Of ships and snarks and sealing-wax, and presidents and things

N. David Mermin is a professor of physics in New York State, who has written about low-temperature physics and the foundations of quantum theory. He is not, so far as I know, especially interested in linguistics, language teaching, or the other matters that concern readers of ET, yet he must be included among language enthusiasts.

Lewis Carroll was a mathematician who gave a great deal to the English language and its literature. Edward Lear, a painter, did the same, in a tradition of ‘nonsense’ writing often assumed to be particularly English and eccentric.

Recently I asked Cambridge University Press to let me see a copy of David Mermin’s latest book, entitled Boojums All The Way Through. The title intrigued me, because it blended a phrase from a tale of turtles told about the philosopher William James and the name of a Carrollian snark. The book is a collection of papers on physics, the quantum theory, relativity, and mathematics: not a place where boojums usually gambol. The first paper, however, was called ‘E pluribus boojum’, a phrase that combines the motto of the USA with another (or the same) snark. It is reproduced here almost in toto, with Professor Mermin’s blessing. We would both welcome readers’ responses.

Another departure concerns an appendix to Sylvia Chalker’s review of a new grammar book from Collins. Many people, I suspect, would welcome an easy-to-consult glossary of contemporary English grammatical terms, as provided at the start of Collins COBUILD English Grammar. I have, with permission, reproduced it in its six-page entirety in this issue. Again, we would be interested in readers’ comments.

Elsewhere in ET24 articles range from the syntax of the US President, through English in Malaysia and Newfoundland, by way of heteronyms, eco-greenery, and gaijin, to the latest etymorphs, bilingual poetry, Aboriginal terms like cuz and half-father, and such neologisms as steamulated and publicophobia. Mermin’s boojum is in good company.

Tom McArthur

The editorial policy of English Today is to provide a focus or forum for all sorts of news and opinion from around the world. The points of view of individual writers are as a consequence their own, and do not reflect the opinion of the editorial board. In addition, wherever feasible, ET generally leaves unchanged the orthography (normally British or American) and the usage of individual contributors, although the editorial style of the journal itself is that of Cambridge University Press.