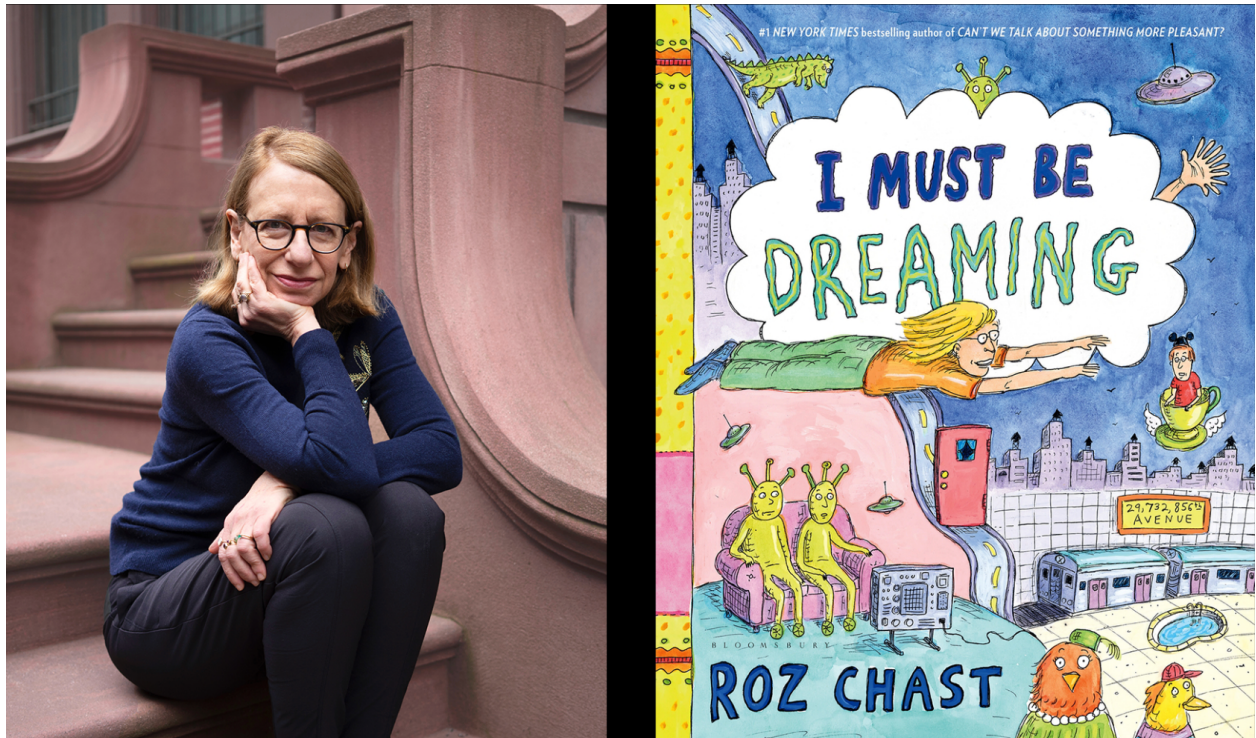


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TALK

ROZ CHAST KNOWS YOU'LL ALWAYS REGRET LEAVING THE CITY FOR THE SUBURBS



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By David Marchese

Roz Chast, across decades worth of her cartoons for *The New Yorker* as well as her own books, most notably the classic “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?” has proved herself to be one of the funniest and most acute observers of modern urban living’s insanities and anxieties. Now she has turned her gaze away from the streets and characters of her beloved New York City and toward her own sleeping mind. Chast’s forthcoming book, “I Must Be Dreaming,” is a collection of cartoons and written observations about her own dreams, others’ ideas about dreams and, broadly speaking, wiggly stuff related to dreams. But Chast is Chast, and the sleeping world she depicts is only somewhat more absurd — and equally as funny and profound — as waking life. “There’s so many different ways to look at dreams,” says Chast, who is 68. “But, for me, the biggest question is probably why do we dream at all?”

I watched a conversation that you had with Steve Martin¹ about your work and he asked something like, “How do you dream this stuff up?” Which is a funny question to think about in the context of the new book. Do you see creativity and dreaming as useful in any similar

¹ Martin and Chast also collaborated on the book “The Alphabet From A to Y With Bonus Letter Z!” published in 2007.

ways? I don't know how people live without taking time to let their thoughts run and see where they go. I don't know if it's useful. I just know that it's something that some people need to do.

I guess when I say "useful," I'm thinking of catharsis or working out your issues. For me, it's more making sense of the world around you. I don't think that's the same as catharsis. Trying to understand who you are, what are your — I hate to use the word "values."

Why do you hate the word values? I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.

It gives you the heebie-jeebies? A little bit. My husband sometimes jokes that I had a wolf-pack childhood because my parents were so overprotective and also in some ways neglectful.²

That feeling when I was a kid and in the house by myself with people who didn't speak English³ and then suddenly I'm in school with all these other people? Working on my writing and drawing and embroidery and dreaming — it's a way of trying to make sense of no longer being by myself in a three-room apartment with some Golden Books and instead being in this bigger world where it's kind of terrifying.



Artwork from Chast's book "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" From Roz Chast and Bloomsbury

² Chast has written about her difficult, complicated relationship with her imperious, easily angered mother and her fearful, spacey father.

³ Both Chast's parents worked growing up and some of her caregivers were "young Norwegian women who spoke very little English."

Toward the end of “Can We Talk About Something More Pleasant?”⁴ you say, “I’m still working things out with my mother.” That book is nine years old now. Are you at a different place with your understanding of her? I have more distance on it now, but no. It’s different because I’m older and maybe I have more understanding of some of the even physical things that my parents were dealing with that I didn’t understand when I was younger. As we move along, certain things that once seemed very far away suddenly seem a lot closer.

You’re talking about death? Woo! Oh! No. What’s that word that you just used? Deaf? Neth?

The idea of death or your own death is too much to even hear about? No, it’s actually kind of obsessive. I don’t know how we stop thinking about it. When you’re 4 or 5 and you learn about it, it doesn’t make any sense at all, the idea that you’re just not here. It’s a kind of nonexistence that we can’t even conceptualize. As I get older, I think about it more and more because it seems less and less abstract. People you know start to die. Not that that means it’s going to happen to *me*. [Laughs.]

Because it’s really not, but still.

I would have thought that working on the book about your parents’ deaths would have made you a little more comfortable with the idea. [Sighs.] Not really. It’s still a giant mystery. It’s something every single person has to deal with. I can’t even say “come to terms with.” Some enlightened swami who’s transcended the binary of being alive and being dead, maybe they have it together about death, but not me.



“When you’re four or five and you learn about it, it doesn’t make any sense at all, the idea that you’re just not here.” Roz Chast

You’ve also written about feeling as if you just didn’t fit in as a kid. Do you remember

when you first thought, I do fit in here? When I moved to New York; when I got my first apartment in the city. When I got out of art school, I thought: “My cartoons, they’re weird. They make me laugh but this doesn’t look like anything that I see. I’ll never be able to make my living as a

⁴ Which focuses on Chast’s experiences dealing with her parents during their old age, decline and death.

cartoonist so I might as well try being an illustrator.” I brought around an illustration portfolio, and I got jobs occasionally in some [expletive] style that was a mishmash of the popular styles. Then I decided to start taking my cartoons around and that was when things started to change.⁵

That has a lot to do with why I love New York and why I loved that apartment so much. It was the first time in my life that I didn’t feel like I was in the wrong place, in the wrong clothes, at the wrong time.

How did moving to the suburbs change that? I’m personally very interested in this question. ⁶

It was hard. I had to learn how to drive. I did not feel like I fit in — and I still don’t — but over the years I did manage to make a few very dear friends. Not tons. I remember going to a P.T.A. meeting and thinking, I hate this so much. I can’t stand any of these people. There was a field day — you know field day?

Oh, yes. I had decided, in a masochistic fit, to be one of the parents who helped out, and somebody gave me a giant bag of ice to break up and I didn’t know how to break it up. I was hitting it with a branch! I didn’t know what I was doing and this woman, she took it from me with this, *tsk!* and she drops the bag of ice on the floor. But she just acted like, *You’re an idiot* — and I sort of knew I was. And all that stuff with going to the kids’ soccer games — this was a big thing in the town.⁷

Again, sometimes, in the masochistic fit you get asked to do things and you’re like, “I’ll do it!” You get asked to bring — not bring a “snack” or “some snacks” — you get asked to bring “snack.”

“Snack”? Just “snack.” “Roz, will you bring ‘snack’ next week?” God, the cut up oranges. It’s horrible. Sometimes there would be fund-raisers, and I remember once I had to flip burgers or something. I had never done this. The night before, I could barely get to sleep. I was having such anxiety about it. I was like, “I know this is going to go so wrong.” I just was not cut out for these things! I could barely drive. These people made me so uncomfortable. All of it: horrible. Sorry, I wish I could be more, Yeah, it was really fun!

Did you like *anything* about it? Oh, here’s a fun thing: You can drive to the grocery store and put your groceries in your cart and then bring your cart all the way back to your car and then drive home. I had spent so many years lugging grocery bags. Because this was in the old days: There was no DoorDash or whatever. You’d have to go to D’Agostino’s or Fairway and schlep these giant bags of groceries, and your fingers would be stiff from holding them. So driving to the grocery store is still a great source of delight.

Will my own lingering sense that somehow moving to the suburbs represents a personal failing ever go away? You have to repress it. [Laughs.] Deeply repress it. Say you’re doing it for your kids and stuff like that. Also, eventually, when you’re old and gray, maybe you’ll find a crappy one-room apartment in the city like I did. It’s great. So what if the bathroom ceiling fell in? I needed to come back to the city. A lot of it for me has to do with not having to drive. Because not driving

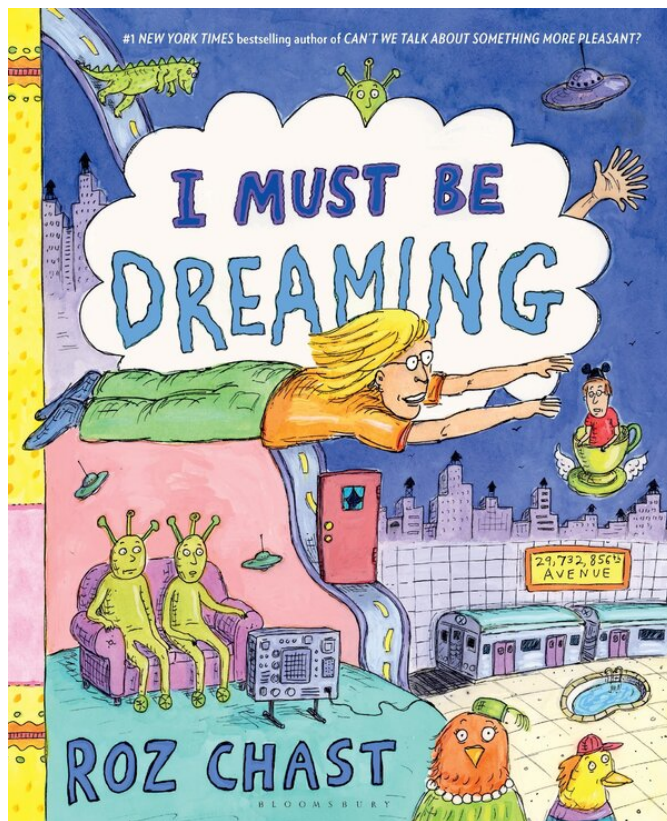
⁵ Chast began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1978.

⁶ Having moved from Brooklyn to the New Jersey suburbs just last year. It’s going fine.

⁷ That town being Ridgefield, Conn., where Chast and her husband, the writer Bill Franzen, moved to from New York in 1990. The couple have two grown children.

when you live in the suburbs, or being a quasi driver — I have a lot of anxiety about it, and when I'm in the city I can go anywhere I want. I feel free. I feel like an actual grown-up.

What is it about driving? Ugh! There's the car itself: tires falling off, a blow out, a car exploding. One time I was driving and the front hood started rattling and the whole drive I pictured the hood of the car flying up and then my crashing and not only killing myself but killing tons of people. I hate it! I hate changing lanes. I hate merging. I hate trucks. Everything about it is hateful. Also, you're going so [expletive] fast! A slight miscalculation and it's disaster.



There's a section in your new book where you share a bunch of theories about what dreams are for. Does one of them seem truest to you? If somebody tied me to a chair and made me choose? Jung's probably. I'm probably getting two-thirds of this ass-backwards, but he writes a lot about archetypal dreams and archetypal imagery. He says these archetypes occur in everybody's dreams and that was part of his theory about the collective unconscious. I've never dreamed about a temple with a giant stone phallus in the basement⁸ and angels flying around,⁹ but his father was a pastor; he grew up with all of these books of ancient mythology and so it makes sense that the stuff that was in his head already from the circumstances of his life affected his dreams. Probably if you're a podiatrist, you're going to maybe have dreams about people's bunions.

I was curious: do you have feelings about The New Yorker cartoon caption contest?¹⁰

It bothers me. I feel like it sort of denigrates cartoons and cartoonists. It makes it a parlor game, and I think it homogenizes everything. It's the opposite of what I like about cartoons, which is that it's a personal point of view from one artist. When I think about my favorite cartoonists, they've created this whole world. Ed Koren and Helen Hokinson, Charles Addams, Gahan Wilson, Mary Petty, Victoria Roberts, Emily Flake, Ed Steed, Liana Finck. These are individuals' voices.

I know you're not particularly religious, but do you think your work demonstrates a Jewish sensibility? It's New York as much as it is Jewish.

⁸ One of Jung's most famous dreams was one he experienced as a child in which he entered an "underground chamber" where "a giant phallus stood erect on a golden throne."

⁹ Angels were another one of Jung's key archetypes.

¹⁰ In which readers are invited to submit their own captions for cartoonists' work.



Chast in front of her hand-drawn mural at an exhibit of her work at the School of the Visual Arts in New York in 2018. Peter Garritano for The New York Times

Where do you draw *that* line? Yes, where *do* you draw that line? But a lot of the people that I draw, they're in an apartment. It's like I'm not picturing them on a hiking trail. If they were on a hiking trail, they wouldn't be very happy about it. They'd be like: "Are you sure we're still on the trail? Do we have reception here? Did you bring the bug spray? I need more spray. Why did you bring the organic spray? It doesn't work. Now I know I have picked up that horrible disease that you can get from mosquitoes."

I know you're a bit of a hypochondriac. How was the pandemic for you? I learned about sheet-pan cooking, so, in a way, I would say the pandemic was worth it.

Did it stir up any phobias? I mean, it was scary. Some of that fear I've probably put on a high shelf in the closet to look at later, if you know what I mean.

Can I just ask: When is your mind at ease? Once I have my idea worked out and I'm working on my embroidery or working with pysanky eggs ¹¹ and I'm doing the mechanical part of it, I find that soothing.

But do you need an external project to focus on in order to put your mind at ease? Like what about if you're just sitting around at home and thinking? Oh, no, that's not so good. [Laughs.] Trouble ahoy!

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity from two conversations. David Marchese is a staff writer for the magazine and the columnist for Talk.

¹¹ Pysanky is a Ukrainian form of egg decoration utilizing wax and dyes.