



Sir Ranulph Fiennes

In between making the world's longest unsupported polar journey, the first unsupported crossing of the Atlantic and running seven marathons on seven continents in seven days, renowned explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes has found the time to write more than ten books, including a highly acclaimed biography of Captain Robert Falcon Scott

1. *The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien (Collins, £6.99)
Wonderful entertainment

2. *Hitler's Willing Executioners* by David J Goldhagen (Abacus, £12.99)
Horifying, but it should be read

3. *Earth to Earth* by John Cornwell (Out of print)
Riveting, true-life death of three 80-year-old siblings in a Devon time warp

4. *Survival of the Fittest* by Mike Stroud (Yellow Jersey Press, £8.99)
Advice on how to keep fit and why we should, by an expert

5. *The Life of My Choice* by Wilfred Thesinger (Flamingo, £10.99)
Autobiography of our greatest desert traveller

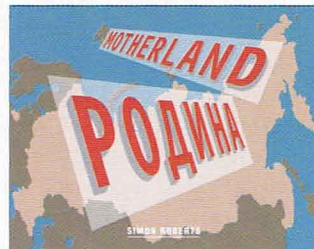
6. *The Coldest March* by Susan Solomon (Yale University Press, £10.95)
Confounds the character assassins' lies about Scott

7. *Roget's Thesaurus* (Penguin, £7.99)
Shows the richness of our language

8. *Kidnapped* by Robert Louis Stevenson (Penguin Books, £2)
Great tale, great atmosphere

9. *The Home of the Blizzard* by Douglas Mawson (Birlinn, £12.99)
The death-defying travels of a great polar man

10. *Mao: The Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday (Vintage, £9.99)
Makes you thankful that Maoism died with Mao



Motherland
by Simon Roberts
Chris Boot, hb, pp191, £25

Simon Roberts finds beauty in the oddest places: an outdoor market set against bombed-out buildings in Grozny, a rusty old bread factory in Oryol, the departure lounge at St Petersburg airport. Roberts spent a year travelling across Russia, from Siberia to Kaliningrad, through the northern Caucasus and along the Volga River. The pictures he took along



the way have been collected into a superb book of photographic journalism. Roberts' pictures are intimate, they are technically accomplished, and they carry an extraordinary narrative charge. You immediately sense the stories behind the tramps and the wrestlers, the desolate hotel rooms, or the smiling waitress (earning some extra roubles to support her academic studies) at a café in Magadan. Unfortunately, the book also

wants to be some sort of meditation on the Russians' love for their motherland – a rather vague, hackneyed notion, hammered home by the inclusion of weighty (and horribly distracting) quotations by the likes of Chekhov and Tchaikovsky. Roberts should let his pictures speak for themselves as a wonderful portrait of contemporary Russia: a diverse place that blends frailty and optimism like few others. Indeed, aside from those



irritating quotations and a slightly pompous afterword, it's the real, messy Russia that Roberts has documented. The reader doesn't need to hear his thoughts on Russia's "nebulous spirituality": far better to simply look at his hypnotic pictures of Armenian construction workers, hideous apartment blocks and octogenarians cruising down the Volga. Such pictures ought to be mundane; Roberts make them luminous. How he has managed



to make every last photo memorable is debatable, but he has, and if there has been a better photographic exploration of Russia in recent years, I haven't seen it.
Jonathan Wright

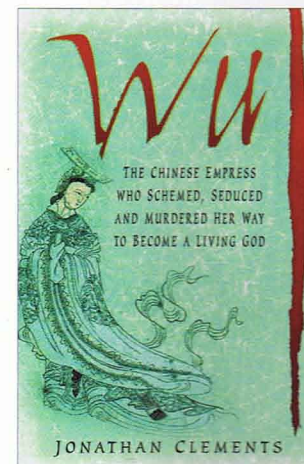


Ancient Rome on Five Denarii a Day
by Philip Matyszak
Thames & Hudson,
hb, pp144, £12.95

There's a simple premise behind this book: it takes the Rough Guide template to navigating through a foreign city and applies it in a historical context. And very well it works too, with various tables offering information of interest to the idle tourist, wandering around Rome in 200 AD (the main aqueducts; the most common types of gladiator), highlighting the local recipes ("If you have no dormouse, gerbil or hamster will do"), and drawing the out-of-towner's attention to the entertainments on offer, from the Circus Maximus (occasionally used for the execution of



Christians) to the local brothels (most of which open at 2.30 in the afternoon). There are plenty of quotations too, from Cicero, Horace, Tibullus et al; carefully chosen to fit the context, and nicely down to earth ("You have to produce some goods that retail with a 50 per cent mark up," Juvenal explains to those not used to big city prices). Local superstitions are explained – it's bad luck to be on a boat at the end of the month, apparently – and if it can read at times as if it were itself translated from the Latin ("Piracy has diminished considerably since its heyday during the last years of the Roman republic, but not every ship is beyond reproach!"), it nevertheless looks like a potentially useful text for sixth-formers (especially as it goes into some detail as to activities in those brothels). I don't know if this is part of a series, but I've no doubt it soon will be.
Mick Herron



Wu: The Chinese Empress Who Schemed, Seduced and Murdered Her Way to Become a Living God
by Jonathan Clements
Sutton Publishing, hb, pp240, £20

A faithful biography of Wu, Jonathan Clements warns us upfront, would be so obscene as to be impossible to read out on the radio. Great. It's tempting to flip through in search of the dirty bits, but that would be to miss out on much illuminating background detail. Wu arrived to be a "palace lady" of the Taizong emperor just as prophecies were appearing that a woman would take control of the Tang dynasty. Luckily for her, Taizong didn't immediately associate this with his 'Fair Flatterer', although he might have done if he'd known she'd take up with his son before his body was cold.

Wu's career, after a faltering start, soon went stratospheric: rivals were imprisoned on false charges, hacked to pieces and dumped in vats of wine; her family was exiled; cats were banished from the royal palace (she didn't like them); and her sexual conduct became the subject of innumerable rumours, although as Clements ably argues, her true "unnameable perversion" might well have been monogamy. She also managed to hijack the Feng-Shan, one of the most important religious ceremonies in history, and become sovereign ruler of China. Not bad for the daughter of a timber merchant. As in previous works, Clements provides a useful chronology and an appendix on his subject's appearances in film and literature. It's with such touches – along with his very readable approach – that Clements is making this period of Chinese history his particular domain. It's hard to see that anyone could do it much better.
Mick Herron