

## **Why do we swear?**

*The history of swearing*

### **THEO**

Why do people swear? Where does it come from? How is it different across cultures? Can swear words be created? Can they have benefits to the human psyche?

### **THEO**

Melissa Mohr has a PhD in medieval and renaissance English literature. Studies profanity and is the author of the popular book *Holy Sh\*t, A Brief History of Swearing*. I want to see what she knows about swearing from a historical point of view, so I'm calling her at her home in Massachusetts.

### **THEO**

Hi Melissa.

### **MELISSA MOHR**

Hi Theo.

### **THEO**

So let's start with a broad question, Melissa.

### **MELISSA MOHR**

OK sounds good.

### **THEO**

So what do you think of the study of swearing can tell us about the history of the human race?

### **MELISSA MOHR**

I think swearing is a really interesting way to look at what has been important to a varied cultures throughout history. Swear words get their powers from our deepest taboos, and so it's really interesting to look at swear words because in looking at swear words you can really see what a culture cares about on a deep level. And so right now in contemporary America and Britain, our taboos revolve around race; whereas in the past, you know, in the Middle Ages a lot of swear words were religious.

### **THEO**

So go on then would you be able to give us some examples of interesting swear words that might sound a bit odd to us now but maybe from different periods of history?

### **MELISSA MOHR**

Yes well in English the sort of worst thing you could say in the Middle Ages was, you know, by God or Christ's body parts, so something like God's wounds, by God's nails, Christ's blood, and when you swore, by God's nails, say, you actually

were pulling the nails off Christ's body in heaven, which obviously was a terrible thing. You know, it sounds sort of bizarre to us today but in the Middle Ages was a tremendously awful thing. Interestingly in the Middle Ages we had most of our contemporary swear words, but they were not considered obscene. Like the Anglo Saxon's swear words are s\*\*t, f\*\*t, a\*\*e and b\*\*\*\*\*ks. And those were all 8th Century but they weren't censored or taboo. C\*\*t and f\*\*k are a little bit later but they also appear in people's last names, the names of flowers. There was a flower called c\*\*t whore. There were all kinds of f\*\*kers in the Middle Ages like John Le Fucker. There's a Roger F\*\*kebythenavele. These were all just people's last names! Swear words appear in English school books in the 15th Century, 15th and 16th Century, which I always think about when my son is taking French and I always look at him learning his vocabulary list and it's oh, you know, Bob makes a salad. But in the Middle Ages, people, young boys learning Latin would have words like they'd have to learn lines like I'm almost beshitten, turd in your teeth, I will kill you with my own knife, you're the biggest coward that ever p\*\*\*\*d.

So those were the words that were and were not obscene in the Middle Ages. In the Renaissance, it's starts to transition from religious to sexual swear words, and so all those words that they had in the Middle Ages but weren't obscene start to become obscene. And by the Victorian era, swearing looks much as it does today without the racial slurs. So all, you know bef\*\*ked, c\*\*t, all these words are extreme, extremely powerful, and totally unacceptable and polite discourse.

**THEO**

All right, thanks Melissa