

## BOOKS

### On the M4 Bus With Cartoonist Roz Chast

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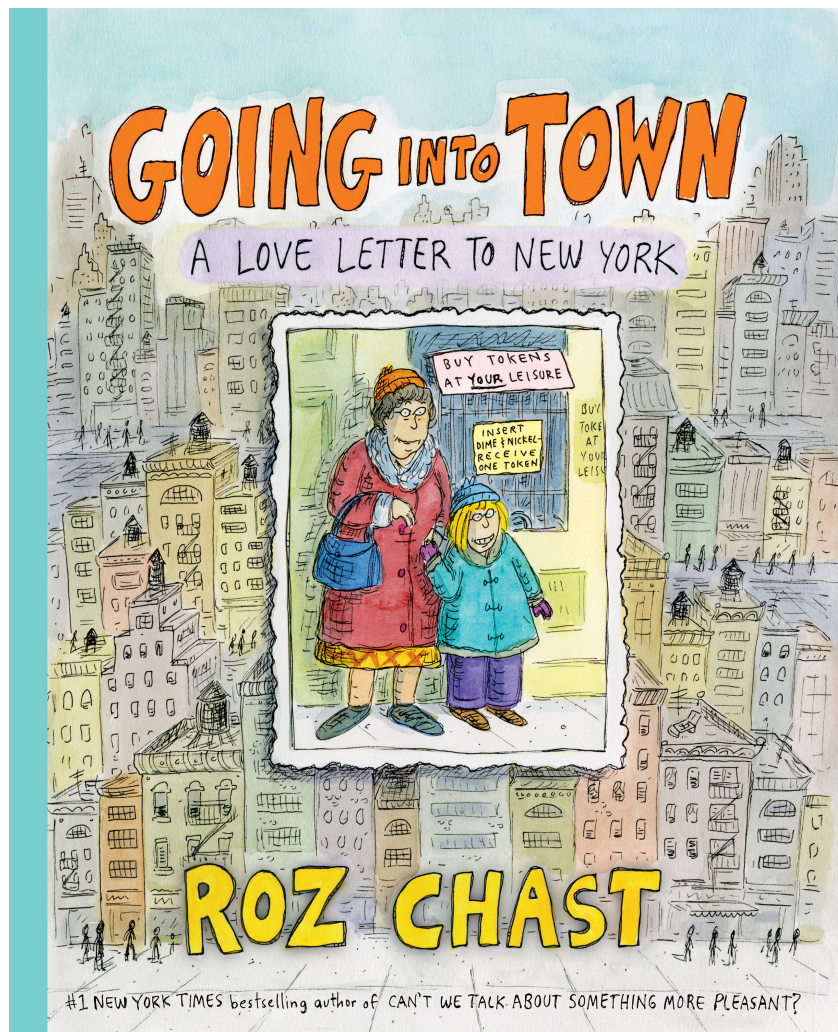


Photo: Courtesy of Bloomsbury Press

One sunny day in early October, I sit on the sprawling steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, waiting for cartoonist Roz Chast. At her publicist's request, for purposes of identification, I feebly hold aloft a copy of Chast's new book, *Going Into Town: A Love Letter to New York*, aware that to the tourists milling around the museum's entrance it probably appears that I am hocking stolen goods or maybe getting stood up by a Tinder date.

Chast is late, but there are few better places for people-watching than the Met steps at lunch (just [ask](#) Blair Waldorf), so I spend the time speculating about who might make for good Roz Chast cartoon fodder. The distracted babysitter dragging her charge down Fifth Avenue? The old man with the Wallace Shawn hair, carting a pitifully understuffed briefcase? The lady primly perched beside her enormous quilted carryall, eating a hot dog dripping with relish? Nope, it would be the 60-something husband and wife, trudging by, shoulders slumped, sneakers scuffling, doing what could only be described as dutiful touring. I scribble that down, then realize that the best candidate for the Roz Chast treatment is clearly *me*: the neurotic journalist, trapped inside her own head, shackled to the deafening clamor of her inner monologue.

Chast has been finding humor in just this type of slightly demented, anxiety-ridden character since at least 1978, when she began contributing her now-beloved cartoons to *The New Yorker*. In *Going Into Town* (the title refers to how the author's late parents used to describe trips from their Flatbush, Brooklyn, apartment to Manhattan proper), she is less interested in the people of New York City than in the city itself. She covers all manner of minutiae typically excised from guidebooks: the origin of those weird black dots mottling the sidewalk ("Gum, probably"); New York City vernacular ("A term you're going to hear a lot is *cross street*"); basic questions of layout ("Avenues are wider than streets"); and how best to explore à la Roz. "The more nondescript your street is, the greater chance you have of making your own discoveries," reads the text that runs above a drawing of a typical Chastian antiheroine—googly-eyed, wavy-mouthed, weak-chinned, sporting a vintage hairstyle and salivating over a bountiful display of ribbons.



Roz Chast, at home in her studio in Connecticut. Photo: Bill Hayes



The project began several years back as a pamphlet, a send-off gift for Chast's daughter, Nina, who was then leaving home to attend college in the city. When Nina graduated, she pronounced the pamphlet quite helpful and returned it to her mom, who then submitted it to her agent. In book-length form, *Going Into Town* is a hybrid, both a bird's-eye view of the city and a memoir of the circumstances that left a daughter of Chast—who is, in my mind, as intrinsically New York-y as, say, [Woody Allen](#) or [Carrie Bradshaw](#)—in need of such a primer.

That story goes back to the late 1980s and the birth of Chast's son, an event that forced the cartoonist and her husband, *New Yorker* writer Bill Franzen, to concede that they could no longer afford Manhattan rent. They debarked for Chast's detested native borough of Brooklyn (for more on that, read her celebrated 2014 graphic novel *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*), where they lived until Chast was once again pregnant. Facing the imminent arrival of the aforementioned Nina, Chast and Franzen admitted defeat and lit out for the hinterlands of Connecticut, where the cartoonist has lived, in exile from the city she adores, pretty much ever since.

When Chast and I were arranging our interview, I took my cues from *Going Into Town*. "Don't neglect buses," it cautions of New York City's most maligned form of public transportation. "These lumbering oblong lane-hogs are slow as 'molasses in January,' and don't come for a long time, only to arrive in bunches. But sometimes, when you're not in a rush, they are a fun way to travel and see the sights

P. P. S. Don't neglect buses. These lumbering, oblong lane-hogs are slow as "molasses in January," and don't come for a long time, only to arrive in bunches. But sometimes, when you're not in a rush, they are a fun way to travel and see the sights above ground: the people, the stores, the mish-mosh of architectural styles. Try to get a window seat.



[Make sure you board the one that starts with "M" or you'll wind up in Queens or the Bronx or some other place that's not in Manhattan.]

travel and see the sights aboveground." We were not in a rush, so Chast and I hatched a plan to catch the M4 a few blocks down from the Met. When she arrived, flapping her hands in greeting and showing off her tote bag, printed with a William Morris-like floral, that's precisely what we did—for 20 blocks, that is, until I finally picked up on Chast's repeated hints that she'd prefer to walk.

Here are some things to know about Roz Chast: She has a high, fluttery voice; is bespectacled and slight; and sort of resembles a Roz Chast character, which is to say that many Roz Chast characters bear some resemblance to their creator. Someone once told her that she has a tiny head (she does not), and she independently observes

that Anthony Bourdain's head is gigantic by comparison ("It's like a statue! It's like 1.5 times the size of our heads"). She favors sensible shoes ("I would not walk around New York in heels. That's a recipe for being cranky"). Her [hobbies](#) include painting eggs, playing the ukulele, three dimensional feats of origami, and hooking rugs. She is a great observer of human expression, but she's hamstrung by a condition colloquially known as [face blindness](#), which she refers to as "very embarrassing" (and which explains the insistence that I cart around a copy of her book in order to be recognized).

She rarely finishes one thought before beginning the next, though that may be a function of the fact that the streets of Manhattan offer many tantalizing distractions. As we walk from 59th Street and Fifth Avenue down to Herald Square—keeping a wide berth around Trump Tower; "eww" says the cartoonist—Chast's attention is hijacked by store window displays ("Look at that great window! Bergdorf Goodman is the most incredible store in the world"); by outlandish dresses ("That tutu! I would wear that!"); by odd architectural details ("Look at that mansard roof! The green one; it's got all these shitty boxes shoved in the window"); by standpipes, a particular obsession that appear frequently in her drawings and in *Going Into Town*, to which she has appended a photo essay of some favorites ("They're like plants. I feel like I've discovered a new species").

In conversation, Chast often slips into character, like when she tells me about the great *New Yorker* tradition of presenting one's ideas in person to the cartoon editor: "You just kind of sit there and think, *I hope he's not seeing my horrible, needy little face.*" She tightens her voice into a mousy squeak. "*Please like me! Please like my cartoons.*" Over the course of our two hours together, Chast does many voices: one recalls Spicoli from *Fast Times at Ridgmont High*; another reminds me of Homer Simpson; another seems inspired by the parrots she keeps in Connecticut (the only good part about living in the burbs, she has [said](#), are the birds).

Here's one more thing about Roz Chast: Recently, after nearly three decades of navigating full-time life outside the city, she has finally made her triumphant return. When her son found a place on the Upper West Side that rented for less than \$2,000 a month, Chast realized that she could, too. Franzen doesn't want to leave Connecticut, but they've found marital compromise in the form of a tiny Manhattan crash pad—"My friend calls it my *pomme de terre*"—where Chast spends at least one night a week (she's currently working on a book about Brooklyn—"like outer Brooklyn, places where you might have to take the subway *and* a bus to get to").

"I'm going to get this apartment," she remembers telling her husband. "You don't understand. This is my home."

It's that kind of desperate, unrelenting love of New York that comes across most clearly in *Going Into Town*. More than other recent books on the subject—Julia Wertz's encyclopedic *Tenements, Towers & Trash*, [Tamara Shopsin's beautifully elegiac memoir](#) *Arbitrary Stupid Goal*—Chast's latest reflects an unmitigated adoration of the city, an endless patience for its shortcomings, a full-throated embrace of New York's infinite capacity for change, and a complete lack of snootiness toward those who have less of a native claim to it than she does. "This is the best place in the world," she writes, "an experiment, a melting pot, a fight to the death, an opera, a musical comedy, a tragedy, none of the above, all of the above. We're a target for seekers and dreamers and also nuts. We live here anyway."

Chast's last book, a finalist for the National Book Award, grappled with the deaths of her mother and father, and the pain of ushering one's parents through the final stages of life. *Going Into Town* is undeniably lighter, but I also found it quite moving. At a moment when so many of my friends, fed up with the grime, the expense, and the inconvenience of New York, are fleeing for the promised land of [Los Angeles](#)—on a seemingly daily basis, I run into a bedraggled acquaintance on the subway who asks me: “Why do we live here again?”—Chast's book serves as a reminder that New York's future is not all Russian oligarchs, [bankers, tech bros](#), and beleaguered yuppies hanging on by a thread, that the weirdos are still finding a way, that the city is and always has been a matter of taste (and that someone whose taste I admire also finds so much to love about plastic bags hanging from anemic tree branches, the absurdity of industrial plumbing fixtures, the coziness of looming buildings and compressed horizons).



Photo: Courtesy of Bloomsbury Press

Speaking of which, when the afternoon sun descends low enough to shoot like a laser beam up Sixth Avenue, Chast and I decide to stop for an iced coffee. We settle for a café franchise with covered outdoor seating in a bland office plaza just north of Radio City Music Hall, the sort of interstitial corporate space that might, in someone snobbier, spark a rant about the death of authenticity. (Quite the opposite: “Most of the people who have nostalgia for the '70s and '80s in New York didn't even live here then. It's like: Are you kidding me?") Even this antiseptic sliver of the city seems to delight Chast. “This is such a funny little space,” she remarks. “I don't think I've ever sat here. It's fun to watch people, all these people who work in offices, how they're dressed, wondering what their job is. I've never worked in an office, so it's fascinating to me.”

She pointed at a plaque displayed on a nearby wall, squinting to read it. “Look at that! ‘Plaza Rules of Conduct.’”

“‘No destruction of property?’” she goes on, getting fake worked up. “Crap! Why did you bring me here? I thought I could bring my ax out and smash this table to shit.” She gestures at a planter on the sidewalk about a hundred feet away. “No plant life? Dammit! I wanted to uproot those!”

It feels like a Roz Chast cartoon in the early stages of conception—the corporate drone finally snaps, but her personal revolution consists only of defying the bizarre, unnecessary rules of the office plaza—that classic Chastian brew of conformity and convention in conflict with nervous individuality.

“I think humor and anxiety are probably intertwined,” she says, when I ask how the particular Trump-fueled angst of 2017 has come to bear on her work. “Most cartoonists I know are not the jolliest, most optimistic people. On every level I feel like anything horrible can happen at any moment. This ground could give way.” She glances up at the granite ceiling, the undercarriage of the building above. “This could collapse. I could have a heart attack. My daughter and I were talking about belly buttons the other day, and I said, basically we are just carelessly tied Hefty bags. You know? We’re just a disaster waiting to happen.” Chast grows visibly unnerved. “I think we should move on,” she urges. “This is actually a very anxious space to be in.”

We exit onto 47th Street; stop by Kinokuniya, the Japanese bookstore across from Bryant Park, to try out fountain pens; wander downtown, past a tourist shop selling T-shirts that read *Fuck You You Fucking Fuck*, past a dress shop called Menorah (Chast, in a crotchety old-lady voice: “It’s Aunt Sadie! Do you have this in a size 98?”), past a GNC, its windows displaying massive tubs of protein powders in front of photographs of glowing yogis namaste-ing on mountaintops (“The more things I see about yoga, the more it’s like, do you want to make me really hate yoga?”).

Then suddenly our time together is up. Chast offers some parting words of wisdom. “New York speaks to some people,” she says. “It doesn’t speak to other people. There may be fancy people to whom it genuinely speaks, you know? And that’s great. But I don’t think you need to be fancy. You just have to really like it. So anyway: I am off!” She disappears through the glass doors of her publisher’s office building, leaving me on the sidewalk alone to contemplate the singular charms of the city around me—and also, yes, my own poorly tied navel.