Once upon a time, there was a television series on the history of English, beautifully shot on location around the world and presented by an informed language enthusiast. There was a glossy follow-up book, full of maps and series shots. Great idea. Anything that helps to raise public interest in the English language is, for me, a Good Thing.

That was The Story of English, BBC, 1986. But the English story keeps changing; every year researchers discover new things. The latest series is on ITV, with Melvyn Bragg, and there is a book as well. Great idea. I thought again. A chance to bring a new television generation up-to-date. The first sentence in this review applies again.

But not the second. This is a straight textual read, albeit with inserts of glossy illustrations, so, apart from some passing mentions, you would never know there was a television series. Bragg has, he tells us, written it from scratch. So we must forget the series, and judge the book on its own merits. Do we need a new popular introduction to English, as we already have Bill Bryson and others (including my own efforts), which Bragg readily acknowledges? Yes, but with a caveat: there has to be some “value added”.

Bragg, as a novelist and a Cumbrian, inter alia, should give us elegant words, imaginative analogies and dialect-roots anecdotes. And we do get them. “New words are new worlds.” English is “a hunter-gatherer of language” — nonsense, of course, for there could be no language without people — but it is intriguing to see it so ingeniously developed. English is a “hungry creature” as it travels around. When sidelined by French it nurses itself “like an exiled and wounded animal”, and then it takes “sweet revenge” on French by borrowing its words.

But I want more than literary tropes from a retelling of English linguistic history. So much has happened in the past couple of decades. The language has become global and changed dramatically. And recent research has debunked numerous old myths. All of this should be in a new-millennium account. This is where I have problems. My sense of “already” is overwhelming. It is the same old story. All the myths are here. It feels as though we are still in the 1980s. It is a pity, because I support the spirit of this enterprise, and share Bragg’s linguistic egalitarianism, his respect for dialects, his sense of the expressive richness that borrowed words bring. His retelling is strong on vocabulary. This book is really a history of the lexicon, with the occasional nod at other issues. It is, as its last sentence affirms, “a history of words”.

With so well-known an author, this book will put the subject in front of readers who might never have bothered with it. That’s good. But perpetuating myths? That’s not so good. Nobody would ignore the latest research in retelling a topic in arts or political history. It should be the same with linguistic history. Bragg is a great storyteller, but he is telling an out-of-date story. As we say in English, we don’t want déjà vu, but nouvelle vague.

David Crystal’s books include Shakespeare’s Words and The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language. The Adventure of English is available at the Books Direct price of £16 plus £1.95 p&p on 0870 165 8585

Read on... websites: www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/routesofenglish Bragg’s radio series about English

In other words...