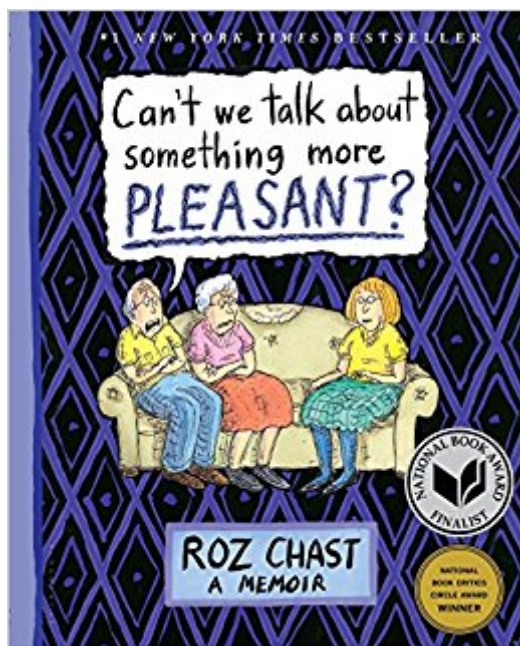


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# Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?: A Memoir



## Synopsis

#1 New York Times Bestseller  
2014 National Book Award Finalist  
Winner of the inaugural 2014 Kirkus Prize in nonfiction  
Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award  
Winner of the 2014 Books for a Better Life Award  
Winner of the 2015 Reuben Award from National Cartoonists Society  
In her first memoir, New Yorker cartoonist Roz Chast brings her signature wit to the topic of aging parents. Spanning the last several years of their lives and told through four-color cartoons, family photos, and documents, and a narrative as rife with laughs as it is with tears, Chast's memoir is both comfort and comic relief for anyone experiencing the life-altering loss of elderly parents. While the particulars are Chast-ian in their idiosyncrasies--an anxious father who had relied heavily on his wife for stability as he slipped into dementia and a former assistant principal mother whose overbearing personality had sidelined Roz for decades--the themes are universal: adult children accepting a parental role; aging and unstable parents leaving a family home for an institution; dealing with uncomfortable physical intimacies; and hiring strangers to provide the most personal care. An amazing portrait of two lives at their end and an only child coping as best she can, *Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant* shows the full range of Roz Chast's talent as cartoonist and storyteller.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

New Yorker cartoonist and prolific author Chast (*What I Hate from A to Z*, 2011) writes a bravely honest memoir of watching her parents decline, become too frail to stay in the Brooklyn apartment

they called home for five decades, suffer dementia and physical depletion, and die in their nineties in a hospice-care facility. Unlike many recent parent-focused cartoon memoirs, such as Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* (2012) and Nicole J. George's *Calling Dr. Laura* (2012), in which the story is as much about the cartoonist's current work and family life as it is about his or her parents, Chast keeps her narrative tightly focused on her mother and father and her own problematic—though not uncommon—guilt-provoking relationships with them. Chast's hallmark quirky sketches are complemented by annotated photos from her own and her parents' childhoods. Occasionally, her hand-printed text will take up more than a full page, but it's neatly wound into accompanying panels or episodes. An unflinching look at the struggles facing adult children of aging parents. --Francisca Goldsmith --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"By turns grim and absurd, deeply poignant and laugh-out-loud funny. Ms. Chast reminds us how deftly the graphic novel can capture ordinary crises in ordinary American lives." *Michiko Kakutani, New York Times* "A tour de force of dark humor and illuminating pathos about her parents' final years as only this quirky genius of pen and ink could construe them." *Elle* "An achievement of dark humor that rings utterly true." *Washington Post* "One of the major books of 2014 . . . Moving and bracingly candid . . . This is, in its original and unexpected way, one of the great autobiographical memoirs of our time." *Buffalo News* "Better than any book I know, this extraordinarily honest, searing and hilarious graphic memoir captures (and helps relieve) the unbelievable stress that results when the tables turn and grown children are left taking care of their parents. . . [A] remarkable, poignant memoir." - *San Francisco Chronicle* "Very, very, very funny, in a way that a straight-out memoir about the death of one's elderly parents probably would not be . . . Ambitious, raw and personal as anything she has produced." *New York Times* "Devastatingly good . . . Anyone who has had Chast's experience will devour this book and cling to it for truth, humor, understanding, and the futile wish that it could all be different." *St. Louis Post Dispatch* "Gut-wrenching and laugh-aloud funny. I want to recommend it to everyone I know who has elderly parents, or might have them someday." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* "Joins Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*, William Trevor's *The Old Boys*, and Kingsley Amis's *Ending Up* in the competition for the funniest book about old age I've ever read. It is also heartbreaking." *Barnes & Noble Review* "Revelatory! So many have faced (or will face) the situation that the author details, but no one could render it like she does. A top-notch graphic memoir that adds a whole new

dimension to readers" "appreciation of Chast and her work." "Kirkus Reviews (starred review)"Chast is at the top of her candid form, delivering often funny, trenchant, and frequently painful revelations -- about human behavior, about herself -- on every page."

David Small, author of STITCHES"Roz Chast squeezes more existential pain out of baffled people in cheap clothing sitting around on living-room sofas with antimacassar doilies in crummy apartments than Dostoevsky got out of all of Russia"s dark despair. This is a great book in the annals of human suffering, cleverly disguised as fun." Bruce McCall, author of BRUCE MCCALL'S ZANY AFTERNOONS"It is in that sense of having 'nailed it' - of providing a detailed, funny, heart breaking and true description of what it is like to care for and lose elderly patients - that this book will find its greatest impact. As points for discussion and for reflection, and as a means of reassurance, this work will offer to many the validation and support of their imperfect roles as imperfect caregivers. It is a great resource." Kenneth Rockwood, University of Manchester, UK, Age and Ageing"Never has the abyss of dread and grief been plumbed to such incandescently hilarious effect. The lines between laughter and hysteria, despair and rage, love and guilt, are quavery indeed, and no one draws them more honestly, more . . . unscrupulously, than Roz Chast." Alison Bechdel, author of FUN HOME

\* As I write this, my 83-year-old dad is withering away in an assisted living facility, riddled with Alzheimer's. Sometimes I want my Dad to die now - because he's unaware of his suffering - and he'd cuss me out if he knew he is turning into what Roz Chast's mother describes as "a pulsating piece of protoplasm." I feel guilty feeling this way - but "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" makes such forbidden thoughts feel normal.\* (BTW, don't buy the Kindle version. This title, with its colorful cartoons and photos - as well as its handsome construction as a hardcover book - truly belongs on your coffee table. I sampled the Kindle version, didn't like it, and bought the hardcover.)\* This book feels weirdly clairvoyant. It exposed my doubts, fears and paradoxical feelings about watching my parents die slowly before my eyes. I've read almost everything about the subject of aging and dying. And yet this is the first book that captures the exhausting experience of caring for aging parents, e.g., that it's sometimes gross - (see passages about hoarding, incontinence and "grime") - AND funny - (see "The Wheel of Doom" and Roz Chast's father's obsession with myriad bank books, decades old).\* The author's hand-wringing about whether there's going to be enough money to pay for her parents' care is spot on. How long will the money last if they live "X" more years vs. "Y" more years? I do these calculations every month, constantly updating and trying to prepare for the worst. Any savings will be drained by expenses which will

have no effect on terminal outcomes. If the daily care and feeding of your parents doesn't kill you - then the avalanche of paperwork and legal stuff that must be done - will.\* Hence despite the preference to "talk about something more pleasant," if nothing else, this book demonstrates why planning for our parents' end-of-life care must begin NOW - not later.\* I recommend this book for every person who's on the brink of going insane about their aging parents. Give it to caregivers, give it to your siblings, give it to anyone who hates dark subjects - but who can handle them if they're presented in a disarmingly funny style that's accessible - yet still honest. (I don't think I can read another "text-only" book about the "death spiral" of aging parents.)\* In sum, "Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?" takes the hard edges off some things while inflicting blunt-force traumas about others. Roz Chast nails the impending death of our parents in a way that feels like a landmark work. I know such praise sounds silly given the sea of excellent books out there about aging. But I've never seen this subject presented in an original, humorous and touching way, complete with hand-drawn illustrations and color photos. It avoids the trap of being overly optimistic, forcing us to confront the gruesomeness of mortality - while STILL providing an emotional "lift" about something universal.\* This book makes going through one of the darkest periods of my life - feel almost worth it.

Cartoonist Roz Chast has written/drawn a book about her parents' final years, "Can't We Talk About Something Pleasant?". In it she describes both her own upbringing - only child, born late-in-life to older and neurotic parents - and how her feelings as a child hindered her dealing with the parents as they aged. She is certainly not alone in her mixed-up emotions towards her parents; most of us have the same feelings. Roz Chast can just express them better. This is a difficult book to read. It must have been excruciating to live through and then put down on paper. But it is a book that all us "boomers" (hate the word but what else is there? "Lunch meat in the sandwich generation"?) should read. Because I'm not sure too much is going to change when we reach our 80's and 90's. We tend to have fewer children - Roz was an only child, as I noted above - and so fewer people to share the burdens of us as we age. Will we be put in Assisted Living "places" with the alacrity we seem to be putting our own parents into? For the record, both my parents died in nursing homes where they received excellent care. Roz Chast's parents - George and Elizabeth - lived well into their 90's. And they aged "together". They tried to take care of themselves and each other in their dingy Brooklyn apartment, but it came the time to get them the extra care they could no longer give themselves. Roz describes how going through her parents' vacated apartment was like going through a junk store haven. And she shows photographs - as well as using her drawings - to show how crowded

the apartment truly was. The reader may come away thinking Roz had conflicted feelings about her parents. She sure did and she was certainly entitled to those feelings. I laughed a bit in parts, but I was able to appreciate her words and deeds because I had frequently felt the same way with my own parents, particularly as they aged. As death took the Chasts - two years apart - Roz seemed to have come to terms with these strange people who had given birth and raised her. Chast's book is a very "personal" book which will resonate with a lot of people.

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