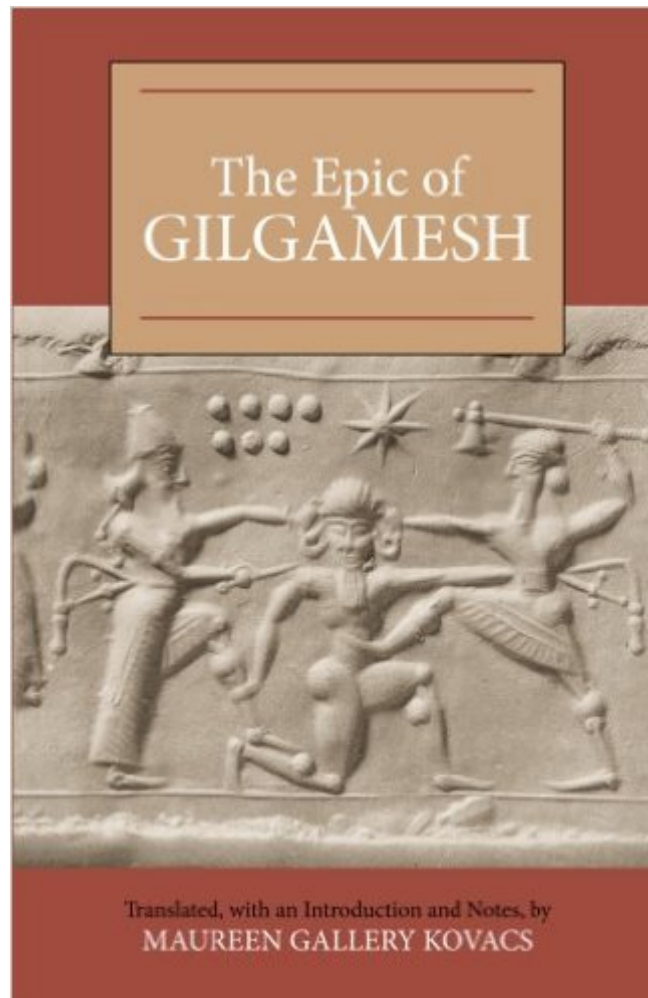


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# The Epic Of Gilgamesh



## Synopsis

Since the discovery over one hundred years ago of a body of Mesopotamian poetry preserved on clay tablets, what has come to be known as the Epic of Gilgamesh has been considered a masterpiece of ancient literature. It recounts the deeds of a hero-king of ancient Mesopotamia, following him through adventures and encounters with men and gods alike. Yet the central concerns of the Epic lie deeper than the lively and exotic story line: they revolve around a man's eternal struggle with the limitations of human nature, and encompass the basic human feelings of loneliness, friendship, love, loss, revenge, and the fear of oblivion of death. These themes are developed in a distinctly Mesopotamian idiom, to be sure, but with a sensitivity and intensity that touch the modern reader across the chasm of three thousand years. This translation presents the Epic to the general reader in a clear narrative.

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## Customer Reviews

I think it's safe to say that I've read them all, or at least, all versions of the Epic of Gilgamesh available in English. This is the best. Kovacs builds upon scholarly advances in Ancient Middle Eastern Studies without ever becoming dryly academic. Her background materials are excellent and extensive, and above all, her discrete inclusion of parallel Old Babylonian Version excerpts, as extended footnotes, is a wonderful solution to the problems posed by those numerous clay tablet gaps in the Standard Version narrative. I'm a professional teller of myth and epic, one of only two tellers (as far as I know) regularly presenting the full Gilgamesh epic in English, and I approach these

texts with an eye for integrity of scholarship, beauty of expression, and passionate commitment to the epic itself. Ms. Kovacs' fellow presenters of Gilgamesh often manifest one or two of these qualities, but hers is the only one to satisfyingly combine all three in a contemporary publication that benefits fully from scholarly progress. (Several should definitely be avoided, or checked out from the library first.) I frequently refer back to her work when puzzling over a turn-of-phrase or interpretive challenge in my teller's adaptation. A final word -- if you've been bitten by the Gilgamesh beast, (and you're in very good company if you have been) you may also wish to purchase *The Gilgamesh Reader*, edited by long-time Gilgamesh lover and writer, John Maier: it's another jewel. And guess where you can buy it!

I previously wrote a more extensive review of the Andrew George edition of the Epic of Gilgamesh, but I was looking at this version, and there was one thing I liked that Kovacs did, so I thought I would mention it. In the introduction, on page xxxiv or xxiv, if I recall, Kovacs has a very nice chart showing the chronological history of all the versions we know of for this epic, which is a couple of dozen, ranging from the first known versions around 2700 BC in Uruk down to the Syriac versions more than two millennia later. Although he discusses the various versions in his book in his introduction, George doesn't include this nice timeline and chronology. The Epic of Gilgamesh is notable for the fact that it's considered the oldest text understandable by a modern reader without special knowledge, and it's also the most ancient text for which we have an author attribution. Around 1200-1300 BC, a Mesopotamian by the name of Sun-Liq-Unnini compiled the well-known "Standard Version" of the epic. He wasn't actually the "author" of the text, but it seems likely he was steeped in the historical tradition and the different versions of the text which had come down over the years in both the Sumerian and Akkadian traditions, and he seems to have gone to some trouble to gather and compile the best versions of the various stories and legends about Gilgamesh in his "edition," which became the most widespread and popular version. We also know that he was employed as an exorcist, an important job in Mesopotamian society, since they were called on for everything from driving out evil spirits in the ill and sick, to making sure dwellings and new buildings were free of evil spirits, to blessing farmland that was about to be planted for the new season. I found the Epic of Gilgamesh surprisingly accessible for a modern reader. This is mainly due to the character of Gilgamesh himself, since his concerns are easily understandable to a reader of any day and age. He is motivated by several concerns, such as his fear of mortality and death, the ephemerality of life on earth, the desire to accomplish heroic feats to prove himself worthy of immortality, to protect his friends and loved ones, and to destroy evil and preserve the good. Overall,

a surprisingly interesting tale that was much better than I was expecting, and that was as accessible as has been claimed for such an ancient text.

I read this with almost no familiarization with things Mesopotamian. The story itself is cryptic and many parts are still missing, but Kovacs organized the book so that there is a separate chapter for each of the eleven tablets, and provides a one-page summary at the start of each chapter so that it's easy to understand the action and context unfolding. Keep in mind, however what the purpose of this book is. It is simply an updated translation of the epic. She doesn't provide a lot of commentary about peripherals such as how the epic fits into the broader body of ancient literature, or other historical information about Gilgamesh himself. So, if you're interested in those things, look elsewhere.

The EPIC of GILGAMESH Translation by Maureen Gallery Kovacs I first learned about The Epic of Gilgamesh in my 9th Grade Ancient History class. At the time, I was intrigued by the reported similarities between Utanapishtim and Noah. I finally decided to give it a read. On the surface, The Epic of Gilgamesh is a simple myth which exhibits similarities to other classic myths and stories. However, despite the many missing lines and lost passages, the story retains a power and universality which speaks to us even today. Gilgamesh is a god-like king, but he oppresses his people. To bring him into line, a rival is created in the woods -- a natural man named Enkidu whose path takes him to the city of Uruk to confront the tyrant. Instead of conflict, a friendship blooms between the two men. They adventure together, but anger the gods, who take their revenge on Enkidu. Gilgamesh is left alive and alone to face his own mortality. His fear and grief lead him across the world to seek the only man who has ever been granted immortality, Utanapishtim, survivor of the Great Flood. Kovacs has done a good job with her translation, which is accessible even though it is fragmentary. One has to be prepared to work with this poem, because so much has been lost since it was written down in 800 BC. But if you are willing to put some effort into reading the (or one of the) oldest surviving work(s) of literature, it is well worth your time. I recommend this work.

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