



Aging Graphic Medicine Discussion Guide:

Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant? by Roz Chast

From the publisher... “Roz Chast and her parents were practitioners of denial: if you don’t ever think about death, it will never happen. *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?* is the story of an only child watching her parents age well into their nineties and die. In this account, longtime New Yorker cartoonist Chast combines drawings with family photos and documents, chronicling that “long good-bye.”

Why a Graphic Novel?

- Research suggests that we are better at understanding and absorbing information presented in visual forms, such as comics.
- Stories are more engaging than factual information alone. How much easier is it to remember and empathize with something a friend experienced versus hard statistics alone?
- Coined by Ian Williams, a physician in the UK, Graphic Medicine “is the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare.”
 - Graphic medicine, then, combines visual storytelling and medicine, creating a unique opportunity for readers to experience and learn about healthcare experiences through comics.

To Learn More...

- www.graphicmedicine.org – The home base for all things graphic medicine.
- *The Graphic Medicine Manifesto* by MK Czerwiec et al. Available from Penn State University Press.



Created by Matthew Noe as part of the NNLM Region 7 Graphic Medicine Initiative.

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Questions for Discussion*

1. Roz Chast is very honest about her relationship with her parents and her thoughts and feelings as they aged and grew sicker. Did you find her honesty to be an asset to the book or did it make it uncomfortable to read? Were there times when you felt more or less sympathetic toward her or identified with her more or less?
2. Did you appreciate the visual aspects of this book? Do you think the format of a graphic novel is more or less effective for a memoir than for a fictional account? How is it different than a memoir written in prose?
3. The experience that Chast writes about, caring for aging parents, is one that many have experienced. Were there similarities to your own family story? Did that make it easier to connect to the family or harder? Was there anything that surprised you in Chast's story? Do you think that having personal experiences with the topic would make you enjoy the book more or less?
4. In the New York Times' review of the book, Alex Wichtel writes, "No one has perfect parents and no one can write a perfect book about her relationship to them. But Chast has come close." Do you agree?
5. One of the blurbs for the book, by author David Small, says, "Reading Roz Chast has always had the quality of eavesdropping on a person's private mutterings to herself." Did reading this book feel like eavesdropping to you? Does that make it easier to empathize with Chast as a reader or did it make you feel like a voyeur?
6. What do you think of Chast's portrayal of her parents? Did you find either of them to be likable, admirable, or sympathetic? Does that matter? As she illustrates their final years, do you feel like she is honoring their memories?
7. Do you think Chast's parents were portrayed with dignity? Why or why not? If not, is there a way to tell the real story of this period of their lives while maintaining their dignity?
8. There were several times where Chast includes non-cartoon drawings--family photographs, sketches, her mother's poems, etc. What effect did these have for you? Were they disruptive or did they add to the personal narrative and character development? What effect did the sketches of Chast's mother at the end of the book have on you? Did they change the tone of the book for you or alter your overall takeaway as a reader?
9. What role does humor play in this book?
10. Do you think there is an overall message to this book or is it no more than a recounting of a personal story?
11. Would you share *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant* with people in your life?

Remember: These are just suggested questions and there could be many, many more. Don't feel tethered to these – let the conversation flow naturally and use these questions as starting points when conversation stalls.