

MAN ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF W.C. FIELDS Simon Louvish (Norton, \$29.95) This dogged biography of the irascible, bulbous-nosed comic sweeps away the myth of his hardscrabble youth, cruel father, and life as a bitter, unfriendly star steeped in isolation and alcohol. (Well, the bit about the alcohol is true.) What remains—a normal childhood, a happy marriage that turns sour, friendships with fellow artists, a string of girlfriends—certainly isn't as entertaining, but at least it's accurate. And *Man on the Fly-*

ing Trapeze does what an artist's biography should do: It makes you itch to view his work again (in this case, classics like *The Bank Dick* and *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break*). **B** —Michael Giltz