

**Review: *The Adventure of English (500 AD to 2,000):
The Biography of a Language* by Melvin Bragg
(Spectre, 2003, 317 pp.)**

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This book represents a fantastically interesting way to look at the history of our language from the very beginnings to the most recent computer jargon. It covers the history, complete with myriad connections to the original Germanic dialects.

Bragg approaches the entire history by using the idea that English is a living thing, not just a handy form of communication. He thinks of English as being a sort of adventurous survivor, taking on all manner of foes from the very start, when its first few days were already being threatened by those darn Danes setting up camp not too far away.

Bragg shows how there is something innately strong and heroic about a language that can keep going despite threats from within and from without. He reminds us that English has always been under siege and has always defeated its competition (though sometimes things looked rather glum). Bragg goes to great lengths to show us the strong capacity English has not only for survival but for conquering other languages threatening to wipe out our language entirely.

His personification of *l'anglais* as spoken by the masses is the key to his arguments: English is a being, not just a system for communication. Despite his romantic approach, he makes use of entirely sound scientific, historical and linguistic references to the great changes English underwent from its very beginnings. In contact with various Germanic and Scandinavian dialects and languages from the start, English has nonetheless won its struggle to remain the strong force for communicating in England and later nearby and even far away. His strong understanding of the linguistic mutations and blossoming are clear throughout.

The grammatical and pronunciation aspects of the story are correct and suitable for all serious students of the language, for historians interested in that island called “Albion” that would eventually be called “England,” and for writers and teachers connected to the tongue.

Bragg does something that has not been done before: He talks about English as a fit, mutating, tolerant being, able to both hold its own and steal, adapt, and rob other languages of their concepts. The nuances capable of a language having several terms for the same exact object or phenomenon are great indeed. Bragg argues that no other language has been able to accomplish what English has managed to do. The language has fought hard! The language still survives despite many scrapes, wars, decrees, invasions, battles, and revolutions!

I recommend this book to all writers, students of English, and persons with an interest in interdisciplinary connections among language, history, political science, and other related fields. It is not only a great example of looking at a topic a new way, it is also an example of excellent writing and successful use of research to prove a thesis.