Have we always sworn like sailors? Has creative cursing developed because we can't just slug people when they make us angry? And if such verbal aggression is universal, why is it that some languages (Japanese, for instance) supposedly do not contain any nasty words? Throughout the twentieth century there seems to have been a dramatic escalation in the use and acceptance of offensive language in English, both verbally and in print. Today it seems almost commonplace to hear the f word in casual conversation, and even on television. Just how have we become such a bunch of cursers and what does it tell us about our language and ourselves? In Expletive Deleted, linguist Ruth Wajnryb offers an entertaining yet thoroughly researched, lighthearted look at this development, seeking to reveal the etymologies of various terms and discover how what was once considered unfit-for-company argot has become standard fare. Wajnryb steps outside the confines of English in her search for answers, exploring whether offensive words in English are mirrored in other languages and examining cultural differences in the usage of dirty words. For instance, why is it that in some languages you can get away with intimating that a person and his camel are more than just good friends, while pouring scorn on a mother's morals guarantees you a seat on the next flight out? An amusing and idiosyncratic look at the power of words to shock, offend, insult, amuse, exaggerate, let off steam, establish relationships, and communicate deep-felt emotions, Expletive Deleted is a must-read for anyone who loves language -- or has ever stubbed a toe.

My Personal Review:
There can be no more gleefully erroneous title for a book than Expletive Deleted: A Good Look at Bad Language (The Free Press) by Ruth Wajnryb. In Wajnryb's book, the expletives are decidedly not deleted, although in this review, proper fellow that I am, I will try to avoid the worst ones. Thus every member of George Carlin's infamous list of the seven major words you can't say on television is here, along with lots of others,
plus some guest appearances by swear words of other languages. There is plenty of sexual language, of course, but there is little titillating here. Though Wajnryb is a witty writer and puts in many good jokes of her own and others, this is essentially a serious study. Wajnryb, after all, is not a stand up comic like Carlin, but a linguist who sometimes has to explain, with as little apology as possible, that bad words are a proper subject of academic linguistic study. For instance, she writes that it might be mysterious that anyone would want "... to get into the grammatical knickers of cross-cultural swearing is anyone's bet, but linguists do things like that." She delves into details of that particular aspect of bad language, and many others, and entertains throughout.

Why do we swear? Wajnryb does not want to consider the question other than linguistically (not, say, psychologically), and sees swearing as a meaningful use of words, a use which has characteristics and patterns. In other words, it has meaning and it has uses. One use is catharsis. Stub your toe, and you are likely to say a swear word loudly, even if there is no one else at home. The same words that might be used for a stubbed toe, however, can be used against other individuals. This is abusive swearing, and it was examined by (of all people) the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. A completely different category of swearing (Coleridge didn't get around to this one) is social swearing. The more relaxed a group is, and the less mixing of sexes within in, the more likely the participants are to use swear words, not in shock or anger, but just as a sort of a social lubricant. It is playful and jokey. Many of Wajnryb's examples come from her native Australia, where they are much more likely to use the term "bloody" than we are, and an example of such swearing is an "infix", a technical linguistic term meaning that the swearword is inserted into another word for emphasis: one mate might reply to another when asked if he wants a drink, "Abso-bloody-lutely".

Among the most interesting aspects of swearing that Wajnryb describes is our clever capacity to get around it. We have rightly come to see as stupid the do-gooder efforts of such prigs as Thomas Bowdler, who wanted to make Shakespeare's words safe for children, but we still find ways to swear without swearing. As the taboo on "the" word has been reduced, so, too, has the number of asterisks risked in print; "f***" became "f**k", then "f*ck" and now is regularly written in full. Blanks are often used, as in "F--- ", so that the compound "blankety-blank-blank" can be spoken as a swear substitute. We also change words to their close kin, so someone might say "That's just too freaking bad," and he knows what he really means, as do his hearers, and he gets the approximate use of the word without incurring any penalty for actually using it. So, too, with "frigging," which has given birth to the delightful portmanteau word "frigamarole." "Bloody" itself may have derived from the religiously more improper "by Our Lady," so it is itself a euphemism, but it is now itself euphemized by "ruddy", "blooming", or "bleeding". When Eliza Doolittle exclaimed, "Not bloody likely!" in the 1914 production of _Pygmalion_, it was so scandalous and delightful that swearers commemorated it with the exclamation, "Not
"Pygmalion_ likely!" Even this sort of change would probably not gratify the president of a real organization, The Cuss Control Academy (who is the author of the book _Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cussing_). Those who campaign against swearing insist that swearers are not only naughty, they are lazy. Not so, demonstrates Wajnryb; her instructive book shows that swearing is something people have inventively worked on for centuries, and they use according to understandable linguistic principles. It's a damn fun book.

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