



reading room

Biblio

Dirty laundry, killing sprees, medical madness, girls with issues. BY CATHLEEN MEDWICK



▼ WILD CHILD

A felsty, fresh-mouthed waif, poet and performer Staceyann Chin

was born on the floor of a shack in rural Jamaica and batted from one brutal, Bible-thumping "auntie" to another after her mother fled the coop and her likely father, a Chinese-Jamaican businessman, denied his paternity. Chin's hurricane-strength memoir of social and sexual dislocation, *The Other Side of Paradise* (Scribner), might make her seem pathetic if she weren't so hell-bent on thriving. "It tickles me to think that from my very first breath, everyone expected me to stop breathing," she writes, laughing, as always, in the dark.

▼ RUNNING WITH BULLETS

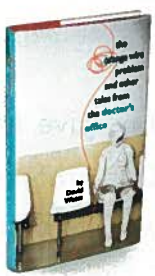


Bonnie Parker has star quality; she dreams of being a famous poet. Charming, baby-faced Clyde Barrow eases into criminality the way he slips into his natty suits. In a biography so intimate it feels like an act of ventriloquism, Paul Schneider uses a wealth of primary sources—oral and written testimony from relatives, lawmen, victims, and partners in crime—to go deep into the hearts of two spectacular Texas

criminals and the Depression-era America that engendered them. *Bonnie and Clyde: The Lives Behind the Legend* (Holt) ignites like a combustion engine, driving the narrative toward its gruesome climax. A cross between ballad and pulp fiction (plenty of BLAM! and POW!), this book is a close encounter with killers at play.

▲ CLEAN DREAMS

Thoreau's dirty secret? He took his laundry home to Mother. And he's not the only cleanliness fanatic to appear in *Dirt: The Quirks, Habits, and Passions of Keeping House* (Seal), an anthology edited by Mindy Lewis, who had an adversarial relationship with her vacuum. "For me," confesses Katy Brennan, "the California Closets Web site is online porn." Ann Hood, by contrast, has a fondness for dust bunnies. A tip from Alice Walker to her daughter, Rebecca: In hard times your house "must suggest a sparkling future. Room must be made for your ship to come in."



◀ TOUCH ME, HEAL ME

Forget about professional distance. Physician David Watts talks to his patients about love and pain (often indistinguishable), about immortality and the crying needs of "the soft animal of the body."

As he operates, he probes "these windless chambers inhabited by ghosts of worry, ghouls of sorrow and anxiety." And in *The Orange Wire Problem* (Iowa), he tells funny, horrible, bewildering true tales of mismanaged care and health insurance insanity. As a patient himself, he reports from the business end of a colonoscope. Take a dose of philosophy, buffered by humanity, and call him in the morning.

▶ HEARTSTRINGS

Adagio, accelerando—words that mark the way music moves through time and, in Eva Hoffman's acute new novel, *Appassionata* (Other Press), describe the dynamic of human emotion, the subtle "vocabulary of the soul." Isabel Merton is a brilliant concert pianist, a medium who transmits the passions of Mozart and Chopin through her fingertips. Unmoored from her marriage, on tour in Europe, she meets Anzor, a charismatic Chechen exile. Their romance is hardly unexpected, but Hoffman's eloquent insights into "the intimate history of violence" ring startlingly true.



▼ SOUTH AFRICAN GOTHIC



Don't look for easy sentiment in Lynn Freed's fiction. What you'll find instead is unblinking insight into the unruly nature of passion and the subtle imperatives of class. Her latest novel, *The Servants' Quarters*

(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), is set in post-World War II South Africa, where a girl named Cressida hurtles into adolescence under the unnerving eye of Mr. Harding, the brooding, disfigured, oddly compelling owner of Harding's Rest. Newly impoverished, Cressida and her harsh, flamboyant mother are now living in the servants' quarters of Harding's Rest, where shadows of Nazi atrocities seep into Cressida's dreams and social insecurity brings out the devil in her. A story of civilization and savagery, brisk as a strong cup of tea. **D**