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ROZ CHAST INTERVIEW
PORTIONS USED IN: *THE THREAD SEASON ONE*

Roz Chast, Cartoonist
September 6, 2022
Interviewed by Nancy Steiner
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 1 minutes and 42 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Story Features

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Roz Chast

Cartoonist

NANCY STEINER:

We're good to go?

GEORGE KUNHARDT:

We are good to go.

ROZ CHAST:

Okay.

Roz Chast

Cartoonist, The New Yorker

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NANCY STEINER:
How would you describe your childhood growing up in a small apartment in Flatbush?

ROZ CHAST:
My parents were a lot older than most other people's parents. And I think that explains a lot of my childhood. I was an only child. They had me in their forties, their mid forties… and overprotective is a sort of mild way of putting it. I think they were terrified that something was going to happen to me, as in being killed or something or getting sick and dying. They had had another baby before me that died. And I think as I was growing up, I of course was not aware that they had been through this sort of trauma. So there was that. There was also, my parents were both children of immigrants and they were not by any means assimilated Americans. Their parents didn't speak English. Their parents spoke Yiddish. A lot of my relatives spoke Yiddish. My parents didn't know a lot of things that other parents of my friends knew. It was just— I have a friend who jokes that I grew up in the 1930s because they graduated from college into the depression. They had grown up very poor and I had two hair brushes throughout my entire childhood. I remember them, you know, so that is just sort of emblematic of... I mean, my life is now filled with, I must have, you know, over the last 10 years, 70 billion different hair brushes, but when I was growing up, until I left for college when I was 16, I had two. So yeah, it was kind of strange.

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ROZ CHAST:
They saved soaps slivers in a wash cloth so that you didn't waste. It was frugal. It was very constricted. It was filled with a lot of fear. Fear of illness, fear of other people, other children, you know, had impetigo. They were stupid. Also, they had bad posture. They spoke with an accent. I had a friend in the building, who's, "Raz, you want to go to the store with me?" And my parents were in the school system. My father was a teacher in high school. My mother was an assistant principal at a public school and speaking non accented English… Well, if you spoke with an accent and you tried to get a teaching license in the thirties, you would not be able to get a license. So speaking correct English was very important.

NANCY STEINER:
There's a strip of yours where you say, "I'm Harriet the Spy, Wednesday Adams, Eloise, Carmen Miranda, among others." Who were you as a child? What kind of a child were you?

ROZ CHAST:
I was anxious. I was a hypochondriac. I wasn't sure about other children. I loved to draw. I had a weird sense of humor. I was very angry and depressed and I was waiting to get out. I was waiting to grow up. I couldn't wait.

NANCY STEINER:
Why were you angry?

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ROZ CHAST:

Couldn't stand my parents. A terrible thing to say, but true. My mother was super strict, super strict, very rigid, and my father was a sweet man who just could not stand up to her. So, you know, I was just waiting to grow up and get out.

NANCY STEINER:
Do you think that you were depressed because you were oppressed or repressed or what was the depression about?

ROZ CHAST:
I was just pressed. Every— All those things. I didn't like school and I didn't like being at home, so, you know, that didn't leave me a lot of options.

NANCY STEINER:
It sounds like you had a lot of fear.
ROZ CHAST:
Oh yeah. Still do.

NANCY STEINER:
Can you tell me about the way fear came into your life and continues to play a part in it?
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ROZ CHAST:
My father was the most anxious person I have ever known. He was the same way somebody might be a chain smoker, he was a chain anxietyer. The minute one anxiety would be solved, he'd be onto the next one. It was like opening up a bottle of seltzer. Suddenly it would be like, "Be careful." And you'd go,

"What? What am I doing?" Oh, he knew somebody who the seltzer cap flew off and flew right into his eye and blinded him. So, you know, everything could and probably would end in being blinded or killed or maimed in some horrible way. So yeah, it was just a lot of fear.

NANCY STEINER:
And it sounds also like you adopted these fears yourself. They couldn't help but sink into your pores.

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ROZ CHAST:
Oh yeah. I mean… I was terrified of most things growing up, terrified of other kids, terrified of just calamity happening at every turn. I was very… aware of sensations in my body, and that is something that sadly has come with me into adulthood of like I feel the blood in my hands. I can feel the blood in my hands right now. And for a while I went through a phase of that freaking me out. Now it's been, you know, 40 years of being aware of this sensation, so I'm kind of more used to it now, but just nervousness, I guess, which is stupid.

NANCY STEINER:
It's not stupid at all. It's just wiring. It's all it is.

ROZ CHAST:
Yeah. Yeah.

NANCY STEINER:
And what about phobias? Did you have phobias?

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ROZ CHAST:
Tons, tons. I was afraid of a million illnesses, some of which I learned about from children's books, you know, like appendicitis from Madeline. Death Be Not Proud, brain tumor. There was a— Somehow I learned about mastoiditis, which was something in your ear that could get an infection or something. I would feel my permanent teeth and they would feel wiggly and I would be afraid that they were going to fall out. I was afraid of going blind. I was afraid of going deaf. I was afraid of going blind and deaf. I was afraid of like in Helen Keller, she was blind and deaf and then she felt the wall and there was a fire in the wall and then afraid of the fire in the wall. You know, just like… this kind of nonsense.

NANCY STEINER:
Were you able to ever enjoy a fearless day?

ROZ CHAST:
Uh, I don't even know. It just so much connected to being alive, I think.

NANCY STEINER:
Your mother wouldn't let you read comics.

ROZ CHAST:
Yeah. Yeah. She thought they were for morons.

NANCY STEINER:
So how did you come to the world of cartoons?

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ROZ CHAST:
Ah, I had cousins. I had older cousins and there was a girl in the building, the same one who was, "You wanna go to the store with me," she read a ton of Archie and Veronica. I read a lot of those, Betty and Veronica, Archie, Jughead. And my cousin introduced me to Mad Magazine when I was about 11 and loved, loved, loved, I loved things that made me laugh. I mean, that was just like… to read something that made you laugh was a complete miracle. It was like how did this— just took this kind of unbidden automatic response of [laughter] you know, and Mad Magazine was one of those things that did it for me.

NANCY STEINER:
So what then brought you to drawing cartoons? Something about it had to have felt very... You magnetized to this.

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ROZ CHAST:
Oh, I loved— I mean, I drew from the time… I can't remember when I didn't draw. You know, from the time I was three and maybe probably picked up a crayon before that, but I remember drawing when I was three or four, and I liked things that made me laugh. And I also liked, with cartoons, how you didn't have to choose between drawing and writing. I liked to write, also. But when I wrote without the drawings, it felt sort of lopsided. And when I drew without the words, it also felt lopsided and cartoons are one of these strange forms where you get to combine them. And it's also a very flexible form where I feel like you can decide how you want to do it.

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ROZ CHAST:

If you are the kind of—If it feels best for you to be very, very, very verbal and have just the most rudimentary drawings, then go with that. If you are a mostly visual cartoonist, then go with that. I mean, I think that's why sometimes learn to draw cartoon schools kind of, like, I don't understand them because for me, I feel like what's so interesting is discovering yourself, what feels right for you and what feels right for me isn't going to be right for somebody else. So, for me, I started to feel like, I think this might be the direction I'm heading when I was around 12.

NANCY STEINER:
But it's so interesting to me that you say this because your cartoons really resonate with lots and lots of people.

ROZ CHAST:
Shockeroo.

NANCY STEINER:
They are incredibly funny, and yet they're also pretty tender and they can be powerful because they're poignant, and they tap into a lot of emotions and a lot of those scenes are direct hits from your life.

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ROZ CHAST:
Yeah. Yeah. They're somewhat autobiographical, but not all. Sometimes I feel more autobiographical than others and sometimes there's something that comes right from life that's so funny I have to draw it up. I mean, that is a gift that happens every once in a while. I mean, I remember when one of my kids was around 15 or 16, they were doing their homework in the living room and

I wanted to just see if they were paying attention. So I came into the living room. They were listening to some music on the boombox and it was some kind of hip hop thing, and boombox that tells you how long ago it was. And I just did this kind of mom dance, you know, those kind of horrible, there's a lot of awkward sort of movements and they looked up and said, "Mom, stop. You're hurting me," and it cracked me up so much I actually used it in a cartoon, which sold.

NANCY STEINER:
Yeah. Um, Charles Adams was an influencer.

ROZ CHAST:
Oh, my love.

NANCY STEINER:
Tell me.

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ROZ CHAST:
Well, a lot of reasons. I think, back when I was a kid, there was something called sick jokes and they appealed to me a lot. There was something sort of jolly and yet transgressive about them, kind of… I think some people would say, "Well, this is really kind of hostile. It's really not nice that that man is asking his wife to back up off the cliff because she's going to fall and get hurt." And you know that one where he's taking a picture of her and she's like at the edge of the cliff and it's just back up a little bit more, or the one where Uncle Fester is in the car and he's waving the truck driver to pass him on the road, and of course the truck is going to go right off the edge of the cliff or Harold

dropped the keys, when he's being carried off by… I mean, there was something hilarious and hostile that I really responded to, but hostile in this kind of hilarious way.

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ROZ CHAST:
One of the more famous Charles Adams cartoons, and also one of my favorites, it actually has a title called Boiling Oil, and it's the one where the entire Adams family is on the top of their mansion and they have this cauldron of boiling oil, and at the bottom there are all these sincere sort of carolers kind of, and they're about to dump… They're going to dump this cauldron of boiling oil on them and it was going to be on the cover and then Harold Ross was like, "Maybe we'll put it on the inside." I guess he just felt maybe that's a little too much, but I just love that. And also the other thing about Charles Adams that when I discovered him, I was about eight or nine, was that his cartoons had children in them. So, you know, Wednesday and Pugsley, they didn't have names when they appeared in The New Yorker. They only got names for the TV show, but most New Yorker cartoons didn't have children, and these were very unusual children.

NANCY STEINER:
So do you remember when you discovered Charles Adams?

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ROZ CHAST:
Yeah, I do. I was about eight or nine and my parents… In the summer, we were living in Brooklyn and in the summer, my parents and a whole bunch of Brooklyn school teachers, they called it their contingent. Most of them were childless, almost all of them were childless and they would all go up to Ithaca,

New York in the summer, and they would live either on the Cornell campus, in graduate student housing, where it was cheap because these were teachers mostly, they didn't have a lot of money and, or in some nearby area and rent an apartment for July and August. And they would go to Cornell. That was the center of their activity. There were always activities in the summer. There were concerts, there were lectures.

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ROZ CHAST:
And when my parents would do these activities, they would hang with their friends or go to these lectures, they would park me in the browsing library, in the student center, which I think was called Willard Straight. And in this browsing library, there was one section that was all cartoon books. And in this section they had a whole ton of Charles Adams books. They had *Black Mariah*, *Monster Rally*, *Adams and Evil*, *The Groaning Board*, *Drawn and Quartered*. And I could look at these books until doom's day. They just killed me. I just adored. So, you know, I was one of those many people, apparently my age, who found Charles Adams as a kid. And that was it.

NANCY STEINER:
Do you think there was anything about your parents that was a good influence on you?

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ROZ CHAST:
Yes. My parents believed that you should find what you love to do and that your job wasn't just a way to make money, that it should resonate with you, that it should have uh meaning. And I think that they knew, on some level, that I was probably going to be an artist, but I think that they thought I would

probably be an art teacher, which is a very reasonable assumption on their part, you know, because to say I want to be a cartoonist, it's a little ridiculous, but...

NANCY STEINER:
Did you ever have that conversation?

ROZ CHAST:
No. No. We never had that conversation.

NANCY STEINER:
So when you got to college at 16, which is very young, what happened as far as your decision to pursue this?

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ROZ CHAST:
The first college I went to was Kirkland College, which was the girls' school to Hamilton, and I was so young. I really did not know what I was doing. I knew I wanted to do art and the reason I chose Kirkland was because they were brand new and they had an incredible art department. They had an incredible printmaking department, photography till doomsday, art, painting, everything. And the good part about it was that there weren't— I mean there were people who liked art, lots of people who loved doing art, but there weren't that many people who were, I would say, driven. So I often had the facilities to myself, especially in the evening.

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There was nobody else there, you know, and I could just do whatever. And also at Kirkland, there were no required courses, so I could just take—and my

parents did not want me to go to art school. So Kirkland, it was like, "Okay, I'll get my BA, but I'm also going to take all art classes." And then after two years, it should have been one, but I had a boyfriend, blah, blah, blah. I wound up staying a second year at which point I was 18, so I was a normal age for starting college and I decided to go to RISD, Rhode Island School of Design. And then I was with many very driven people and it was a different experience, but good.

NANCY STEINER:
You credit your conspiracy for inanimate objects to your mother.

ROZ CHAST:
Oh. And I think she got it from somebody else.

NANCY STEINER:
Okay. What is that?

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ROZ CHAST:
The conspiracy of inanimate objects is like when your pen rolls off your desk, and then you bend down to get your pen, and then you smack your head on the underside of the desk, and in doing so you tip over the coffee cup, which spills all over what you've been working on. So it's just this kind of Rube Goldberg of terribleness.

NANCY STEINER:
And that creeps into your life.

ROZ CHAST:
Oh, yeah. Yeah. I think that you could say that. Yeah.

NANCY STEINER:
So your cartoons reflect an entire world of characters and situations. They seem to be, as Adam Gopnik wrote in The New Yorker, "An ongoing projection onto adult life of the world where you grew up."

ROZ CHAST:
Huh.

NANCY STEINER:
Are you obsessed with your past? And if so, why? Why does it continue to have this grip over you?

ROZ CHAST:
Hmm. Am I the only one? I think that's kind of a… I mean, didn't Fitzgerald say something sort of similar? We are living into our past. It's kind of…

NANCY STEINER:
So drawing from your past is just like, who doesn't? Everyone does. We all do.
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ROZ CHAST:
Well, there's that. It's also, I think you work with what you know, or I do. I draw what I know. I remember doing a— I agreed to illustrate a children's book once that took place mostly in the woods. And when I hit my first two page spread and I had to draw these animals that were very cute, but I had to

draw them in the woods and it was like, all right, what's in the woods? All right. There's trees. All right. What's on the floor? All right. Twigs? There's maybe leaves? Pine needles? There's some rocks? More twigs? I couldn't quite, you know, whereas when I'm drawing an interior, like an apartment interior, I could draw a billion kinds of lamps, a billion… I have an image bank of everything that's in a house or in an apartment, but, woods. I don't know. It's a pine cone? Then the pine cone sits there and it looks stupid.

NANCY STEINER:
So you draw from what you know.

ROZ CHAST:
Yeah. Yeah. You draw kind of what you know.

NANCY STEINER:
So when you left home at 16, I just want to go back to this for a second, were you deliberately sort of saying, "I've had enough, I'm getting out of here as fast as I can. And here I go."

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ROZ CHAST:
Pretty much. Yeah. Yeah. I knew I was not going to... I mean, I had to after I got out of college. I had to live at home for a little while, but I couldn't wait to get out.

NANCY STEINER:
When you return home or visit Flatbush after you've left it, were you ever nostalgic?

ROZ CHAST:
No. No, I didn't. I didn't. No, it was depressing. I didn't have nostalgia for that.

NANCY STEINER:
So, finish this sentence for me. If you could repeat it and then finish it, please.

ROZ CHAST:
Shoot.

NANCY STEINER:
When I look back on my childhood, I see a person who was…

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ROZ CHAST:
When I look back at my childhood, I see a person who is waiting to be a grown up.

NANCY STEINER:
And when you think of the historyonics of your home life, are you still haunted by their voltage? By their power?

ROZ CHAST:
I'm sure I am on some level. It's not something I think about all the time. Thank God.

NANCY STEINER:
When you had your own children, what did you want to make sure you did

for them that hasn't been done for you?

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ROZ CHAST:

Oh, everything. I think I wanted to make sure that when I had my own kids, that I would figure out a way to not make them hate me, to not fuck it up so badly that by the time they were 12, I didn't trust them. They didn't trust me anymore. I just didn't want to fuck it up. I wanted—My mother said to me many a time, you know, when I was upset about something, "I'm not your friend, I'm your mother." And I deeply felt that there was a way of being a parent and also being a friend. And I just wanted—I knew that at some point they were going to be grownups, and I didn't want to have the same relationship with my kids as I had with my parents, or I didn't want them to have the same relationship with me as I felt with my parents. But, you know, to kind of cut them some slack, there was such a gap age wise and also just orientation to life wise between me and my parents. And I think it was less so with my kids, for many different reasons, economics, language, the fact that my parents were first generation Americans, you know, how hard their lives were compared to mine, World War II. I mean, all these things that they went through that I just didn't have to.

NANCY STEINER:

What was it like for you, Roz, when you moved to Richfield, which is a pretty leafy place?

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ROZ CHAST:

When I moved to the suburbs of Connecticut it was definitely like a sort of… the fish out of water genre. For one thing, I didn't know how to drive, which

was really bad, but I had insisted that I was never— there was no way I was going to live in a place where I couldn't walk to town, so we lived in town. We live in town, which is nice because I can walk into town to get a quart of milk or go to the library or just a mental health walk where I can see stores. I don't want to see trees. I don't care. A tree, I don't know the names of them, they don't mean a lot to me. I like looking at shop windows. That's kind of fun. Somebody made a little arrangement. Maybe I'll go in, maybe I'll touch a shirt. I'll see the different color combinations. Somebody designed this. I like that. I even like going to CVS and like seeing the arrays. I like the…I like going into the store and seeing the sort of the insanely hopeful and hilarious potions. It's a spray, calm yourself spray. And these vitamins that are going to make you smarter and this kind of basically snake oil kind of stuff, but it cracks me up. It's funny. It amuses me more than just taking a nature walk, which makes me sad because I get tired. I get very tired and bored and cranky, but walking into town, I don't feel that way.

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ROZ CHAST:

So, yeah. So not knowing how to drive, I had to learn when I was in my thirties and that was really awful. And I would not say I'm a full driver. I have my license. I mostly drive locally, although I did drive to Amherst, not to brag, this past weekend. It was a little scary. It was the second time I've done that. I got honked at just once. But that was a big step. But I'd never lived in a house and houses are weird. They make noises. When something goes wrong, you can't just call the super. I don't like that. There's things like roofs. I don't like basements. I don't like the pipes when you see them. I don't like the boiler or we don't have a boiler. We have something else. I forget. I don't like when it bangs. I don't want to know about that.

NANCY STEINER:

"Places that are trying to impress me always scare me. They don't impress me. They just scare me." How would you describe your beginnings of The New Yorker? Was that scary?

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ROZ CHAST:

No. No. The New Yorker was was quiet. It looked old. It was a little bit grubby. It looked like people were doing what they wanted to do, like writing. The light fixtures were the same as my public school. It wasn't loud or show offy. We're really modern and we really are up to date on… Nobody looked like that. They weren't aggressive looking. Everybody just looked sort of basically plain, like they were working on their things and I liked that.

NANCY STEINER:

How did you get to The New Yorker?

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ROZ CHAST:

When I got out of RISD, I drew cartoons for myself. I wanted to. That's what I did before I went to RISD and it's what I did. I stopped while I was at RISD for a while because it was just thought of as a kind of very bad thing. This was a long time ago. This was a while ago when cartoons were very much like, because they weren't really art and you were doing that incredibly embarrassing, I can't even say it, thing of trying to communicate with another person, which is very needy and pathetic really. Better to have a video monitor with a lot of static on it and then write 12 pages about architectonics or something. But cartoons were really, you were trying to communicate with

other people, which is sad.

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ROZ CHAST:

Anyway, I got out of RISD and I was drawing the cartoons for myself, but I thought nobody is going to like these. They're really weird. They're not—They don't fit in anywhere. They don't look like anybody's cartoons. I don't know what they are. I'm going to put together an illustration portfolio. And I cooked up a style that was a sort of pastiche of the styles that I saw around. Little Milton Glaser, mixed with a little bit of this, mixed with some RISD artiness, which was a kind of you draw, but you make it look sort of sloppy because also drawing exactly meant your work looks kind of tight. This drawing would be better if you kind of scribbled it more, like made it really loose and smeared it. I know this is wobbling. Anyway, so there was that and I got a few jobs and then this is just one of those weird things that happens. When I was about 23, I was coming home from taking my portfolio around, picking it up, illustration portfolio, and I found an issue of Christopher Street Magazine on the subway, on the D train opposite me, and I thought, "Should I pick it up or should I not pick it up? Should I pick it up? Should I not pick it up?" And this voice in my head said, "If you pick it up, it will change your life." So I thought, "Okay." Now, you know, when you're 23, this is not things happen like this, so I picked it up and they used cartoons and it was kind of—Christopher Street was not a gay porn magazine. It was kind of like a gay literary magazine, but they used cartoons and they seemed to have three different artists, which I found out later were all the same person who drew in three different styles with three different names.

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ROZ CHAST:

And they were like New Yorker cartoons, except they were slanted gay. So it'd be like two guys, but businessmen or whatever. And so I called them up and he said to come by and I was living in my parents' house at this apartment at this time. And I met him and they started buying cartoons from me for 10 bucks a piece, which in 1978 or '77, actually, was still crap pay, but I was selling cartoons and I thought, "This is interesting. I'm going to keep doing this, and to hell with the illustration, which I hate anyway." And I started taking my cartoons around and I got work. The National Lampoon and also The Village Voice. I started selling to The Village Voice. And then I thought, "Well, I might as well try the New Yorker." My parents subscribed. I knew they used cartoons. I was sure they weren't going to take anything, so I wasn't nervous. I didn't quite know how to do this because the other places I could meet with the art director. The New Yorker wasn't like that. You had to bring in all your stuff, drop it off and pick it up the next week. So I put everything in an envelope. I had 60 cartoons. I didn't know. And I went back the next week, and instead of the rejection note, there was a note from Lee Lorenz who was the cartoon… or the art editor, actually. He did everything. He did the cartoons, he did the spots, he did the covers. This was in April of 1978. And he said, "Come back." There was a note. It just said, "Come see me. Lee." And I still remember because it was this loopy handwriting.

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ROZ CHAST:
So I got buzzed in and they pulled out a cartoon. They said, "We're going to buy this cartoon, and I want you to keep coming back every week." So that was it. And that's essentially what I've been doing since I was 23, except I don't go in person. Now I send it electronically, but I still submit every week. Yeah.

NANCY STEINER:

I'm wondering what the culture was like there for women. Did you feel like you fit in? Was there a sense of camaraderie for you? Had you found your people?

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ROZ CHAST:

I've never felt like I fit in. Anywhere. As a woman, I felt like I had so many peculiar things about me. I was younger by 10 years than the next youngest person there. I was the only woman. There was a woman from Israel who came in every once in a while, Norit Carlin, but aside from her, I was generally the only girl there. And my stuff was just so weird compared to what most of these people were doing, except for maybe Jack Siegler, who was a little bit of a sort of ground— not a little bit he was a lot of a ground breaker. I mean, he did cartoons with titles. He was playing with the form a little more than some of these people who were just, you know, they had their desk joke, they had their end of the world joke, they had their generals with all the… They had their joke genres and Jack Ziegler, he was making up some new genres. So there were a lot of problems you might say. Well, problems with the older guys looking at me as an outsider, not just being female was almost the least of it.

NANCY STEINER:

So how did you deal with that?

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ROZ CHAST:

Um, I didn't care, you know. I didn't socialize with them. I thought, "Well, Lee

likes my stuff," and I remember Lee telling me, "Sean really likes your work." I did not know who Sean was. I didn't know anything. I thought it was a first name and all I could think of was Sean Connery and I knew it was not Sean Connery, but he said it like it was a good thing. So I was like, "Oh, that's good." Mr. Sean, William Sean, was the editor in chief of The New Yorker for many decades. There was Harold Ross, then there was William Sean and I came in when William Sean was still the editor. So when Lee Lorenz told me that Sean really liked my work, that was a good thing. And I knew from his tone of voice, it was good. I just didn't know who Sean was, because queen of the ignoramuses or ignorami.

NANCY STEINER:
So how does it work, Roz? You're going through life and then you get hit with a thought of, "Oh, there's a cartoon." Tell me about that process.

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ROZ CHAST:
Yeah, cartoons. I don't know. I guess it's seeing some things as funny, having funny thoughts sometimes, like things that make you laugh. It's very hard to explain.

NANCY STEINER:
Well, let's try it this way. Let's say I was living in your head.

ROZ CHAST:
You don't want that. Trust me.

NANCY STEINER:

And something strikes you because it's not always funny. I mean, some of your cartoons aren't funny. They can be sad and they can be moving in other directions than just straight out humor.

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ROZ CHAST:
I mean, the book that I wrote about my parents was definitely— there were some very sad things, but I hope that the cartoons that appear in The New Yorker, they're generally things that while I'm drawing, while I'm working on my batch, as we call it, that I think, "Oh, this is funny." The cartoon that's in The New Yorker this week, it's called What Holds the Subway Together? Because I do love the New York subway. I mean, I think it's amazing that it actually works, but let's put it this way, it looked decrepit when I was a teenager and that was a while ago, and it's not really gotten better. There may be a brand new station with a Chuck Close mural in it, but in general, you're standing on the platform and you see black gook kind of leaking down from where the ceiling and the wall join and you think, "I don't think that's good. I don't think that's a plus," and then the rat sort of scurries along and I don't mind rats, but I know that they're probably chewing on things like wires and things.

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ROZ CHAST:
So, anyway, so what holds the subway together? So I was thinking, "Okay, well, you got your duct tape and bakery twine. You got to have your bakery twine." And I forget something else. And then the last thing is enchantments and there's a wizard kind of just tapping the tile wall, which has all this gluck kind of dripping down. And he has, of course, a wizard outfit on and the wand with the star because I thought, "Well, a lot of times it really is kind of positive

thinking. This station looks like it's about to collapse on me, but maybe it won't tonight because I'm on my way to meet a friend for dinner and I just can't have that, not tonight."

NANCY STEINER:
So you're quoted as saying that your cartoons are not autobiographical, but my life is always reflected in them.

ROZ CHAST:
Yeah.

NANCY STEINER:
Which is interesting considering how much you don't really like to talk about yourself. You tell us actually so much about your life through your art.

ROZ CHAST:
Yeah. I think it does go back to you draw what you know. Some cartoons come from the cartoon universe. There's the end of the world guys and desk jokes, and I just sold a desk joke this week and there's all these different genres. Tunnel of love jokes. Oh, I don't know. There's several dozen cartoon genres. And then there's cartoons that come more directly from life and some come quite directly.

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ROZ CHAST:
When my son was getting married, I was shopping for a dress to wear to the wedding and I went with a friend to this mall near where I live in Connecticut. And we went to the fancy dress mother of the groom sort of

area, and one dress was more hilarious than another. We were laughing so hard that… snot and tears. It was just hysterical, these dresses. They were little bolero jackets with sequins on them and horrible colors. Just ladies of a certain age, do you want to look really bad? Do you want to look dead? Check out this weird blush color or light blue doesn't have to be pretty. It can be really bad. Do you know a landlord that got a whole bunch of free light blue paint from some out of business company from 1940? That's the dress for you. Matching sequins, matching hat. And we were just holding the dresses up and dying. So I wound up doing a cartoon about that.

NANCY STEINER:
What'd you wind up buying?

ROZ CHAST:
Sorry?

NANCY STEINER:
What'd you wind up wearing?

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ROZ CHAST:
Oh, not a mother of the bride dress. I found just a nice dress. It was black, but it had little flowers on it. So and I've worn it. I've worn it actually to the club. So, you've probably seen it. I can wear it. It's not bizarre.

NANCY STEINER:
Many of the cartoons speak to an obsessiveness and draw from a range of images and language to create a whole world. How would you finish this

sentence? I draw a world where...

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ROZ CHAST:

I draw a world where there's people living in it and they sometimes say funny or ridiculous things, and wear sort of funny things, and things have a certain kind of look, like a lamp, a coffee table. It'll have stuff on it and it's not an architectural digest world. It's not—I feel like there are so many cartoonists that have worlds. I mean, Charles Saxon drew a certain world of upper middle class, white America, golf, pants, and these ladies and Helen Hokinson certainly had a world of her club ladies. My mother always said that these ladies had bosoms like the prow of a ship and then they would tape her down to these teensy tinsy little feet, and they always wore a little hat and they were always going to garden club meetings.

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ROZ CHAST:

And of course George Price had his world and George Booth and Ed Koren and Mary Petty, and I think those are the cartoons that—and Charles Adams, I mean, duh. Those are the cartoons that I love, you know, where the cartoons that you see, they're snapshots from a world that this person has created. It's not just some generic, goggle eyed people with this generic kind of funny gag and that's all another thing. I'm not saying there's something wrong with it. I'm just saying that it's not something I care that much about. That almost is like a service industry job to me. People are in a hurry. They don't want to... They just want kind of a fast gag line and fine. That's great, but I'm not interested. What does interest me is… are the cartoonists who create a world and the gags come out of that world, and everything is part of that world. You're not going to see George Booth's characters making a Charles Saxon

joke. It just wouldn't make any sense.

NANCY STEINER:
As an only child, watching your parents grow old had to have been pretty tough for you in spite of how difficult they were as parents. It's still really hard to watch. What did it teach you about aging?

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ROZ CHAST:
How hard it is, how awful, in many ways. Once you get past that point of Centrum Silver aging, the commercial side of old people sort of squabbling and being their cranky old person self, when you get dependent, when everything starts to just fall apart… and also you're kind of on your own. I think that's one thing that I learned. Especially being an only child, you know, I did not have brothers and sisters to turn to and it just sort of sucked. It was horrible. And I know that speaks a lot to my own probably lack of compassion and selfishness. I'm aware of that. It's awful. Getting old is terrible, you know, once you become dependent on other people and things really become very painful. And also I learned, you know, it almost starts to tip into black comedy how expensive it is and how much you get nickled and dimed and how nothing is covered.

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ROZ CHAST:
Things that one would think would be covered. Oh no, no, no. Oh. And then I learned— you know, my parents lived in Brooklyn and they had been paying into a healthcare plan from their teaching years their entire lives, but I learned that when they moved to an assisted living place in Connecticut at the last couple of years of their lives to be near me, their insurance did not

cross state lines. So there are all kinds of— you learn about rules like that, that don't make it any easier. It's just crazy. It's just crazy, sad, terrible.

NANCY STEINER:
How did you deal with your own grief?

00:50:23:00

ROZ CHAST:
I think this is going to sound horrible. As I said, I'm not the most compassionate person. In many ways, I was relieved. My father was 95. He was ready to go. He had broken his hip and he told me. He said he was ready. He felt like he had a good life. My mother was still alive at that point. He was surrounded. My kids were there. It was okay. My mother lived until she was 97 and the last couple of years were not good. I have grief about a lot of things, but not grief about the fact that they died.

NANCY STEINER:
Where does the grief show up then?

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ROZ CHAST:
The grief is that my mother and I couldn't have had a better relationship, but that goes so far back. It probably goes back to before I was born. So that's just— You know, I think that's another thing that I learned that… Oh, I learned a lot from when my parents were dying. I learned that death can be a very quick process, but it can also be really drawn out. I also learned that unlike the movies on TV where these deathbeds sort of reconciliations, that doesn't always happen. So you're kind of left with, "Well, that did not happen." So…

NANCY STEINER:
I read that your next book is going to be about dreams. Is that true?

ROZ CHAST:
Yeah, that's true.

NANCY STEINER:
What is it about dreams that fascinates you?

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ROZ CHAST:
Dreams. Oh, I don't know what they are. I don't know what dreams are. I don't know why we have them. There's a lot of theories, but I think the jury is still out. Freud says this, Jung says that, the Kabbalah says this, the Egyptians say that. Scientists have all different theories about, you know, neuron boot camp, that it's actually teaching your brain how to think. There's dreaming to remember, dreaming to forget, dreaming to— the predictive dreams. There's all different reasons. They're also so peculiar. When I write my dreams down, I am imposing my conscious awake sense of narrative onto the dream. I don't think I could replicate in words what a dream… I don't think we have language for what a dream feels— actually feels like. It's another state of consciousness.

NANCY STEINER:
So why do you want to write a book about them?

ROZ CHAST:

I just find dreams extremely interesting.

NANCY STEINER:
When you look at your life, I mean, you're still really, really young, but I mean, we just talked to Betty, who's 30 years older than you. But when you look at your life, what do you feel the overarching wisdom comes from for you? Where do you feel that you've learned the most?

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ROZ CHAST:
I think it's really important to figure out what you love, to have something that deeply, deeply engages you, and hopefully it's something that can be there for your entire life. I mean, I often thought, God, I'm so lucky I'm not a dancer or something like that because drawing and writing, you know, I might not be great at lifting a lithography stone, but you can make somebody do that for you, I suppose, but it's not like being a dancer or something where your body is… Or an actress where, there's that, you know, you're limited by your appearance and what roles you can do. So, yeah and that is something that I did get from my parents. The knowing from a very— you know, that it was important to not just, you know, do whatever, but to have a passion. I mean, for my father, it was languages. He loved foreign languages. I mean, he taught, but even after he retired, he was still deeply involved with all of that and belonged to a French group and French poetry group and a French playwriting group. My mother, it was music and also teaching. So they had their things that they loved.

NANCY STEINER:
With everything that you learned from your parents, what was most

important for you to give to your children?

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ROZ CHAST:
What I really wanted my children to understand was that it was important to find something in life that you loved to do, and not necessarily for money. Although if that's what you wanted to do, then that's great too. But that… to sort of go with the flow in that way. It was like if you love to sing then, and you should do that because the more you sing, the better you're going to get at it. And I think that with children, you can see this, there's going to be kids who… they love music and then they get to be the musical kid in the class and they get good feedback for that. And then that makes them want to do it more. And then it just sort of builds on it. So I did feel for my kids that it was very important to find out what they loved, to find out what gave them pleasure to do.

NANCY STEINER:
What about human connection? What about who they loved? Did you feel like you had something to teach them about that or?

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ROZ CHAST:
Human connection. That's not been my strong suit, maybe. Maybe from being an only child and spending so much time by myself. I think in some ways I've learned, especially from my younger kid more about that, he's a therapist… No, no. They were more on their own for that.

NANCY STEINER:
Okay. And what do you want old age to look like for you?

ROZ CHAST:

Oh, I hope I'm still drawing and writing. That's how I… when I think about older age and getting into my even older age than I am now, I just really want to keep working. I want to keep drawing, not just drawing cartoons, but doing art projects because that's what I do. I mean, I have all kinds of art projects that I'm working on. I do embroidery, you know, these funny canvases and pysanky eggs and hooking rugs and I really want to do printmaking, and I'm bookbinding, and I love putting books together and art projects. That's what I want to keep doing my whole life is art projects.

NANCY STEINER:

That is so great. And Roz, one question that we're sort of asking people, is that the importance of storytelling of lives. You use your cartoons to tell life stories. How important is it, do you think to have storytelling about lives?

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ROZ CHAST:

I think storytelling is extremely important. I think storytelling is how we make sense of things and how, sometimes, you know it can be a— you can rationalize things, sometimes for better or for worse. Storytelling connects things and helps you connect with other people, I think. It's sort of the opposite of like 40 minutes of static and then writing an incomprehensible paper about architectonics. It's kind of like, well, I'm here. I don't really know why. I don't know how I got here. I don't know where I'm going from here. Although I do know I'm going to take the one down to 72nd street after this, but in general it's a mystery, it's a mystery and sometimes things are funny and sometimes things are very sad or frustrating.

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ROZ CHAST:

Sometimes they're just stupid and boring and this is what I think. And what do you think? You know, what do you think about? And also with storytelling and some of it is craft and shaping. It's like nobody wants to listen to somebody tell a story and it's like, “and then I walk down the stairs and then there was a piece of paper on the stairs. And then I saw this boy.” You're kind of making a story so that you can… It's the empathy for the other person who's listening, I think, also. That's, I mean, good storytelling has a lot to do with empathy, I think. We've all seen those vanity press kind of books where somebody is just telling their life of how they were head of Acne incorporated. And it's just oh, or somebody who just, I mean, that's my fear of doing this is like, Ugh, am I droning in this way. It's empathy for telling a story and not lying, but telling a story in a way that you're thinking about the person listening a little bit.

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