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The Epic Of Gilgamesh (Classics)



PENGUIN CLASSICS

The Epic of Gilgamesh



Synopsis

Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, and his companion Enkidu are the only heroes to have survived from the ancient literature of Babylon, immortalized in this epic poem that dates back to the 3rd millennium BC. Together they journey to the Spring of Youth, defeat the Bull of Heaven and slay the monster Humbaba. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh's grief and fear of death are such that they lead him to undertake a quest for eternal life. A timeless tale of morality, tragedy and pure adventure, The Epic of Gilgamesh is a landmark literary exploration of man's search for immortality.

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Customer Reviews

I recommend this Penguin Classic, but it offers more thorough scholarly apparatus than usual for the series. This is not meant as a criticism! But, a beginner may find a "version" such as Stephen Mitchell's easier to start with for an overview of the storyline, and a briefer introduction and helpful endnotes. The poem itself is not lengthy, but the ancillary texts and sources, as Andrew George shows us, do take up considerable space which may please enthusiasts but discourage newcomers to this epic poem. George prepared for Oxford UP in 1999 a two-volume edition, and this Penguin

adapts the core of the English translation for a wider audience. It appears ideal for a college classroom or the reader wanting to learn more about the lacunae, the gaps, the language, and the editorial decisions made by George and fellow translators. A fascinating appendix shows how out of grammatical markers, syllabic, and half-syllabic cuneiform incisions the sounds and rhythms and absences that fill this most ancient of narratives turn into what we can understand. To a point. Terms such as "louvre-door," "glacis-slope," "hie to the forge," and notably Ishtar's exhortation to "stroke my quim" give a rather archaic diction to parts of the translation. George aims obviously for precision in such terminology, but this does clash with the more demotic vernacular chosen by Mitchell in his popularization. Mitchell's also considerably more erotic and develops passages that in their original state, reading George, remain terse.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a fascinating tale of great historical importance. Composed 1500 years before Homer's epics, the story is one that modern man can readily understand and appreciate. Gilgamesh was the more than capable ruler of the ancient town of Uruk; his strength and physical beauty were unmatched by any in the land, and his subjects adored him. Although he possessed so much, Gilgamesh wanted desperately to live forever like a god. He was two-thirds god and one-third human, but he refused to accept his destiny to die. If it were his lot to die, he wanted to perform great deeds so that his name would never be forgotten. The story opens with the story of Enkidu, a wild man of nature who was to become Gilgamesh's best friend and accompany him on his dangerous journeys. The first trip takes them to the Land of the Cedars where Gilgamesh sets out to kill Humbaba, the guardian of the forest. When he later slays the Bull of Heaven, the anger of the gods is turned upon him and Enkidu, leading to new suffering by Gilgamesh. In desperation, he seeks Utnapishtim in the land of the gods; Utnapishtim was granted eternal life after preserving mankind in the wake of a great flood. Gilgamesh again finds only heartache for his troubles. Returning to Uruk, he preserves the story of his journeys and deeds in writing, and it is, perhaps ironically, in this written record that Gilgamesh is recognized today for the great man he was. One learns much about the ancient gods in this tale, and the story of the great goddess Ishtar's role in the related events is pretty amazing. When Ishtar invited Gilgamesh to be her husband, he issued forth a litany of former lovers whom Ishtar had turned out and cursed, boldly rebuffing Ishtar's advances.

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