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# Beowulf (Signet Classics)



## Synopsis

Before there was Game of Thrones, there was Beowulf... **SONG OF BATTLE AND KINGS**

Beowulf is one of the earliest extant poems in a modern European language, composed in England before the Norman Conquest. As a social document this great epic poem is invaluable—reflecting a feudal world of heroes and monsters, blood and victory, life and death. As a work of art, it is unique. Beowulf rings with beauty, power, and artistry that have kept it alive for a thousand years. The noble simplicity of Beowulf's anonymous Anglo-Saxon singer is recaptured in this vivid translation by Burton Raffel. Translated and with an Introduction by Burton Raffel and an Afterword by Roberta Frank

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Translator Burton Raffel has taught English, classics, and comparative literature at universities in the United States, Israel, and Canada. His books include translations of Beowulf, The Complete Poetry and Prose of Chairil Anwar, From the Vietnamese, Ten Centuries of Poetry, The Complete Poetry of Osip Emilevich Mandelstam (with Alla Burago), Poems from the Old English, and The Annotated Milton. Mr. Raffel practiced law on Wall Street and taught in the Ford Foundation's English Language Teacher Training Project in Indonesia.

Roberta Frank, Marie Borroff Professor of English and Linguistics at Yale University, works in all aspects—literary, historical, and archaeological—of early England and Scandinavia. She has written widely on

Beowulf, including Ælfric's "A Scandal in Toronto: The Dating of Beowulf a Quarter-Century On" (2007).

From John McNamara's Introduction to Beowulf: Even more perplexing is the question of values and beliefs in the poem. The world of Beowulf is the world of heroic epic, with its legendary fights among larger-than-life figures, both human and monstrous, its scenes of feasting in great beer halls presided over by kings, its accounts of bloody feuds trapping men and women alike in cycles of violence, its praise of giving riches to loyal followers rather than amassing wealth for oneself, its moments of magic in stories of powers gained or lost; and over all, a sense of some larger force that shapes their destinies, both individual and collective. Readers have often looked upon this long-gone heroic world for a glimpse of a pagan past in Northern Europe before Christianity was brought by foreign missionaries, yet the poem is filled with references to the new religion and the power of its God. This tension between the ancient past and what was, in the time of the poet, a new worldview disturbed many romantic and nationalistic critics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They sought in Beowulf the origins of Germanic, including Scandinavian, culture; or at least clues from which that culture could be reconstructed. Yet many were for the most part frustrated, for they saw the epic of Northern antiquity marred by the intrusions of foreign beliefs and values, such as the Christianity imposed by missionaries from the Mediterranean South, and equally marred by the fantastic fights with monsters in the center of the poem, while the historical materials that most interested them were placed on the outer edges. In this view, the poem simply was not the poem that it should have been. However, the great work of Friedrich Klaeber, and especially the influence of Tolkien, cited above, would change all that. In recent times, scholars have not only stressed the Christian element as integral to the poem as a whole, but they have spent enormous energy in ferreting out its sources and functions. All of which brings us back, not just to the question of the poet, but more importantly to the question of the audience. After all, the poet was composing the work for a community that already shared certain core values, though those values appear at times to emerge from a moment of cultural transition between the memory of the old and the power of the new. So, once again, we are faced with complexity, and attempts to reduce Beowulf to some single, or at least predominant, worldview cannot explain the creative tensions in this complexity. Yet there are further questions about audience. Did it consist, as some scholars have proposed, of people so well versed in Christian teachings, and even in learned theology, that it would have been a monastic community? The answer is by no means clear. We do have the famous letter from Alcuin to the monks of Lindisfarne

(797) enjoining them not to include secular heroic narratives in their entertainments. But we also have the even more famous story of the poet Caedmon in Bede's History of the English Church and People (731), which shows the members of the monastery at Whitby singing narrative lays, while accompanying themselves on the harp. Their lays must have been secular since it was only after the miracle of Caedmon's poetic inspiration that Christian biblical narratives were set to traditional Anglo-Saxon poetic forms. Such a community would not only house scholars, as well as monks with considerably less education, but also the monastic familia was made up of all the lay people—men, women, and children—who occupied and generally worked the lands surrounding (and dependent on) the monastery. Our modern view of medieval monasteries has been shaped by later reforms, in which walled structures often shut reclusive monks in cloistered protection from the temptations of the larger world. But in Anglo-Saxon England, the monasteries were generally open to the social world, and the Rule of St. Benedict lays great stress on the need to extend hospitality to all who come to the community. We also have depictions in monastic works, such as lives of the saints, of storytelling events that included monks and laypeople alike. Thus, even if one were to claim that Beowulf was aimed at a monastic audience, it is clear that such an audience would most probably include many who were not monks. And, of course, one need not postulate a monastic audience at all in order to account for the Christian element in the poem. For the dominant ethos of the poem is a celebration of the values of heroic society, and while the poet-narrator's comments often reflect a Christian point of view, the heroic values in the poem are in themselves primarily secular. Or do we have, once again, a complex creative tension between the two?

—This text refers to the Paperback edition.

The author of this translation of Beowulf explained how this book was translated through the years. The author of the actual book is unknown and several people through the years have tried to come as close to a precise translation as possible. This translator referred to as many prior translations as possible in addition to the original transcript that had missing parts. His explanation of the process, and his assumptions are well thought out and help in the reading of Beowulf.

I first read Beowulf, as did countless high schoolers over the years, in my senior English class; the experience was less than memorable, due in part to my teacher's insistence on using an Old English text. When I entered college the most vivid imagery I still had was of Grendel entering the

mead hall and tearing the diners limb from limb. Had I been able to also read the text in modern English in that senior class, I would have been well-prepared to tackle the OE with a deeper understanding of how this great work acts as a foundational text for all British literature from Chaucer to the Renaissance and beyond. Burton Raffel's clear translation allows the reader to establish a connection to the allegorical and mythological constructs without having to resort to a "Beowulf for Dummies," just to get a passing grade. I am using this book in a graduate class in Horror Text and Theory, and though I am now able to read the OE with more fluency, the accessibility of this translation situates the text in a more viable position for discussion and critical analysis in an arena populated with 20th and 21st century horror. I would recommend Raffel's Beowulf to anyone as their entree into Old English Lit.; to be read along side the original text. It takes the "horror" out of ready Horror.

Raffel's translation is the most readable, easiest to understand, and most honest translation available. I do not begrudge Seamus Heaney his poetry, but I find that Beowulf has already had to undergo glosses of other types in its recordings without further flowery alterations being performed on the text. The original composition/song would have been understandable and engaging for any of the warriors, villagers, or foreign guests of the Anglo-Saxon tribes: it should be equally as accessible to modern high school students and twenty-somethings. Raffel achieves this, and this translation is a steal while it remains available. If you are interested in Heaney's version of Beowulf, spend the extra money: but know that you are buying Heaney, not Beowulf.

An original reading of beowulf. just wonderful. no grant it that this in not just something you would sit down for a "good read" It is an actual original language is wordy and takes time to process. if your looking for the original copy this is your book. no illustrations was in good condition has a place on the bookshelf.

This is one of the best stories ever. It's the oldest written story of the Anglo Saxon race. No need to read a review. Just read it.

Good

Kids should read this.

Very interesting read Old style hard to cipher but has more thought to subject continuity and entire thought process so it all ties back together

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