

Discussion Guide



End of Life

Summary

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; managing logistics; and hiring strangers to provide the most personal care.

Questions

1. Have you had a similar discussion with your parents and/or children about aging and long-term care plans? What was the result? At what age do you think parents and children should have this conversation?
2. Which part(s) of the book, if any, could you relate to the most? Did you find yourself empathizing more with George and Elizabeth, or Roz? Did this change as you progressed through the book?
3. Which aspects of the role reversal Chast depicts – the child assuming a caretaker role – were the most striking to you? What emotions did you experience as you were reading about the challenges Roz, George, and Elizabeth all faced?
4. Did you enjoy Chast's technique of telling her story through illustrations? Why or why not? Were there scenes in the book that you thought were effective because they were depicted in cartoons rather in straightforward text? Which ones, and why?
5. What experience is more frightening to you – George and Elizabeth's, or Roz's?
6. Which parts of the memoir made you laugh? Which made you cry? Did Chast's use of humor surprise you? Do you think it's necessary or inappropriate to approach this type of subject with humor?
7. In the chapter, "The Fall," would you have done anything differently than Roz did? Who did you sympathize with the most in this section?

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8. Did your perceptions of George and Elizabeth as parents, spouses, and people in general change as the book went on? If so, in what ways?
9. Were there scenes in the book that you found exasperating? If so, which ones and why?
10. What do you think George and Elizabeth would think about the ways in which they're represented in the memoir?
11. In your opinion, what is the greatest loss that George and Elizabeth experience as they age?
12. Have you considered your own end-of-life plans? Why or why not? Was the book informational for you, and if so, what did you learn? Has reading this book changed your thinking about your own end-of-life care?
13. What is your opinion of Roz's decision to keep her parents' ashes in her closet?
14. Chast discusses at length her complicated feelings regarding her mother, and how her relationship with her mother differed greatly from the one she had with her father. Do you think this has an impact on Roz's approach to her parents' end-of-life care? Do you think Elizabeth was a good mother? Do you think Roz was a good daughter?
15. Toward the end of the book, Roz struggles with the financial cost of her mother's care, compounded by the fact that she's "not living"

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