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## Holy @&%\*! Author Steven Pinker Thinks We're Hardwired to Curse.

By Josie Glausiusz 08.21.07 | 2:00 AM

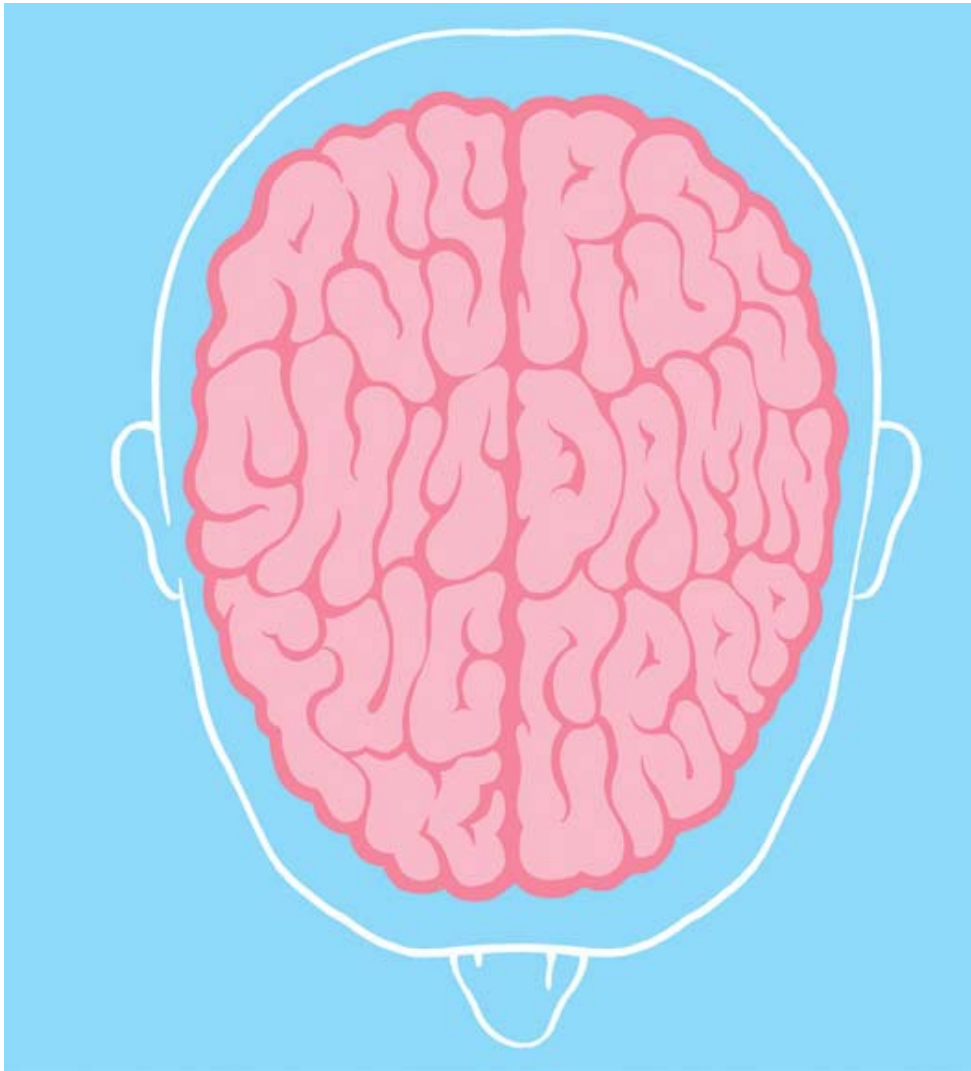


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Television," which explores sex and taboo language. We called the Harvard professor, ostensibly to discuss his new book but really in the hope that we could get him to talk dirty.

Pinker believes cursing is rooted in a primordial part of our brains, which means f-bomb-like utterances are not unique to

**For a nice Jewish** boy from Montreal, Steven Pinker has one helluva potty mouth. His latest work, *The Stuff of Thought* (out in September), is a fascinating look at how language provides a window into the deepest functioning of the human brain. Densely braided chapters cover everything from the way we speak about space and time to the meaning of baby names, but the most fun is in chapter 7, "The Seven Words You Can't Say on

Homo sapiens. "I wouldn't say that other mammals swear, per se, since they don't have the language," he explains, speaking in the academic tone of a spinster peering at a dog turd through pince-nez. "But I think the same parts of the brain are involved when you bump your head and yell, 'Oh fuck!' as when you step on a dog's tail and get a very sudden howl."

The experimental psychologist also takes a fresh look at the "poo-poo theory," which proposes that swearing was actually the first form of language. He points to the fact that brain-damaged patients who lose the power of articulate speech often retain the ability to curse like a sailor. "Since swearing involves clearly more ancient parts of the brain," Pinker says, "it could be a missing link between animal vocalization and human language."

"Cathartic swearing," analogous to the earsplitting shrieks of rats, cats, and monkeys, is part of a primal, embedded rage circuit, and likely evolved to startle and unnerve an attacker. The advent of language only added nuance. "If you want to intimidate someone," Pinker says, "then talking about sexual acts he does with his mother and advising him to engage in various other undignified or sexual activities is certainly one of the techniques that we use: 'Go fuck yourself, you motherfucker. Eat shit.'" Hell yeah!