



# Bringing Beowulf to Britain

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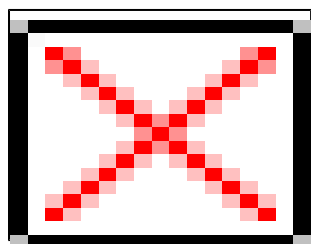
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Byline:

**Tony Bradman** on a story that's enthralled him all his life

**Tony Bradman** on the enduring appeal of the story of **Beowulf**, which has enthralled him nearly all of his life.



I was probably about 12 when I first encountered the story of **Beowulf**. I had only recently discovered the joys of books - a wonderful teacher called Mr Smith had read **The Hobbit** to my fourth-year class (this was in the mid-1960s, so Year 6 these days) at Malcolm Junior School in Penge, south London. It took him most of the year, and the story got me hooked on tales of quests and adventure and dragons and battles.

I joined my local library, where I soon discovered **The Lord of the Rings** and many other books by great writers. One of these was, of course, Rosemary Sutcliff. I started with **The Eagle of the Ninth**, her gripping tale of a young Roman's quest for the truth about his father's lost legion, and read everything of hers I could lay my hands on. Like Tolkien, she created entire worlds in which I could happily lose myself. So you can imagine my delight when I came across a book by her called **Beowulf: Dragonslayer** on the shelves of my local W.H. Smith. It was a slim volume with amazing, swirling black and white illustrations by Charles Keeping that promised a dark, magical story set in a distant past. I wasn't disappointed. The story is brilliantly re-told in Sutcliff's trademark lyrical, supple prose and left me utterly enchanted.

It also became part of my growing interest in the period after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, a chaotic time of barbarian invasions and turmoil. 'Britannia' was part of that Empire, but during the 'Dark Ages' - a term used because there is so little written evidence for what actually happened - tribes of Angles and Saxons arrived from Northern Europe and fought with the Britons for control of these islands.

Over the years I've read a lot about the period, and any fiction I could find that was set in the Dark Ages (there isn't much, either for adults or for children). I also read other versions of **Beowulf**, those aimed at adults as well as adaptations for children. My favourite among the former is the translation by Seamus Heaney (Faber). His knotty, muscular style and emotional intensity is perfect for Anglo-Saxon poetry.

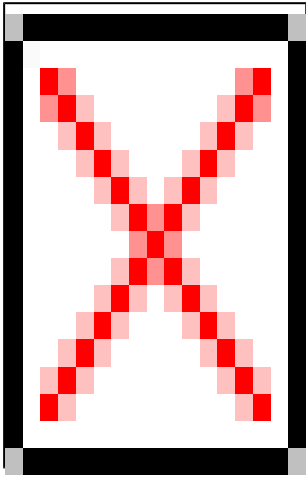
The versions for children are many and varied, but several are excellent. Poet Brian Patten's **Monster Slayer** is short but full of magic, and hauntingly illustrated by Chris Riddell. There's also a full-length, gift-book version of the story by Michael Morpurgo - **Beowulf** (Walker Books) - that's well worth getting hold of, with moody full-colour illustrations by the ever-reliable Michael Foreman.

Another favourite of mine is the translation by Kevin Crossley-Holland (**Beowulf**, Oxford University Press), who is a poet himself and steeped in Anglo-Saxon culture, all of which gives his version great depth and power. The illustrations were provided by Charles Keeping, who clearly liked the story enough to want to re-visit it in a larger format. His

pictures brilliantly capture the sheer weirdness of the tale.

I also like a recently re-issued re-telling by John Harris, **The Geat: The Story of Beowulf and Grendel** (notreallybooks). In his introduction professional storyteller John Harris says he thinks of Beowulf as the original horror story, and his version was forged in many live re-tellings. It certainly has pace, power, humour and the kind of gore kids love, and it's very well illustrated by the excellent Tom Morgan-Jones. John Harris's title refers to the fact that in the poem Beowulf is described as a 'Geat', a member of a tribe from southern Sweden. The action of the poem takes place in Denmark, so it seems likely the Angles and Saxons knew the story before they left their northern European homelands and brought it with them to Britannia. That idea always intrigued me, and last year I decided to write a story about it.

I came up with a character called Oslaf, a young boy living in the homeland of the Angles. His parents die, and he is



given sanctuary by a chief who is about to lead his people to the eastern part of Britain that eventually became East Anglia. Oslaf's father was a great storyteller, and passed on to his son a story that Oslaf knew as the Tale of the Monster from the Lake, as well as some of his storytelling talent. The book is called **Winter of the Wolves**, and at one point when I was writing it - as often happens - I got stuck. So I read some more Anglo-Saxon poetry for inspiration. I came across a poem about a seventh-century poet called Widsith (it opens brilliantly with Widsith 'unlocking his word-board'), who turned out to be vain and boastful, and I knew that I had to put him in my story as Oslaf's mentor and friend.

It really helped - the story immediately came to life with Widsith in it, and I have to say it was great fun to write. Kids these days have to learn about the Anglo-Saxons as part of the Key Stage Two History Curriculum, and that often involves taking a look at the story of Beowulf too. Nobody really knows how it came to these shores, but I hope my version is plausible - and a gripping story for children to read.

Tony Bradman has written many historical novels, including **Viking Boy, Anglo-Saxon Boy** (both Walker Books), and **Attack of the Vikings** (Bloomsbury Educational).

**Beowulf: Dragonslayer**, Rosemary Sutcliffe, Puffin, 978-0141368696, £6.99 pbk

**Beowulf**, Seamus Heaney, Faber, 978-0571203765, £10.99

**Monster Slayer**, Brian Patten, illus Chris Riddell, Barrington Stoke, 978-1781125489, £6.99 pbk

**Beowulf**, Michael Morpurgo, illus Michael Foreman, Walker Books, 978-1406348873, £6.99 pbk

**Beowulf**, Kevin Crossley-Holland, illus Charles Keeping, Oxford University Press, 978-0192794444, £8.99 pbk

**The Geat: The Story of Beowulf and Grendel**, John Harris, illus Tom Morgan-Jones, notreallybooks, 978-0955212925, £6.99pbk

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