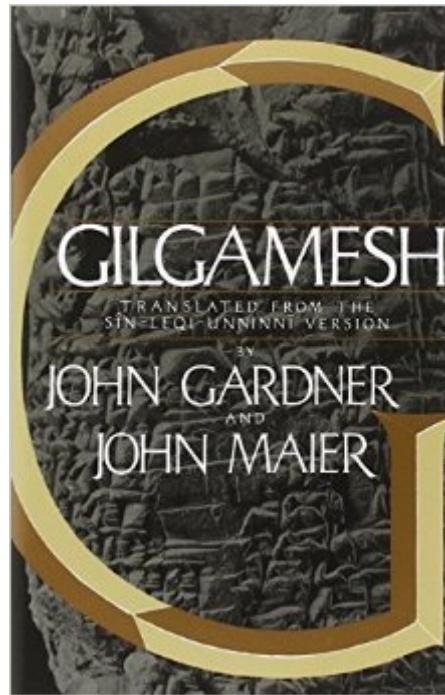


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Gilgamesh



Synopsis

The story of Gilgamesh, an ancient epic poem written on clay tablets in a cuneiform alphabet, is as fascinating and moving as it is crucial to our ability to fathom the time and the place in which it was written. Gardner's version restores the poetry of the text and the lyricism that is lost in the earlier, almost scientific renderings. The principal theme of the poem is a familiar one: man's persistent and hopeless quest for immortality. It tells of the heroic exploits of an ancient ruler of the walled city of Uruk named Gilgamesh. Included in its story is an account of the Flood that predates the Biblical version by centuries. Gilgamesh and his companion, a wild man of the woods named Enkidu, fight monsters and demonic powers in search of honor and lasting fame. When Enkidu is put to death by the vengeful goddess Ishtar, Gilgamesh travels to the underworld to find an answer to his grief and confront the question of mortality.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

GILGAMESH : Translated from the Sin-leqi-unninni Version by John Gardner and John Maier, with the assistance of Richard A. Henshaw. 304 pp. New York : Vintage Books, 1985 (1984). ISBN 0-394-740-89-0 (pbk.) The present book is the fruit of a collaboration between John Gardner, literary scholar and writer who was responsible for the translation, and John Maier, who wrote the 50-page Introduction, the extensive Notes, and the concluding Appendix. Although both might be described as 'non-specialist enthusiasts,' and it was their intention to write "a translation for the non-specialist" (page 4), evidence of real scholarship is evident throughout, and it's clear that we are dealing here

with enthusiasts who were madly in love their subject and knew a great deal about it. The Gilgamesh story has a very long history and reaches back to a real Sumerian hero of the Third Millennium B.C. Its late version was written, not in Sumerian but in Akkadian, the language of Sumer's conquerors, by the priest, Sin-leqi-unnini, around 1300 B.C., and it is this Middle Babylonian version that we have been given in the present book. Although Gilgamesh is usually presented as a poem in twelve books, Gardner and Maier, guided by the fact that each of its twelve cuneiform tablets has six columns on each side, and feeling that "the column is an important unit of composition" (page vii), decided to treat the tablets as seventy-two columns or separate poems. Hence the unusual column-by-column layout of their book. Most clay tablets that have survived are usually in a pretty battered condition, and have lost many words and lines of their text. These losses are usually smoothed over and largely hidden in translations for the ordinary reader.

The epic of Gilgamesh would, of course, be of historical interest regardless of its content, since it seems to be the oldest written narrative in human history. Its relevance, however, goes far beyond the purely archival -- the story is engaging and powerful, and addresses fundamental questions of humanity. The combination of these two important characteristics makes for a classic creation of human culture; it is somehow comforting and at the same time humbling to know that people 3000 years ago struggled with the same questions with which we struggle still today. I have read several renderings of the Gilgamesh epic, and in my opinion this version by John Gardner and John Maier is the best overall. It is probably the most direct translation you will find. The original text from which this translation is drawn (the "Sin-leqi-unninni" version) is written on 12 stone tablets, each of which has 6 columns of cuneiform. (The appendix includes pictures of some of the tablets, along with commentary about the translation process.) Gardner and Maier have preserved this format, dividing their text according to the tablet and column divisions of the original. They have also, for the most part, translated line-by-line from the original, rather than reorganizing it as many other renderings have done. The result is a work of disarming simplicity. Taking little or no poetic license, Gardner and Maier allow the text to speak for itself. Not being a reader of Akkadian myself, I cannot say how literal or accurate this translation is; I can, however, say that, to me as a reader, it FEELS authentic, and I think that is at least as important.

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