undercover

THE AMISTAD REBELLION is the most famous successful slave uprising in American history. On July 2, 1839, slaves being transported from Sierra Leone to Cuba rose up against their captors and — armed with cane knives — took control of the ship. The slaves, led by Joseph Cinque, ordered the vessel's navigator to return them to their homelands, but instead he piloted the ship north along the American coast, where the ship was captured near Long Island. The detainees were imprisoned in New Haven, Conn., where their famous trial took place. Eventually the case reached the Supreme Court, which in 1841 ruled in favor of the rebellious slaves and ordered them freed. In a country that wouldn't see the end of legalized slavery for another 25 years, the ruling was nothing short of a landmark.

University of Pittsburgh history professor Marcus Rediker is the author of several books on Atlantic maritime history, including The Slave Ship: A Human History (2007). Rediker's latest work, The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom, acts as a counterpoint to the tragedy, horror and hopelessness documented in his earlier book. The story of Amistad has been told before in books and, of course, Steven Spielberg's film of the same name, which garnered several Academy Award nominations. Those previous accounts of the rebellion and court case, however, told the story from the perspective of the Americans involved. As Rediker notes, "The drama of the courtroom has eclipsed the original drama that transpired on the deck of the schooner. The American actors — abolitionists, attorneys, judges, and politicians — have elbowed aside the African ones whose daring actions set the train of events in motion." His book returns the focus to the Africans themselves.

During their 27 months in Connecticut, the captives met many thousands of people and were able to tell not only the story of the uprising aboard the ship, but also relate their life stories, which in turn appeared in detailed newspaper accounts, abolitionist pamphlets and court documents. Rediker takes full advantage of this wealth of information, creating clear portraits of the leaders of the uprising — Cinque, Faquorna, Moru and Kimbo — as well as the other captives. The history of Amistad may have been told before, but in The Amistad Rebellion, Rediker tells the story from the point of view of the people at its center, and for the first time, readers are given the full account of the bravery and sacrifice of people who, in the intervening years, have become more symbol than flesh and blood human beings. The Amistad Rebellion is a true accomplishment.

CRIMES OF A SMALLER, more local variety are at the heart of Gangs and Outlaws of Western Pennsylvania. If you're looking for tales of shootouts, prison escapes, daring robberies, murders and kidnappings, then you've come to the right place. "[W]e chose to focus on the more brazen outlaws and gangs that tended to commit violent and sometimes public robberies (in the style of John Dillinger). These were the kinds of outlaws that led local historian C. Wallace Abel to label the area the 'Wild, Wild East.'

White and Hassett do not disappoint either. Don't let the slim page count fool you — there's a body count here high enough for a James Ellroy epic. The authors do a fine job of not only providing biographies for these nefarious felons, but also of sorting out fact from myth and supplying even-handed (but no less lurid) accounts of local legends like the Biddle Boys and The Flathead Gang. We've also treated to a few lesser-known criminals, like The Cooley Gang, which robbed and tortured its way across Fayette and Somerset counties, and Irene and Glenn, the Keystone State's own Bonnie and Clyde. It's a real page-turner in the best spirit of the old-style police gazettes.

The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom
by Marcus Rediker
Viking: $27.95

Gangs and Outlaws of Western Pennsylvania
by Thomas White and Michael Hassett
The History Press: $19.99

For more book reviews and lectures, go to pittsburghmagazine.com/culture

speak up

EILEEN MYLES, March 21 / Legendary underground author Eileen Myles visits the Pitt campus for the Pittsburgh Contemporary Writers Series. A poet, fiction writer and journalist, Myles has published 19 books, including Chelsea Girls and Cool for You. Inferno: A Poet's Novel won a Lambda Book Award for Best Lesbian Fiction in 2011. In her rich and varied life, Myles also oversaw the famed St. Mark's Poetry Project in New York in the mid-1980s and even ran for president in 1992 as a write-in candidate. (Trick Fine Arts Auditorium, Oakland; pgwritseries.wordpress.com)

TRIO OF READINGS PRESENTED BY LOCAL SERIES
As we usher out winter, now is the perfect time to see what's happening in the local writing scene. This month, there are plenty of great readings offered by local running literary series:

» Start off with a March 2 visit to Most Wanted Gallery for an evening of acrobatic words in the latest installment of Word Circus, presented by the Chatham MFA program; the event features poetry, fiction and nonfiction from Laura Drumm and others. (5015 Penn Ave., Garfield; most-wantedfineart.com)

» On St. Patrick's Day, the Carnegie Library Sunday Poetry & Reading Series hosts James Arthur, author of Charms Against Lightning and current Hodder Fellow at Princeton University. (4400 Forbes Ave., First Floor Quiet Reading Room, Oakland; carnegielibrary.org)

» Round out the month with the March 21 event by TNY Presents ... , the reading series arm of The New Yinzer. Wordslingers Sean Hill, Mike Knapps and Karen Dietrich will grace the stage at ModernFormations Art Gallery. (4919 Penn Ave., Garfield; tnyresents.blogspot.com)