

# INTRODUCTION



In early June of 2008, Dick Cheney—the imperial vice president who ran our country (into the ground) for eight years—admitted to reporters that he had Cheneyes on both sides of his family, “and we don’t even live in West Virginia.” His snide implication required no further explanation. Thanks to stereotypes of moonshine-swigging Hatfields going back more than a hundred years, many Americans still believe that Appalachian hillbillies are the products of consanguinity, or shared blood, between cousins, siblings, or parents and offspring. As a West Virginia native who has spent most of his adult life in other states, I’ve fended off countless brother-sister/mother-son jokes, and assured plenty of folks that my family tree does indeed fork at every generation. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, I never knew anybody who was his own stepdad. Yet, even today, I can’t shake that little childhood ditty rattling around in my head—a take-off on the popular pre-World War I song “Pretty Baby”—that we kids used to sing: “If your mother has a baby and the baby looks like you, motherfucker, motherfucker!”

Other than that, so far as I can recall, *motherfucker* wasn’t part of my working or playing vocabulary. Even after I went out into the world in the early 1960s, the word never came up unless somebody was telling a joke about black people. There was the one, for instance, where you’re sitting on an airplane as it’s taxiing down the runway. The hon-eyed Kingfish drawl of the pilot comes over the intercom: “Well, hello deh, folks, we got us a fine day, a *fine* day, yessah, no clouds, no wind, it look like it gonna be smooove all da way to St. Louie. So y’all just kick back and relax and enjoy yo’selfs while I tries to get dis motherfucker off da ground.”

This was just an updated minstrel routine about a slow-witted Negro—a “coon” in minstrel parlance—finding himself in a situation clearly over his head. The joke would have been pointless if the pilot had been white. (In her 1973 best-seller *Fear of Flying*, Erica Jong’s “So I keep concentrating very hard, helping the pilot fly the 250-passenger motherfucker” just doesn’t have the same impact.) The humor depended on the teller’s talent for dialect and the listener’s fragile sense of racial superiority, but if anyone were going to find it funny, the “trigger” word, the punch that defined the punch line, was *motherfucker*. Nothing else worked, because the joke played on the typical white listener’s assumption that *motherfucker* was an all-purpose baseline word of the black idiom. Its presence reinforced the centuries-old idea that blacks were uncouth, for who else would slip references of fucking their mothers into everyday speech? But today the word’s trigger value in that joke is practically meaningless, not only because minstrel humor sounds more dated than ever to reasonably educated people, but also because many whites now use *motherfucker* as liberally as blacks do.

Maybe you’ve noticed that Americans are regressing (some might say evolving) into a tonal English that’s short on vocabulary and long on gestures, inflection, and the need for context. Take the word *dude*. Originally a New York fashion term for men’s clothing in the 1880s—short for *subdued*—it became part of black hipster lingo in the 1920s and crossed over to white America in the form of “dude ranches” in the West, where city slickers paid good money to sleep in bunk houses and kick parched cow turds across the prairie. After California surfers picked it up in the 1950s, *dude* became the lingua franca of marijuana-puffing stoners who embraced repetitive and inarticulate utterances as if they were haiku. And so today we have a word with dozens of meanings, depending on how it’s spoken. As *New York Times* writer Dave Itzkoff put it not long ago, “In the right circumstances dude can be a stern admonition to a co-worker (‘Please stop tapping that pencil on your desk’), an entreaty to a teammate (‘Pass me the basketball!’), or a subtle nudge to a friend (‘Check out the scantily clad showgirls on that escalator!’).” In late 2007 Anheuser-Busch began a series of “dude” TV commercials for Bud Light beer, featuring an airhead (Jason Davis) and his pals dealing with each other and various situations with just a one-word vocabulary.

It’s doubtful that we’ll be seeing a Bud Light “motherfucker” commercial anytime soon, but the word has become even more elastic and all-encompassing than *dude*. Young suburban whites and old hippies say *dude*, but people from every age, race, and ethnicity say *motherfucker*. A lot of it has to do with the mass marketing of urban street culture

over the past forty years. In 1973, in a comic riff called “White Harlem,” George Carlin observed that if five young white guys and five young black guys start hanging out together, after a month the whites will be walking, talking, and standing like blacks, not the other way around, because black culture is more expressive and “in the moment.” Later on, in an interview, Carlin rephrased his point: “If you mix an Irish neighborhood and a black neighborhood, it won’t have any effect on the blacks at all. But in six months all the Irish kids will be finger-poppin’ and doing the boogie and saying, ‘Hey, what’s happening, motherfucker?’” That pretty much sums up what occurred all over America—and beyond.

What I’ve written here isn’t groundbreaking or revolutionary. An earlier book called *The F Word*, published by Random House, has already expounded at length on the word *fuck*. Its editor, Jesse Sheidlower, stated in his introduction, “[T]he increasing acceptance of fuck in American society is not a sign that its use should be encouraged—nor should this book be considered such a sign. Any sort of language has a time and a place appropriate to its use, and it is often unsuitable to use the word so thoroughly chronicled in this book. It would be as misguided to say that ‘fuck’ should be used everywhere as it would be narrow-minded to insist upon its suppression.” That’s exactly what I mean to say here. Just substitute *motherfucker* for *fuck*. Thank you, Mr. Sheidlower, for making my job easier.

But where we’ve taken “the MF word” to the next level is our use of its full, uneuphemized, unadulterated spelling in the title: *The Compleat Motherfucker*. Not MF, not Mofo, not Motherf%#\$, but Motherfucker. Yes, it’s going to limit the book’s mainstream coverage. In August 2008, when Crown published humorist Sandra Tsing Loh’s *Mother on Fire*, the *Los Angeles Times* omitted its subtitle—*A True Motherf%#\$@ Story About Parenting*—in its review, even though critic Susan Carpenter did at one point call Ms. Loh a “cunning linguist.” The message? In a family newspaper, a pun on the word for licking pussy is one thing, but a typographic bowdlerization for a mother-humping, mother-jumping, mother-bumping mother thumper is quite another. And we can be certain that the *Times* will not be extolling the considerable virtues and merits of *The Compleat Motherfucker* anytime soon.

But hey, we come to you with our principles, along with our subject word, fully intact, and how many other books can make that claim?