

Beowulf: The New Translation

Gerald J. Davis, Translator

Insignia Publishing (Dec 1, 2013)

Softcover \$5.99 (109pp)

978-1-4912-5018-1

This engrossing adventure offers modern phrasing while maintaining the spirit of earlier translations of Beowulf.

Beowulf is one of the classics of the Western literary canon, still studied in high school and college classrooms. The original manuscript, written in Old English, has been translated by many scholars, and Gerald J. Davis offers his own excellent effort with *Beowulf: The New Translation*, which offers modern phrasing while still keeping intact the spirit of earlier versions.

Davis has written many books of fiction, but his most notable previous credit is *Don Quixote: The New Translation*, a finalist for *ForeWord*s 2012 Book of the Year award. Turning his attention to *Beowulf*, Davis bases his interpretation on two previous translations, those of John Mitchell Kemble and John Lesslie Hall. Since those books were published in 1837 and 1892, respectively—with Kemble’s a prose version and Hall’s in verse—it’s safe to say that Davis brings much of his own insights to *Beowulf: The New Translation*.

Davis’s *Beowulf* is prose but still honors the alliteration and kennings of the original manuscript. The little that Davis loses in terms of strict poetic faithfulness is more than made up for in simple, inspiring readability. King Hrothgar’s warning about excessive pride in leaders of men reads as though it could come from Shakespeare: “Until, within him, overweening pride and arrogance awakens and burgeons. Then does that guardian, his conscience, the sentry of his soul, slumber. Its sleep is too deep, with cares encompassed. Unannounced, the slayer draws very near unto him.”

It’s a powerful moment, perhaps made more poignant by allowing the reader to forget, for a moment, that this is a translation of an ancient tale and not the voice of a contemporary storyteller.

Davis includes a brief foreword, quoting some of J. R. R. Tolkien’s famous praise of *Beowulf* (there are great similarities of style between Tolkien’s work and the epic poem). It would have been interesting to read Davis’s opinion on other, more recent translations, like Seamus Heaney’s 2001 *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*; like Heaney, Davis makes the reading easier on modern eyes and ears (they both use “Shield Sheafson” for the name of the Danish king instead of “Scyld Scefing,” as it’s written in many earlier translations, for example).

Davis chooses to avoid footnotes, and it’s a wise decision—it’s easier to become engrossed in the story without them. As a result, he’s shaped the text into a rousing adventure that could easily find a place on the Fantasy shelf at the local bookstore.

Readers who’ve sampled other interpretations of *Beowulf* will be pleased to explore Davis’s take on the tale. But truly to be envied are those for whom *Beowulf: The New Translation* will be an introduction to the world of heroes and honor, monsters and evil. Davis has created a version that helps us to imagine sitting around a campfire, a thousand years ago, listening to a great story.

PETER DABBENE (September 11, 2013)

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