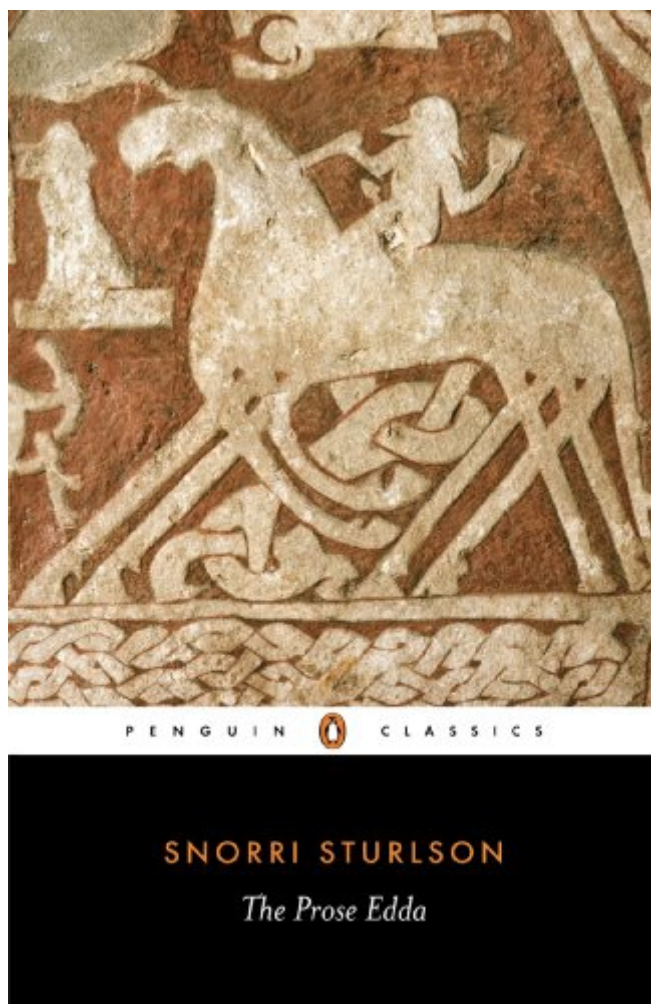


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The Prose Edda (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

The Prose Edda is the most renowned of all works of Scandinavian literature and our most extensive source for Norse mythology. Written in Iceland a century after the close of the Viking Age, it tells ancient stories of the Norse creation epic and recounts the battles that follow as gods, giants, dwarves and elves struggle for survival. It also preserves the oral memory of heroes, warrior kings and queens. In clear prose interspersed with powerful verse, the Edda provides unparalleled insight into the gods' tragic realization that the future holds one final cataclysmic battle, Ragnarok, when the world will be destroyed. These tales from the pagan era have proved to be among the most influential of all myths and legends, inspiring modern works as diverse as Wagner's Ring Cycle and Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings.

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Customer Reviews

Jesse L. Byock, who has written some splendid works on medieval Iceland and the Sagas of the Icelanders, and translated two of the legendary sagas, as "The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer" and "The Saga of Hrolf Kraki," the latter two both available as

Penguin Classics, here offers a new translation of the most famous and entertaining parts of another Icelandic work, "The Prose Edda." The prose is lively and clear, and the translations of verse made with attention to the use made of the passages in the surrounding text. There are helpful notes, and a very useful index, giving proper Icelandic forms, including variants, for the usually Anglicized names. I have to wonder why Penguin waited so long (2005 in Britain, officially January 2006 in the U.S.) to add a translation of this important, and very enjoyable, medieval work to its catalogue, but, given the present result, it was a fortunate lapse. Byock's selection, actually subtitled "Norse Mythology," is comparable in scope to the old (1954) translation by Jean I. Young, "The Prose Edda: Tales from Norse Mythology," which has been available from the University of California Press for decades. Byock's rendering is, in my opinion, superior in style, and is not marred by unacknowledged bowdlerization of references to body parts and functions. So Byock's version is probably ideal for the beginner, although perhaps not for general school use -- Young is less likely to provoke outrage from sensitive parents over exactly how Loki got Skadi to laugh! (Note that originally managed to confuse the titles, and attached reviews of Young to Byock, and of Byock to Young.) I would expect serious students to want the new Penguin Classic as well.

Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) was a famous Icelandic author, statesman, and one of Iceland's wealthiest men. During Snorri's time Iceland was increasingly dominated by Norway and Norwegian culture. Snorri's Prose Edda was written in response to these new trends as a handbook for those "aspiring Icelandic skalds [poets] who wanted to master the traditional forms of verse and the older stories essential to the imagery of Old Norse Poetry" (xi). The Prose Edda's stories were based on the oral tradition from the Viking Golden Age (800-1000). The Edda is divided into four parts (the Prologue, the Gylfaginning, the Skaldskaparmal, and the List of Meters). Sadly, this volume only includes a sample stanza of the List of Meters due to its dense didactic content. For me the Prologue is by far the most interesting part of the entire Edda. Firstly, Snorri might not have been the author which raises some interesting questions about later additions to his text. Secondly, the Prologue consciously attempts to reconcile Norse myth with Christian beliefs. For example, the Prologue states that after the Fall Norse myth was developed in an attempt to understand the world and that they "understood all matters in an earthly way because they had not been granted no spiritual wisdom (ie. of the Christian God's existence)" (4). Also, Graeco-Roman myths are fitted into the Norse mythology and pantheon for the author states that Odin was descended from the Trojans. The second section, the Gylfaginning, consists of a dialogue between King Gylfi and the Aesir (Mysterious God people). King Gylfi asks questions to the three manifestations of Odin about

the All Father, The Primeval Cow Audhumla, the origins of the Gods, Ice Giants, the Bifrost bridge to Heaven, etc.

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