

Six years after the killings, Charlie Hebdo cartoonist is still drawing to offend

Peter Conradi Paris

Corinne Rey struggles to fight back the tears as she remembers the brutal encounter on a winter morning just over six years ago that was to change her life. She had just popped down a couple of flights of stairs from the office of the satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo for a cigarette when she was confronted in the entrance of the building by two hooded figures brandishing Kalashnikovs.

Addressing her as “Coco”, the name with which she signs her cartoons, the pair – the French-born brothers, Saïd and Chérif Kouachi – demanded she take them to the magazine’s office. “They were determined to kill,” she recalled. “And they showed it in their readiness, in the way they spoke to me, in the way they moved around me.”

In a state of shock, Rey, who is petite, with a swirl of black curls, provoked their fury by bringing them by mistake to the first floor. “At that moment, my body told me I was going to die and I put myself into an execution position,” she said. But she was too vital to their murderous plan. Unable to speak – or do anything else – she led them one storey higher and tapped in the code that opened the armoured door to the office.

In the carnage that followed, 12 people – including the magazine’s editor Stéphane Charbonnier, 47, better known as “Charb” – were killed and 11 injured. Rey hid under a desk behind a bin and survived, even though the killers realised she was there. To this day, she does not know why they did not shoot her like everyone else.

The attack on January 7, 2015, provoked a worldwide outpouring of support for the magazine – and for free speech – under the slogan “Je suis Charlie”. The 38-year-old cartoonist has recounted the horrors of the day – and the psychological toll they took on her – in a non-fiction graphic novel, entitled *Dessiner Encore* (Keep on Drawing). It has appeared as parliament considers a law proposed by President Emmanuel Macron to fight Islamist extremism and separatism in response to a wave of jihadist attacks that have since killed about 250 people on French soil.

Over the past 50 years, Charlie Hebdo has attacked everyone and everything – most recently the Queen, whom it depicted on the cover of its March 10 edition, red-eyed and grinning, as she knelt on the Duchess of Sussex’s neck in an echo of the death of George Floyd. Cue predictable outrage and accusations of tastelessness on the other side of the Channel – and amusement in the French media.

“It is a kind of blasphemy for you, because you see the Queen as sacred. But she is not sacred for us,” laughed Rey, who was not involved in the decision to publish the cartoon, but supports it.

She was also dismissive of critics who see the drawing as belittling the fate of Floyd, whose killing by police in Minneapolis last May gave impetus to the Black Lives Matter movement. It was instead merely a way of addressing the racism the duchess claimed to have

publish drawings that disturb and upset you and that pinpoint what is wrong,” Rey added. “That is the meaning of satire: something that is still a drawing but that has a certain force and certain impact. It is really in the spirit and history of our newspaper.

“We won’t be able to draw anything if each time we have to take into account whether someone is going to be hurt or offended by it. If someone doesn’t like something they don’t have to look at it.”

The Queen, like the majority of other prominent figures the magazine has lampooned over the years, will no doubt take the attack in her stride – in the unlikely event she noticed it at all. Its run-ins with radical Islam have been more explosive.

As Rey recounts in the book, the January 2015 massacre – for all its bloodiness – was not the first time Charlie Hebdo had been attacked. In November 2011 its former office was destroyed by a petrol bomb the day after it published a picture of Muhammad with the tagline: “100 lashes if you are not dying of laughter.” The culprits were not found.

Then last October came the murder of Samuel Paty, 47, a teacher at a school in the Paris suburbs decapitated by a 18-year-old Chechen refugee after he used cartoons of Muhammad in a lesson on the concept of free speech.

Among them was a famous – or infamous – drawing by Rey in 2012 that showed the prophet bending down naked, viewed from behind with a star covering his anus and his genitals dangling.

Entitled “A star is born”, Rey’s drawing was inspired by an obscure anti-Islamic film blamed for inspiring a wave of violence across the Middle East in 2012 that included the killing of Chris Stevens, the US ambassador, in the Libyan city of Benghazi. The magazine claimed it was merely poking fun at the furore. Others accused them of pouring petrol on the flames.

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My body told me I was going to die

Charlie Hebdo’s Meghan cover caused anger in Britain – and amusement in France



MAGALI DELPORTE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES; CHARLIE HEBDO



suffered at the hands of the royal family, she said.

“It is in Charlie’s DNA to



Corrine Rey doesn't know why she wasn't killed