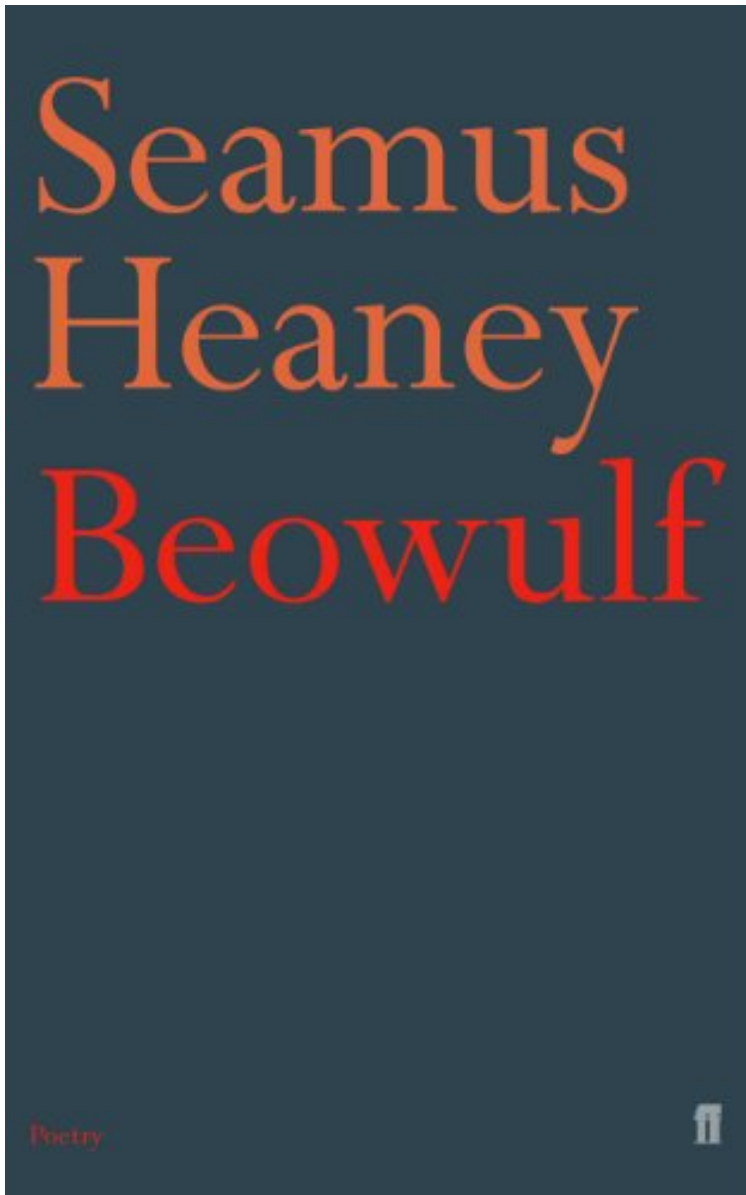


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# Beowulf (English Edition)



*Par Seamus Heaney*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurComposed towards the end of the first millennium, the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf is one of the great Northern epics and a classic of European literature. In his new translation, Seamus Heaney has produced a work which is both true, line by line, to the original poem, and an expression, in its language and music, of something fundamental to his own creative gift. The poem is about encountering the monstrous, defeating it, and then having to live on, physically and psychically exposed, in that exhausted aftermath. It is not hard to draw parallels between this story and the history of the twentieth century, nor can Heaney's Beowulf fail to be read partly in the light of his Northern Irish upbringing. But it also transcends

such considerations, telling us psychological and spiritual truths that are permanent and liberating..comIn 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 FriedFrom Publishers WeeklyWhen 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.