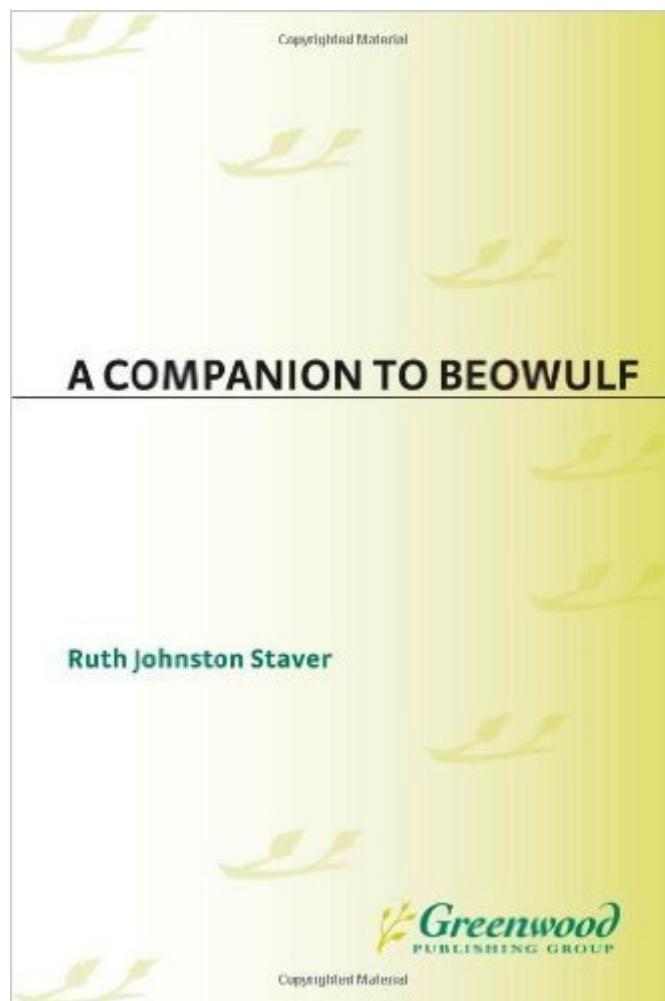


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A Companion To Beowulf



Synopsis

Perhaps the most important work written in Old English, Beowulf grew out of a culture very different from ours, and yet its story of war, violence, and heroism remains relevant to modern readers. Accessible to high school students, general readers, and undergraduates, this companion overviews the poem and its legacy. The initial chapters review the plot of Beowulf, while later chapters discuss its style and language, its cultural and historical contexts, and its afterlife in contemporary popular culture. The first part of the book provides information of interest to a wide range of readers, while the second covers more specialized topics. Thus the initial chapters review the merits of different translations and offer a detailed plot summary, while later chapters discuss the poem's language and style, its treatment of religion, its relation to Anglo-Saxon culture, and its legacy in popular culture. One of the greatest Beowulf scholars was J.R.R. Tolkien, and the book gives special attention to his use of the poem in his own fiction. High school students, undergraduates, and general readers will find this book a valuable guide to one of the most challenging yet enduring works of English literature.

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Customer Reviews

A COMPANION TO BEOWULF by Ruth Johnson is remarkably clear, well written, concise, and chock full of fascinating insights and observations. Readers baffled by the complexities of the poem, or bored by the digressions, will find Ruth Johnson's exegesis refreshing, insightful, and useful. The helpful chapters range from discussions of arms and weaponry and habits of the time, to abstract matters as linguistic forms, but no description is dry or crabbed: the writing style is clear and lucid as a running brook. Let me give but two examples: Many readers are baffled by what seem to be digressions in the poem. Ruth Johnson makes the case that this is deliberate. One artistic technique the poet of Beowulf used was to interpolate references to even earlier events and sagas into the matter of the poem. Early critics of Beowulf thought this a structural weakness, or even evidence of two or three poets cobbling disjointed earlier material together. But a close attention to the matter perhaps shows the poet meaning to draw out parallels and contrasts between the ancient events and the struggle in Hereot, or the dark mere, or the barrow. It gives the poem, which was meant to be antiquarian at the time it was written, a richness of depth, by depicting a world of many layers of ever receding time. Behind every treasure sword and necklace, there is a tale, and weapons have names and histories even as great households and heroes and the lineages do. Let me in particular remark on her last chapter, which concerned Tolkien and Beowulf.

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