

## **The *Beowulf* Trilogy**

In submission

Stephan Grundy's *Beowulf Trilogy* (*Young Beowulf*, *Beowulf the Hero*, and *Beowulf the King*) is a follow-up to his acclaimed novels of Germanic legend, *Rhinegold* and *Attila's Treasure*. Like the previous two, his rendition of *Beowulf* is his own translation from original texts worked into a modern novelization, placed in the historical setting of those characters in it who can be proven to (or are thought likely to) have existed.

While Beowulf himself is a figure of myth, the archetypal “Bear’s Son” (who appears, in various forms, throughout Germanic legends and tales from the oldest pre-Christian myths to the fairy stories collected by the Brothers Grimm), Beowulf’s king Hygelac and the Yngling kings Onela, Eanmund, and Eadgils are all historical figures, Hygelac’s ill-fated raid on the Franks being particularly well-documented in Continental sources of the time. Grundy has, accordingly, filled out the brief references to battles and political conflicts in the poem *Beowulf* with more detail from *Ynglinga saga* and *Hrólf’s saga kraka*, both of which deal with the same characters and many of the same events. He has also put the events described in the poem into chronological order, whereas in the original most of them are recounted as background to the dragon-slaying and an explanation of the Geats’ desperate military and political situation at the end of the poem.

Grundy's chief additions, however, come in regards to the two aspects of life which appear only sketchily in the original *Beowulf*: the role of women and the influence of the native religion of the North. The position of women as advisors, managers, and co-rulers is hinted at briefly through the figure of Wealhtheow in the original, but has little impact on what is, fundamentally, a tale of heroic deeds. By emphasizing not only Wealhtheow, but the women who are influential both in Beowulf’s personal life (almost completely absent in the original) and in Scandinavian

politics of the day, the *Beowulf Trilogy* presents the realistic social balance to the exceptional deeds of near-superhuman heroism performed (at widely-spaced intervals) by its hero.

Likewise, in the interest of presenting as accurate as possible a view of early Scandinavian thought, Grundy has restored the influence of the native religion of the North, overt references to which were almost completely excised by the Christian scribe who created the final written version of the story. In particular, even despite the lack of direct religious references, it has been suggested that *Beowulf* represents a friction present in the early religion itself: the peaceable, trustworthy king and protector associated with the worship of Freyr (god of good harvests and peaceful rule) contrasted with the violent, even actively anti-social, worship of Óðinn, patron of many of the storied Scandinavian heroes. Grundy, who is well-known himself as a professional scholar of Old Norse religion, finds that theory exceedingly plausible in the context of the original poem and its probable audience. His extensive background in the magico-religious life of early Scandinavia adds a further dimension of both historical reality and human motivation to the *Beowulf Trilogy*.

*Young Beowulf* tells the parallel stories of how Grendel came to Heorot, and of Beowulf's difficult early life. A disappointment to his father Ecgtheow, fostered in the house of the Geatish king Hrethel, the young Beowulf is seen as a "sleac...unfromm atheling" (slack, unpromising noble) by all except Hrethel's youngest son Hygelac and a maiden named Hygd, whom he meets at a Midsummer gathering. Despite his exceptional strength, Beowulf is taunted for his clumsiness and weight; his only means of escape from his tormentors is swimming in the ocean. *Young Beowulf* culminates with Beowulf's coming of age, his betrothal to Hygd, and his swimming contest against Hygd's brother Breca. For Beowulf, the contest ends when he is drawn down by one of Ran's daughters, who takes him as a lover, delighted by his living warmth and his strength. However, he eventually remembers Hygd, and leaves with Ran's daughter cursing him. The sea casts Beowulf up in the Saami territories of the far north; he makes his way home to

appear at Winternights as a seeming revenant, with a mysterious curse upon King Hrethel's household ringing in his ears and a discovery of great personal woe to make: Hygd, thinking him long-dead, is married to Hygelac.

*Beowulf the Hero* continues the story of Hrethel's curse: a fratricide unavenged, the old king's death, and the revival of war between the Geats and their old enemy the Swedes. Beowulf's eerie return, together with his great size and near-supernatural strength, end the taunting of his youth; now he is seen as a half-monstrous being, and still has only Hygelac and Hygd as friends. In one final battle, the Geats defeat the Swedes, but Beowulf's father Ecgtheow is killed, as is the Geatish king, Hygelac's brother Hathcyn. Hygelac insists that Beowulf must take up his father's steading on the border between the Geats and the Swedes; it is in too critical a point to be left without a strong and loyal man guarding it. Beowulf's new folk are first unruly and rebellious; then, when he shows his strength, begin to think of him as a troll and a figure of ill-luck. He is asked not to take part in the Midsummer worship; he presides over the Winternights ceremonies, but those are marred when the sacrificial bull kills a man. Later that night, Ecgtheow's ghost appears to Beowulf, exhorting him to pay Ecgtheow's old debt to the Danish king Hrothgar by challenging Grendel, as Ecgtheow himself would have done had he not been constantly needed to keep watch on the Swedes. Beowulf decides that he is useless where he is – his folk will not follow a man who is both unlucky and feared – and convinces Hygelac to let him go. Together with twelve chosen followers, Beowulf takes ship for Denmark. His victories over Grendel and Grendel's mother transform him, in the public eye, from a possible monster into a hero.

*Beowulf the King* continues the tale of the Geats. Hygelac is slain in an ill-advised raid down the Rhine. Making his way back in sorrow and shame, Beowulf is sheltered by a prostitute and learns the full nature of the curse Ran's daughter laid on him: he is too strong to make love to a normal woman without grievously harming her. He returns to the hall of the Geatish kings, where Hygd is temporarily regent for Heardred, her son by Hygelac. Since Heardred is too young to rule

as yet, Hygd asks Beowulf to marry her and take the kingship which is his by kin-right, but Beowulf refuses: instead, he and Hygd continue as regents. Several years pass; then the Swedish royalty fall out among themselves, and the two exiled princes, Eadgils and Eanmund, come to the Geats for aid. Heardred, now grown to manhood, agrees to give it. The battle ends inconclusively, but Eanmund and Heardred are killed, and Beowulf, the last man of royal blood, must take the kingship. He cannot marry Hygd; but a wedding is held to bind him to the earth, with Hygd speaking for the Frowe, and in his dreams he lies with a woman who is both of them.

Eadgils goes into exile, but returns with allies; the Geats join with him again, and this time they are fully successful, putting Eadgils on the Swedish throne and guaranteeing themselves years of peace. Beowulf's Swedish kinsman Wihstan comes home with him as his thane.

A long peace follows; after a number of years, a plague comes to the Geats. It is particularly deadly to women. Hygd, now quite old, dies of it, and Wihstan's wife is sick when she gives birth to her son Wiglaf - who should be Beowulf's heir, but grows up near-sighted and rather puny, tormented by the other children, and showing no sign of becoming the warleader the Geats will need in these increasingly troubled times.

When Wihstan is eighteen, a long famine comes to Northern Europe. Beowulf sends to the priests' isle of God-Home; the seeress who comes to advise him is the ancient Wealhtheow, once Hrothgar's queen. She advises the king, since his personal luck is still strong, to make Fro Ing's wagon-journey around his lands, sharing his luck and hoping that the god will be moved to come back from his long withdrawal. While Beowulf is gone, a runaway thrall enters one of the sea-caves below the cliffs and comes back with a marvellous gold cup. Three days later, the dragon rises from the cave to burn Beowulf's steading. Beowulf returns to undertake the last challenge of his heroic life, and his last duty as a king, fighting the dragon in single combat.