The New York Times

Roz Chast Is New Yorkier Than You

By John Leland
Oct. 11, 2017

Roz Chast in Bryant Park.Credit...Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Perhaps you've wondered what sort of thing catches the eye of the cartoonist Roz Chast, whose characters, when something catches their eye, tend to FREAK OUT, in vibrating capital letters.

Ms. Chast, 62, was in midtown the other day to promote her new book, “Going Into Town: A Love Letter to New York,” and what caught her eye was a store on West 38th Street called Joyce Buttons & Trims, which might be, for the right shopper, the greatest store in the world. Ms. Chast would not argue.

“I mean, look at these tassels,” she said, eyeing an explosion of electric-colored plumage and a jumble of foot-high embroidered iron-on animals. “Don’t you want this? Look at that bird. Don’t you want that someplace, somehow? I love everything in this window. Look how dirty that is. That dirt is old. All this schmutzy stuff — nobody’s touched this in years. I love this. Just knowing that it’s there.”

So went an afternoon stroll through Roz Chast’s New York. Try it sometime.

Ms. Chast in person is exactly what you’d expect from her cartoons: a little neurotic, a lot New Yorky, openly phobic, smallish, with chunky glasses and a Brooklyn accent that could probably be traced to a single census tract in Flatbush. She loves the suburbs, she hates the suburbs, she loves the crowded city where you can be alone, and the Upper West Side, where the schleppy old guys of old have given way to the schleppy old guys of now.

“It’s still like no other place I’ve ever been,” she said of New York. “This density of buildings, of people, everything. Some people really love Paris. Some people love London, they’ll read everything that Dickens wrote. I sometimes feel that way about New York. There’s something about the city, not the least of which is that it’s on a grid, so I don’t get lost. And I don’t need to drive. I hate driving. This is almost like being in nature to me, looking at the buildings and noticing the little details.”

Since 1978 she has written fuzzy, anxiety-fueled cartoons for The New Yorker about the insecurities of New York life: the “Bad Mom” trading cards (“#61: Deborah Z. Has never even TRIED to make Play-Doh from scratch”), the Cab of Guilt taxi recording (“This is your mother, reminding you that if you don’t buckle up I will kill myself”). Equal parts schadenfreude and inadequacy, with a seasoning of guilt and superstitious panic — that’s the world according to Rosalind Chast.

Two years ago, after the success of her graphic memoir “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?” about caring for her parents in their last years, Ms. Chast allowed herself to rent a studio apartment in the West 70s, which she visits every week or so from her house in — brace yourself — Ridgefield, Conn. It was a homecoming of sorts for Ms. Chast and her husband, Bill Franzen, a humor writer, who were driven from the city in 1990 by the modern equivalent of a biblical plague, namely the New York real estate market. She still describes the Upper West Side as home, and her move to suburbia as a kind of exile.

“There were questions like, What kind of backsplash do you want?” she said, her voice rising in remembered terror. “And I didn’t know what a backsplash was. It was just horrible. I hate that kind of stuff. And faucets. It was a combination of very boring and very stressful.”

The Upper West Side, by contrast, offered good diners and lousy restaurants, a beguilingly terrible supermarket, zero cool bars or boutiques — nothing, in short, to attract people who do not live there.

“I really, really like that,” she said. “When I go home after being in Midtown or even the Village, the vibe is so much more people going about their business — I need to buy shoelaces, or I need to buy a new wastebasket and some hangers, and then I’m going to go home. It’s not like, Hey, there’s this new hip restaurant on West 83rd street. I don’t think so. I really doubt that.”

Ms. Chast grew up in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, the only child of parents who rarely left the neighborhood. Her father, a teacher, never learned to drive. “My mother drove, but she was a very anxious driver,” Ms. Chast said. “So I grew up with a lot of anxiety about cars and driving.

“We’d come into Manhattan to see plays, and we’d turn around and come back. We never stayed. There was always a story where something terrible happened to someone — some restaurant where a lady found a piece of glass in an olive. So you just ate at this one Chinese restaurant near our apartment and sat in the same booth, and you ordered the same food, moo goo gai pan, of course, because that’s safe.”

When she returned to New York after art school, in January 1978, it was to an apartment on West 73rd Street with no stove, just a hot plate, and wiring that regularly blew a fuse. Her parents helped with the rent. Four months later she sold her first cartoon to The New Yorker for $250, or roughly a month’s rent.

“She really opened the doors to a certain kind of idiosyncratic weirdness at The New Yorker,” said Emily Flake, 40, who followed Ms. Chast into the magazine’s pages three decades later. “Part of that has to do with coming from a point of view owned by a woman. She wasn’t the first female cartoonist at The New Yorker, but she’s one of the first female stars. She carved out a space for a more personal brand of weirdness for people who are similarly off the map.”

Richard Gehr, author of “I Only Read It for the Cartoons: The New Yorker’s Most Brilliantly Twisted Artists,” called Ms. Chast the magazine’s “first subversive cartoonist,” who was not appreciated by the older male cartoonists on staff. “She was a feisty, punky young person whose stuff looked completely different,” Mr. Gehr said. “A lot of other cartoonists there found that very challenging: if this is the new wave, what are we? And she’s come to display more range there than almost any other cartoonist in The New Yorker’s history.”

As Ms. Chast has aged, her characters, often loosely autobiographical, have aged with her, growing into middle age with their neuroses intact. “Some worries I’m probably going to carry with me until the point comes when you stop worrying, which is when you’re dead,” she said. “Where do I start? Driving, medical, electricity, basement, boilers.”

In recent years, Ms. Chast has turned her attention to elaborate egg-painting, embroidery, rug-hooking and ukulele, partly as a remedy to chronic insomnia. After the cathartic nakedness of “Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?” which literally took on matters of life and death, “Going Into Town,” which began life as a city guide for her daughter, feels genial but slight. At an October speaking engagement at the Museum of the City of New York, where tickets cost $40, she leaned heavily on earlier cartoons.

But she may be saving her energies for her next big project, in which she ventures back into the land where her neuroses began.

“Brooklyn,” she said. “Out there Brooklyn. Places where you take the subway and then you have to take a bus.”

It’s a big topic, especially for someone dreaming of playing Hawaiian heavy metal on the ukulele. But why not? As the character Pigeon Little says in Ms. Chast’s new collection, “The sky is falling, the sky is — oh look! Part of a bagel.”

In a world where panic is the default setting, salvation is wherever you find it.