



BOOKS

GOOD READS

The best books for children of all ages. By *Richard Hopton*

Reading is the foundation of education, and its importance is reflected in the vast and varied output of books for children. It covers everything from touchy-feely board books for babies to sophisticated stories for young adults, catering for all tastes and abilities. In an age in which our children are hypnotised by screens, it has never been so vital to get them reading – anything and everything.

The Highland Falcon Thief ❶ by MG Leonard and Sam Sedgman (*Macmillan*, £6.99) is a gentle detective story, told with old-fashioned, jolly gusto for eight to 12 year olds. Set on a steam train as it puffs through the Scottish Highlands, it combines the spirit of Agatha Christie with the youthful, hearty enterprise of the Swallows and Amazons. The plot is laced with clues to keep the reader alert and there are some excellent passages explaining the workings of steam locomotives. It's fun and stimulating.

Likewise, Sara Pennypacker's **Here in the Real World** ❷ (*Harper Collins*, £7.99), also for the eight to 12 age range, is the story of Ware, an American boy who, consigned by his parents to municipal day care during the school summer holidays, retreats into an imaginary medieval world of knights and castles, of moats, battlements and barbicans. A demolished church becomes the dreamy, self-sufficient Ware's kingdom and with the help of Jolene, an energetic and practical girl he befriends, he builds a castle in the air. It's a hymn to the importance of imagination and whimsy in childhood.

Written for the same eight to 12 age range, **The Infinite** ❸ by Patience Agbabi (*Canongate*, £5.99) recounts the time-travelling adventures of Elle Bibi-Imbele Ife, a British girl of Nigerian origin who is a Leapling – someone, that is, born on 29 February. A small group of

Leaplings travel to 2048 where they encounter a strange and instructive future with much fun and adventure along the way.

Wilder Girls ❹ (*Macmillan*, £7.99) is a story for young adults of female friendship and survival by American author Rory Power. A group of girls, quarantined on an island off the coast of New England, live in semi-feral circumstances that bring to mind *Lord of the Flies*.

For babies and very young children try Victoria Cassanell's **The Grizzly Itch** ❺ (*Macmillan*, £6.99). For older readers Dorling Kindersley's **A Street Through Time** ❻ (£10.99), illustrated by Steve Noon, is a fascinating pictorial history of the development of a street in a city from the Stone Age to the modern era and beyond. It explains how our cities have grown and changed over the centuries in a way reminiscent of Osbert Lancaster's wonderful and humorous histories of architecture.

For preschool children Macmillan has produced a series called **My First Heroes** ❼ (£5.99), one introducing readers to famous scientists like Isaac Newton and Marie Curie, and the other to notable artists, including Andy Warhol and Vincent Van Gogh. There are also books on explorers and eco warriors. They are interactive board books which will engage and inform even very young children.

One of the joys of parenthood is reading to your own children books which you remember reading yourself as a child. Dr Seuss's **Green Eggs and Ham** ❽ – a childhood favourite of mine – is now 60 years old and to celebrate this milestone, Harper Collins has produced a special anniversary edition (£6.99). In the same vein, Ladybird books still soldier on, covering an ever-wider range of subjects. There is even one on Donald Trump, a fitting format, some might think, for the subject although perhaps too alarming a topic for a toddler's bedtime story. ■