



The Geat: The story of Beowulf and Grendel

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The illustrations give the game away. Hrothgar and Beowulf, the Danes and the Geats, could be close kin to Noggin the Nog. Grendel has a crocodile grin, his mother a comic-book squint. And, at the rave in Heorot to celebrate Grendel's defeat, is that really Wealtheow, the gracious cup-bearer, grooving the night away in a red mini-skirt? The text is somewhat at odds with the images, for often the reworking of the adventure is told with pace and energy. However, the back cover declares, 'This is the original horror story? Read it if you dare?', and there's a strain throughout the narrative which is closer to the Hammer House of Horror than to the bleak but courageous Anglo-Saxon epic of the brevity of life and the uncertainty of fame. So, if what you want is a story loosely based on the old poem, in which stepping on 'squelchy' eyeballs or warriors rolling about in excrement to put Grendel off the scent is seen as amusing in a schoolboy 'Ugh' sort of a way, in which Heorot is 'redecorated in red' after the night's carnage and Grendel's problems stem from a youthful experience when fearful humans wouldn't play with him? well, if that *is* what you want, then this could be the version for you. The acknowledgements to prep and junior schools suggest the book has been classroom-tested, and **The Geat** might well amuse and even excite in its own terms.

But why bother? There is enough so-called horror fiction about already. The great traditional tales draw young listeners and readers in because of, not in spite of, their otherness. Who can tell what personal metaphor a reader may find in the grim threat of Grendel? Tolkien suggested that the monster lurks outside the door for each of us? and must be confronted. Children attempt to face their monsters according to their own experience and readiness. And if *that's* the story you want for young readers, better to track down the fine Oxford retelling of **Beowulf**, with text by Kevin Crossley-Holland and illustrations by Charles Keeping. Here words and images work together to sear themselves into young readers' minds. Surely, traditional tales must be 'handled with care'; and with respect for what they continue to offer across the centuries.

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