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Britannia may not rule, but it still presides over the world's discourse, according to this sketchy, triumphalist chronicle of the English language. McCrum (The Story of English), associate editor of Britain's Observer, surveys the latter-day apotheosis of English as the international language, observing Chinese English-language boot camps, Bangalore call centers, and the takeover of Britain's Man Booker prize by non-British novelists. But most of the book is a historical pageant of the English-speaking peoples as they assimilated, conquered, or enslaved foreigners and expropriated words and dialects under the leadership of statesmen/wordsmiths from King Alfred to Churchill and literary geniuses like Shakespeare and Twain. McCrum makes a pragmatic, happenstance case for the international popularity of English: the British Empire and American hegemony spread it around the planet, making it the obvious choice for a globalizing world's lingua franca. But he also advances a grander and less coherent brief for English as the language of individual freedom, democracy, and capitalism, contrasting its contagious, adaptable, populist and subversive spirit with the snobby elitism of French.