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# CURRENT BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTEWORTHY NONFICTION

## Bath and Body Works

By Winifred Gallagher

IN THE WELL-SCRUBBED MODERN WEST, it's easy to assume that what constitutes personal cleanliness is an objective matter. Upon arriving in India, however, I found that my spotless hotel's bathroom wasn't furnished with the familiar toilet and roll of paper but with a "squatter," a spigot, and a pitcher. As I absorbed the realization that the world is divided between wipers and washers—each group convinced of its method's superiority—I also saw that in India, as in many places, people have long been concerned not just with cleanliness, which focuses on the body, but with purity, which also involves the soul, or at least one's religious and cultural status. Thus, an observant Hindu fresh from the shower may be considered ritually impure if he or she previously touched something regarded as unclean.

Such variations on the theme of what's "clean" and what's "dirty" are important to the history of Homo sapiens in general and of the personal care of the body in particular. Virginia Smith, a British historian and fellow of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, begins *Clean*, her survey of hygiene's "material empiricism" and purity's "immaterial

imagination," at the beginning, observing that our grooming rituals are rooted in those of our primate ancestors. Indeed, well into the 17th century, artists depicted wealthy women apparently proudly delousing their children, much as monkeys pick their progeny's nits—perhaps a skill worth cultivating again in this era of resurgent lice and bedbugs.

By the Eurasian Bronze Age (4000 BC), says Smith, our forebears had progressed to *ellu*—a Mesopotamian word for a new kind of "beautiful cleanliness," which involved lots of "pampering." Then as now, the rich indulged themselves with numerous beauty products and rituals—baths, facials, hairdressing, cosmetics, mani-pedis (manicures and pedicures, for the uninitiated). Good grooming was an increasingly important sign of status. Egypt was the first capital of cleanliness deluxe, and its practices of mummifying and making up the dead are with us still.

**CLEAN:**  
A History of Personal  
Hygiene and Purity.  
By Virginia Smith.  
Oxford Univ. Press.  
457 pp. \$30

**THE DIRT  
ON CLEAN:**  
An Unsanitized  
History.  
By Katherine  
Ashenburg. North Point  
Press. 358 pp. \$24

As anyone who's seen *Troy* or *Ben-Hur* knows, ancient Greeks and Romans enjoyed being clean and getting that way. In *The Dirt on Clean*, Toronto-based journalist Katherine Ashenburg begins her chatty history with ablutions in the *Odyssey*. The Greeks not only brought us hygiene, which made cleanliness part of healthfulness, but also their sociable public baths. Taking this concept and running with it, the Romans created baths where, says Ashenburg, you could have "sex, a medical treatment, and a haircut" in one convenient stop.

In England, Elizabeth I declared that she bathed once a month "whether I need it or not."

With the fall of Rome and the spread of Christianity, baptism was in, and bathing—both public and private—was out.

Like its founder, the early Christian church prized spiritual purity over physical cleanliness, which facilitated "sins of the flesh." Thus, a Christian ascetic who crawled with vermin and reeked of body odor was venerated as a paragon of virtue. (For their part, pious pagans and Jews were appalled that Jesus had touched the impure, including lepers, strange women, and even the dead, and that his followers venerated saints' corpses and graves.) For centuries, Ashenburg says, married Jewish women of menstruating age were among the cleanest people; ritual purity mandated thorough monthly baths.

Cleanliness improved during the Middle Ages—particularly after the Crusaders imported the Turkish bath. Medieval courtly love encouraged dainty ways, and Saturday baths became commonplace. Public bathhouses were popular and well run, Smith says, and expectant mothers even used them for "baby showers," or festive "lying-in baths," with their female friends. Paris and London had many of these jolly communal "stews"—a term later applied to houses of prostitution.

The real Dark Ages of cleanliness began in

the 16th century. Fear of disease helps explain why people just stopped bathing—indeed, doing any meaningful washing. Ashenburg blames the plague, which produced so many corpses that they were layered in mass graves "just as one makes lasagne," wrote one Florentine. Smith thinks the likelier culprit is syphilis, which by the 16th century was both virulent and prevalent. Clueless doctors declared that bathing was dangerous, because it opened the skin to the malign "vapors" thought to cause much illness. The church chimed in that the baths encouraged concupiscence, and the stews were closed. From the mid-16th century well into the 19th century in much of Europe, a person could go from cradle to grave without a good wash. As Ashenburg says, "Water was the enemy, to be avoided at all costs."

Most of the deliciously dreadful things you know about how dirty people used to be are drawn from this lengthy Age of the Great Unwashed. Even aristocrats were filthy and louse ridden beneath their jewels, brocades, and furs. In England, Elizabeth I declared that she bathed once a month "whether I need it or not." In Spain during the Inquisition, Ashenburg says, Jew and Muslim alike could be condemned by the frightful words "was known to bathe." Nor was sanitation prized in France, where feces left in the halls of Versailles were carted away once a week. Instead of bathing, smelly, grimy people changed into fresh linens, which became a consumer craze among the Dutch. When John Wesley famously remarked, in 1791, that "cleanliness is, indeed, next to godliness," he wasn't talking about the body, but about clothes.

Rising above the miasma of this long, dirty era, Smith examines the ways in which, as Europe slowly moved toward the Enlightenment, various social movements interpreted cleanliness according to their own lights. In 17th-century Britain, for example, the combined influences of

# PEARS' SOAP



· a Specialty for Children ·

**Rub-a-dub-dub.** By the late 19th century, cleanliness was an American gospel.

reforming Protestant sects and neoclassicism's interest in Greek hygiene associated the ideas of "coolness, cleanness, and innocence." Cold air, vegetables, and baths were in vogue, and the last became a hallmark of the Englishman.

By the 19th century, the industrial revolution was spewing its soot and smoke onto the newly crowded cities, which grew filthier than ever. Queen Victoria's beloved Prince Albert himself died of typhoid, one of the new plagues that accompanied urbanization, and British reformers made sanitation a political issue. Cities were gradually equipped with sewage systems, and their dwellings with indoor plumbing. These amenities often benefited the average citizen before the aristocrat, who preferred to wash in isolation. As late as

the 1920s, an English lady, who bathed in her boudoir's portable tub, could say, "Bathrooms are only for servants."

By the late 19th century, the United States was much cleaner than Europe. Towns and cities in the young country were newer and easier to equip with municipal sanitation and water systems. Americans liked innovation, and hotels proudly advertised showers and flush toilets as tourist attractions. As more young women took jobs in offices and factories, the shortage of servants sped the introduction of new cleanliness technology into the average home. In an age of class upheaval and upward mobility, the black educator Booker T. Washington preached the "gospel of the toothbrush" to his students at the Tuskegee Institute.

When it comes to modern cleanliness, Ashenburg's account is more zestful than Smith's. Between 1900 and 1950, Ashenburg explains, advertising upped the ante by

insisting that to be clean you needed not just soap and water but new inventions such as deodorant and mouthwash. "Feminine products," as modern drugstores still call them, deserve a book of their own. Who knew that the first disposable sanitary pad for women evolved from a material used to bandage soldiers' wounds during World War I? Long before those enigmatic Modess ads that featured the word "Because" and an elegant woman in an evening gown, the Kotex brand was promoted with illustrations showing female nurses and male soldiers.

Although Smith calls modernity the "most grimly fascinating" and best documented era in the history of cleanliness, her heart is clearly back in the good old days of the Egyptians and Puritans. She does make the inter-

esting point, however, that even the reader's notions of cleanliness have probably changed over his or her lifetime. Pollution has become the new filth, for example, and the "green" movement upholds the new purity.

Smith and Ashenburg both end on the same note: *Plus ça change*. . . . According to one survey, half of the French still don't bathe daily, Ashenburg drolly remarks, but they continue to lead Europe in the consumption of perfumes and cosmetics. Despite hundreds of new "antibacterial" products, Smith notes that we're as worried about cleanliness as our distant, far dirtier ancestors—actually more so. Indeed, Ashenburg says, the only certainty is that a century from now, people will look back on our era "in amusement if not amazement at what passed for normal cleanliness."

Both histories of cleanliness necessarily offer much of the same information, but their presen-

tations may determine where each is shelved.

*Clean* is the more complete and academic, replete with the subheadings favored by university presses, 80 pages of notes, and Smith's politically correct disclaimer—"I am unashamedly looking for universal trends, but do not claim to be anything other than a local European (in fact a British) historian." Ashenburg's style is livelier, and her text is riddled with gossipy anecdotes about the rich and famous. Whatever you think of Napoleon's politics, it's fun to know that he bathed daily for two hours.

In the end, readers may decide to keep *Clean* in the study and *The Dirt on Clean* in the bathroom.

WINIFRED GALLAGHER is the author of *House Thinking: A Room-by-Room Look at How We Live* (2006), *It's in the Bag: What Purses Reveal—and Conceal* (2006), and *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions* (1993), among other books. She has written for numerous publications, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New York Times*.

## Everybody's Business

By Gary Alan Fine

AH, BRITNEY. THE LATEST SUPERNOVA among our tabloid stars. In a culture awash in celebrity, it's easy to assume that the study of reputation is confined to the rich and the famous and their infamous sibs, too. As sociologist Charles Horton Cooley remarked a century ago, societies need the famous to define shared values. They provide us with a common set of references, and a map of the achievements that we, as a community, believe are noteworthy. Yet reputation belongs to us all, celebrity and ordinary citizen alike.

Reputation is an essential feature of the human condition. People care how others see them. A sterling reputation is, as Shakespeare recognized, worth more than a purse of gold. A bad one is a dark stain that limits relationships, rewards, and options. And because oth-

ers may assign us a status that differs considerably from how we wish to be known, the reputation domain can be a hard world. That's one reason the middle school years—when our reputations are being formed—can be so brutal.

Two recent books by law professors assess the complexities of reputation—past and future—particularly as they relate to another human need: privacy. Lawrence Friedman, of Stanford University, focuses on how American law in the 19th century became a tool by which courts

### GUARDING LIFE'S DARK SECRETS:

Legal and Social Controls Over Reputation, Propriety, and Privacy.

By Lawrence M. Friedman. Stanford Univ. Press. 348 pp. \$29.95

### THE FUTURE OF REPUTATION:

Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy on the Internet.

By Daniel J. Solove. Yale Univ. Press. 247 pp. \$24