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 Land of the Aleuts by JRR Tolkien (Collins, £6.99)
   Wonderful entertainment.

2. Hitler’s Willing executioners by David Goldhagen (Abacus, £12.99)
   Harrowing, but it should be read.

3. Earth to Earth by John Cannell (Out of print)
   Revealing, true-life stories of the 85-year-old sailor in a Decree time war.

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

5. The Life of My Choice by Wilfrid Theisgen
   (Plantinga, £10.99)
   Autobiography of one of Britain’s top athletes.

6. The Coldest March by Susan Solomon
   (Yale University Press, £16.95)
   CONTINUES the conclusion of his previous work.

7. Roger’s Travels
   (Penguin, £7.99)
   Shows the richness of our long passing.

8. Kittened by Robert Louis Stevenson
   (Penguin Books, £2)
   Great late, great atmosphere.

9. The Name of the Wind by Patrick Rothfuss
   (Gollancz, £12.99)
   The death-defying terrors of a great paladin man.

10. Mao: The Unknown Story by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday
    (Vintage, £9.99)
    You make the thank that Mason died with Mao.

Motherland
by Simon Roberts

Chris Boot, hb, pp191, £25

Simon Roberts finds beauty in the odddest places: an outdoor market set against bombad-out buildings in Gronzy, a rusty old bread factory in Oryol, the departure lounge at St Petersburg airport. Roberts spent a year travelling across Russia, from Siberia to Kaliachog, 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 weavers, the desolate hotel rooms, or the smiling waiter (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 finality and optimism like few others.

Ancient Rome on Five Denari a Day
by Philip Mattyszak

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 chapters offering information of interest to the idle tourist, wandering around Rome in 200 AD (‘the main aqueducts; the most common types of gladiators’), highlighting the local recipes (“if you have no dormouse, gerbil or hamster will do”), and drawing the out-of-town’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 (“Polya 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.

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 publishing of Wu. Jonathan Clements warns us upfront, would be so obscure as to be impossible to read on the radio. Great. It’s tempting to flip through in search of the dusty 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.

Mao: The Unknown Story
by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday

(We described the death-defying terrors of a great paladin man.)