Let It Snow  By David Sedaris

Winters were frustratingly mild in North Carolina, but the year I was in the fifth grade we got lucky. Snow fell, and, for the first time in years, it accumulated. School was cancelled, and two days later we got lucky again. There were eight inches on the ground, and, rather than melting, it froze. On the fifth day of our vacation, my mother had a little breakdown. Our presence had disrupted the secret life she led while we were at school, and when she could no longer take it she threw us out. It wasn’t a gentle request but something closer to an eviction. “Get the hell out of my house,” she said.

We reminded her that it was our house, too, and she opened the front door and shoved us into the carport. “And stay out!” she shouted.

My sisters and I went down the hill and sledded with other children from the neighborhood. A few hours later, we returned home, surprised to find that the door was locked. “Oh, come on,” we said. I rang the bell, and when no one answered we went to the window and saw our mother in the kitchen, watching television. Normally she waited until five o’clock to have a drink, but for the past few days she’d been making an exception. Drinking didn’t count if you followed a glass of wine with a cup of coffee, and so she had a goblet and a mug positioned before her on the countertop.

“Hey!” we yelled. “Open the door. It’s us.” We knocked on the pane and, without looking in our direction, she refilled her goblet and left the room.

“That bitch,” my sister Lisa said. We pounded again and again, and when our mother failed to answer we went around back and threw snowballs at her bedroom window. “You are going to be in so much trouble when Dad gets home!” we shouted, and in response my mother pulled the drapes. Dusk approached, and as it grew colder it occurred to us that we could possibly die. It happened, surely. Selfish mothers wanted the house to themselves and their children were discovered years later, frozen like mastodons in blocks of ice.

My sister Gretchen suggested that we call our father, but none of us knew his number, and he probably wouldn’t have done anything anyway. He’d gone to work specifically to escape
our mother, and between the weather and her mood it could be hours, or even days, before he returned home.

“One of us should get hit by a car,” I said. “That would teach the both of them.” I pictured Gretchen, her life hanging by a thread as my parents paced the halls of Rex Hospital, wishing they had been more attentive. It was really the perfect solution. With her out of the way, the rest of us would be more valuable and have a bit more room to spread out. “Gretchen, go lie in the street.”

“Make Amy do it,” she said.

Amy, in turn, pushed it off on Tiffany, who was the youngest and had no concept of death. “It’s like sleeping,” we told her. “Only you get a canopy bed.”

Poor Tiffany. She’d do just about anything in return for a little affection. All you had to do was call her Tiff, and whatever you wanted was yours: her allowance, her dinner, the contents of her Easter basket. Her eagerness to please was absolute and naked. When we asked her to lie in the middle of the street, her only question was “Where?”

We chose a quiet dip between two hills, a spot where drivers were almost required to skid out of control. She took her place, this six-year-old in a butter-colored coat, and we gathered on the curb to watch. The first car to come along belonged to a neighbor, a fellow-Yankee who had outfitted his tires with chains and stopped a few feet from our sister’s body. “Is that a person?” he asked.

“Well, sort of,” Lisa said. She explained that we’d been locked out of our house, and, while the man appeared to accept it as a reasonable explanation, I’m pretty sure he was the one who told on us. Another car passed, and then we saw our mother, this puffy figure awkwardly negotiating the crest of the hill. She did not own a pair of pants, and her legs were buried to the calf in snow. We wanted to send her home, to kick her out of nature just as she had kicked us out of the house, but it was hard to stay angry at someone that pitiful-looking.

“We are wearing your loafers?” Lisa asked, and in response our mother raised a bare foot.

“I was wearing loafers,” she said. “I mean, really, it was there a second ago.”

This was how things went. One moment she was locking us out of our own house and the next we were rooting around in the snow, looking for her left shoe. “Oh, forget about it,” she said. “It’ll turn up in a few days.” Gretchen fitted her cap over my mother’s foot. Lisa secured it with her scarf, and, surrounding her tightly on all sides, we made our way home.
Every parent has been there, or will be there soon: the moment when your darling 5-year-old says one of the magic words that can transform a PG movie into an R, or earn an N.B.A. star a $25,000 fine.

How do you react? You can’t pretend, in 2016, that washing a kid’s mouth out with soap will make those words disappear: Lenny Bruce disabused our grandparents of those ideas half a century ago. And if everyone swears, why teach a child that it’s forbidden? But you can’t exactly just high-five the sailor-mouthed tot and send her back to kindergarten, either.

This doesn’t seem like an especially new problem. So why haven’t we yet figured out what to do about profanity?

Benjamin K. Bergen, a cognitive scientist who studies language, would say that’s the case because we don’t really know yet what counts as profanity and haven’t wanted to know. The F.C.C. won’t even tell us which words you can’t say during a broadcast; George Carlin remains the authority on that. And the scholars who know the most about language have mostly shunned dirty words as a subject.

Bergen’s new book, “What the F,” hopes to change that. In it, he insists that it’s totally legitimate to study profanity because of what it can teach us, in general, about language and the brain.
Take aphasias and coprolalia. When brain injuries or tumors render people speechless, they sometimes still swear, while Tourette’s syndrome can cause uncontrollable shouting of offensive slurs and obscenities. For comedy writers, that’s all catnip, but for Bergen, these phenomena reveal where language originates: When you pay attention to the affected brains, you learn that there’s a specific place where automatic, stubbed-toe expletives originate, distinct from the pathway, in the left hemisphere, that generates the rest of our talk.

Profanity, in Bergen’s skillful presentation, also illustrates how our brains edit speech, where we learn grammar and why words that mean similar things sometimes sound alike. “What the F” delivers on the surprise promised by its title, as what seems like a book about language taboos turns out to be a cognitive scientist’s sneaky — charming, consistently engrossing — introduction to linguistics.

Which isn’t to say that Bergen ever strays too far from swearing per se, or misses an opportunity to critique censorship. Doing parents everywhere a favor, he points out that despite what the American Academy of Pediatrics has said, there is no evidence that exposure to profanity harms children. And he argues strenuously “that there are better ways to deal with profanity than to suppress it,” even though he acknowledges evidence that one type of profanity — slurs directed at people because of their racial, ethnic and sexual identities — are measurably harmful.

Bergen synthesizes reams of his own and others’ research clearly and cracks some pretty decent professorial jokes, but as entertaining and enlightening as he is, he inadvertently saps a little of the joy out of dirty words. When he wants to describe profanity as beneficial for something other than teaching neuroscience, he reports on studies showing that people can keep their hands immersed in very cold water for longer if they shout swear words while they suffer. This sounds plausible, but it’s hardly what makes profanity so appealing or enjoyable.

What does? That’s the question that excites the historical linguist Michael Adams, who has previously devoted scholarly paeans not just to slang in general (which he calls “the people’s poetry”), but also to the linguistic innovations begot by “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” His new book, “In Praise of Profanity,” sets out to catalog the “many benefits — personal, social and aesthetic” of cursing a blue streak (and none of them are profanity’s ability to increase your tolerance for freezing water).

Adams ranges widely, energetically, from early modern English poetry to contemporary television, offering definitions, etymologies and theories of language development, all the while tracing patterns in the deployment of profanity in English. He credits it for promoting intimacy — among boy scouts, Tumblr users, bathroom-stall poets and many others. He admires it for giving voice to anger and disenfranchisement on “The Sopranos” (which, he calculates, averaged 82.788 swears per episode) and in James Kelman’s fiction. He takes pleasure in euphemisms, which end up sounding dirty themselves.

Who wouldn’t agree with Adams that profanity can be “useful, expressive and even artful”? It’s not a promising sign that he introduces one of his points by noting that “if you’re alive, you know this already.” He props up a few self-published antiprofanity kooks as straw men, but, really, anyone paying attention can name all kinds of art and social experiences to which profanity meaningfully contributes. Adams’s own examples,
while fair, do not seem more revealing than a dozen others that could be chosen at
random: Instead of Nellie McKay and “Californication,” say, why not substitute James
Joyce, Maggie Nelson and “Hamilton”? Or Henry Miller, “Game of Thrones” and
Claudia Rankine’s “Citizen”?

Adams rejects the stereotype of profanity as a refuge for “sloppy or lazy” writers
and speakers — he’s right, it’s not — but as a cultural critic, he’s sometimes guilty of
those faults himself. Of the comedian Sarah Silverman, he remarks, “She’s not a potty
mouth per se,” and, about her humor, that “profanity isn’t part of this address.” Perhaps
before making such pronouncements, Adams should have at least listened to her song
“Diva,” or read the first chapter of her memoir, “The Bedwetter”?

What Adams gets right is that we’re living in “The Age of Profanity”: It truly is a
wonderful time to swear, and to publish books like his and Bergen’s. There’s not much
risk, but one gets to feel brave and subversive for tossing around four-letter words with
abandon anyhow — shades of Bruce and Carlin, but without all the cops and
courtrooms. If Adams always seems to be patting himself on the back for being a
genuine, bow-tied lexicographer who is completely, 100 percent O.K. with cursing, well,
that’s the kind of thing you can get away with in the Age of Profanity.

This age won’t last, of course. Bergen predicts convincingly that the future of
swearing in America belongs to slurs, because these are already the words judged most
offensive, and they’re the ones most likely to be punished these days by sports leagues,
schools and offices. But he’s less than sanguine about this transition from the “good
dirty fun” of sexual profanities to hate speech. Adams, meanwhile, fears a future in
which “nothing will be obscene, nothing profane and nothing taboo.”

Without quite intending to, both authors remind us that if there’s still any
explosive charge left to be found in an F-bomb today, the parties who deserve our praise
and gratitude are those who continue to censor profanities: the court system and its
confused decisions about “fleeting expletives”; prude English teachers bowdlerizing
their required readings; newspapers like this one, still toeing a line that was trampled on
ages ago. And, finally, the beleaguered parent who tells her kids not to say dirty words in
public, without really knowing why they shouldn’t.

Those are the heroes keeping our profanities alive — because, when the last
prohibitions fade away, so will the power of the words.

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