

# Tamara Shopsin on the importance of publicity for books



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, 1043 words.

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

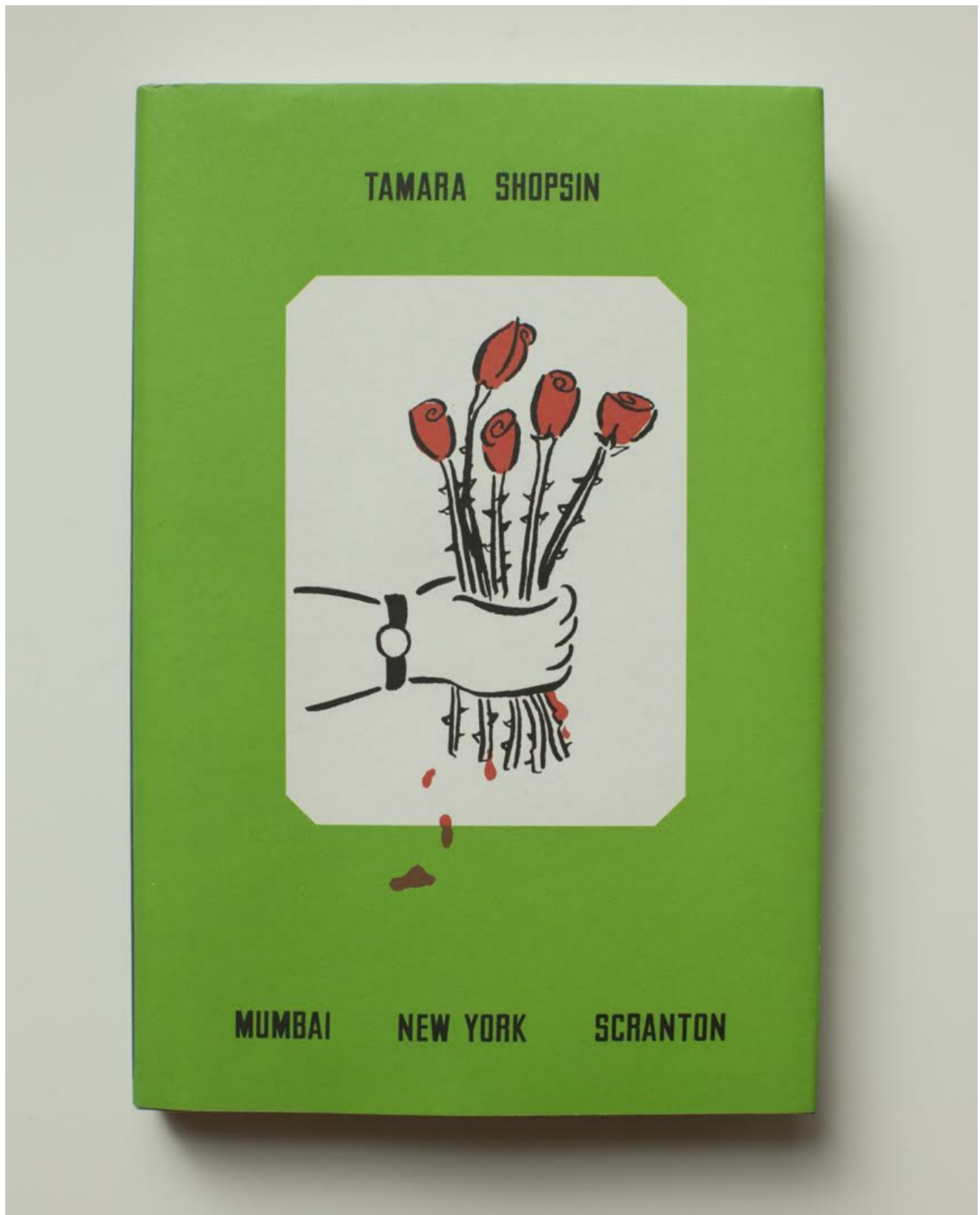
**First, I have a very specific question. On your website, you position your four different roles: "author, designer, illustrator, cook" around a rectangle, one role per side. I noticed "cook" earned the upside-down position. Why?**

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."

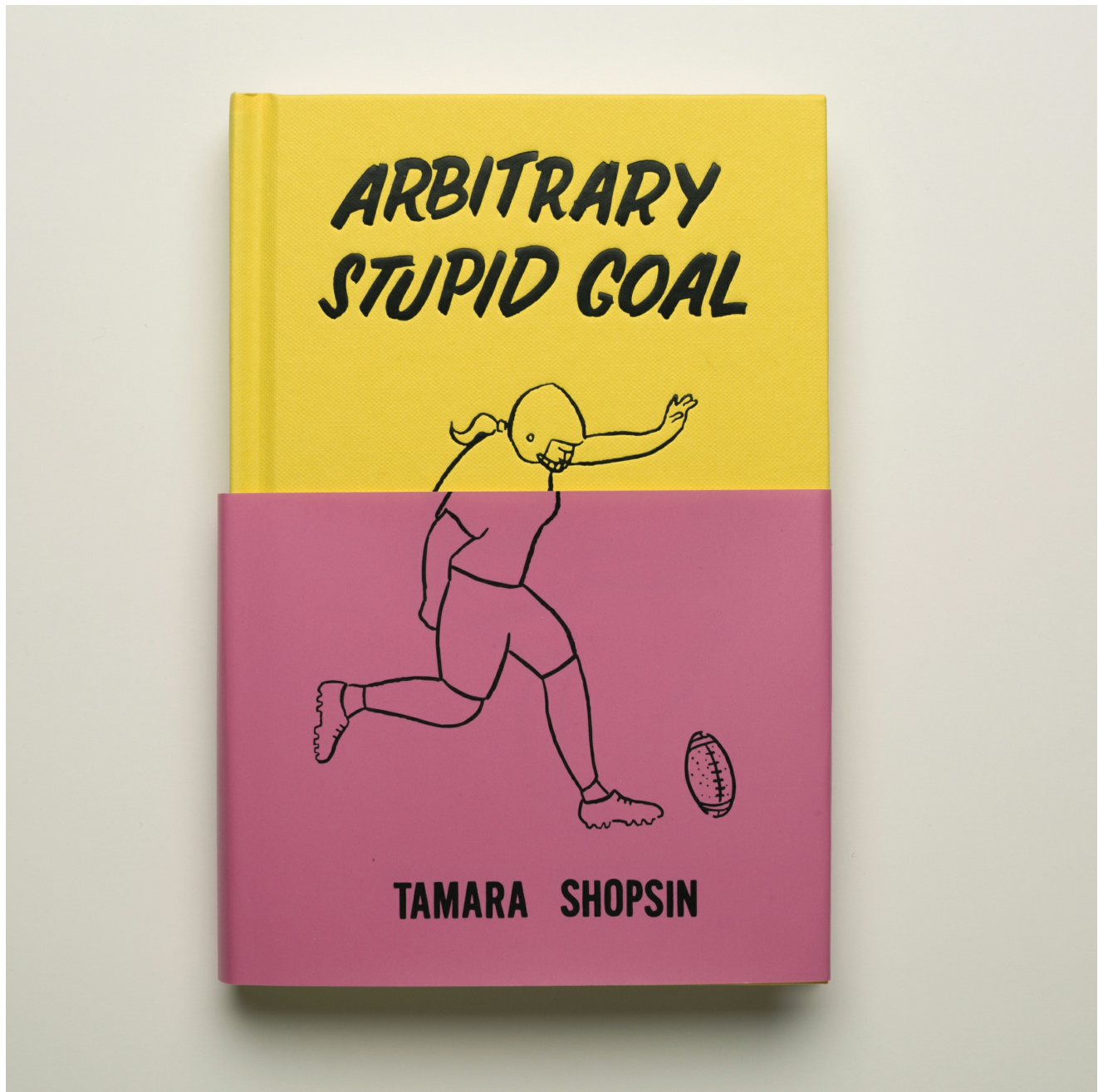


Tamara's first book, *Mumbai New York Scranton*, 2013.

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.





# 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 5-year-old says one of the magic words that can transform a PG movie into an R, or earn an N.R.A. star a \$25,000 fine.

How do you react? You can't pretend, in 2006, 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

**WHAT THE F?**  
What Swearing Reveals About Our Language, Our Brains, and Ourselves  
By Benjamin K. Bergen  
271 pp., Basic Books, \$27.99.

**IN PRAISE OF PROFANITY**  
By Michael Adams  
253 pp., Oxford University Press, \$17.95

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 aphasia 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, stubborn expletives originate, distinct from the

livers on the surprise promised by its title, as what seems like a book about language taboos turns out to be a cognitive scientist's sanity — charming, consistently engaging — 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, edges 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 papers not just to slang in general (which he calls "the people's poetry"), but also to the linguistic innovations begot by "Buff 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



Illustration by [unreadable]

**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 artful"? It's not a promising sign

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 "teetering ex-



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