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What The F: What Swearing Reveals About Our Language, Our Brains, And Ourselves



Synopsis

Nearly everyone swears - whether it's over a few too many drinks, in reaction to a stubbed toe, or in flagrante delicto. And yet, we sit idly by as words are banned from television and censored in books. We insist that people excise profanity from their vocabularies, and we punish children for yelling the very same dirty words that we'll mutter in relief seconds after they fall asleep. Swearing, it seems, is an intimate part of us that we have decided to selectively deny. That's a damn shame. Swearing is useful. It can be funny, cathartic, or emotionally arousing. As linguist and cognitive scientist Benjamin K. Bergen shows us, it also opens a new window onto how our brains process language and why languages vary around the world and over time. In this groundbreaking yet ebullient romp through the linguistic muck, Bergen answers intriguing questions: How can patients left otherwise speechless after a stroke still shout "Goddamn!" when they get upset? When did a cock grow to be more than merely a rooster? Why is crap vulgar when poo is just childish? Do slurs make you treat people differently? Why is the first word that Samoan children say not mommy but eat shit? And why do we extend a middle finger to flip someone the bird? Smart as hell and funny as f--k, What the F is mandatory listening for anyone who wants to know how and why we swear.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A really interesting exploration of profanity. This is for anybody who is interested in language, cultural norms and differences, social psychology, or cognitive and neurosciences. Benjamin K. Bergen provides some remarkable evidence-based arguments. His examination of profanity's alleged harm to children was impressively analyzed, supported and outlined. The sections about

American and British Sign Language and the global, cultural differences with regard to offensive language and gestures were really interesting and I enjoyed all the studies regarding how our brain reacts to profanity. I was actually fascinated by the extraordinary grammar of swearwords. Seriously, I loved that part. There were a lot of "huh, would have never thought of that"-moments. But I guess you might have to be a bit of a language/grammar nerd like me to get the same reaction. Some of this is very textbook style. At times, I felt like being back in the classroom plowing through research papers. But a very well-executed research paper. Mr. Bergen takes great care to explain concepts, theories and even some of the necessary statistics (relating to significance) and images, tables, and graphs are used to clarify his points. Even if you've never bothered with this sort of stuff before, his ideas and findings are easy to follow and his laid-back, humorous style makes this fun to read. Mr. Bergen had me laughing at some of his footnotes. I wish research had been made into this much fun during my rather dry and sober studies. I thought I was reasonably well-versed when it comes to my vocabulary (for a non-native speaker anyway) but I had to look up several of the "bad" words I'd never come across before.

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