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Beowulf: A New Telling



Synopsis

He comes out of the darkness, moving in on his victims in deadly silence. When he leaves, a trail of blood is all that remains. He is a monster, Grendel, and all who know of him live in fear. Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, knows something must be done to stop Grendel. But who will guard the great hall he has built, where so many men have lost their lives to the monster while keeping watch? Only one man dares to stand up to Grendel's fury --Beowulf.

Book Information

Lexile Measure: 790L (What's this?)

Mass Market Paperback: 94 pages

Publisher: Laurel Leaf (March 15, 1982)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0440905605

ISBN-13: 978-0440905608

Product Dimensions: 4.2 x 0.3 x 6.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 0.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

Robert Nye has rewritten the Beowulf saga into a nice little stand-alone fable, but it is so far from the original text that it is a disservice to new readers. Nye had his own idea of what the theme of Beowulf should be, but the original text does not support his theme, so Nye rewrote it until it did -- and then he crams the theme down the reader's throat as though it's the central point of the entire Beowulf saga. Nye's theme is that we should embrace our weaknesses and thereby make them our strengths (huh?), and he demonstrates this through Beowulf's nearsightedness and disproportionately short legs, neither of which are in the original text. Nye's liberties with the original include making the Dane warrior Unferth a villain -- in the original, Unferth is at first jealous of Beowulf's courage until he sees it first-hand, at which point his jealousy turns to respect, and Beowulf respects him in return. In Nye's version Unferth is a treacherous villain throughout -- for

example, in the original it is Grendel's mother who kills the king's friend Esher, but in Nye's version Unferth stabs him in the back. According to Nye, Unferth is then killed by Grendel's mother; in the original Unferth gives Beowulf his own sword to fight Grendel's mother, and this is the scene where Unferth and Beowulf become friends. Nye took a great supporting character and turned him into a cardboard villain. I could go on listing ways in which Nye damages the saga, but I will instead cut to his most heinous crime -- Beowulf versus the dragon. In the original text, Beowulf gathers a band of his best warriors along with his friend Wiglaf to battle the dragon. When they see it, the warriors turn and run away in fear, and Beowulf attacks the dragon with only the loyal Wiglaf behind him. Beowulf succeeds at the cost of his own life, and dies at Wiglaf's side. In Nye's version, Beowulf is a part-time beekeeper, and he kills the dragon by having a bag of bees fly down its throat and sting it to death from the inside (I'm not making this up). There is no battle. Beowulf is never injured. Beowulf then simply dies on the mountain for no apparent reason other than his age. I bought this book to read to my kids, but there is no way I will ever read it to them. It is a very easy read -- Nye tells a lively little tale, and his idea of using bees to kill the dragon is smoothly set up throughout the story -- but the major points of this so-called "new telling" are all Nye's, and run counter to the themes in the original. Anyone who reads this and thinks they've read Beowulf is VERY sorely mistaken, and their mistake will be immediately obvious to anyone who is familiar with the original text.

Rather than offering my own opinion of this book, I will give you a few brief quotations describing the major characters and allow you to decide for yourself if this book is worth reading. Author Robert Nye describes the character of Beowulf as "weak and sickly" in his youth and "below average size" as an adult. He also describes Beowulf as "short sighted." He claims that Beowulf "admits to his weaknesses" and is "not given to boasting." This begs the question: what Beowulf is Nye talking about? The real Beowulf, the one that we know from the epic 7th century poem, was none of these things. We are told that he was neither small nor weak, but rather he possessed the strength of 30 men ("thirty men's might in the grip of his hand"). This is how he was able to overpower his adversary, the demon Grendel, when no other man could challenge Grendel. The original Beowulf boasted quite often. Apparently, Robert Nye has his own idea of how a "hero" should behave. Instead of arrogance in Beowulf we see humility when he says, "He was a better swimmer than I" in reference to his dramatic swimming race against Breca. The problem here is that Beowulf did not lose this race with Breca. He won! But Nye's Beowulf cannot be all-powerful and still be humble, meek and peace-loving. We know from the original story that Beowulf cut off Grendel's head after

he was dead, so he could offer it to the Danes as a trophy. This action was apparently too harsh for Nye. Instead, he tells us that Beowulf cut off Grendel's head in self-defense after Grendel momentarily came back from the dead! The character of Unferth has also been dramatically altered. He is portrayed as both pathetic and evil, a drunkard full of contempt for Beowulf and his people. As such, his words carry no weight and he really serves no purpose in the story. The real Unferth was an insecure man, who was desperately afraid of Beowulf gaining more glory than him. But there is no evidence in the poem that he was evil or that he hated his own people. The depiction of Grendel's mother in this book is downright laughable. Nye tells us that she has "red lips" and "hanging breasts." Furthermore, "she had eyes in her breasts." We are never told why she needs eyes in her breasts, but I guess the author just liked this visual. Grendel's mother is also described as the "wife of Cain." According to Nye, Cain had sex with Grendel's mother (an evil serpent) and the resulting offspring was the hideous creature Grendel. To someone unfamiliar with the poem, this might seem logical. But this is where Robert Nye really misses the point (or chooses to ignore the point). Grendel is a descendant of Cain - this much is true. But Grendel's evil nature did not arise because of a sinful union between Cain and his mother. Cain was already sinful after killing his brother and then being cast out by God. As a result, his offspring were evil and - over thousands of years - slowly became monstrous. This happened because Cain and his offspring were separated from God. It shouldn't be surprising, however, that Nye fails to address this point. As previous reviewers have already stated, Nye chooses to ignore the Christian basis of the poem. His Beowulf has no relationship with God. In the poem, we know that Beowulf draws strength and inspiration from God, and he thanks God for his successes in battle ("the deadly struggle at the start would have ended, if God had not watched over me") Instead, Nye tells us that "Beowulf's best weapon was himself. He put all his faith in that." Beowulf believed in himself fully and therefore had no need for God - according to Mr. Nye. Let's not forget that this story is really about the battle between good and evil, Beowulf (God) versus Grendel (Satan). The poem tells us that Grendel came from Hell, and that he was an "enemy of God," who "waged war against God." Regarding Beowulf, the poem tells us that "Holy God has sent him to help our people." If you choose to read this book you will notice that Mr. Nye wisely includes a disclaimer: "This is an interpretation, not a translation." Perhaps this is how he justifies changing the original story to such an extent that the characters are unrecognizable. His book, therefore, is not an interpretation of the original story but an alteration of it. Instead of bringing honor to the poem, he dishonors it. There's nothing wrong with Mr. Nye writing a story about a humble, unimpressive man who manages to overcome his weaknesses. He just shouldn't have named him Beowulf.

In many ways, this Beowulf is a lot of fun for kids. The writing is direct and clear (although there are plenty of vocabulary stretchers). The action is fun. Beowulf's heroism is unquestionable. But, I don't understand why one would publish a Beowulf retelling and stay just close enough to the original to be confusing (as opposed to John Gardner's wonderful Grendel, which told the story from the monster's perspective). The most disturbing divergence was making Unferth a petty bad guy in enamored of evil. In doing so, Nye sacrifices much of the nobility of the original. I don't know if there are other kid-friendly tellings of this story. But, I would look for one of those, first.

This is a particularly arresting retelling of one of the great seminal works of Western literature. In our Performance English Program (CRDG The University of Hawaii), we use it as an entry-level introduction to this classic at the 7th grade so that when students re-encounter the story in the more conventional translation by Burton Raffel at the 12th grade they are predisposed to enjoy it in spite of its considerably greater difficulty. Students have been known to ask if they could skip assemblies so they could continue our in-class oral reading of the Robert Nye version without interruption. Lively narration, wonderful characterizations, great imagery. This story lives

As an English teacher, I do not like reading abridged and "translated" versions of books; however, Robert Nye does capture the essence of the story in a way that holds students' attention. Furthermore, his version allows me to engage the students in occasional excerpts from the unabridged text, thus allowing for meaningful experiences in critical analysis.

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