement. "It was not something that I wanted to be doing," she says. "But I had to do it."

• *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* is published by Bloomsbury on 3 July, £18.99

BOOK REVIEW

Roz Chast wryly recalls her elderly parents in a graphic memoir

In 'Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?', New Yorker cartoonist Roz Chast shows (and tells) her parents' tenaciousness in the midst of physical decline.



Author Roz Chast and the cover of her book, "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" (Bill Franzen / Bloomsbury)

Douglas Wolk

May 1, 2014 | 9:41 a.m.

There's an image a few pages into "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" whose layout will be familiar to anyone who's seen Roz Chast's cartoons before: a scruffy little figure is surrounded by a handful of sly little captions addressing different half-formed perspectives. ("My mother referred to the entire episode as 'that mess'"). The image is, in fact, a drawing of Chast's prematurely born sister who lived only for a day — and Chast's gift for comedic pacing, applied to her tentative understanding of a tragedy, brings out a much bleaker, bitingly self-aware kind of comedy.

That's the ingenious trick of perspective that drives Chast's memoir of her parents' slow decline and death, presented partly as comics and partly as handwritten prose. There's no experience that's both more awful and more universal than the stumble toward the grave; there's nothing funny about it in itself. But the human

capacity for denying it (and, in particular, George and Elizabeth Chast's extraordinary appetite for denial), and the little indignities scattered along the way, are exactly the kind of folly that fuels her best comedy.

Chast's cartoons are among the reliable pleasures of the *New Yorker*: jittery, acerbic and finely observed, they slice to the bone of a certain kind of high-strung East Coaster. Her knack for letting characters reveal mountains about themselves in a few words shows up even before the first page, as her parents bicker neurotically about the table of contents they find next to them. Her father is as twitchy about it as he was about anything unfamiliar; her mother reassures him with a nonsensical rhyme — "stop getting nervous in the service" — and advises him to make some tea with a used tea bag that Chast draws, soggy and cold, on a little saucer: "it still has plenty of juice in it."

The story proper begins with an account of Chast's 2001 visit to her octogenarian parents' house for the first time in more than a decade. It became clear over the next few years that their situation wasn't sustainable in the long term — they were getting far too old to take care of themselves — but they also didn't want to make a deliberate change in the routine they'd had as a couple for decades, quarrels and all. They also refused to confront the reality of their failing bodies, because that always seemed to be followed by unspeakable horrors.

In one scene, Elizabeth tells Roz of a couple who signed their money over to their daughter: "Next thing you know, she puts them into a nursing home ... and she buys a drawerful of cashmere sweaters!" (This last is accompanied by a shift to one of the rageful facial expressions that make regular, hilarious appearances in Chast's cartoons.)

Their stubbornness is funny until it becomes catastrophic. Elizabeth falls repeatedly and refuses to go to a hospital; George, his memory failing, frets constantly about a bunch of ancient bank books. (A drawing of them is grimly hilarious in its own right: There's a mass of them, large and tiny, their pages fluttering open, with names like "Scrimp 'N' Save" and "You Never Know Savings Bank.") The bank books are a pointed symbol: As Chast discovers when her parents finally do move to a retirement home ("the Place"), elder care is hellaciously expensive, and it gets only more so after her father dies and her mother requires full-time care. That's another unpleasant subject that she forces herself to face, although it's harder for her to be funny about that.

Unsurprisingly, family history bubbles up throughout the book and especially in its second half — unresolved, powerful feelings are always fuel for Chast's cartoons, and her drawings of her Russian-immigrant paternal grandmother Katie practically rumble with a mixture of viciousness and compassion. At the bottom of that page is the brutal payoff: "She died in 1972. In a Place."

Chast manages to find things to wisecrack about in some really unlikely spots: She punctuates her discussion of her mother's understandable depression over wearing a do-not-resuscitate bracelet with a drawing of her in a tourist-style ensemble of DNR T-shirt, bag, hat and umbrella, captioned: "Limited time offer! Not available in stores! Get the entire ensemble!"

A few times, Chast shifts away from her gleeful cartooning to reproduce things to which its tone couldn't do justice: photographs of the clutter her parents left behind in their apartment when they moved to a retirement home and, at the end of the book, the somber drawings she made of her mother immediately after she died. Fair enough — but there's genuine tenderness beneath her scribbled, glowering caricatures, and turning her family's slow disaster into gallows humor is clearly an act of love.

Wolk is the author of "Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean."

Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?

A memoir

Roz Chast

Bloomsbury: 240 pp., \$35

The New York Times

Parents Safely in the Closet

By SARAH LYALL APRIL 30, 2014

RIDGEFIELD, Conn. — By way of introducing her parents, Roz Chast opened her closet door and rummaged through some stuff on the floor. This is where she keeps them, amid miscellaneous boxes and general bedroom marginalia: her mother's ashes in a maroon velvet pouch; her father's in the Channel 13 tote bag he took with him everywhere.

"I like having my parents in my closet," is how she explains it in her new graphic novel, "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?", which chronicles the pair's long, precipitous decline, starting from when her mother fell off a stepladder in 2005 to the time she died, in 2009 (Ms. Chast's father died in the middle of all that). "I think it makes a nice home for them."

It is almost shocking to meet Ms. Chast, whose cartoons so often feature a chronically frazzled woman of her own general appearance, and find no visible rays of anxiety emanating from her head. Other than not being an obvious bundle of neuroses, she is very much the way you might expect: wry, ruminative, able to take the smallest thing and find what is funny about it.

"This is my amusing can collection," she said on a recent afternoon in her house here, showing off a shelf devoted to exotic cans with unusual or potentially un-tasty contents, like squid. One, called "The Full Monty," comes from the United Kingdom and purports to be an entire breakfast — beans, sausages, tomatoes, potatoes and onions — all glopped together in a single container. "My only rule is that it has to have been purchased in a supermarket," she said of the cans.

Ms. Chast's house is neat, in a controlled-chaos sort of way, and full of interesting flourishes. The walls are a riot of art and signed cartoons from her many New Yorker cartoonist friends; the kitchen table is covered in proofs of her latest children's book. Though Ms. Chast, 59, has been contributing to The New Yorker for more than 30 years, a prominent feature of her office is a large filing cabinet devoted to cartoons that did not make it into the magazine — shockingly, some 90 percent of what she submits, she said.



At Home With Roz Chast

Randy Harris for The New York Times

Her great gift is her ability to filter normal life through the manic salad spinner that is her mind, to produce work that is both sui generis and universal.

And so, depending on where you yourself are on the parental-decline timeline, “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?” can be read as primer or cautionary tale, horror movie or documentary. It is also very, very, very funny, in a way that a straight-out memoir about the death of one’s elderly parents probably would not be. At one point, she describes the long theater-of-the-absurd arguments she had with her increasingly befuddled mother. “This is a spoon,” Ms. Chast says. “No, it’s not. It’s a spoon,” her mother replies. Ms. Chast titled that page “The Apartment of Mirth.”

Every story of an adult child and dying parents is the same, and yet each is different. Ms. Chast was an only child, and so when her parents became helpless, everything fell to her.

They needed her to organize medical care, take them to the hospital, move them out of their apartment in Brooklyn and into a nursing home, deal with the paperwork, pay the bills, listen to their complaints, tell them they were not crazy, calm them down. It was hard, and her response was all over the place, a turgid stew of pity, empathy, anger and sadness. She felt furious at their feebleness and furious at herself for her fury. She felt shattered and annoyed, bereft and resentful.

“I wanted to be so much of a better person, and I was so not,” she said, describing her frustration when, for example, her losing-his-grip father insisted that she take him (by car service) to Brooklyn every day from Connecticut to make sure no one had stolen his 45-year-old bank books. “I learned about my own limitations, which were considerable.”

She was also forced to confront scary unfinished business from her lonely childhood, characterized, she said, by her mother’s yelling and criticism. “I learned to keep my head down,” she writes, “and my thoughts to myself.” She is a mental-note-taker, and in the frame where she is keeping her head down, she drew a little book titled “The Big Book of What I Really Think.”

“You know, it’s funny,” she said, and then paused. “Childhood — that was not my favorite time in my life.”

What saved her was herself: her imagination and her creativity. Forbidden to read comics and other supposedly unsavory material, she read them anyway, things like Zap and Mad Magazine. But it was the stodgy children’s magazine Highlights that helped her become a cartoonist.

The magazine had a page called “Our Own,” featuring submissions from readers, and Ms. Chast was determined to be included. Based on visual evidence — pretty much all the girls’ drawings were of horses, she said — she decided that she, too, had to submit a horse.

Despite the obvious impediments (“I didn’t like horses. I wasn’t interested in horses.”), she gritted her teeth, forcing herself to watch multiple episodes of a horse-centric television program, “Fury,” for equine inspiration. She did not like the program, but soon filled a sketchbook with horse drawings.

“And then I looked at them when the sketchbook was done, and they were so bad,” she said. “But they were really funny. They didn’t look like horses at all. They looked like big, weird dogs.”

They made her laugh, spontaneously, to herself. And that was that. “I didn’t think then, like, ‘Aha — these are really bad, but they’re really funny, so I should be a cartoonist,’ ” she said. “It was more like: ‘There’s something really funny about this. I’m not trying to draw them funny, but they’re coming out funny.’ ”

She lost herself in her art, taking extra classes and drawing all the time, and left home for college when she was 16, starting in upstate New York and ending at the Rhode Island School of Design. She sold her first cartoon to

The New Yorker (“Little Things,” a drawing of imaginary inconsequential objects with imaginary humorous names) in 1978 and has all along supplemented her cartoon income with books and artwork.

Surely The New Yorker values her so much that it provides her with a generous regular salary? Well, no; there appears to be no such thing as a staff cartoonist. “In my dreams, I live on that planet,” she said. “Unless you live in an apartment above, like, a really depressing store in Schenectady or something — very small, with no heat, and there’s a lot of rats — maybe then you can afford to not do anything else.”

Hers is a two-New Yorker family; Ms. Chast’s husband is the humor writer Bill Franzen, 62. They have lived in this quiet town just over the Connecticut border since she was pregnant with their second child, Nina, now 23. (The older one, Ian, is 26.) The house is cozy, friendly and spacious, but it is not New York City, and it has its drawbacks.

“I don’t like going into the basement,” she said. “I’m always afraid that something’s going to blow up.”

There is also the issue of driving, which Ms. Chast also does not like. She once had a one-car accident in which, trying to maneuver the car without dislodging some gelatin-based snacks she was transporting to her daughter’s school, she veered off the road. (Everyone, except the snacks, was fine.) And once, just once, she attempted to drive to the city.



Some of Ms. Chast’s pysanka eggs. Credit Randy Harris for The New York Times

The plan was to address the grim business of sorting through decades of detritus in her parents’ apartment without resorting to the expensive car service she had been using to ferry her parents around. But once she successfully reached Brooklyn, the correct borough, her GPS took it upon itself to direct her onto the thing that fearful drivers fear most of all: a ramp and its inevitable conclusion, a bridge.

She freaked out. “It was like, I’m on a bridge!” she said. If she had rendered it in a cartoon, she would have underlined “on a bridge” and put it in shaky oversize capitals. “I don’t know where I’m going! Am I on the

Verrazano Bridge? Am I going to Staten Island? Am I going to New Jersey? Is there a bridge from Brooklyn to New Jersey?”

The bridge ended up taking her to the Bowery, in Manhattan (“This made me very unhappy”), a busy and traffic-y street upon which she came very close to pulling over and abandoning the car for good.

That having been said, suburban life has its advantages, including enough space to give the family’s two parrots a room of their own. Also, “I like being able to go grocery shopping and not feel that I’m fighting a thousand people,” Ms. Chast said.

She has a network of artist friends and a front lawn that Mr. Franzen enjoys decorating in seasonal themes: for Easter, he put up a little scene featuring a bunch of giant eggs and a large bunny atop some kind of wagon.

And the suburbs lend themselves to productivity, she said: “As far as getting work done, there’s really not a lot to do out here.”

The Connecticut quiet was surely a help to Ms. Chast in putting together her book, as ambitious, raw and personal as anything she has produced. Composed mostly of cartoons, but peppered with photographs and chunks of prose, it ricochets back and forth chronologically and in the end is as much a portrait of a family as it is a story about two people’s deaths.

It took Ms. Chast a couple of years to work out what to include and how to structure it, but its outline suggested itself to her from the beginning.

“I had no idea how it would fall together, but I knew where the book was supposed to start and where it ended,” Ms. Chast said. “I knew it would end with my parents in the closet.” She added: “I like that they’re with each other.”

A version of this article appears in print on May 1, 2014, on page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: Parents Safely in the Closet.

Roz Chast Brings Her Characters to Fishs Eddy



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

A new line of dishes called the In Crowd, including a celery dish, featuring a gaggle of her characters.

By PENELOPE GREEN

Published: November 9, 2011



October has never been one of Roz Chast's favorite months. The New Yorker cartoonist, who has made a career out of anatomizing anxiety, is particularly skittish around Halloween, which her husband, the fiction writer Bill Franzen, celebrates with gusto, in an annual spectacle involving a guillotine, severed hands, scented smoke machines and multitudes of other props, on their Ridgefield, Conn., front lawn. In recent years, though, he has scaled back the production, from 26 tableaux to just eight, she said.

Ms. Chast had other reasons to celebrate last month, as well: She has a new book out, "What I Hate: From A to Z," a catalog of aversions, irritations and fears, including alien abduction, spontaneous human combustion and the color yellow. And she has a small line of dishes, with a gaggle of her characters, called the In Crowd, which includes a cereal bowl (\$10.95), a mug (\$10.95), glasses (\$5 each) and salt-and-pepper shakers (\$12.95 for a pair), at Fishs Eddy in Manhattan (fishseddy.com). "There is even a celery dish," she said proudly. This reporter talked with Ms. Chast last week, two days after the winter storm knocked out power in Ridgefield and other towns. But her cellphone was working.

Good news about Halloween — I hear it was canceled.

Well, it was rescheduled by the town for Nov. 6. Anyway, Bill has been scaling back. He originally made an announcement that he was going to quit the year before, but it's kind of like someone quitting smoking. You keep catching them with cigarettes. [Calling to her husband.] Are you going to have any smoke machines? [Muffled response.]



He said, “I don’t have smoke machines. I have fog machines.” Who knew these things? He gave a lot away. He put the guillotine on the lawn with a sign that said, “Free.” A couple of weeks ago, we woke up and it was gone. So it’s a happy ending.

Why are you designing dishes, and why make a celery dish?

I always imagined my little cartoons on plates for some reason. I didn’t want to just put a cartoon on a plate; I wanted to make characters specially designed for the thing. Who doesn’t need a celery dish? Even if you don’t have any dishes, you need a celery dish. We haven’t put any in ours yet, but we definitely plan to.

You had a book signing at Fishs Eddy last week. Did people tell you about their phobias?

I heard some strange ones: turtleneck sweaters, popping open those dough things. I kind of hate those, too. Somebody had a fear of stickers. That was interesting. The thing is, it’s not just phobias. It’s odd things you don’t like. The dough thing, I was happy to be reminded of that fear. Then there’s ones like lockjaw that a lot of people my age grew up with. If you got scratched with a rusty nail, you just kind of wait for that jaw to lock up, and that’s the end.

What do you write when you sign people’s books?

I write something like, “I hope you never get stuck in an elevator full of balloons.”

[Her phone makes a terrible noise, and then goes dead. Repeated calls back to the number yield a busy signal. After 30 minutes, Ms. Chast calls the reporter back.]

I worried that you had spontaneously combusted. Are you O.K.?



I’m absolutely fine. I had convinced myself I had been so boring you had had enough, or that it was some reporter thing, like in the movies or TV, when they don’t go through the hello or goodbye part of the phone call.

We should talk about those hooked rugs you like to make — that’s a very homey pursuit. Are those the same birds you’ve had for awhile, and what are they saying these days?

Yes, same guys. Marco is a blue-streaked lory. Eli, the African gray, turned out to be a girl. You have to get a blood test to find out. That’s why she has a bow. She can say, “Look at the big bird,” “That’s ridiculous.” They both can go, “Meow, meow, meow.”

I’ve always wanted to learn how to hook rugs. A wonderful artist named Leslie Giuliani taught me how. The nice thing is you can change it as you go along.

In the cartoon issue of *The New Yorker*, you made a cartoon of a family vacation. Was that your family vacation?

Yes, we went out West, to Utah. All that stuff is all totally true. We did that hike: “Is this the third emerald stream or the second?” The firecracker store was amazing, like a Stop & Shop for explosives. The names, like “Who’s Your Daddy?” All totally true.

Did you bring any back?

Uh, no. I didn’t think they would like it on the plane.

What Cartoonist Roz Chast Hates, 'From A To Z'

October 18, 2011 12:17 PM ET

New Yorker cartoonist **Roz Chast** says there are two things she's sure of: that she's an anxious person, and that she knows her alphabet by heart. So in her new book, *What I Hate: From A to Z*, Chast puts her dislikes and fears in alphabetical order, with a full-page cartoon for each of her 26 anxieties.

Some are standard fears — H is for heights and E is for elevators — while others are a bit more irrational — S is for spontaneous human combustion and Y is for yellow.

NPR's Neal Conan talks with Chast about the things that drive her nuts.



Roz Chast began cartooning for *The New Yorker* in 1978. Roz Chast/

Interview Highlights

On what inspired her to catalog her anxieties

"It's actually sort of almost an accident. I sometimes suffer from insomnia. And when I can't fall asleep, I play what I call the alphabet game. My other friends ... do similar things. I have one who calls it categories ... You think of a category that, you know, [has] a number of things ... in common. And then you list one for every letter of the alphabet.

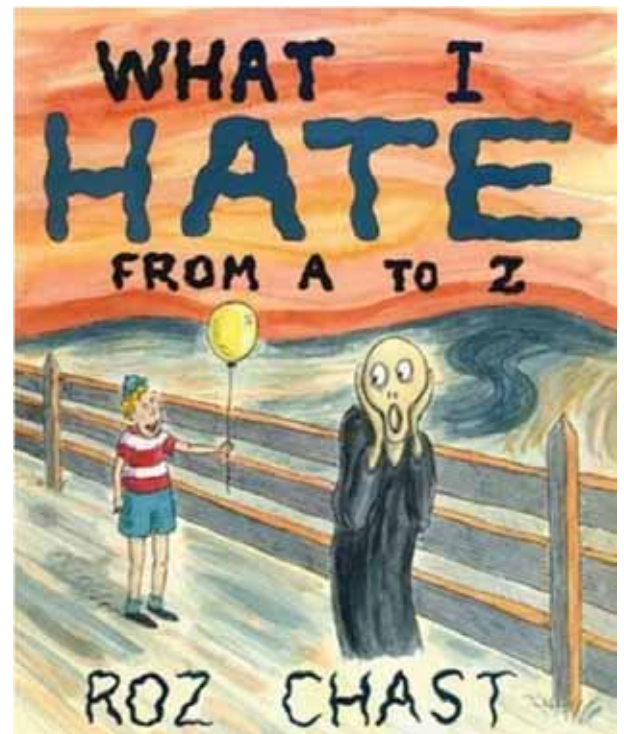
"And, you know, I had done countries and I done Beatles songs and prescription drugs, diseases — you know, appendicitis, bursitis, common colds, diphtheria, elephantiasis, flu, gout — whatever. And I thought, well, what about phobias? And I started out with phobias, but then I realized that this was not really strictly phobias. They were things that kind of — phobias were included under this umbrella, you know? But it was really just sort of loathsome things."

On food texture: J is for Jell-O 1-2-3, the triple-layer gelatin dessert

"I don't like anything that looks gelatinous; really weirds me out. But when I was a kid, I used to get very, very upset if anything had a kind of chalky texture, like certain kinds of cottage cheese I know have a weird chalkiness. But I don't know. I mean, I hate them, but it doesn't, like, freak me out as much as things that are gelatinous."

On disease: R is for rabies

"I think that children's books should be censored not for



references to sex but for references to diseases. I mean, who didn't think after reading *Madeline* that they were going to get appendicitis? Or rabies, you know, reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* with a rabid dog or, you know, *Death Be Not Proud*. It's like every headache is a brain tumor."

On colors: Y is for yellow

"It's certain shades of yellow. Pale yellow doesn't bother me that much. But there's a certain sort of shrill yellow that I think some people think is very cheerful, but it's actually a kind of shrill and horrible color. It's also just kind of like — I think of yellow jaundice. I think of yellow teeth. It's a kind of — not my favorite color ... I wish that, actually, the three primary colors were red, blue and green."

On what makes these phobias possible

"That's the thing about most phobias, that there is this tiny corner of reality to them. I mean, I'm not afraid that this phone on this desk here is going to suddenly fly off the desk and hit me in the head, you know? That will not happen. But I can understand why with an escalator. There's a tiny fear that you will just get sucked into that escalator — the same way that if you're in a bathtub on the second floor of your house and you know your house is 65 years old, and that's a kind of old house, that bathtub could possibly just go crashing its way through the floor into the floor below. It's not like I'm saying the bathtub is going to suddenly levitate and fly out the window, you know?"

"There's something about most phobias where there's a tiny, tiny corner where you think this really actually could happen."

\$165 BILLION!!!

HUGE AMOUNT OF MONEY!

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT!

\$80 BILLION

NOT AS IMPRESSIVE
AS IT ONCE WAS



\$400 MILLION
SO WHAT?

\$5 BILLION

YAWN

\$100 MILLION
NOBODY CARES



R. Chris

Questions for Roz Chast

The New Yorker cartoonist talks about missing Manhattan and why she hates superheroes, elevators, carnivals, hammerheads ...

By Jessica Grose



Roz Chast at the 2007 Texas Book Festival | Photograph © 2007 Larry D. Moore.

The cartoonist Roz Chast hates a lot of things, including but not limited to: carnivals (dangerous rides manned by drunken half-wits); elevators (“The perfect storm of claustrophobia, acrophobia, and agoraphobia”); and Ouija Boards (“Why tempt fate?”). She outlines these aversions in her new book ***What I Hate: From A to Z***.

Slate spoke to the longtime *New Yorker* cartoonist at a crowded cafe, where the diminutive and engaging Chast discussed the lack of respect toward cartooning in the '70s, why she thinks comic books about superheroes are stupid, and how she misses Manhattan.

Slate: How did you decide to write ***What I Hate?***

Chast: It's a combination of two things. One is that I do play a lot of alphabet games. And then I just had a little bit of time. I had other titles at first. Like “Musts To Avoid,” or “Aversions.” I never realized the one umbrella they fell under. They were phobias, aversions, things that frighten me in an inexplicable way. The shape of a hammerhead's head. Revulsions. What I hate. This is what I hate. I hate sliminess, I hate certain shapes. So I thought let's see if I can fill up the alphabet.

Slate: I read an interview in the **Comics Journal** where you talked about how you felt cartooning wasn't getting a lot of respect when you were at the Rhode Island School of Design. What was the attitude toward your work back then?

Chast: It was really different. When I was doing cartoons at RISD it was kind of a hard time in a way—you know the '70s. What got respect—and you know my vision's probably skewed—was not humor. Definitely not humor. If you did anything that was funny: death. Art was serious. It was like being ominous in this way. I just had a lot of objections even philosophically to what they were talking about. If you think of **Donald Judd** or people who did video installations where it was just like two video screens and they're each showing static and the static would go on this monitor. I remember going to some play that somebody had written, and people were just bored. They were sitting in a living room sort of saying bored things to each other. So I think drawing cartoons violated a lot of things. First of all it's a way of trying to communicate with other people—definitely out. Also, jokes. You know, tacky. Bad. Very earnest, very experimental—that was pretty much the scene. God forbid you should find any of this funny or stupid or say anything [questioning it]. Why would anybody **want to shoot themselves with a gun?** Just come to my neighborhood, and someone will do it for you. So that was what RISD was like. And this is very “world's saddest song played on the world's smallest violin territory” there was also a cartoon magazine at RISD that these boys started. It was called *Fred*. I submitted cartoons to it and they rejected it. And I was so upset. I should've been angry but I wasn't. I was just sad, sad, sad.

Slate: I'm still angry about not getting into certain writing workshops in college. That kind of thing still rankles!

Chast: It absolutely still rankles. Those young rejections—I still remember. I like thinking about how I don't really know any of those RISD people. I don't know their work. Maybe they are working, but I don't know any of it. So [their lack of notoriety] gives me great pleasure. It does. It does.

Slate: What do you think is the cultural attitude towards cartoonists and cartooning now as opposed to in the '70s? Do you think it has evolved a lot?

Chast: I think it's really different from the way it was 30 years ago. For one thing, there's the rise of the graphic novel—which was there before—but now it has its own section in the book store. I think people take it a little bit more seriously. Not in a bad way, not like some academic analyzing every panel or text. I just mean it's more viable. And it is such a great art form. You can be a newspaper cartoonist if that's what you want to be, or you can be a magazine cartoonist. Still. Sort of. You can do comic books. You can do superheroes. I cannot stand superheroes. I do not understand any of its appeal. It has just bored me to death since I was a little kid. I remember buying a couple of superhero comic books and trying to get into them. And I just remember thinking, "Who gives a shit?" This is some of the most boring stuff I've ever read. I mean it's not funny, it's tedious. I don't even like looking at these drawings. I just don't even care. I just really love the cartoon form. I love the plasticity of it. I just think of Ben Katchor and Jules Feiffer and Clay Wilson, Alison Bechdel. She's amazing. She's really great. Daniel Clowes. There's just so many amazing great people.

Slate: When you were growing up you drew a lot. Was this something that you ever thought would be a career? Or was this something you thought was just a joy?

Chast: I still almost don't think it's a career. I never really thought I'd be able to make career out of it. I never thought I'd be at *The New Yorker*. I thought if I were to be incredibly lucky maybe I'd get a gig at the *Village Voice*. And I did get some things published in there. I think I was just very very fortunate.

Slate: Why didn't you think that you'd be in *The New Yorker*? Was it your sensibility?

Chast: My sensibility. My style. My works were not—and they still aren't—single panel gags with a punch line underneath them. I like a lot of those cartoons, I just don't draw them. I just don't think like that. And that was—especially back then—pretty much what they had. There were exceptions, like Charles Addams, but the general sensibility seemed to be these upper middle class people saying these witty things to one another in Connecticut. And I didn't know anything about that world. That was not the world I felt I could make jokes about because it was not my world.

Slate: Because you grew up in Brooklyn?

Chast: Yes—I grew up in Brooklyn.

Slate: Do you go back ever? Are you surprised by how it's changed since you grew up there?

Chast: I don't resent people who want to make a home there. I think it's great. They're improving what was there—which was pretty crappy, pretty lousy, and I have no nostalgia for it. For me it was a place I wanted to leave.

Slate: It seems like the *New Yorker's* cartoon sensibility has become more your sensibility since the days of Connecticut cocktail humor. Do you think it's changed because of the editors changing, or do you've influenced the culture over there?

Chast: It's like a chicken or the egg thing. We're all part of the culture. We're reflecting it; we're changing it. So, yeah, I think culture is always changing. The jokes that people made—a lot of that world still exists—but you know they're not quite a part of the *New Yorker* as they were.

Slate: You manage to articulate neuroses really brilliantly. When you're thinking of a one panel cartoon, what's the process you go through? Is it always from personal experience?

Chast: I think there's so many different things that feed into it. Sometimes it can be something personal that happened to me that can spark an idea for a cartoon. Sometimes it will be something somebody said. Sometimes it's just really—like a genre cartoon. Like gravestone cartoons. Like the end-of-the-world guys. Who has seen one of those in a thousand million years? They don't wear the white robes anymore except in cartoons, but I do see them. I see them in the subway, preaching hellfire.

Slate: What happened to cults in New York? There seemed to be so many cults.

Chast: There used to be all kinds of weird characters in the city. Giuliani started clearing them out and Bloomberg is getting rid of the hangers on.

Slate: Do you ever miss living in Manhattan?

Chast: I miss it terribly. And that is a grudge I have. I resent that this is more and more of a place where the very, very rich, or the lucky and deeply entrenched—like they inherited a rent-controlled apartment and pay \$20 or \$200 for some seven-room apartment, and then they'll pass that on to their children. And foreign people with gazillions of dollars, and they don't even live here. Or maybe they live in some high-rise and they come down every once in a while to buy some La Mer cream to fill their bathtub, and then they rinse it all off with Evian water, and then they go back to their apartment.

Slate: Do you identify with Occupy Wall Street?

Chast: I do have great, I don't know what the word is, empathy I guess, for the protestors. I don't know. I feel like I'm too old and too cynical. I was very pro-Obama, and I'm so disappointed. I would vote for him again, but I just thought that, you know, it would be different. So stupid of me, right? That's how I feel now about Wall Street. Is this really going to change anything?

Slate: Your work is mostly seems to deal with smaller, personal maladies and concerns. Are politics ever something you'd want to address in your cartoons?

Chast: There's people who do that so well. I think after a while you get a feeling for what's your territory, what you could really do something with. I could just go splutter splutter, pearl clutching, spluttering. You know it's not particularly funny. Maybe that's what it is. It's just so upsetting—so many of these things—I don't find it as funny as some other things.

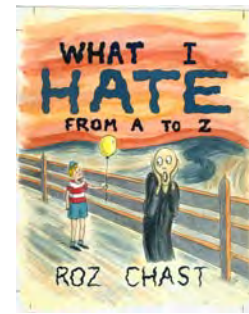
Slate: What do you find the most funny?

Chast: I think getting very very wound up about a neurotic thing in retrospect seems funny but not at the time. Later you can find them sort of funny in a kind of odd way. That's one thing for me I think is funny. [A loud, rumbling cart rolls by behind Chast's head and she pauses.] I was just feeling for a second like I knew it was the cart but I found the ground sort of moving.

Slate: You mean another earthquake?

Chast: Yeah. I had to process that. I did feel that. Could you feel that?

Slate: I did, but I could see the cart.



WHAT I HATE (*reviewed on June 1, 2011*)

Beloved *New Yorker* cartoonist shares an alphabetized listing of life's little irritants.

Veteran illustrator and humorist Chast (*Too Busy Marco*, 2010, etc.) has crafted a colorful career from parodying unsavory situations and maladies alongside the happenstances of the human condition. To truly enjoy her nimble pen and watercolor sketches, readers must be willing to laugh at their own harmless foibles. In the charming introduction, the author admits to being a life-long “anxious person,” a chronic insomniac who is “genetically inclined to worry,” and she brilliantly plays this personal shortcoming to maximum comical effect with the jagged line-drawing style and ironical wit that have become her trademarks. From the unsettling possibility of waking up during general anesthesia to the offbeat catastrophes of “Jell-O 1-2-3” and spontaneous human combustion, the author presents an A-to-Z catalog of distressing concerns and her unique take on “what might funny about them.” Chast prefaces each pictorial with a short, personal preamble describing what it is about each subject that has become so bothersome for the apprehensive author. She lightheartedly exposes the inconvenient nuisance of nightmares and beach undertows, the unknown consequences of Ouija boards and the wincing “imminent explosion” of annoying balloons. Chast doesn't have much use for assumptive doctors, quicksand or carnivals, either (they're “particularly awful at night”). Her takes on vision loss (“the girl who sat too close to the TV”), “mysterious” dental tools and the dark sides of the color yellow are sure to elicit knowing chuckles. With realistic, tongue-in-cheek foresight, the author spotlights a selection of the most commonplace, phobia-inducing situations (elevators, air travel, heights, etc.) and defuses them with brilliantly dry, flippant humor.

A hilarious, collectively appealing index of words and pictures drawn with wry exuberance and a head-nodding relevancy.

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New Yorker Cartoonist Roz Chast Gives Slide Lecture

Beloved Humorist Presents *Theories of Everything* Retrospective on Monday, April 4

Friday, April 1, 2011

By [Charles Donelan](#)

In a field where the gag caption is king, magazine cartoonist Roz Chast has made a career out of locating humor everywhere but on a line below an image. Conventional speech and thought balloons abound in her work, but Chast's signature style relies even more on labels and visual formulas for its charming and inimitable effects. In *Theories of Everything*, the coffee-table book that collects the best of Chast's work, the range of devices is dazzling. Opening it is like entering a parallel universe of highly organized absurdity. "The Archaeology of a Sink," for instance, employs the familiar figure of an excavated cross-section to display the fact that, beneath "today's dishes," "yesterday's dishes," and "dishes from last Tuesday" lie layers of fossilized dishes—not just "Grandma's dishes," but "dishes from Biblical times" and even "Pleistocene" and "Precambrian" dishes. Elsewhere, it's the twin masks of comedy and tragedy looking strangely passive and eerily similar to one another, signifying "Botox Theater." Whatever quirky route she takes to get there, you can be sure Chast will arrive at a place where self-consciousness and wry observation meet. I recently spoke with Chast in anticipation of her April 4 lecture at UCSB's Campbell Hall. Call 893-3535 for tickets and info.



Roz Chast

What did you find about yourself while choosing cartoons for this lecture? I've been drawing for a lot of years, and I did my own selection by getting a huge printout of everything and then going through it chronologically. When I started, I was 23 years old, living in Manhattan, and the autobiographical aspects are evident—so many of the observations are things I saw around me, like the attack of the young professionals, or the signs in the cab from hell. Later on, when I got married and had kids, my preoccupations change, and there are lots of things that come from observing that generation, like the IMs of Romeo and Juliet.

Have methods of organization always been favorite devices with you? Oh yes, I love categories, lists, charts, and graphs—all that kind of stuff. I was once at a meeting and the presenter had a PowerPoint that was full of pie charts, and I couldn't keep a straight face. He was actually using a pie chart! I really thought they only existed in cartoons.



BANANAS

By Roz Chast

I'm a very big fan of fruit. It's really tasty, and, from what I've read, it's very good for you.

Fruit is high in vitamins, aids digestion, blah blah blah. Most fruits don't need to be cooked or doctored or salted and buttered in order to be palatable—you can just eat them “as is.” I have a lot of positive things to say about fruit, including the hand-to-fruit size ratio of most fruits, and how you can pack a piece of it in your purse or your purse or whatever it is you

carry your junk around in. Also, when you eat a piece of fruit as a snack, instead of a package of Oreos, you feel good about yourself, almost like you've built a well in one of those African villages which needed a well, or like you've run a half-marathon. O.K., maybe not quite that great, but pretty great.

But lately I've started to wish that there wasn't such a fruit as the banana, or, more accurately, that people didn't eat bananas in public. It's not because of their phallic aspect. Who *doesn't* notice that? It's so obvious that even a seven-year-old can look at a person eating a banana and think, Heh-heh—hope you're “enjoying” that “banana”! There's really not much a person can do about that, unless you want to pull out a knife and fork and plate every time you eat a banana, and then you look like something's the matter with you. Like maybe you're so bothered by the phallic aspect that you have to cut it into prissy little rounds before you eat it. Talk about drawing attention to a problem!

When I'm walking down some street in midtown and I see well-dressed men and women shoving bananas into their mouths with a chimpanzee's complete lack of self-consciousness, I look at them and think, Well, it's not the banana's fault it looks that way. Anyway, the shape is not the problem I'm talking about. Or, if it is, it's one of the smaller problems. The shape is almost more of a “humor” problem.



ILLUSTRATION BY ROZ CHAST

I am disgusted by bananas' texture. Compare the texture of a banana—mushy, baby-foodish, almost what you would feed a sick person—with the brisk athletic crispness of an apple. And, please, not one of those bulk apples you buy in a plastic bag. Those are mealy and they give all fruit a bad name. It's no wonder so many kids don't like fruit, if that's the only kind of fruit they've ever had. I mean like a really good Macoun or Honeycrisp. My mother hated the texture of bananas, but my father liked it, and for years, when they would get into one of their banana-texture arguments, I would take my father's side, just to annoy my mother, even though secretly I agreed with her. I can still picture the contemptuous face and the cutting remarks she would make when my dad went on and on about how bananas were nature's perfect food. But I would never have admitted that I thought she was right. Yay, bananas! Boo, Mom!

The main problem I have with the banana is its packaging. Whoever came up with it must have been running out of time and went with his or her first idea, which sometimes works out well, but sometimes you need to step away from the drawing board. So, in the place inside your head where you picture things, imagine someone starting to eat a banana. The person breaks open the peel, which always smooshes the top of the banana a little bit. That's O.K. Whatever. But watch how the peel starts to drape over the hand. Now the banana is halfway eaten. The peel is now draping over the entire hand. Finally, the person finishes the banana and is left holding this disgusting peel, which is quickly turning brown and smelly! It's not like an apple core, which you could throw out a car window and think, even though you'd be kidding yourself, Maybe an apple orchard will start here. Or an orange peel, which you wouldn't throw out a car window, but at least it smells nice. You can even do crafts with orange peels. I knew a girl in college who used to cut an orange peel into tiny circles and string them together with a piece of blue embroidery thread and suspend them from a belt loop of her pants and wear them like that till they dried. This was the same person who believed that if you didn't wash your hair eventually your hair would wash itself. Like the oils would cycle through your scalp in such a way that . . . actually, as I'm writing this, I realize it doesn't make any sense, so never mind.

No. The banana peel is garbage of the worst sort, the kind you must get rid of right away. You need to walk quickly to the nearest trash receptacle, throw it in, and then nonchalantly walk away, all the while giving off psychic vibes that you know nothing about it, that it's somebody else's peel. Because you are not the sort of person who eats a banana in public. ♦

THEORIES OF EVERYTHING



Anxiety, Illustrated

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI DEC. 5, 2006

The wacky world Roz Chast has created in her cartoons is a parallel universe to ours, utterly recognizable in all its banalities and weirdnesses, but slightly askew, as if our current 2000-something reality had been transported back to the 1950's TV land of "Leave it to Beaver" — a place where phones still have dials and television sets still have rabbit ears, a place where women still wear blouses with Peter Pan collars, and men still wear their pants too high on their waists. It's Manhattan and Brooklyn re-imagined by someone channeling the Simpsons, Steven Wright and Talking Heads; the New York suburbs as seen by the love child of Gilda Radner and Woody Allen.

Ms. Chast's people tend to be hard-core city dwellers, made nervous by shopping malls and the great outdoors. They spend a lot of time contemplating their own mortality ("birth, bed, bath, beer, bankruptcy, bunions, bifocals, balding, and beyond") and worrying about things like Ebola making an unlikely appearance on West 83rd Street in Manhattan. They suffer from winter blues ("I HATE the cold ... I HATE the ice ... I HATE the filthy slush") and spring guilt ("I should be outside, frolicking and gambling yet I don't like to frolic or gambol"). And they boast a splendiferous array of neuroses: they worry that they are too angry or too wimpy, too pushy or too passive or too passive-aggressive; they harbor fears of driving, fears of chickens, fears of contracting bizarre diseases ("Bengali Foot Fever — Foot itches; cough; mood change.") Under the category of things NOT to tell your kid, Ms. Chast writes, are the following: "Anything electrical can suddenly BLOW UP for no reason whatsoever"; "The Wizard of Oz' is a true story"; and "There's a big stopper at the bottom of the ocean, and every once in a while it gets accidentally pulled out."

In "Theories of Everything" Ms. Chast has brought together nearly three decades of work — much of which has appeared in The New Yorker magazine — and the volume gives the reader a keen appreciation of her range as an artist: her capacity to limn everything from the existential and Dada-esque (an unholy cow who hates being a cow) to the mundane and middle-class (what happens at a party after you leave).

This capacious collection reminds us that her scribbly drawings are deceptively childlike, that they are actually shrewdly detailed word and picture concoctions that reinvent the cartoon form, even as they capture the oddness, discontinuity and plain absurdity of the world around us.

Ms. Chast is adept at the sarcastic. In "Why Oil Spills Are Good," she writes: "Every once in a while, it's good to give the oceans' self-cleaning mechanisms a real workout. It's like taking your car for a long, fast drive on a summer afternoon." But she is even better at the whimsical: in "Hamsterama," those "small, pet-like" creatures hibernate in "small bungalow colonies in the Catskills" and subsist on egg creams, English muffins and Velveeta. And the Charles Addams-esque: a gravestone reads "Tuned In, Turned On, Dropped Out, Dropped In, Worked Out, Saved Up, Dropped Dead."

There are the occasional topical topics. "The NRA's Written Test for a Gun License" includes questions like "When I carry a gun, I feel _____, and the bigger the gun the more _____ I feel." And a Thank You Card for Ralph Nader reads: "What is your problem? Why did you run? If it weren't for you, Gore would have won."

More often Ms. Chast's cartoons practice social anthropology in a more oblique fashion. They chronicle sudden changes in the fashion barometer. ("In a secret rite at Battery Park City, eight men burn their yellow ties.") They speculate on the identity of people from the Planet Spam, those mass e-mailers who bombard us with

special offers, appeals and promotions. And they document the “Cutification” of New York as yuppies conquer Manhattan and move on to the outer boroughs, gentrifying everything they touch.

Perhaps most insistently her cartoons examine the sense of inadequacy modern women feel as they guiltily serve their kids store-bought Christmas cookies instead of baking their own, or compare themselves to the paragon, say, who was a “brain surgeon, professional model, artist, lawyer, plus mother of four.”



Some of the entries in this volume feel like autobiographical reminiscences: one recounts how the narrator’s parents used to park her at a browsing library near Cornell University, where she discovered cartoon collections and became obsessed with the macabre work of Charles Addams. Others feel like improvisations on her current life in Connecticut, chronicling day-to-day squabbles with a spouse who doesn’t share her urban neuroses and children who complain about having to read books like “The Red Badge of Boredom” and “All Humdrum on the Western Front.”

In the latter sections of the book there are lots of jokes about hitting middle age. “Midlife Crisis: The Clouds Before the Storm” shows a tired looking woman, dressed in a frumpy skirt and blouse, sitting on her sofa, thinking, “I bet if I really wanted to, I could bicycle across Canada.”

A few of the cartoons here feel a tad derivative — one in which Humpty Dumpty sits on a rug and is promptly squashed by a big foot is reminiscent of the old Mr. Bill segments on “Saturday Night Live” — but these are the exception. Ms. Chast’s voice in her best cartoons is delightfully her own, as idiosyncratic and instantly recognizable as the voice of any poet or novelist. And her most memorable works hopscotch

over the realm of social observation into hyperspace.

There are loony plays on clichés and familiar sayings: from “Foods of the Demigods” to Nanook Goes South to “Hell’s Kitchen.” There are literary takeoffs: in “T. S. Eliot Meets Beavis and Butthead,” a middle-aged fellow, drinking tea and looking out the window at the rain, thinks, “April sucks.” And there are animal kingdom parables about our self-improvement-obsessed culture: an amoeba makes the New Year’s resolution, “I will evolve,” while a hamster declares it will increase its “wheel-trotting speed to 250 rpm.”

In “A Note on the Author” at the end of this book, Ms. Chast gives us a portrait of herself at 9, sitting on her bed, reading the Merck Manual and various books about scurvy, lockjaw and other terrible diseases. Which doubtless explains her youthful enthusiasm for the work of Addams and his ghostly presence in some of these cartoons. In retrospect she has transformed her hypochondriacal dyspepsia into cartoons that not only chronicle her own fears, worries and anxieties but that also show us how we — or at least some New Yorkers and suburbanites — live today.

A version of this review appears in print on , on page E1 of the New York edition with the headline: Anxiety, Illustrated.

The Farther Side

For nearly 30 years, New Yorker cartoonist Roz Chast has taken her field to absurd heights by focusing on ordinary schlubs.

By JAMES SULLIVAN | October 29, 2006

The cartoonist Roz Chast has a favorite memory of her years in Providence in the mid-1970s, when she attended the Rhode Island School of Design. No, it has nothing to do with drawing - she was actually a painting major, and, by her own admission, not a very good one. "They were all oil paintings, and they all sucked," she says with a beatific smile. Forget the art education. It's the city itself that comes to mind. Providence was a lot less tony than it is today, and she found herself drawn to its eccentricities. She would browse the forlorn arcade malls downtown - "old, dusty outlet shops with boxes of tiny leotards that might be next to a box of beach bags or rubber gloves or plastic flowers." She still wonders about her discoveries. "Why would you put an infant in leotards?" she says, fascinated by the thought. "I loved that."



Chast, whose scribbly, absurd, and utterly delightful cartoons have been a staple in The New Yorker for almost 30 years, finds humor - a huge surplus of it - in the most mundane aspects in the lives of the most ordinary schlubs. Her characters are uneventful people in pants, housedresses, and eyeglasses, people who are fretful, self-conscious, a little overwhelmed. They are, in fact, all of us, which is what makes her cartoons so beloved.

Theories of Everything: Selected, Collected, and Health-Inspected Cartoons by Roz Chast 1978-2006, a sort of mid-career retrospective for the 51-year-old illustrator, comes out this week. It was originally planned as a 25-year anthology of her work, but she's a procrastinator. So, a 28-year anniversary. What's the gift for that, she asks with a laugh - bauxite?

Despite all those years on the prestigious New Yorker staff, she still gets anxious about the magazine's weekly cartoon selection process. She typically submits five to seven new drawings each week, then holds her breath, hoping one makes it. "Hopefully it doesn't last longer than three or four weeks," she says in her singsong voice, sitting on a worn couch in her Connecticut home. "After that, you just want to kill yourself," she adds cheerfully.

Readers who go through new issues of The New Yorker searching for that familiar scrawl of a signature know that her work is more angst-ridden than Howard Hughes at a thumb-wrestling convention. For the "Note on the Author" page at the back of Theories of Everything, Chast submitted a drawing of herself at age 9, lying on a crumb-covered bedspread, engrossed in The Big Book of Horrible Rare Diseases. Life is perilous, Chast's cartoons tell us again and again. Might as well have a sick sense of humor about it.

The crazy quilt of humanity in her native Brooklyn certainly fed that worldview from an early age. She lived a few blocks away from beautiful Victorian houses, she recalls. But that wasn't quite her neighborhood. "We had gas stations, junk stores," she says, and women sitting on beach chairs in the summer, "making faces at you as you walked by."

She and her husband, writer Bill Franzen, who have two children, moved to their two-story home in Ridgefield, a southern Connecticut bedroom community, 16 years ago. In the corner of Chast's office stands a bookcase stuffed with rare books by her hero, the ghoulish New Yorker cartoonist Charles Addams. The space is decorated with drawings her children made years ago and with old, anonymous photos she finds at tag sales.

Her cartoons deal with interiors - specifically, the random wanderings of the voices in her head. One early sketch depicts a housewife on a couch, enduring "The 3 p.m. of the Soul" ("Defrost lamb chops," the woman thinks). In another, an epitaph is lettered in the cartoonist's crabbed handwriting:

Tuned in,
Turned on,
Dropped out,
Dropped in,
Worked out,
Saved up,
Dropped dead.

"She was one of the few cartoonists who immediately seemed important to us," recalls Lee Lorenz, a veteran New Yorker contributor who was the magazine's cartoon editor when Chast arrived. But her oddball humor and scratchy drawings were a wild departure from the magazine's traditionally stylish "he-she gag cartoons," as Lorenz puts it - the cartoon equivalent of a Charlie Kaufman screenplay in a Cary Grant film festival. "There was a tremendous uproar" among readers initially, he says. "They didn't get it."

Downstairs at her house, there is a den almost entirely given over to the family birds - a parakeet, a bluestreak lory, and an African gray named Eli, a misnamed female who has her own long list of "Things I Like to Say" tacked to the wall, written in Chast's inimitable hand.

As closely linked as Chast's work is to The New Yorker, she does step out occasionally. Her cartoons have appeared in Scientific American and Harvard Business Review, and she recently created a conceptual spread for Travel + Leisure based on a trip she took with the humor writer Patricia Marx to the Galapagos Islands, of all places. That was a big trip for the cartoonist. Little flights of fancy are more her style.

She imagines herself peering tentatively into her own brain cavity: "No thoughts at all!" she says in bubbleheaded exaggeration. "It is just a vacuum in there. It's amazing it hasn't collapsed in on itself."

When you've already concocted "Theories of Everything," you're entitled to an off day or two.

AN INNOCENT YOUNG WOMAN GOES OFF TO COLLEGE FOR THE FIRST TIME, ONLY TO DISCOVER THAT SOMEHOW... SOMEWHERE...

SOMEONE IS OUT THERE WATCHING



***New Yorker* Cartoonist: These Days, She's Changing Her Toon**

By Emily Gordon

Special to *Newsday* November 26, 2006

For a public humorist, Roz Chast is admirably discreet. She laughs often and may occasionally say, “La la la la la,” as the people in her *New Yorker* cartoons do, but her humor is also decidedly ironic. *The New York Times* has described her as “small, blond, bespectacled and self-deprecating—equal parts Mia Farrow and Woody Allen.” In person, whether she’s onstage reading her cartoons to a fanatically attentive audience, casing the umbrella rack at an upscale drugstore or considering the oddness of eyebrows, she’s an appealingly diplomatic personage.

Racing through the 400 pages of her newest and biggest collection, *Theories of Everything: Selected, Collected, and Health-Inspected Cartoons, 1978-2006* (Bloomsbury, 400 pp., \$45), Chast fans will see her irony in all its dimensions, as well as her sympathy with many (though not all) of her fellow humans—especially put-upon children and parents. *Theories of Everything*, which documents the best of Chast’s creations over nearly three decades, demonstrates that her range far exceeds the surreal living-room drama and the ominous doily. “For a while I was doing more domestic-type cartoons, when my kids were younger,” she says. “I still do them, but not as much.”

One of the persistent delights in *Theories of Everything* is Chast’s precise—if not precisely accurate—documentation of peculiar objects. Outer space and amoebas make many appearances in this book, too (Chast also contributes drawings to science magazines), as well as pointed political cartoons. Mortality and melancholy often loom, as does a cheerfully narrated sense of foreboding.

Chast was born in Brooklyn in 1954. In an unusually personal cartoon, she recounts how the kids in her neighborhood would explore only as far as a certain street; she’s more or less the same way now when driving in Connecticut, where she lives with her husband, humor writer Bill Franzen. When she needs directions, she says, she takes a map in which every street is labeled and enlarges it: “Ideally, I’d like to enlarge it so that each street was exactly the same size as the real street, and so you could follow along. One mile equals one mile!” In the stories of her drawings, “Writing is always patching together stuff that happened, stuff that never happened, stuff you wish happened, stuff you would dread happening, somebody you knew that lived in your building, somebody you’ve never met.”

After growing up as the best artist in the class, she became one of many such artists at the Rhode Island School of Design. It was at the Art Students League in New York that, she says, she learned more of her technique. Cartooning seems to have been in her blood from her early years, when she worshipped the work of Charles Addams (her parents subscribed to *The New Yorker*) and devoured “Krazy Kat” and “Nancy.” She still lives pretty close to the page: “I love the medium [of drawing] because it’s so simple, in a way; it’s just pen and paper,” she says.

She has mastered the elaborately painted Ukrainian Easter eggs known as pysanky, and loves their controllable scale: “When you look at books of pysanky decoration, they all work with geometry.” Many of her cartoons, and her preoccupations, similarly end up being about (slightly awry) organization. She loves the crammed surfaces and spaces of New York City, and recalls one Upper East Side coffee shop: “I loved how everything looked behind the counter. Everything was just crammed in—a turkey roasting on a spit, cereal boxes, pickles and then the water glasses. Every square inch was used, and I just *loved* it.”

When Chast draws, the light from the bulb illuminating the drawing at hand is almost all she can see; cartoon figures emerge with their own ideas and hilariously formless wardrobes. She relishes talking about the key moments in the cartoons—the tidy, complete worlds they make on a panel or a page—more than chatting about her actual life. When ABC Family animated some of her work not long ago, she was delighted to see one of the classic Chast ladies “walking” across the screen. Ultimately, though, the involvement of a slew of executives and committees took too much

of the fun out of the world she had created. In the end, “It’s just about telling the story—and it sounds so cheesy to say it, but communicating a very specific feeling or thought, hopefully a funny one.”

Some of the standout cartoons in *Theories of Everything* are multi-page, autobiographical tales that she drew first for *DoubleTake* magazine. They involved adventurous traveling, and she’d love to take more trips, but still has a teenage daughter at home, “so I have to be really careful with projects so that I don’t take on more things.” (She also has a son in college.) Meanwhile, she and Steve Martin have collaborated on a children’s alphabet book to be published in 2007. If some of Chast’s life has to be lived outside the bright circle of her pen, it’s a safe bet that hers is the life to have.

THE DELUSIONAL WORLD OF THE
FREE-RANGE CHICKEN



First Feed Birds, Then Procrastinate

Sunday Routine

By CARA BUCKLEY JUNE 12, 2009



WINDING DOWN Roz Chast, a cartoonist, with one of her three birds at her home in Ridgefield, Conn. Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times

Roz Chast's cartoons about neuroses and general angst have been running in The New Yorker since 1978. Ms. Chast, who has illustrated children's books and is currently writing one of her own, lives in Ridgefield, Conn., with her husband, their 18-year-old daughter and three extremely well-fed and somewhat neurotic pet birds. (She also has a 22-year-old son who lives in Seattle.) **CARA BUCKLEY**

WAKE-UP TIME Somewhere between 9 and 10. My life is so boring that your brains are going to melt and come out of your eyes. I kind of tend to stay up late just about every night, anywhere from 12:30 a.m. to 3 a.m. I putter. I nurse old grudges. I fold origami while nursing

old grudges. I think about the past. I wonder if there's any grudges I should start.

FOR THE BIRDS There's coffee. Then I have to take care of my birds, which sounds like a euphemism for something really bad. I have an African gray parrot, her name is Eli; we thought she was a boy. And a blue-streaked lory named Marco. He's 10. And a yellow and green parakeet, Petey. He's very cute, but he's getting old. It takes me an hour and a half every morning to clean their cages. Birds are just extremely messy and I'm extremely slow. I usually eat breakfast with the birds, because they like cinnamon toast.

AFTER THE BIRDS There's more procrastination and stalling about everything, everything: the grocery shopping and laundry and incredibly mind bogglingly boring things like that. Sunday there's not a lot of structure. I might spend an hour thinking about why I don't exercise, and feeling very guilty about not exercising. I tried running, over 10 years ago. It didn't really take.

EVER GO OUTSIDE? Not so much. We have things that grow outside of the house but I wouldn't really call it a garden. I'm not really involved with that. I don't really like yards. It's just, they're so boring. I might visit my mother, she's in an assisted living place about 10 minutes away, so I do get out of the house for that.

WHAT ABOUT FOOD? We go out for dinner a lot because I'm not much of a cook. My daughter usually comes, too.

And then the birds would have dinner. The parakeet just has birdseed. The lory has this thing called nectar that I have to specially mix up. This jar of nectar costs something like \$90 and every time I order it I think I'm an idiot. The lory actually gets five dishes: the nectar dish, the water dish, the powdered lory food, a dish for fruit and a little dish for dried cereal. I don't know how I got into this, but this is every day. The gray gets a cooked dinner; I buy these precooked bird things from this company called Beak Appétit that I heat up on the stove. My kids always joked that I spent more time cooking the birds' food than I have cooking for them. And it's probably true.

WINDING DOWN We usually putter and watch TV and fret away the rest of the night.

SLEEP WELL? Um. Hmm. We're not going to talk about that.

Cartoonist Chast visits as Montgomery fellow

By LUCY RANDALL January 29, 2008

A tombstone may not be the ideal subject for a comic, but when SAT scores — “Verbal 680 ” Math 720” — appear in lieu of lifespan, one cannot help but laugh. In all of Roz Chast’s cartoons, life’s most mundane and bleak scenes fall prey to bright pastel watercolors and charming wit.

Chast, a cartoonist famous for her work in *The New Yorker*, will be in residence at the College as a Montgomery Fellow from Jan. 28 to Jan. 29. Chast has contributed her cartoons to the *New Yorker* since 1978, and has published several books that she will be signing following her lecture, including “The Alphabet from A to Y With Bonus Letter Z!” (2007, with Steve Martin), “Theories of Everything: Selected, Collected and Health-Inspected Cartoons” (2006), “The Party After You Left” (2004) and “The Joy of Worry” (2004).

She has lived with her family in Connecticut since her children were young, but her work such as “Stay Well” cards for loved ones, continues to reflect and mock the anxieties of life in New York.

In an interview with *The Dartmouth*, Chast described her beginnings as an artist starting, at the age of four or five with her passion for drawing and humor. “I always loved making myself laugh and making other people laugh,” she said. “I’ve always been attracted to that kind of thing,” Chast cites cartoonist Charles Addams as an inspiration for her subject matter. “He just knocked me out so much. I have a cartoon in ‘Theories of Everything’ about it.” While Chast was growing up in Brooklyn, her parents, both teachers, took her to the Cornell University library where she remembers being drawn to books of Addams’ cartoons. “I could look at them again and again,” she remembered. “I loved his style and his jokes.”

Chast studied at Rhode Island School of Design from 1973 until 1977, beginning in graphic design before ultimately graduating with a degree in painting.

Chast confessed that her interest in cartoons made her feel marginalized. “It seemed like a sort of embarrassing thing to want to be doing,” she said. Chast explained that things have changed since then. “Now it’s different. There are so many aspects of it that seem to have some respect in the art world.” Her work for the *New Yorker* is distinctive for its bright pastels, which underscore her depressive characters, dark scenes and wicked sense of humor. She rarely follows the standard cartoon and gag-line format, more often labeling items within the drawing or writing the characters’ dialogue or thoughts in bubbles.

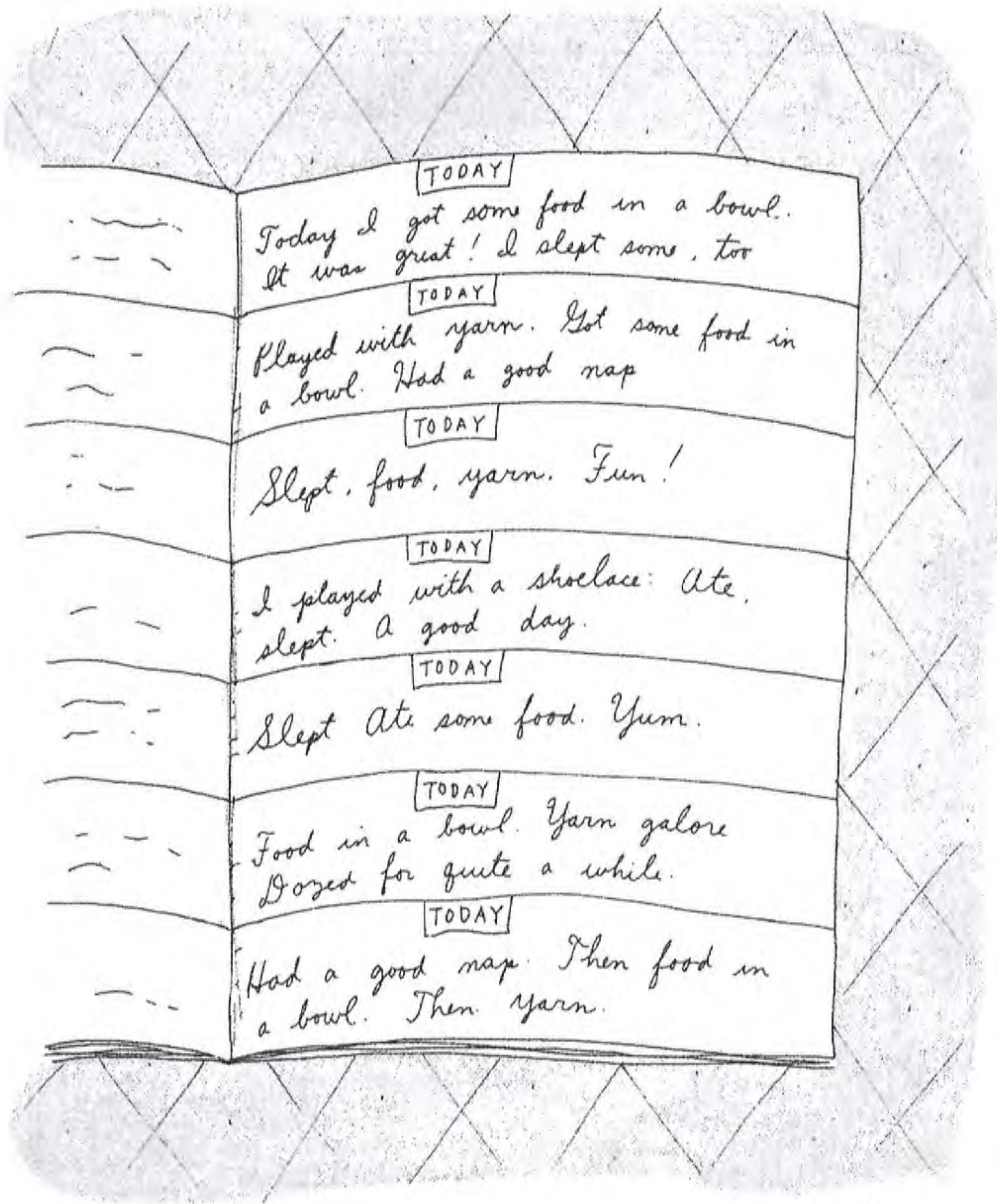
“My husband and I both realized that we both had the same book of sick jokes that you don’t think are funny except when you’re, like 9 or 10 years old,” she said about the development of her sarcastic, off-color sense of humor. “Either you tear your hair out and decide you’re never going to get out of bed, or you decide it’s funny.”

Chast said that her creative process starts with an idea and develops over time. “Most of the time the words come first — some fragment or some idea that I want to work with,” Chast said. “Occasionally I’ll be doodling and the picture will suggest something.”

She has followed the same work schedule for years, submitting about six or eight “roughs” to *The New Yorker* from her home in Connecticut by fax each week.

“You have to do a lot of stuff to get to the good stuff. That’s what I tell myself so as not to get terribly depressed.”

DIARY OF A CAT



TODAY

Today I got some food in a bowl.
It was great! I slept some, too

TODAY

Played with yarn. Got some food in
a bowl. Had a good nap

TODAY

Slept, food, yarn. Fun!

TODAY

I played with a shoelace. Ate,
slept. A good day.

TODAY

Slept Ate some food. Yum.

TODAY

Food in a bowl. Yarn galore
Dozed for quite a while.

TODAY

Had a good nap. Then food in
a bowl. Then yarn.

n. Chot

And Here's the Kicker

Roz Chast

By Mike Sacks
2009

During an interview with Roz Chast at the 2006 *New Yorker* Festival, comedian Steve Martin read aloud from one of her cartoons. It was a fictional help-wanted classified, touting the “opportunity of a lifetime.” Among the many absurd qualifications, applicants were expected to have an up-to-date trucker’s license and knowledge of quantum physics.

“There is so much literature involved,” Martin remarked about this cartoon, and others. “So much *writing*.”

For some cartoonists, complimenting their writing is akin to an insult. After all, theirs is mostly a visual medium; too many words add unnecessary clutter. Chast has always been a master at finding the perfect balance between the literary and the visual. Her cartoons do not depend on funny pictures to sell the joke. But, at the same time, they never seem overcrowded and dense with needless explanation or rambling punch lines. She’s a rarity among her creative brood—a cartoonist whose humor can be appreciated *without* the drawings.

As with all great writers, she has a fascination with the tiny, seemingly insignificant details that are usually and all too easily ignored. Her cartoons—which have appeared in *The New Yorker* since 1978—have featured an array of hilarious and over-the-top characters, some of whom bear an uncanny resemblance to her own family members.

But many of Chast’s most famous creations are insentient and not in any way alive, beyond their tendency to mouth off. Chast has devoted entire comics to those items usually relegated to the background and usually ignored—wallpaper, lamps, boxes, electrical cords. She specializes in finding the “inner voice” of these objects—or, as her mother once referred to it, the “conspiracy of the inanimate.” In one late seventies cartoon, she gave a toaster a bow tie, a vase a string of pearls, and dressed a grandfather clock in a skirt and a straw hat. (“You can dress them up,” she wrote in the accompanying caption, “but you can’t take them out.”).

Born and raised in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn in the mid-fifties, Chast did not grow up aspiring to become a professional cartoonist. Even when she began drawing—her first original comic strip, which featured two anthropomorphic birds named *Jacky and Blacky*, was created at the age of five—it never crossed her mind that she might someday make a living in cartoons. But within only a few months after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design (which she attended with the future members of Talking Heads), Chast was already publishing her work in *Christopher Street* magazine and *The Village Voice*, and, still in her twenties, she was invited to join the approximately forty cartoonists under contract with *The New Yorker*.

Today, Chast lives with her two children and husband, humor writer Bill Franzen, in Ridgefield, Connecticut, where she continues to write and illustrate her cartoons, as well as the occasional book.

How much did *The New Yorker* mean to you growing up in Brooklyn in the fifties and sixties?

Not much, truthfully. *The New Yorker* wasn’t something that I focused on when I—was a little kid, even though my parents subscribed. I read *Highlights for Children*. It wasn’t until I was about eight or nine that I discovered the old *New Yorker* cartoonists like Charles Addams.

My parents were both involved with education. My mother was an assistant principal at a Brooklyn elementary school, and my father taught high school. Each summer, we would drive from Brooklyn to Ithaca, New York, to Cornell University, and we’d rent graduate-student housing, because it was cheap. When my parents attended

lectures, they'd stick me in the browsing library in the student center. There was one section that contained only cartoon books. I would look through these books and just die.

I especially loved Charles Addams. It was the funniest stuff! had ever seen-just amazing. I still remember the books: *Monster Rally*, *Addams and Evil*, *Black Maria*, *Drawn and Quartered* . . .

What was it about Addams's cartoons that appealed to a 9-year-old?

For one thing, I "got" them. I couldn't relate to some of the other *New Yorker* cartoons, like the ones in which grown-ups said witty things to each other at a cocktail party. That just didn't make any sense to me; I had no idea what a cocktail party was, really.

But with Addams, I understood the jokes. It was sick humor-very black. They were funny to me. Plus, there were kids in them! A few of his cartoons I've never forgotten. One had an entire family pouring boiling oil onto a group of holiday carolers. In another one, the Uncle Fester character is waving to the car behind him to pass, even though he knows an oncoming truck is approaching. Or the cartoon where Uncle Fester is grinning as he watches a movie, while everyone else sobs. So many great ones! Very transgressive.

Wolcott Gibbs, the *New Yorker* writer, once wrote that Addams's work was a denial of all of the spiritual and physical evolution in the human race. Maybe I related to that.

Even when you were nine?

Oh, when I was a kid I was obsessed with all sorts of weird, creepy, dark things. I was fascinated with medical oddities and bizarre diseases. My mother's sister was a nurse, so we always had *The Merck Manual* lying around. I didn't understand much of it, but I did understand the symptoms. Just the faint possibility that I might have leprosy or lockjaw or gangrene ... tantalizing and terrifying.

I'm still fascinated with that sort of thing. Last night I watched this incredible medical show on television and [laughs] ... I shouldn't laugh, because it's not funny at all, but the show featured a woman who turned silver.

She turned what?

Her skin turned silver, but I can't remember why.

I suppose it doesn't matter, really.

It doesn't matter, it's true.

Oh, actually, I *do* know why! When she was a kid, a doctor prescribed nasal drops that had silver in it.

And you're not confusing this person with a superhero?

No, she was definitely just a normal woman who turned silver. The condition is called argyria.

To me, that's the ideal type of disease show. If I watch a show that features, say, a man with an extra arm growing out of his shoulder, I know that I don't have that condition and I never will. Same with parasitic twins. Horrifying, but not contagious.

What is it about these medical conditions that fascinated you? Are you intrigued by the outsider element?

Have you ever seen *Dear Dead Days*? It's a book by Charles Addams [Putnam, 1959], and it's a compendium of all of these odd images-weird photos of patients suffering from rare diseases, criminals, revolting or frightening architecture, wheelchairs. I loved that book.

Many writers and cartoonists are fascinated by people who live on the outskirts of society-criminals, the mentally ill, those suffering from deformities.

Those people are more interesting than the everyday humdrum. To quote [photographer] Diane Arbus, “Most people go through life dreading they’ll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.”

I suppose it’s also helpful for a creative person to look where others might not be looking.

Maybe. If I could, I *would* look where everyone else is looking. But my attention is always drawn elsewhere. When I was in school, trying to listen to the teacher talk about the French and Indian War, I would be distracted by irrelevant things like the ugly shoes she was wearing.

You drew a *New Yorker* cartoon about that.

I did. It was called “Newly Discovered Learning Disabilities” [December 3, 2001], and one of the entries was “Doodler’s Syndrome.” The child in the cartoon insisted on drawing and didn’t hear a thing the teacher was saying—very similar to my own experience.

You’d be labeled A.D.D. today.

Oh, absolutely! It’s still very hard for me to pay strict attention to something that I have to listen to. I once drew a cartoon called “Adult Attention Deficit Disorders” [*The New Yorker*, June 7, 2004]. It included “Financial Information Disorder,” “Driving Directions Deafness,” and “Technical Manual Fatigue Syndrome.” I suffer from all of them—and more.

I’d love to be able to pay attention to a lecture about saving money on my taxes, but I’m always fascinated by the silver person sitting in front of me.

How often does that actually happen?

Not often enough.

Were you a fearful child?

I remember I was afraid of kites, but I have no idea why. Actually, I can sort of guess: I had an uncle who told me that if I were to hold onto a kite long enough I would be lifted into the sky.

I’d say that’s a pretty good reason. Everyone seems to have an uncle like that.

Yes, they do. Kids believe *anything* you tell them. I did, anyway. I could easily convince myself that something bad was about to happen, or that I was about to come down with a terrible, incurable disease.

My parents were older than all of my friends’ parents. They came from a world where people actually did get diphtheria. I remember my mother describing having had diphtheria as a child; she said it was like having “a web across [her] throat.” My grandmother supposedly stuck her finger down my mother’s throat and pulled out the web. This was very real to me. I heard that diphtheria story many times.

My parents were both forty-two when they had me in 1954. They were a link to another time and place, and that affected me greatly. A lot of my friends had parents who had experienced the excitement and the prosperity of the fifties, whether they were “red-diaper babies” or “Eisenhower babies.” My parents didn’t seem to know anything of that; I might as well have been raised during the Depression. My parents grew up poor in households that spoke mostly Yiddish. They were from the Old World.

How did your parents feel when you achieved success? Did they understand your cartoons?

Sort of, but they were more excited that I had insurance [laughs].

Did your parents allow you to own comic books?

My parents were very serious; they did not like pop culture *at all*. Comics were considered “crap.” They did buy me *Classic Comics*, however. Have you ever seen them? They’re illustrated versions of *Moby Dick*, *Robin Hood*, and other works of literature.

They were like pieces of candy that looked great but tasted terrible. The sad part was that an illustrator actually drew them. So much work went into them, and they were really horrible. They were like the “Prince Valiant” comic strips in the newspaper: meticulously drawn, but, to me, a waste of good comic space.

Were your parents influenced by the Senate subcommittees on juvenile delinquency in the 1950s? And the 1954 anti-comic screed, *Seduction of the Innocent*, by the psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham? The book implied that comic books would lead our nation’s children to ruin.

I think it might have been more of a class issue. They thought comic books were for stupid people, and if I didn’t want to be a stupid person with a stupid job who was going to live a stupid life in a stupid apartment and marry a stupid husband and have stupid children, then I shouldn’t be reading comic books.

I did manage to borrow some issues of *Mad* magazine from my cousin. I loved Don Martin and the way he wrote out all those amazing noises his characters made. I loved the way his characters’ shoes would bend—you know, the top part of the shoe would sort of bend over at a 90-degree angle. He just drew *funny*. I’ve never forgotten one cartoon in particular, for some reason: a man in a bathroom is using a towel-dispensing machine, and a sign says: Push Down and Pull Up. This guy takes the whole machine and pushes it down and pulls it up, and rips it off the wall. The joke itself wasn’t even that great. It was just the way Don Martin drew the guy’s expression. He drew great expressions.

Were *Archie* comics allowed in the house?

To my parents, Archie was the devil. So, of course, that’s what I wanted to read the most. I thought *Archie* comics were fantastic. Even though they already seemed kind of dated when I was reading them in the sixties, Archie and Jughead and Betty and Veronica were very seductive to me.

Seduction of the innocent.

Right. It was sort of a parallel universe with all these people who didn’t look like they lived anywhere near Newkirk Avenue in Brooklyn. There were no girls with beehive hairdos, or people who would punch you in the school hallways for no apparent reason.

What did Manhattan represent to you, as someone who grew up right across the East River?

Speaking of parallel universes! It was a different world for me, and it was magical. When I was young, I attended weekend art classes at the Art Students League in Manhattan, and I really liked it. As I got older—after I moved to the city—I loved it even more.

As for my career goals, I never, *ever* thought that I would one day be published in *The New Yorker*. I was hoping that maybe, fingers crossed, I might one day have a strip in *The Village Voice*, because that’s where Jules Feiffer and Stan Mack were published. When I first began to sell my cartoons in the late seventies, I was mostly dropping them off at *The Village Voice* and *National Lampoon*.

What was the magazine-cartoon market like in the late seventies?

There were very few outlets. The “golden age of cartooning,” as the cartoonist Sam Gross used to call it, was over by this point. It used to be that all of the male cartoonists—and they were pretty much *all* male—would put their work into a portfolio each week. First, they’d go to *The New Yorker*, because that was the top of the heap. Whatever cartoons weren’t bought would be taken to the editors of the next tier, like *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Ladies’ Home Journal* or *McCall* ‘s. They would make the rounds and work their way down the list, to the very bottom—maybe eventually even to [pornographic men’s magazine] *Gent*.

That process was already over when I started to pitch my cartoons to magazines in the late seventies. For one thing, there were so few magazines publishing cartoons. It was much more difficult to place them. It was pretty much down to *The New Yorker* and *National Lampoon*. There was *Playboy*, but that wasn't on my list.

Did you always write your own cartoons? Or did you have outside gag writers help you?

No, I always wrote my own. Gag writers were more common in the past. The tradition of the gag writer selling cartoon ideas to an artist had begun to end in the sixties. I didn't even know there was such a thing as gag writers until I became a cartoonist. A lot of famous cartoonists used them, like Peter Amo, George Price ... even Charles Addams would sometimes buy gags-which really freaked me out.

When I first started, for maybe the first seven or eight years, I would receive packets from gag writers. And that was very weird. The envelopes would arrive, and I'd just go, *Arrrrghhhh!*

I knew that these people were going through a list of cartoonists' names, and mine was on there somewhere. The gags were always very traditional and mostly pretty lame: "Two guys standing in a bar talking," and then there'd be a corny punchline you'd read eighty times before. It was obvious they'd never seen a single cartoon of mine.

Who were these gag writers? Were they doing it for fun, or did they actually make a living at it?

I have no idea. I don't think they were young people, because I can't imagine a young person doing such a thing. I always imagined them as middle-aged men living alone in small apartments, above stores on main streets in sad, grim towns. Even the envelopes the gags came in were sad-all crumpled and yellowed and hand-addressed in a saddish way.

How old were you when you sold your first cartoon to *The New Yorker*?

I was twenty-three. I went under contract at the end of that first year. I think a lot of it had to do with my being in the right place at the right time. Maybe the magazine wanted to attract younger readers. Lee Lorenz was the art editor at the time. I will always be grateful to him.

Did you feel that *The New Yorker* wanted to include underground cartoonists and their sensibility in the magazine?

No, not underground, exactly. I didn't have that sense at that time at all. I think they just wanted to open it up a little to maybe a "younger sensibility."

Do you feel that it helped that you were a female cartoonist? There weren't many at *The New Yorker* at the time.

I'm pretty sure it wasn't only because I was female. I signed my cartoons "R." They didn't know *what* I was.

I think there was only one other female *New Yorker* cartoonist in the late seventies, although there'd been more in the past, like Helen Hokinson, Mary Petty, Barbara Shermund, and others. Now there are about five. I didn't think much about the "female" thing.

How much were you paid for your first *New Yorker* cartoon?

\$250.

How much are you paid today for a *New Yorker* cartoon?

\$1,300.

What was the reaction to your first one? Even looking at it today, I find it to be very odd and different. It's called "Little Things," and it features bizarre shapes with funny names: "chent," "spak," "kabe," "tiv," etc. There's no gag-at least in the traditional sense.

I think a lot of readers were pretty perturbed. Some of the older *New Yorker* cartoonists were really bothered by that cartoon, too. It's strange that Lee chose that one. I had submitted fifty or sixty, and this was the weirdest in the batch. It was so rough and personal, and it was so weird.

[Laughs] Later, Lee told me that somebody had asked him whether he owed my family any money.

It was certainly a break from the type of *New Yorker* cartoon that came before.

I knew that my cartoons were quite different, which is why I never really thought they would appear in *The New Yorker*. I never deliberately set out to be different; that's just how I draw. But if I tried to conform to somebody else's idea of what's funny, I'd have no compass at all. I wouldn't even know where to begin.

Has *The New Yorker's* submission process changed for you since you first began?

No, it hasn't changed much at all. I've submitted, let's see: thirty years times forty-six weeks on average a year ... whatever that is, since I first started, and I still do it basically the same way: Each week I submit between five and ten cartoons. Usually, about six or seven.

And how many, on average, will be accepted each week?

It's really hard to say. I might average one per issue for maybe three or four weeks in a row, but then I might go for three or four weeks and not sell any. And then the next week, for no reason at all, it seems, they'll buy two.

Someone once told me about a psychological experiment that was done with rats: if you keep rewarding the rats with a pellet each time they push a lever, they will eventually become bored and stop pushing the lever. And if they receive no pellets at all, they'll get discouraged and stop pushing the lever. But if you provide them with intermittent, random pellets, they just keep pushing that lever. Sometimes I feel like I am that rat.

It's a tough business. You only feel as good as your last sale. Even this many years later, I still get depressed if I haven't made a sale for a couple of weeks. I always feel like that's the end of it, you *know*—*I really have run out of ideas!*

You would think that by now I would understand that when I get depressed, it's part of the cycle. But it's still hard. The fact is, there are no guarantees. I don't know too many cartoonists who are super-confident people.

Do you hand-deliver these cartoons to the *New Yorker* office?

I used to go every week, but it just took too much time. In the eighties, I'd have a weekly lunch with the rest of the *New Yorker* cartoonists. But when we all moved out of the city, the group disbanded. I feel I can better use my time to stay at home and work. Or procrastinate.

Anyway, once a week, I fax a batch of rough sketches to *The New Yorker* offices. I try to draw pretty much what the finished cartoon will look like. You know, if people are standing in a room, I'll sketch the room, but I won't put in all of the fine detail until the cartoon is bought. The initial versions are always rough. If they buy it, I do a "finish"—a finished version of the sketch.

How long does a finish take?

For a very simple drawing, it might take an hour and a half. For a more complicated one, especially those in color, it might take several hours.

What exactly goes on in a *New Yorker* cartoon meeting? To me—and, I think, to many *others*—*The New Yorker* is almost like the Kremlin. It's a world of mystery, smoke, and mirrors.

I've never been to a *New Yorker* art meeting where the editors talked about cartoons. It'd be like peeking in on your parents and accidentally seeing them doing things you know they do, but don't want to think about them doing.

I once read an article that described the process, but I've since repressed it. As much as I would like to imagine the editors saying, "*This* one is really good, but *this* one is even better!," I know the disgusting, painful reality.

Do a lot of these ideas for cartoons gestate for a long time before you sketch them?

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Often, ideas will crop up when I'm in my studio just doodling and thinking. I remember when I was drawing "The Fantastic Voyage" [*Scientific American*, July 2002]. I had been thinking about the cliché of spaceships and strange submarine-like vehicles that would travel through the body in sci-fi films from the fifties and sixties. I wondered, What if people were in a broken-down bus instead? Or in the family sedan? That's how that cartoon came about.

I once doodled a crazy man holding a sign that read: The End is Near! I just felt like drawing one of these guys—who knows why. After looking at the guy for a while, I realized that he needed a crazy wife. So I drew him a wife, and she was holding up a sign that said: You wish. That one came out of the blue.

What ideas are you currently mulling over?

I'm working on an idea now. I wrote down, "Break Internet." I like the thought of breaking the Internet, as if it were a toy or an appliance. Now that I describe it, it sounds pretty lame. [The cartoon was not bought.]

How extensive is your backlog of unsold cartoons?

Thousands and thousands. It's an ocean of rejection. A lot of them are very dated, and a lot of them are just plain bad, but in that pile I will sometimes find something I want to rework. I have so many rejected drawings that it almost becomes raw material for me. When I'm stuck, I sometimes go into that file, and I'll see if there's an idea hiding that can be fixed.

How much time do you spend on the exact wording of your cartoons?

It really depends. Sometimes a cartoon will be very clear in my head from the minute I conceptualize it. Other times—especially with a multi-panel "story" cartoon—it takes longer. I like the editing process. I think—! hope—that this is something I've gotten better at as I've gotten older. I probably could have done more self-editing when I was younger.

Specifically, what sort of self-editing?

Eliminating things I don't need; paying attention to the rhythm of a joke. I don't want to make anyone read more than absolutely necessary.

I wonder how many readers even notice how finely structured the wording is in certain cartoons—such as with your work, or Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury," or Gary Larson's "The Far Side." There's never an extra comma or beat.

Bad rhythm is something you see frequently with amateur cartoonists. With that said, there are times when I can feel the rhythm of a cartoon more clearly than at other times. I work on deadline, and I have to do this whether I'm in the mood to work or not. But why I'm in the mood sometimes and not at other times is still a mystery.

Do you have tricks you've taught yourself that have made the process less difficult?

Getting away from work and coming back to it fresh really helps. Also, Truman Capote once said that if you have to leave a manuscript or a chapter, don't finish up the last little bit, because then, when you come back, you'll have to re-start from nothing. I've often used this approach. If I'm going downstairs for lunch, I leave something I'm excited to come back to—so I won't be starting from zero miles per hour. But it doesn't always work.

Do you consider yourself as much a writer as a cartoonist?

I don't consider myself as much of a writer as a "real" writer—those writers who write without drawings. And I don't consider myself as much of an artist as a "real" artist—somebody who paints without using any words. But cartooning is a hybrid, and cartoonists are hybrids. We feel incomplete doing just one or the other. When I have to write and I can't use pictures, it's very frustrating.

So where do you see the art of cartooning in the future? Do you think it'll remain a viable profession?

I don't know how viable it is *now*. It's a very tough profession. I really don't know whether cartooning for magazines will stick around. There's a lot written about teenagers and print media and how irrelevant the non-electronic media might soon become. I really don't know what's going to happen. But I do know that if someone wants to become a cartoonist, they're going to find an outlet.

I'd like to learn more about animation programs. If there were a computer program that wasn't too difficult to learn, I might just give it a shot. Hopefully you can always learn something new-always, always, *always*. Key word: "hopefully."

Any advice for cartoonists starting out with their careers?

I'm really grateful for the life-drawing classes I took at art school. Not that anyone looking at my characters would believe it, but I think life-drawing is really important. A cartoonist has to know how a body sits or stands on a page. It's like learning a language.

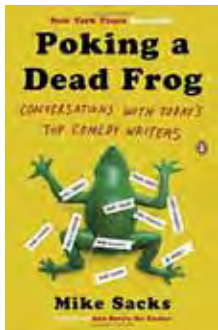
I feel that on my deathbed, which is something I hope to eventually have, I'll probably look back and wish that I didn't always look on the dark side of everything. But how can you not? You could die at any time, for any reason. You're walking under an air conditioner, and kaboom! My parents actually know someone who was killed by a falling flower pot. But we have to kind of go along and put one foot in front of the other and pretend that we don't know that everything could take a serious tum for the worse in the next second.

It's all in the pretending.

Yes, it's all in the pretending. Any of us could walk outside right now and Mr. Anvil could suddenly meet Mr. Top of Head. But we pretend otherwise.

Actually, that'd make for a nice cartoon.

And if I'm safely off to the side while it happens to you, and if there's a deadline looming, I would absolutely love to draw it. [Laughs]



—From *Poking a Dead Frog* by Mike Sacks

