



ROZ CHAST INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Roz Chast, Cartoonist, The New Yorker
September 6, 2022
Interviewed by Nancy Steiner
Total Running Time: 36 minutes and 2 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ROZ CHAST:

Storytelling connects things. 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, you know, it's a mystery.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories
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?

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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 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. Like 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 not 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 kind of strange. They saved soap slivers in a in a washcloth 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 spoke with an accent. You know, I had a friend in the building whose it was. You want to go to the store with me, you know, And my mother, 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 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.

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NANCY STEINER:

So there's a strip of yours where you say, I'm Harriet the Spy. Wednesday Addams, Allawi's Carmen Miranda, among others. Who were you as a child? What kind of a child were you?



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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.

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NANCY STEINER:

Why were you angry?

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ROZ CHAST:

Couldn't stand my parents. Terrible thing to say, but true. You know, 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.

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NANCY STEINER:

Can you tell me about the way Father 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 anxiety. Or like the minute one anxiety would be solved, he'd be on to the next one. It was like opening up a bottle of seltzer was like, suddenly it would be like, Be careful. And you go, What? What am I doing? He knew somebody. Who? The seltzer, You know, Cap flew off and flew right into his eye and blinded him. So, you know, everything I could and probably would end in being blinded or killed or maimed in some horrible way. So, yeah, it was just a lot of a lot of fear.

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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, it was I was terrified of most things, you know, growing up, terrified of other kids, terrified of just calamity, you know, happening at every turn. You know, I was very. Aware of sensations in my body like. And that is something that sadly has, you know, come with me into adulthood of like, I feel the blood in my hands. Like, I can feel the blood in my hands right now. And for a while, I went through a phase of, like that freaking me out.

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NANCY STEINER:

And what about phobias? Did you have phobias?



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ROZ CHAST:

Tons. Tons, tons. I was afraid of a million illnesses, some of which I learned about from children's books. You know, like appendicitis from Madeleine. Death being not proud, Brain tumor. There was. I somehow I learned that, like, about mastoiditis, which was something in your ear that could get, like, 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, you know, just like this kind of nonsense.

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NANCY STEINER:

Your mother wouldn't let you read comics. So how did you come to the world of cartoons?

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ROZ CHAST:

I had cousins. I had older cousins, and. And I had there was a girl in the building who the same one who was, you know, one of the stuff with me. She read a ton of, you know, 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 like a complete miracle. Like, it's just this kind of unbidden automatic response of, like, you know. And Mad Magazine was one of those things that



did it for me, you know?

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NANCY STEINER:

So what then brought you to drawing cartoon? Something about it had to have felt very. You magnetized to this?

ROZ CHAST: [00:07:24:00] 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, you know, probably picked up a crayon before that. But I remember drawing when I was three or four and I liked things. It made me laugh. And I also liked with cartoons how you didn't have to choose between drawing and writing that I like 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 make you can decide how you want to do it. 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 I sometimes, like, learn to draw cartoons, schools kind of like I don't understand them because I 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 I started to feel like I think this might be the direction I'm heading when I was around 12.

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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. You know, sometimes I feel more autobiographical than others, and sometimes there's like 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, when 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 I just did this kind of mom dance, you know, those kind of like, horrible, like there's a lot of, like, awkward sort of, like movements. And 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.

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NANCY STEINER:

Charles Addams was an influencer.

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ROZ CHAST:



Oh, my love.

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NANCY STEINER:

Tell me.

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ROZ CHAST:

Well, a lot of reasons. Back when I was a kid, there was something called, like, 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. You know, it's really not nice that that man is asking his wife to, like, back up off the cliff because she's going to fall and get hurt. You know that one where like he's taking a picture of her, she's like at the edge of the cliff. And he just tells her, like to just back up a little bit. 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, you know, the edge of the cliff. There was something hilarious and hostile that I really responded to. One of the more famous Charles Addams cartoons and also one of my favorites is actually has a title called Boiling Oil. And it's the one where the entire Addams 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 like going to dump this cauldron of boiling oil on them. I just love that. And also the other thing by Charles Addams, that when I discovered him, I was about eight or nine, was that his cartoons had children in them, 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.

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NANCY STEINER:

So do you remember when you discovered Charles?

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ROZ CHAST:

Yeah, I do. I was about eight or nine. And my parents, they in the summer, you know, we were living in Brooklyn, and in the summer, my parents and a whole bunch of Brooklyn schoolteacher, they called it their contingent. 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 or in some nearby area and rent an apartment for July and August, and they would go to Cornell. That was this the center of their activity? They were always activities in the summer. They were concerts. There were lectures. 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. And in this browsing library, there was one section that was all cartoon books, and they had a whole ton of Charles Addams books. They had Black Maria Monster Rally, Addams and Evil, the groaning board drawn and quartered. And I could look at these books, it till doomsday. They just killed me. I just adored. So, you know, I was one of those many people apparently my age who found Charles Addams as a

kid. And, you know, that was it.

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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. Uh, 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 that it should resonate with you, that it should have a 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.

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NANCY STEINER:

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

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ROZ CHAST:

I draw what I know. I if I remember doing a I, I agree to illustrated children's book once that took place mostly in the woods. And when I hit my first like



two page spread and I had to draw like 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, These trees. All right, what's on the floor are twigs. There's like, maybe leaves, pine needles. There's some rocks. More twigs like I couldn't quite. You know, whereas when I'm drawing an interior, like an apartment interior, I could draw like a billion kinds of lamps. A billion? I have, like, an image bank of everything that's in a house or in an apartment. But, like, you know, woods and I don't know, you know, it's pine cone. Then the pine cone sits there and it looks stupid, you know.

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NANCY STEINER:

What was it like for you was when you moved to Ridgefield, which is a pretty leafy place? Oh.

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ROZ CHAST:

Yeah, very leafy, very old. When I moved to the suburbs of Connecticut, it was definitely like 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 there was no way I was going to live in a place where I couldn't walk to town. So we live in town, which is nice because I can, you know, walk into town to, you know, get a quart of milk or go to the library or just to a mental health walk where I can see stores. I don't want to see trees. I don't care. I like looking at shop windows. You know, that's kind of fun. Like somebody made a little arrangement. Maybe I'll go in, maybe I'll touch a shirt, you know, I'll see the



different color combinations. Somebody designed this. I like that. I even like going to CVS in, like, seeing the sort of the insanely hopeful and hilarious, like, these potions. It's like this a spray. Calm yourself spray. And, you know, these vitamins that are going to make you smarter and, you know, this kind of basically snake oil kind of stuff. But it cracks me up. It's funny. It amuses me more than like just taking a nature walk, which, you know, makes me sad.

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NANCY STEINER:

How would you describe your beginnings of being a New Yorker? Is that scary?

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ROZ CHAST:

No, no. The New Yorker was it 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 like, show offy. Like we're really modern and, you know, we really are up to date. You know, 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.

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NANCY STEINER:

How did you get to The New Yorker?



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ROZ CHAST:

When I got out of Rosie, I drew cartoons for myself. I just I wanted to I that's what I did before I went to Disney. And it's what I did. You know, I just I stopped while I was at Disney for a while because it was just thought of as like 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 know, you were doing that incredibly embarrassing. I can't even say it thing of like trying to communicate with another person, which is very needy and and pathetic, really. Anyway, I got out of school and I was roaming the court. I got out of prison 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. 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 like with the hardiness, which was a kind of like you draw, but you make it look sort of sloppy because, you know, also like drawing like exactly meant like, you know, your work looks kind of tight. You know, like the stronger the better if you kind of like scribbled it more like made it like, loose and, like, 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 round, 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 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, you know, things. You see things happen like this. So I picked it up and they used cartoons and it was kind of Christopher Street was not it was not a gay porn magazine. It was kind of like a gay literary magazine. But they used cartoons. So I called them up and he said to come by, and I was living in my parents house at his apartment at this time. And I met him and they started buying cartoons from me for ten 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, you know, 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, you know? So I put everything in an envelope. I had like 60 cartoons I didn't know. And instead of the rejection note, there was a note from Lee Lawrence, who was the cartoon of 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 there was a note which said, Come see me, Lee. And I still remember because it was this loopy handwriting. So I got buzzed in and they pulled out a cartoon. They said, We're going to buy this cartoon. And I want to I want you to keep coming back every week. So that was it. And I, I that's essentially what I've been doing since I was 23, except I don't go in in person now. I send it electronically, but I still submit every week. Yeah.

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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 ten years, then the next youngest person there. I was generally the only girl there and my stuff was just so weird compared to what most of these people were doing. So there were a lot of problems, you might say, Well, problems with like the older guys, like looking at me as like an outsider, not just being female was almost the least of it.

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NANCY STEINER:

You're quoted as saying that your cartoons are not autobiographical, but my life is always reflected in them, 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.

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ROZ CHAST:

Yeah, I think it does go back to you. Draw what you know. Some cartoons come from the cartoon universe. You know, there's like, the end of the world guys in 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.

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NANCY STEINER:

Many of the cartoons draw from a range of images and language to create a whole world. How would you finish the 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 where sort of funny things and things have a certain kind of look. And it's not like in Architectural Digest world. Like a lamp, a coffee table. It'll have, like, stuff on it. You know, I feel like there are so many cartoonists that have worlds. Charles Saxon drew a certain world of upper middle class white America. Helen Hodgkinson certainly had a world of her club ladies. And of course George Price had his world, and George Boothe and Ed Currin and Mary Petty. And I think those are the cartoons that I. Love. You know where the cartoons that you see, they're like snapshots from a world that this person has created. It's not just like some generic, you know, goggle eyed people with like this, like generic kind of funny gag. You know, people are in a hurry. They don't want to like, you know, they just want kind of a fast gag line and like, you know, and fine, that's great. But it doesn't I'm not interested. What does interest me is, uh. Are the cartoonists who created world, and the gags come out of that world.



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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:

Oh, everything. I mean, how hard it is. How how awful. In many ways, you know, once you get past that point of, you know, centrum silver aging, you know, the commercial side of like, you know, old people sort of squabbling and being there like cranky old person self when you get dependent when everything starts to just fall apart. And. And also, there's no 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, you know, probably lack of compassion and selfishness. I'm aware of that. In many ways, I was relieved. They were my father was 95. He was ready to go. He had broken his hip. And he told me he said he said he was ready. He was he felt like he had had a good life. My mother was still alive at that point. He was surrounded. My you know, my kids were there. It was 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, you know?

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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. You know, 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, you know, 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 or in TV, where are these, you know, deathbed sort of reconciliations? That doesn't always happen. You know, so you're kind of left with. Well, that did not happen, so. Mm. You know.

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NANCY STEINER:

What do you want old age to look like for you?

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ROZ CHAST:

Oh, I'd like to. I hope I'm still drawing and writing. That's how I, you know, when I think about older age and getting into my even older age than I am now, I, 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, I have all kinds of art projects that I'm working on. I, I do embroidery, you know, these funny canvases and pissing eggs and hooking rugs. And I really want to do printmaking and and bookbinding and and I love putting books

together and, you know, art projects. That's what I want to keep doing my whole life is art projects.

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NANCY STEINER:

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? Um.

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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, you know, 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, you know, French poetry group and a French playwriting group. My mother, it was music and also teaching, you know, So they had there were things that they loved.

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NANCY STEINER:

With everything that you learn from your parents, what was most important for you to give to your children? Oh.



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ROZ CHAST:

I think finding out what you love to do and pursuing that and not necessarily for money, although, you know, if that's what you wanted to do, then that's great too. But that. Just 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. So I did feel for my kids that it was very important to find out what they loved, to find out what you know, what gave them pleasure to do. You know.

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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, like 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 like 12, I didn't trust them. You know, 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 and I didn't want to have the same relationship with, you know, 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.

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NANCY STEINER:

You use your cartoons just 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 you can rationalize things, you know, sometimes for better or for worse. Storytelling connects things in and helps you connect with other people. I think 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, you know, it's a mystery. It's a mystery. And sometimes things are funny and sometimes things are very, you know, sad or frustrating. Sometimes they're just stupid and boring. And, you know, this is what I think. And what do you think, you know, what do you think about? So, um, and also with story telling and some of it is, is craft and shaping, it's like, you know, nobody wants to listen to somebody like 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 there was I saw this boy the you know, you're kind of making a story so that you can, you know, it's empathy for the other person who's listening. I think also that's I mean,

that's good. Storytelling has a lot to do with empathy. I think telling a story in a way that you're thinking about the person listening a little bit, you know?

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