

PAPER BRIGADE

A PUBLICATION OF THE JEWISH BOOK COUNCIL • VOLUME ONE • 2017/5777

520 8th Avenue, 4th Floor, New
York, NY 10011. Subscriptions: \$25.
For advertising information, contact
the publisher.

Overthinking Life and Death with Roz Chast

TAHNEER OKSMAN

Jews are overthinkers.” So notes Robert Mankoff, cartoon editor for *The New Yorker*. “Humor is the antidote to overthinking. It’s a way of saying that life is paradoxical.”

Mankoff’s theory of humor seems to apply to the work of the overthinking humorist Roz Chast. In sifting through the longtime *New Yorker* cartoonist’s works, a theme emerges: the paradoxical nature of living, eating, shopping, arguing, and paying the bills as the inevitability of death looms. In one cartoon first published in 1981 and titled “The Three Certainties,” a triplicate of black-and-white unevenly sketched panels sit side-by-side on the page. “Death,” reads the first box, a skull and bones illustrating the word. “Taxes” and “Bobo” (the clown) follow.

Chast’s juxtapositional humor, drawn in her unmistakable, wiry line, has frequently thrived on the anxiety of knowing that we all die, yes, but we attend to the trivial and mundane in spite of this. Her comedy relieves readers of the need to linger on what’s always there, whether or not we are willing to admit it. In another now-famous

cartoon, originally published in 1993, we see a middle-aged man with a receding hairline reading his morning paper, a cup, saucer, and spoon daintily placed on the table beside the open obituaries page. “Two Years Younger than You,” “Three Years Your Junior,” and “Exactly Your Age,” the headlines read. This memorable image cuts to the quick: for Chast and her cast of characters, death is always close by. Yet somehow, even while facing death head-on, they calmly attend to their morning coffee.

In 2014, Chast published her memoir, *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* (paperback edition, September 2016), which recounts life with her parents and includes everything from snapshots of her childhood to the final years and even final moments of her parents’ lives. In this memoir, Chast transitions from examining death in a theoretical sense to tackling the practical aspects of death and dying. What happens when we become responsible for those who used to be responsible for us? What kind of emotional and material labor is involved in watching one’s parents die? Despite a career spent exploring the anxiety tied to the inevitability

of death, Chast's book reveals how no amount of overthinking can prepare us for this primal loss.

The overarching timeline of the book is based on the story of her parents' decline. Using her trademark scathing humor, Chast starts with what she terms "The Beginning of the End" and concludes with "The End." The book consists of a medley of single-panel cartoons; shorter and longer snippets of storylines constructed via comics, photographs, and drawings; and narrative text conveyed using only words. These words are drawn in Chast's familiar, unembellished handwriting, which sometimes dramatically fills up whole pages.

From the start, Chast's ambivalence toward her parents, and particularly her mother, is apparent; she doesn't seek to mask it. The book is dedicated to them and the first photograph displayed is a family portrait. All three are seated together on a chaise, *The Story of Babar* open in front of them. Each smiling parent holds one side of the book, and a young Chast looks up from the middle, an expression of appreciation, or interest—something akin to but not quite a smile—cast

on her face. This portrait of a young artist seems to connect Chast's future work—using images and words to tell stories—with her parents. It's a tribute.

But the remainder of the memoir animates and complicates the image, digging beneath the surface to tell of Chast's lonely upbringing—the anxiety, fear, and anger that crowded the world of her parents and shaped the artist as well. In Chast's memoir, and in her oeuvre more generally, we can recognize the dynamics that drive and impede us—the ones our therapists (if we're neurotic and yielding enough to enlist them) are always trying to get us to acknowledge.

The memoir is invested in visualizing and verbalizing the unseemly, taboo subjects that people often want to turn away from: aging, dying, and death. As Chast depicts them, her parents worked hard to avoid the very conversations that would have helped prepare her, their only child, for what was to come. "So...do you guys ever think about... THINGS?" she asks in a one-page untitled comic included in the book's introduction. This time her alter ego is seated not between the two but at the edge of a sofa, a

Here's what I used to think happened at "the end":



This portrait of a young artist
lect Chast's future work—using
words to tell stories—with her
tribute.

remainder of the memoir animates
es the image, digging beneath
tell of Chast's lonely upbringing,
ty, fear, and anger that crowd-
of her parents and shaped the
In Chast's memoir, and in her
generally, we can recognize the
drive and impede us—the ones
(if we're neurotic and yielding
st them) are always trying to get
dge.

r is invested in visualizing and
ie unseemly, taboo subjects
ten want to turn away from:
and death. As Chast depicts
nts worked hard to avoid the
ions that would have helped
eir only child, for what was
...do you guys ever think
JGS?" she asks in a one-page
included in the book's intro-
ime her alter ego is seated not
vo but at the edge of a sofa, a

"the end":

One night, she developed
something called a
"death rattle," and soon
after that, she died.
The end.



© ROY CHAST, 2014. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF BLOOMSBURY

small gap separating them. A much broader
invisible chasm divides the aged parents
from their now middle-aged child. "What
kind of things?" her father asks. As their
daughter grows increasingly exasperated—
imploing in one instance, "I have no idea
what you guys WANT!"—they alternate
between expressions of confusion, bemuse-
ment, hysterical laughter, and stoicism.

Chast soon transitions backwards, telling
the story of her painful childhood in order to
pinpoint the root of this abyss between par-
ents and child. "It was against my parents'
principles to talk about death..." she explains.
"Nor would they discuss religion beyond a
most superficial level." Beneath these words,
a young Chast is seen silently looking up at
her mother who matter-of-factly declares,
hands on hips, "I'm Jewish. Daddy is Jewish.
You're Jewish. End of story." In order to move
beyond these silences, Chast pieces together
what she can, mining her memories as well as
objects left behind in order to arrive at some
understanding. "They were first-generation
Americans," she recently explained of her
parents in an interview on Debbie Millman's
podcast, *Design Matters*. "And my parents
had barely assimilated... I look at my family
album, and they all look like the Gestapo is
about to come and kick the doors in. They
look depressed and anxious."

Throughout, Chast seems determined
to get to know these unassimilated char-
acters, to figure them out in ways that she
did not—and perhaps could not—while they
were alive and well. In a chapter titled "Bed-
time Stories," Chast recalls much of what
her mother told her while in hospice. Her
mother's stories are based partly in the vivid
dreams that she has (she sleeps a lot, Chast
tells us) and partly in reality. Chast weaves
these fragments together with her own
childhood memories.

No matter how laboriously Chast tries

to dig into the past, these story fragments
often yield more questions than answers.
In another section of the introduction, she
writes about her mother giving birth to a
baby girl who died after a single day. The
event, which her mother refers to as "that
mess" and which occurred fourteen years
before Chast's own birth, prefigures the si-
lence and loss that cast a shadow over the
remainder of her parents' lives. Indeed, the
momentous effort that Chast makes to de-
pict every detail of the story of the end of
their lives—from her own layers of worry-
ing to the cleaning, talking, attending, and
waiting that busied her over those years—
seems to function as a corrective to the not-
telling that her parents engaged in for so many
years. In recalling what she can, in drawing
and writing those very details that could just
as easily have been ignored and lost, Chast
acknowledges that, even though she can never
fully put together her parents' story—which
is also, of course, her own story—there are
profound truths embedded in the attempt.
Stubbornly, resolutely, she refuses to change
the subject.

In a powerful set of panels illuminating
her project as a whole, Chast depicts "what I
used to think happened at 'the end.'" In the
first panel, she draws an old lady propped up
on a pillow in bed and the text reads, "One
day, old Mrs. McGillicuddy felt unwell, and
she took to her bed." In the second panel,
the old woman's face and posture become
increasingly contorted, although she re-
mains neatly tucked under the bedcovers.
"She stayed there for, oh, about three or four
weeks, growing weaker day by day." The final
panel displays a tombstone, the old woman's
dead body glaringly absent from the image:
"One night, she developed something called
a 'death rattle,' and soon after that, she died.
The end." Chast's comically succinct and or-
derly end-of-life fantasy contrasts with the

chaotic recounting of events that makes up this book. Her work strives to dismantle her childhood illusion, offering instead a comprehensive testimony based on reality. "What I was starting to understand," she writes beneath that orderly, simple story, "was that the middle panel was a lot more painful, humiliating, long-lasting, complicated, and hideously expensive." In fixating on what's usually skipped over, in recording and exposing what truly happens from "the beginning of the end" on through to the end, Chast honors the act of dying, and the act of bearing witness to dying. Although we may not want to think about that phase, in relation to either ourselves or our loved ones, there is life in that final unfolding.

Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant? ultimately presents its readers with the

paradox of what it means to mourn those who had such a profound effect on you, even as they never fully grasped who you are and even as you never fully grasped who they were. Chast gets through the pain of looking back, of moving on, by comically targeting a world that she doesn't fully understand, the very world that cast her out before she became a shaper of her own. Laughter that doesn't take us away from, but brings us closer to, those subjects we don't understand, the ones we often also don't want to see, is perhaps the most potent, the most sincere. In talking about those silences and omissions that unite us and make us human, those gaps between ourselves and those who surround us, we give ourselves the chance to live, intensely, in that paradoxical space in between. ●