

August 15, 2017 - Tamara Shopsin is an illustrator, graphic designer, writer, and part-time cook in her family's New York restaurant. She has published two memoirs, *Mumbai New York Scranton* (2013) and most recently, *Arbitrary Stupid Goal* (2017).



As told to Laurel Schwulst, 1029 words.

Tags: Writing, Design, Art, Process, Success.

Tamara Shopsin on the importance of publicity for books

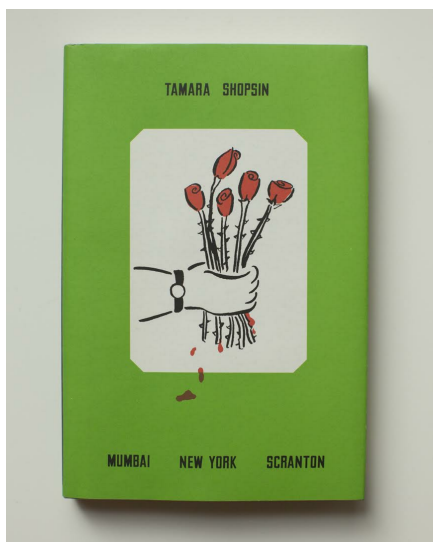
First, I have a very specific question. On your website, you position your four different roles: "author, designer, illustrator, cook" around a rectangle, one role per side. I noticed "cook" earned the upside-down position. Why?

This is because cooking is probably the least creative part of what I do. When I cook, it's muscle memory. It doesn't involve any brainstorming. I don't make the recipes, my dad does. There is some bit of creativity in the way I interpret my dad's recipes, but mostly I am trying to cook as good as my dad would.

You just published your second book, *Arbitrary Stupid Goal*. It focuses on your family's store and restaurant, *The Store*, and your dad Kenny Shopsin, who is behind its central personality and philosophy. Your dad has a very specific view on press. Can you tell me more?

I was raised to think that press was poisonous. Press would bring customers he didn't like into *The Store*. My dad was all about loving the customers and having the right kind of person: a person who is not just taking but giving and adding to the community.

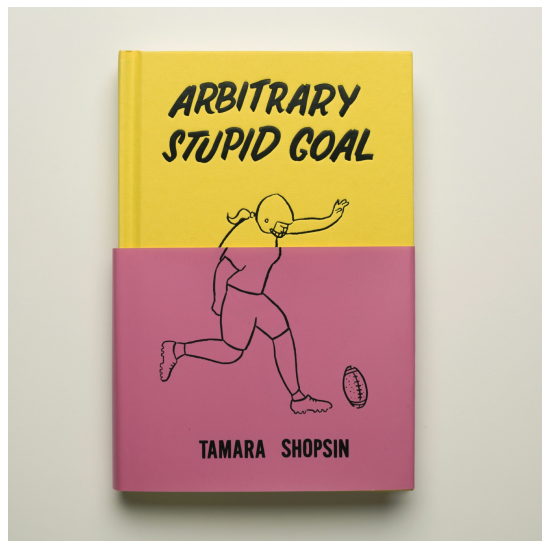
As I've grown up, it's gotten less poisonous. The response to my dad's cookbook, *Eat Me*, has been great. The customers that come in because of that book are lovely human beings. Thankfully we get these people regularly. I can think of no bad customers who have come in who have said, "Oh, I love that cookbook."



Tamara's first book, *Mumbai New York Scranton*, 2013.

With my first book, I had a really hard time with the press thing. It felt anti-me. I did it, but it was like dragging my feet, gritting my teeth. It felt wrong. I have a huge amount of guilt that I didn't do enough for that book. I didn't "bring it."

I realized that because publishing is having a very difficult time, if you're an author, you owe it to your publisher to do this final third leg. First you make the book, then you edit the book, and finally there's PR for the book: it's important.



Tamara's second book, *Arbitrary Stupid Goal*, 2017.

For my second book, I figured out a way the PR didn't make me feel weird. I made it my own. I created stupid little trailer videos, I made hand lettered fliers, and my husband Jason agreed to do a surprise slideshow at each event. Everything I did was in hope that the press would feel uniquely me; when someone responds to it, hopefully it's similar to how the *Eat Me* book worked with my dad.

Actually, the journalists I've met with have been so nice. I would hang out with them.

I think I'm just lucky. I've had a lot of luck this time around.

How did the tour go?

It was a mini tour. It started in New York. I have a very kind editor who only sent me to the places where I knew people: San Francisco and Los Angeles. I'm a very shy public speaker, so I think my editor was protecting me. Or maybe nobody wanted me. [laughs] It went really well.

How was the process of writing this book different than your first?

This book is so different. *Mumbai New York Scranton* is written in a perfect chronological order—each short chapter equals one day.

Arbitrary Stupid Goal hopscotches through time. It sort of ends where it starts. I wanted it to be overwhelming the way New York is. And it ended up being that overwhelming to write. I'm thankful for my editor Sean McDonald.

But *Mumbai New York Scranton* was overwhelming in its own New York sized way too. And at the end of the day looking back the process wasn't that different.

I'm used to working on rush illustrations that get done in a day. These books were both total beasts.

A Math Lesson on College Loans

By Madeleine May Kamin

THE Department of Education is looking for ways to make the federal loan program more efficient. It is looking for ways to make the federal loan program more efficient. It is looking for ways to make the federal loan program more efficient.



The government is a more efficient lender than banks.

It would seem to make sense to let the government lend money to students. The government has a long history of lending money to students. The government has a long history of lending money to students.

But it is not so simple. The federal loan program is a complex system. It is a complex system. It is a complex system. It is a complex system. It is a complex system.

When it comes to college loans, the government is a more efficient lender than banks.

Essentially, this is a new way of looking at the federal loan program. It is a new way of looking at the federal loan program.

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I Swear

Two new books examine the linguistics, neurology, sociology — and just plain fun — of cursing.

By Josh Lambert

EVERY PARENT HAS been there, or will be there soon: the moment when your darling 3-year-old says one of the magic words that can transform a PC parent into an ex.

WHAT IF? What happens if you say a bad word? What happens if you say a bad word? What happens if you say a bad word?

By Benjamin K. Bergen

221 pp. Basic Books, \$27.95

IN PRAISE OF PROFANITY

253 pp. Oxford University Press, \$17.95

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high-five the under-sung but not well-known to kindergarten, either. This doesn't seem like an especially new problem. So why haven't we yet found out what to do about profanity?

Benjamin K. Bergen, a cognitive scientist who studies language, would tell you that's the case because we don't really know yet what it is about profanity and haven't found a way to teach it. The F.C.C. won't even tell us which words you can't say during a broadcast. Some courts remain the authority on that. And the scholars who have the most to say about profanity are almost always dry as a desert.

Adams reports the stereotypical profanity as "hippy or hippy" writers and speakers — her right, it's not — but as a cultural critic, she sometimes finds it more than one, perhaps several, of these factors behind it. She is, of course, right. It's not just the hippies who are the most profane. It's also the hipsters, the hipsters, the hipsters, the hipsters, the hipsters.

What Adams gets right is that we're living in "The Age of Profanity." It is a wonderful time to write and to publish books like his and Bergen's. There's not much risk, but one gets to feel brave and subversive for naming around bad letter words with abandon anytime — shades of Freud and Carlin, but without all the rage and courtroom. If Adams always seems to be putting himself on the back for being a grammar-obsessed neurologist 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.



Profanity can tell us a lot about where language originates in the brain.

Who wouldn't agree with Adams that profanity can be useful, expressive and even useful? It's not a grammatical age



A selection of Tamara's illustrations for The New York Times from 2007, 2016, 2009, respectively.

I think *Arbitrary Stupid Goal* is also overwhelming in the way memory is overwhelming. It's organized non-linearly through fragments. Different things from different times are juxtaposed. You can't request your memories in a particular order like a meal. Memories are both stored and retrieved according to their own rules.

I also remember one time, when we were at a typography lecture, you said, "I need to be selective about what I remember. There's a lot of noise out there."

I don't remember saying that. But I believe it.

Even though I apparently said that, I don't think you can choose what you remember. For example, Jason sometimes sings this "Monchhichi song." I'm sure it's just taking up space in his brain. I love when he sings me this song. There's no reason for the Monchhichi song to be stuck in his brain, but I'm so glad it's there.

I wrote this book because there are many things I wanted to *remember* (personally) and many things I wanted *remembered* (by many people) about New York. I feel relieved, thinking, "Okay, that stuff is remembered. If I forget it, I can read it. And if somebody goes to Morton Street and thinks it's just a boring place, they can read my book and know it wasn't always a boring place."

I fear having so many memories in my brain that I can't find the one I want. I think that's my final memory answer.

You've said completing an illustration assignment feels like a solving puzzle or a riddle. Does writing feel like puzzle-solving too?

Right, completing an illustration feels like a solving a puzzle. But with writing, I think I'm creating puzzles for somebody else.

I love puzzles. Just for the record.

Tamara Shopsin recommends:

Obituary of Olive Yang

Plain Pleasures by Jane Bowles

Sesame seeds

Comedy of Julio Torres

2hoursaweek.org

Name

Tamara Shopsin

Vocation

Author, Illustrator, Designer, Cook

Fact

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Photo: Jason Fulford

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