



Filthy English: The How, Why, When and What of Everyday Swearing

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Explores swearing and the impact of its acceptability on our language, our manners, and our society. This book considers how we have become more openly emotional, yet more wary about insulting others.

Filthy English: The How, Why, When and What of Everyday Swearing Details

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Author : Peter Silverton

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Russianwitch says

Haven't even gotten past the intro and I'm loving this book already. I mean even the intro title has a footnote! Besides I really really like linguistic anthropology.

So far the only downside to this book is over saturation. I can't sit down and read it in one go as much as I would like to do so.

The language is clear, the writing funny and engaging but material does require occasional breaks.

I'd recommend it to anyone interested in how our primary mode of communication has evolved even the gutter part of it.

Claudia says

While rather interesting for quite some long passages, the never-ending lists of variations of swear words and the dates when certain words were publicised first made me skip through it at points. I feel that keeping the book shorter would've done it quite some good. As a speaker of German and Japanese, the continuing errors not only annoyed me, but also made me question the accuracy of information in general. Bad research and fact-checking meant I couldn't quite trust other facts the author claimed.

To cut it short, the book just felt extremely long and I'm happy I've made it through.

Aoife says

I am not quite sure what this book wants to be. For a serious linguistic paper, it is not in-depth enough and relies too much on anecdotal evidence and not enough on actual research. For a typical popular science book that is supposed to appeal to people with no previous knowledge of linguistics, it is far too dry and consists of too many lists. There are just long lists of dates detailing which dictionary added which swear word when and even longer lists of what different things mean in other languages.

Those lead to another problem. I can obviously only judge the German ones but what the author claims is just wrong. In one chapter he writes that *Fünf gegen Einen* (Five against One) was German slang for masturbation. I never heard that one and a quick survey among my (online)friends brought no results either. It's possibly something regional or (more likely) terribly out of date but it's definitely nothing as omnipresent as the English wanking to which he compares it (that would be *wichsen* just in case you need to know). Later he describes *Schweinehund* (pig-dog) as one of the worst German swear words which again is wrong. It can be used as an insult but rarely is (your "inner pig-dog" is that voice that tells you that you rather stay lazily at home and watch TV instead of doing sports or some work). I can't say much about the other languages – except that he has the oddest way to explain Russian spelling and I only understood it because I re-read the passage repeatedly and knew enough Russian to eventually get what he was trying to say – but it does not give me much confidence that the passages on other languages are better. It is understandable that it might not be that easy to find native speakers who are happy to talk about swearing but I'm wondering anyway why a book that's called Filthy English needs that much information about non-English swearing.

Now I am trusting the author to at least know his own language so I won't question the claims he makes about English and one could simply ignore everything about foreign languages. However, that still leaves you with a quite boring book. As mentioned a lot of it are just lists of the first appearances of various words in print (which is actually somewhat interesting) and very extensive lists of which dictionaries first printed fuck or wanker when (which really isn't at least not in that much detail). The stories about how people reacted to the first fuck etc. in a newspaper, on TV or on a record again are quite intriguing but the author's personal anecdotes about his experiences with swearing are mostly too drawn out (and full of self-important name-dropping).

DNF at 60% .

Nick Jones says

This turned out to be a different book from the one I expected, but an excellent one all the same. I was expecting more about the etymology and history of swearing, though that might have made quite a slim volume. But Silverton does a great job of examining differences in swearing across cultures, and has a really interesting discussion of the purposes of swearing, of why humans swear and why swearing is an important human function.

Jennifer says

This book started really well, managing to be informative and hilarious at the same time, but a few chapters in began to drag a little, and seem a little more textbook-y than reading-for-fun-y. As I have only just finished my English language degree, I was looking for some light-hearted, but informative, fun and Silverton unfortunately did not deliver. Good for someone who's looking for something drier.

Matt says

What the fuck..

This is an excellent introduction into linguistics and my interest in this has now been increased. I found some really interesting things contained in this book which is very well written, informative and very funny.

Paulina says

Highly inaccurate. I didn't realize that until I got to the point where the author organized Polish swearwords hierarchically from the most to the least offensive- basing this organization on a conversation he had with one of his friends. Whoa. That's now how you make linguistic generalizations. Also, I didn't like the style, which is too anecdotal for my taste. The digressions are so far-fetched that sometimes it's difficult to see the relationship between the digression and the topic it is supposed to be related to. Moreover, the book is often offensive, being based on prejudice and national stereotypes. Although I have to admit that at some points it was funny, on the whole I didn't enjoy it. If you are interested

in the topic, Encyclopedia of Swearing would give you a better insight (though admittedly it's not as entertaining).

Nikki says

The cover makes this look like it's gonna be the light-hearted, bite-sized sort of non-fiction that I read when my brain can't take fiction and I just want to learn something without trying too hard. It's not. It's quite an academic work, with a lot of detail and a lot of footnotes -- I don't know what someone who actually does linguistics would think of it, but for me (a lowly literature postgrad student) it was kind of boring after a while. As far as I can tell it's well-researched, but it's not exactly light-hearted.

Ryan Watts says

Great idea, poorly executed. It's not easy to combine academic study with filth, and there's no shame in coming up short here, but I did find myself wondering if it would have been better to just publish a f***** spreadsheet of the words.

That said: the story of the phrase 'friends of Dorothy' and the US Navy was very entertaining.

Kate Gould says

Swearing is a universal phenomenon. The delivery, meaning, intent, and pitch maybe vary – some mouthing a silent “fiddlesticks”; others erupting with a string of expletives so incomprehensible it’s difficult to discern the meaning, though the intent will likely be clear – but we all do it to a greater or lesser extent.

This is the subject of Peter Silverton’s Filthy English. From the figurative communion wafers Spaniards hurl at each other, the Yugoslavian “march on your mother’s Chinese cunt”, and Yape “You have no foreskin”, to the many flavours, colours, and textures of genitalia, Silverton investigates the ways people find to insult each other.

It’s an exhaustive piece of research that, as a textbook of linguistic and cultural curios works well. What it lacks is humour. It could have been an entertaining romp through the break from social niceties that swearing represents, but instead is more a repetitive tome of infinitesimal detail.

Orla says

Linguist here, and btw that is the discrete (not "discreet") word for folks who study the bits that make up language, multi-lingual people are more correctly called polyglots. First sentence of the review and I'm correcting something from an early chapter. You can guess how this one is going to go.

This is riddled with errors, at times it seems like the author would do almost anything to stop facts getting in

the way of yet another of his music-biz pals' anecdotes.

Many basic facts are wrong, anecdotes are given as supporting evidence for all manner of things, and the book drags itself along from one anecdote, through multiple digressions, to another anecdote and so on.

There is very little in the way of structure (yeah, there are chapters, but the chapters themselves are a bit all over the map, internally) and his segues are a little baffling.

If ever there was a book in dire need of a strict editor and some rigorous philological fact-checking, it's this one.

How can a book about the swearingest swears that were ever sworn be such a trial to get through?

Tl;dr: I wanted this to be a fun read, but it wasn't. It isn't accurate either.

James says

The parts about this book that actually talked about swearing were interesting - they covered etymology, why we swear, international curses, censorship and all sorts of expletive filled entries. I was frequently irritated, however, by the author's habit of digressing either to cover something totally irrelevant to the subject or to offer up his own autobiographical experiences in far too much detail. So the book lost a star for the inability of Silverton to stick to the fucking subject.

Ben says

Well researched etymological study of swearing in the English language that although full of interesting information (Tony Blair was fond of the "C" word apparently) becomes rather dull to read through due to often becoming essentially a list of the origins of foul-mouthed words - my 10 year old self would never have thought that swearing could be boring.

Structured differently this could have been much more successful; where Silverton moves away from listing words and talks about aspects like how quickly swear words lose (or gain - as with racial slurs) their power over time, censorship and how many of our swearwords have been imported (or at least bastardized) from overseas it's fascinating but a missed opportunity for the level of research that's gone into it.

Stephen Coatsworth says

Fuck, I fucking enjoyed this fucking book. As a fucking round up and general bastardizing history of swearing it really was the shit.

Advait says

I didn't finish this book because it was a) very long and b) there were incessant amounts of profanity (which I was ready for, just not the weight with which the history of everyday curses came). Nevertheless, it made me think about the words which today, we take for granted, but back then they were still evolving and changing and it strikes me to know that it's not some random teenage kid who invented a word which exploded over the internet because that's all that seems to be happening these days when it comes to new words! :P Anyway, if you like history and cursing, this is the book for you!
