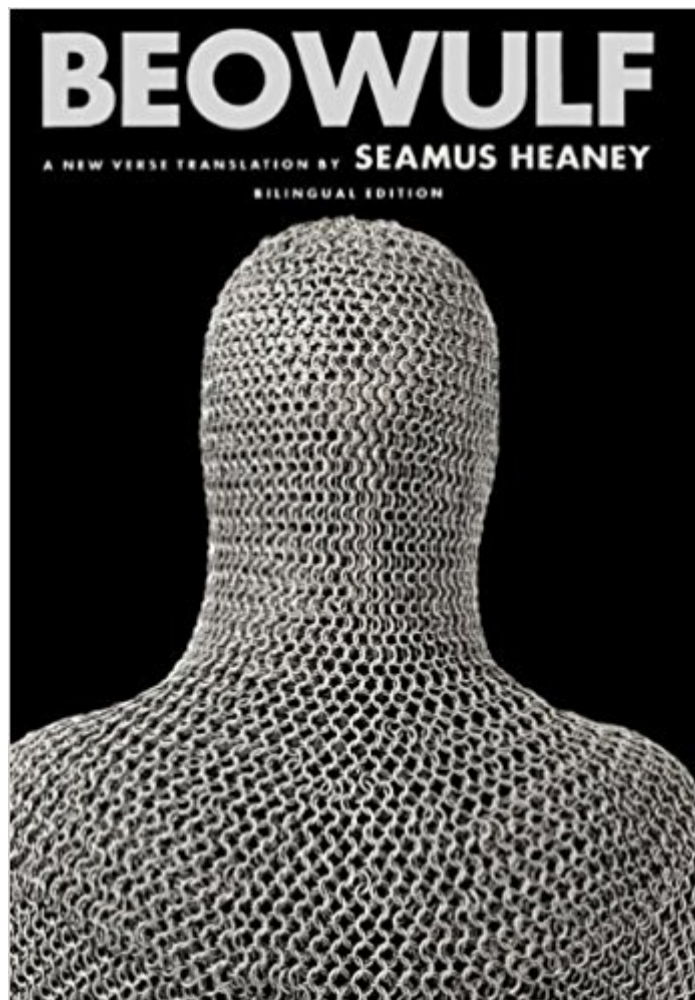


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Beowulf: A New Verse Translation



Synopsis

A brilliant and faithful rendering of the Anglo-Saxon epic from the Nobel laureate. Composed toward the end of the first millennium of our era, Beowulf is the elegiac narrative of the adventures of Beowulf, a Scandinavian hero who saves the Danes from the seemingly invincible monster Grendel and, later, from Grendel's mother. He then returns to his own country and dies in old age in a vivid fight against a dragon. The poem is about encountering the monstrous, defeating it, and then having to live on in the exhausted aftermath. In the contours of this story, at once remote and uncannily familiar at the end of the twentieth century, Seamus Heaney finds a resonance that summons power to the poetry from deep beneath its surface. Drawn to what he has called the "four-squareness of the utterance" in Beowulf and its immense emotional credibility, Heaney gives these epic qualities new and convincing reality for the contemporary reader.

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Customer Reviews

In Beowulf warriors must back up their mead-hall boasts with instant action, monsters abound, and fights are always to the death. The Anglo-Saxon epic, composed between the 7th and 10th centuries, has long been accorded its place in literature, though its hold on our imagination has been less secure. In the introduction to his translation, Seamus Heaney argues that Beowulf's role as a required text for many English students obscured its mysteries and "mythic potency." Now, thanks to the Irish poet's marvelous recreation (in both senses of the word) under Alfred David's watch, this dark, doom-ridden work gets its day in the sun. There are endless pleasures in

Heaney's analysis, but readers should head straight for the poem and then to the prose. (Some will also take advantage of the dual-language edition and do some linguistic teasing out of their own.) The epic's outlines seem simple, depicting Beowulf's three key battles with the scaliest brutes in all of art: Grendel, Grendel's mother (who's in a suitably monstrous snit after her son's dismemberment and death), and then, 50 years later, a gold-hoarding dragon "threatening the night sky / with streamers of fire." Along the way, however, we are treated to flashes back and forward and to a world view in which a thane's allegiance to his lord and to God is absolute. In the first fight, the man from Geatland must travel to Denmark to take on the "shadow-stalker" terrorizing Heorot Hall. Here Beowulf and company set sail: Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank, sand churned in the surf, warriors loaded a cargo of weapons, shining war-gear in the vessel's hold, then heaved out, away with a will in their wood-wreathed ship. Over the waves, with the wind behind her and foam at her neck, she flew like a bird... After a fearsome night victory over march-haunting and heath-marauding Grendel, our high-born hero is suitably strewn with gold and praise, the queen declaring: "Your sway is wide as the wind's home, / as the sea around cliffs." Few will disagree. And remember, Beowulf has two more trials to undergo. Heaney claims that when he began his translation it all too often seemed "like trying to bring down a megalith with a toy hammer." The poem's challenges are many: its strong four-stress line, heavy alliteration, and profusion of kennings could have been daunting. (The sea is, among other things, "the whale-road," the sun is "the world's candle," and Beowulf's third opponent is a "vile sky-winger." When it came to over-the-top compound phrases, the temptations must have been endless, but for the most part, Heaney smiles, he "called a sword a sword.") Yet there are few signs of effort in the poet's Englishing. Heaney varies his lines with ease, offering up stirring dialogue, action, and description while not stinting on the epic's mix of fate and fear. After Grendel's misbegotten mother comes to call, the king's evocation of her haunted home may strike dread into the hearts of men and beasts, but it's a gift to the reader: A few miles from here a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch above a mere; the overhanging bank is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface. At night there, something uncanny happens: the water burns. And the mere bottom has never been sounded by the sons of men. On its bank, the heather-stepper halts: the hart in flight from pursuing hounds will turn to face them with firm-set horns and die in the wood rather than dive beneath its surface. That is no good place. In Heaney's hands, the poem's apparent archaisms and Anglo-Saxon attitudes--its formality, blood-feuds, and insane courage--turn the art of an ancient island nation into world literature. --Kerry Fried

When the great monster Grendel comes to Denmark and dashes its warriors' hopes, installing himself in their great hall and eating alive the valiant lords, the hero Beowulf arrives from over the ocean to wrestle the beast. He saves the Danes, who sing of his triumphs, but soon the monster's mother turns up to take him hostage: having killed her, our hero goes home to the land of the Geats, acquires the kingship, and fights to the death an enormous dragon. That's the plot of this narrative poem, composed more than a millennium ago in the Germanic language that gave birth (eventually) to our version of English. Long a thing for professors to gloss, the poem includes battles, aggressive boasts, glorious funerals, frightening creatures and a much-studied alliterative meter; earlier versions in current vernacular have pleased lay readers and helped hard-pressed students. Nobel laureate Heaney has brought forth a finely wrought, controversial (for having won a prize over a children's book) modern English version, one which retains, even recommends, the archaic strengths of its warrior world, where "The Spear-Danes in days gone by/ and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness." Well-known digressionsAa detailed dirge, the tale-within-a-tale of Hengest, "homesick and helpless" in ancient FrieslandAfind their ways into Heaney's English, which holds to the spirit (not always the letter) of the en face Anglo-Saxon, fusing swift story and seamless description, numinous adjectives and earthy nouns: in one swift scene of difficult swimming, "Shoulder to shoulder, we struggled on/ for five nights, until the long flow/ and pitch of the waves, the perishing cold drove us apart. The deep boiled up/ and its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild." Heaney's evocative introduction voices his long-felt attraction to the poem's "melancholy fortitude," describing the decades his rendering took and the use he discovered for dialect terms. It extends in dramatic fashion Heaney's long-term archeological delvings, his dig into the origins of his beloved, conflictedAby politics and placeAEnglish language. (Feb.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Everything depends on the translation, and for a work as old and remote as this, the translation really has to be an original work in its own right while retaining its character as a translation. This is nearly impossible, yet Heaney pulls it off. Fabulous.

A well written and highly informative example of 11th Century literature. While the story is supposed to take partbetween Beowulf and Grendel in ancient Denmark, it was originally composed in Old English (Anglo Saxon) and it would be wonderful if moreof us could read and speak this ancient form of English. Interesting insight into the times.

Seamus Heaney has provided a beautiful translation informed by his unique combination academic training, poetic mastery and Celtic heritage. This version of Beowulf delights the mind with lyric phrasing and perfect word choices. It is unfortunate that this paperback version is printed on fairly cheap paper; it would be nice if the richness of the word was met with substantive paper.

One of my favorite classics. What's not to love, with monsters chomping people's heads off, powerful verse, heroes, heroines, creeps and lots more. I've read a couple translations and this one is by far the best. I read this as an adult and loved it enough to re-read it. Who says very old books can't be awesome in modern times, if you're patient enough to put down your hand held gadget down!

This is one of the best translations I have read and I like that it is bilingual. I have a CD on Anglo-Saxon and will be able to use this book. Because Heaney was a poet, he was able to pick up on nuances and pace that other translators did not. I would recommend this for anyone interested in this great poem.

Kindle version DOES include the Old English version. It is easy to navigate, and you don't have to read that part. The Old English in its entirety is first, followed by the translation...so those worrying that the original English is in the way, it is not (it is not side-by-side bilingual). His modern translation is unparalleled, so it is worth purchasing this version. To ensure you are purchasing the correct version, do a search for Seamus Heaney Kindle Beowulf and it should be easy to purchase from there. ASIN: B001ULOPUE

I met Heaney 10 years ago at Dartmouth College where I was fortunate enough to hear him read his poetry -- I was captivated then and I still am now by his command of English. I almost enjoyed his introduction more than the actual translation for its erudition, rich vocabulary and contextual explanations. It's been a long time since I've seen the words "revenant," "chthonic" and "oneiric" bandied around with alacrity. I'm not an Old English scholar either, but I still found the facing translation useful. I agree with the reviewer below who said it would be helpful to have glosses and textual notes. Even better in this regard is the Robert Pinsky facing page translation of Dante's Inferno. Anyway, this translation makes Beowulf fun and accessible -- sure, it's worth reading the "classic" translations as well, but Heaney should be congratulated for bringing a book many were forced to read, to a state where the book can be savored. Like Branagh's revival of Shakespeare,

who can lament the return of one of the most pivotal works in English. Read it!

Urged to read Seamus Heaney's translation of BEOWULF by the Best Sellers Lists (I felt the need to know why this old warhorse was getting so much popular attention...), I must join the ranks of readers who now feel a resurgence of faith in the reading public! We've all been through the original translations somewhere in our schooling and I never considered this an important poem. But what a wallop it now packs! Heaney's macho way with words and his tossing about of impossible names that challenge even Wagnerites rarely gets in the way of the sheer romanticism of centuries-old tale telling. This is "Fantasia" without needing the music, an epic, bragadocio good guy/bad guy story that leaps off the beautifully constructed and designed pages and just asks to be enjoyed. I doubt I'll ever struggle through the Old English version provided here page for page, but I'm sure I'll be re-reading this bonanza whenever I feel the need for heroes. And we thought blood & guts & violence was a contemporary problem in the movies....!

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