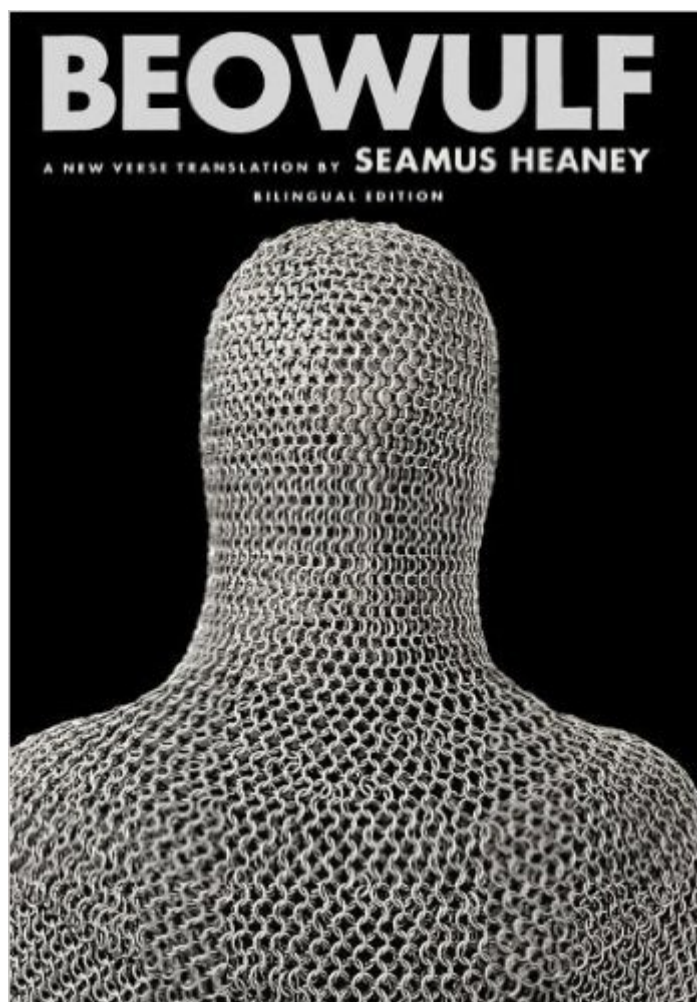


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Beowulf: A New Verse Translation



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

"Beowulf" is justly regarded as a cornerstone of English literature, but those of us who do not read Anglo-Saxon must approach it through a translation. Certainly there is no shortage of translations; I have at least a dozen sitting on my bookshelf. However, I would eliminate half of them as adequate vehicles for really appreciating this grand poem because they are prose versions. While they may accurately convey the literal sense of the Old English words and provide a readily understood storyline, prose can never adequately render the poetic essence of the original. Verse translation, however, is of necessity an imprecise art; poetry is too tightly bound to the language of its creator

for a valid direct transposition to another tongue. Anglo-Saxon verse relied upon strong alliteration and a balance of stressed syllables rather than the use of rhyme and formally patterned meter as in later English poetry. The contemporary translator has a formidable and delicate challenge to transform "Beowulf" into a poem suited for today while remaining loyal to its ancient timbre.

Although I greatly admire Ruth P.M. Lehmann's 1988 translation for its steadfast replication of the tone and cadence of the Old English original, there is truth in what another "Alliteration is a key element in Old English metrics ... but long stretches of it in Modern English will stupefy the most ardent reader". At times the beat and alliteration of Lehmann's verse threatens to overwhelm the present-day listener, becoming a deadening drumbeat. Yet, if the translator strays too far from the Anglo-Saxon structure in attempting to create something palatable for present taste, then the result inevitably lacks the bardic flavor at the heart of the poem.

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