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Gilgamesh: A New Rendering In English Verse



Synopsis

A new verse rendering of the great epic of ancient Mesopotamia, one of the oldest works in Western Literature. Ferry makes Gilgamesh available in the kind of energetic and readable translation that Robert Fitzgerald and Richard Lattimore have provided for.

Book Information

Paperback: 112 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; Reprint edition (June 1, 1993)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374523835

ISBN-13: 978-0374523831

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.3 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (51 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

For years I have had trouble with translations of "Gilgamesh" that were either too formal, too literal, or too academic. Ferry's translation is involving, adventurous, psychological and above all, extremely accessible to the modern reader. And what do you get? Political power, a romance that transcends death, a bit of wit, gorgeous poetry, a great war, and an ending that is so spiritual that it will stay with you for years. I read Ferry's translation last year, and returned again this year to see if it was as beautiful as I remembered. The answer: moreso!

If you enjoyed Robert Fagels' wonderful translation of the Illiad and the Odessey, I think you will appreciate what David Ferry has done with this ancient story. By his own admission he has taken some poetic liberties but by doing so he has made these archaic characters accessible and human. Other editions will give you a feel of the problems of translation; this will give you a sense of the primordial power of simple story telling and simple themes.

... and the questions then were the same as now: is there life after death?, can I achieve

immortality?, will people remember me when I'm gone?, what is true friendship/love?, how to get/keep/use power? what makes one human? This reading of Gilgamesh was my first foray into the writings of the "Ancients." I found Ferry's rendering to be understandable, lyrical, attention-grabbing, interest-holding, heart-wrenching, and even humorous in parts.

Translating poetry is a tricky thing. Some people maintain that it can't be done. I would say that the translator can set himself three possible goals. First, he can try to create a "trot," a plain, "literal" translation where every word of the original is explained. See Nabokov's "Eugene Onegin" for an example of this. Second, he can try "simply" to translate it, to give his reader a good idea of what is there on the page, the mood, and so forth. LOTS of translators do this. Third, and most elusive, most difficult, is to create a work of literary art IN ENGLISH (or whatever the target language is). Hopefully this third goal will automatically include all the most important elements of "mere translation." But, if the translator succeeds, he will have created an independent work of art which will then take on a life of its own. The most famous example of this would probably be FitzGerald's "Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," probably better described as a fantasy and variations on themes of Omar Khayyam. Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's "Iliad" surely has legs, still in print after all these years. David Ferry has attempted the third goal in his translation of "Gilgamesh," and to my mind he succeeds. The result is a moving and beautiful work of literary art, and I predict a very long life for it.

I was initially introduced to this version of the classic epic of GILGAMESH through Harold Bloom's THE WESTERN CANON. This is, without a doubt, the best translation of the Mesopotamian epic, giving the reader a taste of the style of the original. GILGAMESH is one of the oldest works of Western literature, having been written around the same time as the Bible. It tells the tale of King Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu and their journeys, finally, with the tale of Gilgamesh's attempts to escape death. David Ferry's translation of GILGAMESH is exquisite. Poetic and lyrical, it has a flavor uniquely of its own. With excellent explanatory notes, anyone with an interest in ancient literature, or in the GILGAMESH epic would do themselves a favor to read Ferry's translation. If there is any weakness to GILGAMESH, it is the fact that the epic itself is very short, and will leave readers feeling that the stories ended all too soon.

There are three really good versions of Gilgamesh for the common reader, this one, Stephen Mitchell's, and N.K. Sanders'. This one is the most poetical, while Mitchell is the best for pure narrative. Plus, this one is free of Mitchell's political correctness, which often pushes an

anachronistic feminist softening of Inanna. In Ferry's version, she is her authentic badass self.

Okay, I am not an expert on ancient history, nor do I read much from Sumerian times. Having said that, I did have to read "Gilgamesh" for a history class, and while it is a very good story (fellow students-you won't be bored), Ferry's translation is not the way to go. First, it is written in poetry form. Unless that is something you are looking for, I just believe it makes the story unclear. Secondly, and let me remind you I am not a scholar; the lines did not flow well. Ferry's interpretation also seemed to deviate from other editions I have read. 3 stars, because if you know what you are looking for, this translation is not without merit. And one final thought, I liked the Penguin Classics translation by N.K. Sanders. It was clearly written, in a story form. Plus, there is a lot of background information, historical facts and footnotes to guide the reader.

I've read two translations of Gilgamesh over the years (Dalley's in Myths from Mesopotamia, and the prose version published by Penguin classics). I enjoyed them but Ferry has given us a beautiful poetic version that, although faithful to the translations, is liberated enough from them for the artistic spirit to soar, thus giving us the heart and beauty of this timeless story.

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