

ROZ CHAST: CARTOON MEMOIRS



Like many readers of *The New Yorker* and other popular publications, I have always been drawn to Roz Chast's singular wit, and look forward to each new cartoon recounting the exploits of characters whom I feel I have come to know. Inspired, as Norman Rockwell was, by life's small moments, her intelligent, expressive drawings prove that fact can be stranger than fiction, and that one need not go far to find comic relief in our crazy, irrepressible world.

Norman Rockwell Museum is honored to present the art of this distinguished illustration master in *Roz Chast: Cartoon Memoirs*, celebrating almost four decades of outstanding artistic accomplishment. The exhibition offers the first presentation of original works from her acclaimed visual memoir, *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, which chronicles the lives of her aging parents with heartfelt humor and emotion. The full range of the Chast's talents and the breadth of her career are also revealed in her legendary cartoons for *The New Yorker*; book illustrations for *Around the Clock*, *What I Hate from A to Z*, *Marco Goes to School*, and *101 Two-Letter Words*, among others; intricately-painted Ukrainian character eggs; and one-of-a-kind hand-made storytelling rugs.

The **Distinguished Illustrator Exhibition Series** honoring the unique contributions of exceptional visual communicators is presented by the **Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies**, the nation's first research institute devoted to the art of illustration. The Distinguished Illustrator series reflects the impact and evolution of published art, and of Norman Rockwell's beloved profession, which remains vibrant and ever-changing.


Stephanie Haboush Plunkett

Deputy Director/Chief Curator
Norman Rockwell Museum

Acknowledgements

Dedicated to the art of illustration in all its variety, Norman Rockwell Museum is honored to present *Roz Chast: Cartoon Memoirs*, a tribute to an exceptional and influential visual communicator. We wish to express sincere appreciation to **Roz Chast** for her enthusiasm and assistance throughout the planning process, and to **Dena and Felda Hardymon** and **Amy C. Liss** for their generous support of this exhibition.

Appreciation also goes to cartoonist **Liza Donnelly** for her outstanding catalogue essay; to **Renato Danese**, President, and **Carol Lee Corey**, Director, of Danese/Corey in New York City, for making important original artworks available for exhibition; and to Condé Nast Content Operations Manager **Trevor Hoey** for assisting us in obtaining imagery for publication. Many thanks also to the Norman Rockwell Museum staff, who make all things possible.

Curator : Stephanie Haboush Plunkett; Graphic Design : Rita Marshall; Printing :  Blissior
Photography : Thomas Mesquita, Paul Munroe, Eric Masters; Exhibit Video : Jeremy Clowe
Compilation Copyright : © Norman Rockwell Museum, 2015

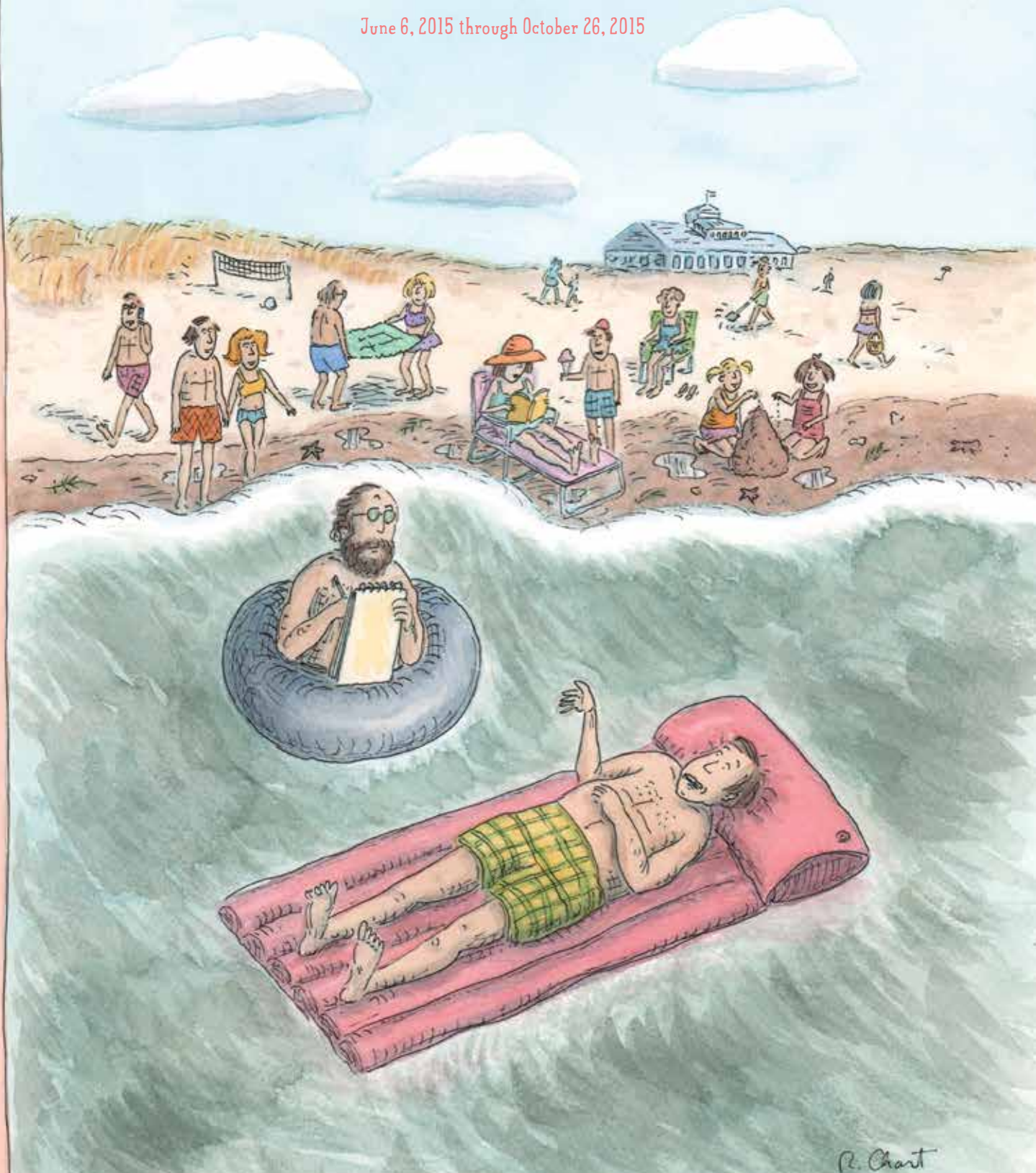
All illustrations © Roz Chast. All rights reserved. **Front cover**: Roz Chast, *Cheese Danish*, 2014. Illustration for *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (Bloomsbury, USA, New York). Watercolor and ink on paper. **Back cover**: Roz Chast, *Dad's Favorite Foods*, 2014. Hand-hooked wool and burlap rug. Image courtesy Danese/Corey, New York. **Facing page**: Roz Chast, *Summer Psychology Session*, 2006. Cover illustration for *The New Yorker*, August 7, 2006. Image courtesy Danese/Corey, New York.

NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM 

9 Glendale Road, Stockbridge, MA 01262, 413-298-4100
nrm.org

ROZ CHAST: CARTOON MEMOIRS

June 6, 2015 through October 26, 2015



R. Chast

NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM

My mother had a strong aversion to doctors and hospitals. It didn't surprise me that she didn't want to call in the cavalry



Roz Chast, *My Mother Had a Strong Aversion to Doctors*, 2014. Illustration for *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (Bloomsbury, USA, New York). Watercolor and ink on paper.

I was against my parents' principles to talk about death...

Nor would they discuss religion beyond a most superficial level.

I'm Jewish. Daddy is Jewish. You're Jewish. End of story.



Asking too many "spiritual" questions meant that you had too much time on your hands.

Pure navel gazing.



People who said they knew anything for sure were either stupid, or lying, or crazy.

When I die, I will go to Zoltanland. Zoltan said so himself.

I'm on the ninth Varbitz level.



All true believers had different opinions.

There's Christians and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus...

... and Confucians and Unitarians and Jains and...



No one could deny that religion caused a lot of problems in the world.

Fanatics want to kill people who aren't on their team!

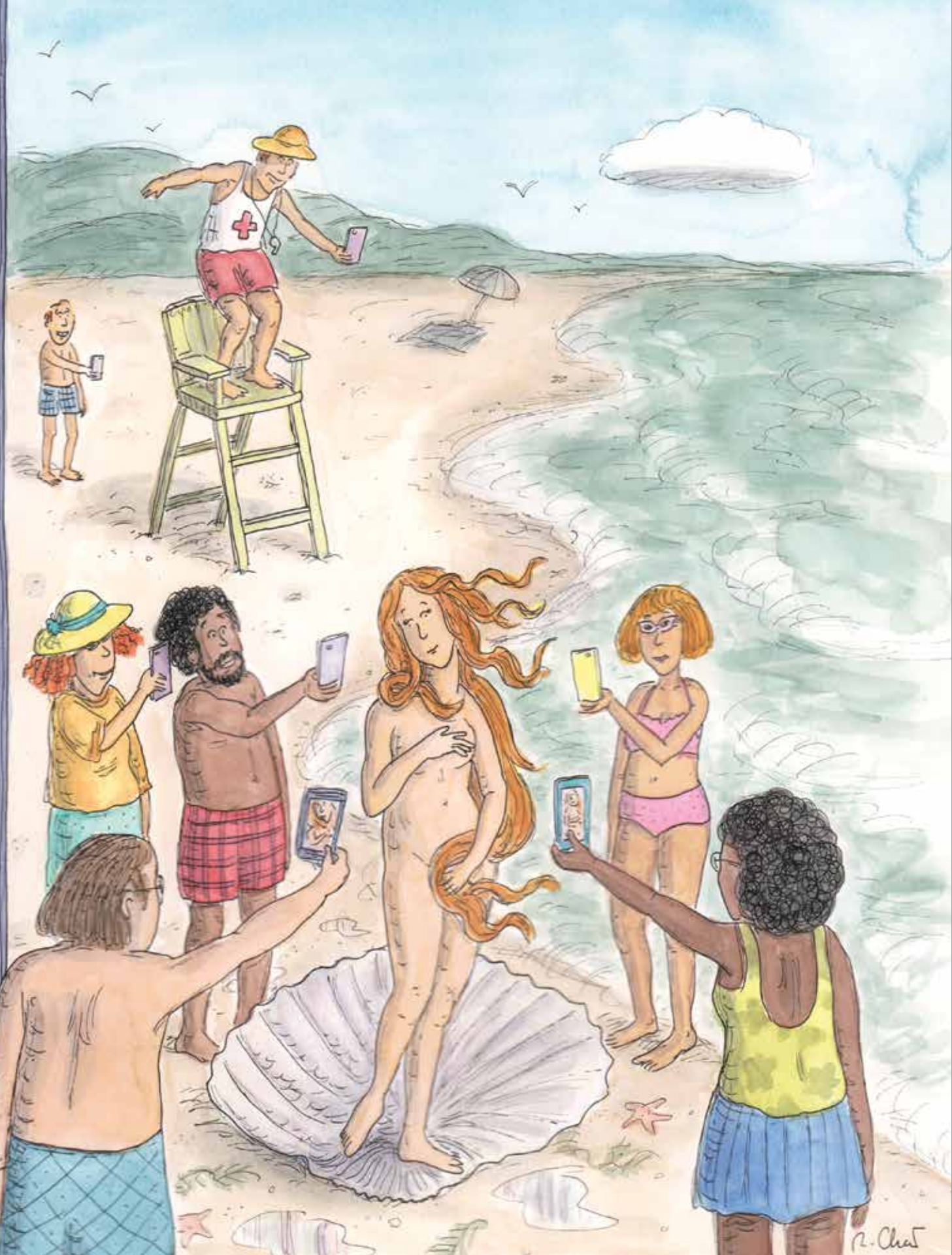


Finally, if there was something besides "this," we'd all find out soon enough.

When you're dead, you'll know.

Either there's something, or there's nothing. Probably nothing.





ROZ CHAST

LIZA DONNELLY



As an art form that is almost a century old, *The New Yorker* cartoon provides a unique window on our culture. It's possible to focus in on an individual cartoonist and look at their work for insight into creativity and into the times in which their work was published. Roz Chast's drawings began appearing in *The New Yorker* at an interesting time in the country and at the magazine; and her work widened our understanding of what humor can be.

The New Yorker was founded as a humor magazine in 1925, and over the course of the first year, founder Harold Ross and his editors and artists worked together to create what we now know as *The New Yorker* cartoon: often subtle, ironic, sometimes political, often sophisticated. The cartoon has evolved and certain forms have found favor at different times over the course of the magazine's history.

The first few years, there were all kinds of cartoons—single panels with two captions, comic strip—like sequential cartoons and caption-less cartoons. The editors often toyed with the layout: there were odd-shaped cartoons that were creatively surrounded by text, drawings that were as tall as the page, others traveled across double page spreads.

In the 1930's, *The New Yorker* cartoon was in its heyday. Artists such as Peter Arno, Helen Hokinson, Barbara Shermund, Alan Dunn, William Steig, and James Thurber, brought the art form to great heights in popularity and artistry. The generation of the 50's and 60's brought cartoonists such as Frank Modell, Charles Saxon, George Price, Ed Fischer, and Mischa Richter. The cartoons by that time had become fairly uniform in type and cartoonists often used gag writers, and with the exception of Steinberg and Steig, most of the cartoons were typical single panel with a caption.

The 1970's brought change at *The New Yorker*. The art editor who had been selecting cartoons for three decades, James Geraghty, was replaced by Lee Lorenz in 1973. Only the second art editor, and the first cartoonist to hold the job, Lorenz brought a number of new artists into the fold right away. One of the artists Lorenz discovered was Roz Chast.

Roz began selling cartoons as soon as she submitted them to *The New Yorker* in 1978. I met Roz around 1979 after I sold my first cartoon to the magazine. When I first saw her drawings, I was simultaneously charmed and perplexed; there was nothing like them in the magazine at that time.

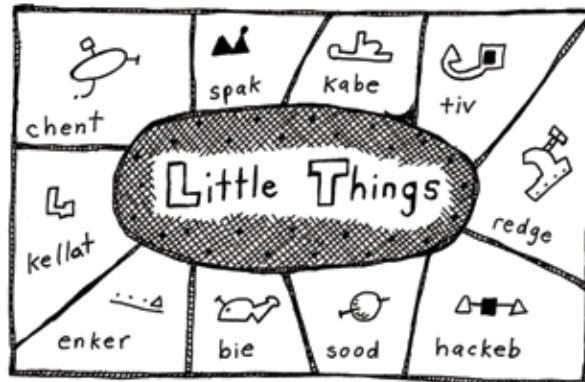
Left: Roz Chast, *The Birth of Venus*, 2014. Cover illustration for *The New Yorker*, August 4, 2014.

Watercolor and ink on paper. Image courtesy Danese/Corey, New York.

Above: Roz Chast, *Marco*, 2012. Illustration for *Marco Goes to School* by Roz Chast (Atheneum Books for Young Readers). Watercolor and ink on paper.

Her first drawing published in *The New Yorker* was called "Little Things," and one can imagine the confusion it brought to many readers. Some were delighted, connecting to a cartoon in a way they had never before. The drawing is at once silly yet profound, and it's hard to explain why. It was a taste of things to come from Roz. She examines the daily life of just about everyone, the small parts of our days that go unnoticed, unacknowledged, and under-valued. The simple pleasures, and the horrible deep worries; the secret life of cows, the bizarre thoughts of your homely neighbor, the ever-present obsessions of mom—nothing goes unexamined by Roz.

All cartoons are stories to one degree or another. Each has characters and settings and each cartoon has a beginning and an end—it's just that we don't often see it all: the story is implied in order to deliver the humor. Whether a single image or a multi-paneled one, Roz's drawings are clearly stories that show us everyday people who may not be in our thoughts. And she seems to have affection for them. Yet one can also see a darkness; Roz had an early obsession with the work of Charles Addams and that connection is tangible in some of her darker cartoons. Her somber, realistic world-view is balanced out by her naïve drawing style; we are caught off guard when a pessimistic tone emerges from the shaky, almost child-like line. But in the end, Roz's love for her characters wins out, and one feels reassured and joins in her affection. They are us, but not really. Roz keeps us in a complicated dance of relating to those she draws, while



allowing us to keep our distance so we can laugh.

It feels as though Roz's drawing come straight from her psyche, uninterrupted. She is sharing her inner thoughts as they emerge, unedited. If one relates to what she is saying in her cartoon, it's on an

emotional level, not an intellectual one. *New Yorker* writer E.B. White famously wrote decades ago that humor should not be dissected; because, like dissecting a frog, no one cares and the thing dies in the process. One can't analyze Roz's work: it just is and we are drawn to it.

Her early drawings in *The New Yorker* were often one panel, but sometimes they were several boxes grouped together as if in a category. Soon, we began to see longer visual stories, and over the years, one could watch as Roz played around with format. With her stories, she's inviting us into a world she inhabits, and saying to us, "Look who I found and guess what he/she is thinking." Or, "This really grosses me out, does it bother you as much as it does me?" or "This is really stupid, I have to show it to you." One grows to love Roz's people and animals, and can't wait for their reappearance in the magazine.

Cartoons are a reflection of our lives. What makes *New Yorker* cartoons unique is that they are not all crafted jokes; rather the best cartoons are reflections of life through the eyes of an artist. *New Yorker* cartoons are a seamless blend of art and words. Roz's are just that; through her work, we experience the world in a new way. She taps into something deep inside us that perhaps scares us, yet at other times makes us laugh and think.

THE DELUSIONAL WORLD OF THE FREE-RANGE CHICKEN



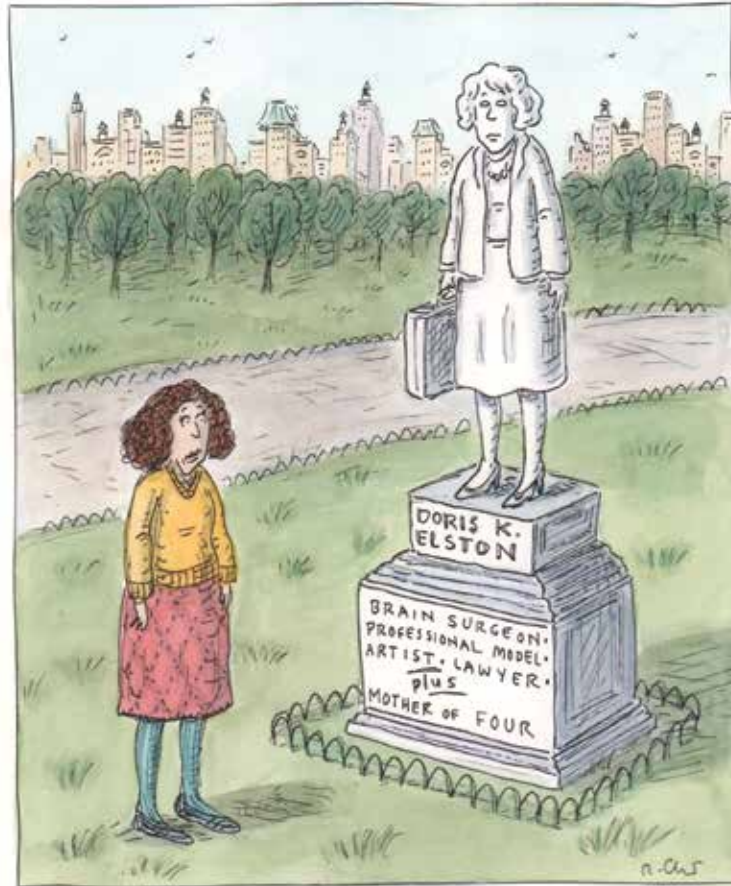
Roz Chast, *The Delusional World of Free-Range Chicken*, 2003. Illustration for *The New Yorker*, June 30, 2003. Ink on paper.



In trying to understand the context in which Roz's art developed, it is important to look at the 1970's as the continuation of a period of change in the U.S. This was certainly true of humor as well. Television shows like *Laugh In* (1967) and *Saturday Night Live* (1975) were challenging accepted formats and delivery of humor, as did David Letterman a bit later (1982). In print, *National Lampoon* (1970) pushed the boundaries of humor in a similar way to *MAD* magazine (1952). At *The New Yorker*, Lee Lorenz began his tenure as art editor in 1973 by being open to different ways to create humor. Immediately he discovered Jack Ziegler, and then Roz, artists who make us question our established ideas of what humor can be. There was an air of

questioning of authority, and that extended to humor. This open approach by the editor also led to another change : the work of more women cartoonists began appearing in *The New Yorker* after a few decades' absence. When Roz began selling to the magazine, there was only one other woman publishing cartoons : Nurit Karlin. Over the next few years, readers began seeing the cartoons of myself, Victoria Roberts, Huguette Martel, Roz Zanango, Ann McCarthy, and Stephanie Skalisky. The 1970's was a time of change for women, and this was reflected in humor to a certain degree. Once you open up the standards as to what is considered "good" in any field, humor included, you get more diversity. Under the leadership of Lee Lorenz, *The New*

Roz Chast, *Alma and her Flying Wall-To-Wall Carpet*, 1988. Illustration for *The New Yorker*, November 14, 1988. Ink on paper.



Yorker cartoon became diverse again, as it had been in the beginning. Roz drew cartoons about women from a young woman's perspective, a view that had not been heard from for a while.

I am grateful for my friendship with Roz that has spanned more than three decades, both beginning our careers at *The New Yorker* in our early twenties. We have grown up with the magazine—first as single gals, then both getting married, having children, buying houses, caring for aging parents, dealing with numerous (nerve-wracking) changes in editorship at *The New Yorker*, both of us soldered on as we chronicle all of this and more in our cartoons. In an

interview of Lee Lorenz for my book *Funny Ladies: The New Yorker's Greatest Women Cartoonists*, he told me a story about when he first showed Roz's cartoons to Editor, William Shawn, who had the final say on what was bought. Upon viewing Roz's submissions, Shawn asked, "How does she know they're funny?"

Roz may not know the answer to that question, and I am pretty sure she would not want to answer that question. She is just putting her work out there, inviting us to enter her world. One doesn't know Roz's drawings are funny, we feel they are funny.

SPEAKING WITH ROZ CHAST



Born in Brooklyn, New York, Roz Chast is the only child of two educators who subscribed to *The New Yorker* and inspired her art and world view—her strong-willed mother, Elizabeth, and her gentle, worrywart father, George, who were in the same fifth grade class together. Chast studied painting and printmaking at Kirkland College and received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Rhode Island School of Design, but did not feel free to explore cartooning fully until after graduation. Her earliest drawings were published in *Christopher Street*, *The Village Voice*, and later, *National Lampoon*.

In 1978, *The New Yorker* accepted her first submission, a small collection of “Little Things” that stood apart from the cartoons generally associated with the magazine. As a young artist, she gathered a collection of original drawings, “put them in a portfolio, and dropped it off with my little

card. I came back to pick them up the next week and there was a note from the cartoon editor [Lee Lorenz], which completely floored me. He said to start coming back every week, so I did.” Since then, more than eight hundred of Chast’s artworks have been published by *The New Yorker*. Though she covers all manner of subjects in her art, she particularly enjoys drawing interior scenes, replete with elaborate wallpapers and furnishings—“a conspiracy of inanimate objects” reminiscent of her early life.


A National Book Award Finalist for Non-Fiction, her 2014 graphic memoir *Can We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* has garnered acclaim for its grimly funny and deeply poignant examination of end-of-life issues as Chast experienced them with her elderly parents. The winner of the prestigious National Book Critics’ Circle Award for Autobiography and the Kirkus Prize for Non-Fiction, the book

Roz Chast in Her Studio, 2015. Photograph by Jeremy Clowe.

and Chast's artistic contributions were recognized, in 2015, with a Heinz Award for Arts and Humanities. Of the effort, Chast noted that "I didn't want to forget how they talked and I didn't want to forget how they were. To know that others felt the book meant something to them—I'm very happy about that."

In an interview conducted on March 13, 2015, we had the opportunity to speak with Roz Chast about her prolific career, and about her place as one of America's most beloved cartoonists.

Did you draw as a child, and was art encouraged in your youth?


I can't remember when I wasn't drawing, it was always something I liked to do. Sometimes my parents or teachers would say, oh  it's a nice drawing, and it would make me want to do more. When you're a kid, it may not be articulated, but you start to get a sense of who you are.

When did the concept of being a cartoonist emerge for you?


Over the summers, my parents would spend time in upstate New York at Cornell [University] with a group of Brooklyn schoolteachers, who were there to attend seminars. The student building on campus had a browsing library, and there was a section filled with cartoon books. That's where I first saw the drawings of Charles Addams, and I became obsessed with them because they made me laugh. I looked at those books over and over again, and I just loved them. Later, I don't think I ever thought about having a career as a cartoonist. I just thought, this is all I can do. It never occurred to me that I would do anything else. I did not want to work in a school, cash registers frightened me, and I wasn't good at

listening to instructions. The only thing I really thought I could do was work by myself and draw, and that is what I do.

How did you get your start as a professional after college?

When I came out of school I lived in my parents' apartment and kept drawing. I didn't think I was going to be able to make a living as a cartoonist. I thought maybe I'd be an illustrator  I wasn't very good at it—then I decided to try cartoons. I was very surprised when I started to get work, because it happened very suddenly and very unexpectedly. It wasn't like I was working for ten years, and then *The New Yorker* came along and everything changed. I was just starting out when that happened.

What is your process like when drawing *New Yorker* cartoons?

Coming up with ideas for *New Yorker* cartoons is probably the most structured part of my schedule because they have weekly meetings at the magazine. Tuesday evening is my deadline for getting together a group of sketches from which they will select maybe one, maybe none. I usually turn in around six or eight drawings a week, so Monday and Tuesday are my most hermetically-sealed dates, when I compile all of the ideas I've jotted down. It's the time of the week when I lock myself away and try not to have distractions—I just sit, doodle, think, draw, and try to come up with sketches. The rest of the week, I work on books and other projects, like posters, or whatever  happen to be working on.

I've been asked if I ever have writer's block, and I think I have it all the time. I just keep going anyway. If I only wait until I'm in the mood, that doesn't work. I have to



make myself sit at my desk, and sometimes if I start out with something terrible it leads to something better. Or not, and then I'll just come downstairs, make a cup of coffee, and look at bird videos for a while. Coming up with ideas is not super easy.

How do you approach your work for illustrated children's books?

For children's books, I've illustrated other people's stories, and I've also done my own. Creating images for kids is a little different than doing drawings for adults, but I think there is an overlap, a Venn diagram aspect. There are certain jokes that I know kids will get, but it won't mean to them what it might



imply to a forty year old. Different senses of humor, but there is overlap.

Too Busy Marco and *Marco Goes to School* were inspired by a wonderful bird we had, a blue streak lorry, and the conversations I used to have with my children. I used to think of Marco as a little boy in a bird costume. I would say, ‘We need to have a very serious conversation,’ and my kids would say, ‘What is it, Mom?’ And I would respond, ‘Picture Marco in a little graduation gown with a little graduation cap, and on the tip of his wing, a little diploma.’ So those books were inspired by picturing Marco in all different scenarios. I still do that to some extent, but now my children are older and they know my tricks.

How did you conceive *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*

I think of some of my cartoons as straightforward, as taking place in cartoon world. But I also submit drawings about things that happen to me in real life. This book was based on conversations and experiences I had with my parents in their later years. I had no idea they would appear in a book, I was just submitting them to *The New Yorker*—like the one

about my mother’s patched and burned oven mitt from the 1970s. Who patches an oven mitt? I was amazed to find that the material she had patched it with was from a skirt I had made in seventh grade. Others, like *Cheese Danish* and *Ouija Board*, which were published in the book, were just part of a weekly batch. My parents’ lives were so interesting to me that I did not want to forget, and I eventually found myself developing a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Some of the stories that emerged were sort of hilarious, but also heartbreaking, and they became a record of my experience with them.

Any closing thoughts?

I feel as though I’ve been extraordinarily lucky and I keep waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under me. I constantly feel that at some point someone is going to realize they’ve made a terrible mistake, and that it’s all going to disappear. Fortunately, that hasn’t happened yet. About cartoons in general, it’s a great medium. Everybody has a different line, a different sense of humor; I just love the variety of it.

