

PIONEER

Liz Montague Makes History at The New Yorker

BY CURTIS STEPHEN

When the coronavirus pandemic began to flare up across the U.S. with the onset of spring, cartoonist

Liz Montague found refuge in a pencil and a sketchpad inside her Washington apartment.

And as she played some of her favorite podcasts — notably, Harry Potter and the mental health-themed *The Friend Zone* — Montague produced a sparse but vibrantly inked, single-panel illustration titled “Brave.” In it, a young Black woman stands before a couch and poses a question to her dog.

“How scared should I be?” she asks.

“Scared enough,” the pup answers. “But brave enough, too.”

The cartoon was another installment in Montague’s animated “Liz at Large” series, which recently wrapped a seven-month run in *Washington City Paper*. “Drawing and coloring things can be a very therapeutic exercise,” she says. “It helps you to be in the moment. And when you’re in the moment, you’re not worrying about the future or the past.”



Cartoonist Liz Montague, 24, made history at *The New Yorker* last year.

As for Montague’s present, she has been making deep impressions well beyond the page. At just 24 years old, she made history last year as the first-known Black woman to have a cartoon published in the storied weekly magazine, *The New Yorker*.

It’s a breakthrough that has catapulted her into the national

spotlight with profiles on NBC’s *Today* show and in *The Washington Post*. While tackling issues such as race, class and gender within the context of headline news, Montague’s cartoons — which place Black women at the forefront — veer from tongue-in-cheek musings to biting social commentary. Each piece, though, is sentimental in its own way.

"I'd say that my work is the best and worst parts of myself in conversation," she explains. "I think it's really fascinating when you take pieces of yourself and have them interact with each other."

Born in South Jersey, Montague was raised in a close-knit family with two older sisters. Her father was an executive in the defense industry and her mother is a recently retired architect. In 2014, Montague enrolled in the University of Richmond on an athletic scholarship. (She ran track.) And while she spent her childhood sketching, the thought of pursuing an artistic career had been ruled out.

"I tried everything but art," she recalls with a laugh. "I was going to do computer science, anthropology or English because I wasn't sure that you could be an artist and support yourself."

That all changed after Montague attended a lecture by the Sarajevo-based graphic designer Bojan Hadzihalilovic. "He was talking about how art can be this tool for mass communication. And it just blew my mind," she says. "Then I was like,

"I was impressed by her bravery. Liz has a particular talent for taking complex, often deeply unassuming issues and finding concise, often hilarious ways to highlight them... ."

"OK—I'm gonna do this."

After graduating in 2018 with a bachelor's degree in studio art, Montague landed a job in graphic design at the Aga Khan Foundation USA, a nonprofit group in Washington that combats global poverty. As part of that effort, she traveled to Tajikistan, which she credits with exposing her to "all kinds of skin tones" and boosting her tenacity.

When Montague returned stateside, she fired off a random

email to *The New Yorker* in which she denounced the lack of inclusion in its cartoons. To her surprise, she received a response from the magazine's cartoon editor, who asked if she knew of any artists who could help to change the narrative. Without skipping a beat, Montague endorsed herself.

"Looking back at it now, I tell myself, 'Wow — that was bold.' I actually feel a lot more pressure now," she says. "But I've always been around empowered women, including in my own family. I was also hired by a young woman of color and my first boss was a woman. So that, to me, is what power looks like and what confidence looks like."

Having sold six illustrations to *The New Yorker* on everything from climate change to the perils of ignoring "Don't Touch My Hair," Montague was a guest reviewer for the magazine's annual cartoons issue last year.

"When Liz recommended that I check out her work, I was honestly so impressed by her bravery. Far too often, young women are taught not to put themselves out there, not to be their own best advocates," says Emma Allen, cartoon editor at *The New Yorker*. "Liz has a particular talent for taking complex, often deeply unassuming issues and finding concise, often hilarious ways to highlight them, to expose hypocrisy with humor, without being didactic."

Montague — who cites the Iranian-born, French illustrator Marjane Satrapi as an influence — recently relocated to Philadelphia and is focusing on a new project. It's her first book, a coming-of-age graphic novel, slated for release in 2022 by Random House.

And as she adjusts to the lightning-fast changes in her life, Montague is seeking to be a disrupter at her own pace. "We're still treating the default for cartoonists as old White men. And if you're not, then you have all of these qualifiers — young, Black woman — before your name," she says. "But why can't this be normal? I'm creating from my perspective as a noticeable Black woman. And that is always going to be the lens through which I see the world." ■

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