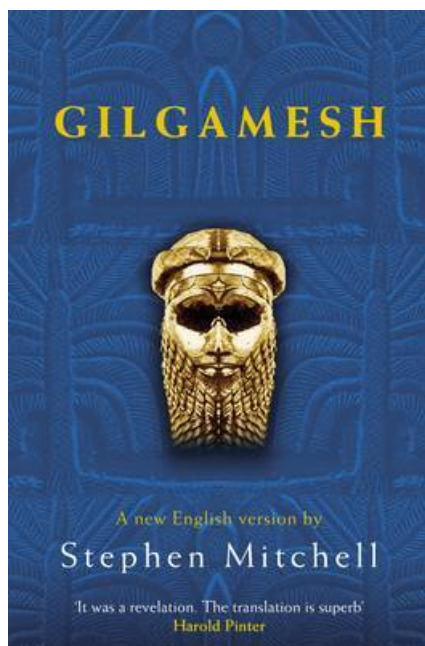


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Book description

Why is it that I should feel a pit in my stomach when I think of the Library of Alexandria wreathed in fire? Cottons Library, too, when we nearly lost Beowulf and The Pearl. Who knows what we did lose? A copy of an unknown work of Archimedes was found to have been scraped clean, cut in half, and made into a Bible. To think: a unique book of knowledge--one that outlined Calculus 1800 years before its time--was turned into a copy of the most common book in the world. As a young man, Tolkien once gave a speech equating the linguistic shift brought on by the Normans as a sort of genocide, overlaying original languages with endless permutations of Rome. It is remarkable that, between accidents and purposeful destruction, some of our remote history has survived intact. Tolkiens own fictional Middle Earth is better documented than the entirety of the Dark Ages. Gilgamesh escaped total annihilation, though certainly did not survive unscathed. Buried beneath the desert sands for three thousand years, it was finally unearthed, opening a new world to us, a new history, a deeper root of literary tradition. The peculiarities of the writing and the culture are remarkable and enlightening. Far more remarkable are the similarities. The work is comprehensible, the character motivations sympathetic, and the philosophical explorations

recognizable. If all the sciences are philosophy, all bent on exploring a vision of our world, then Gilgamesh is valuable to us because of the fundamental human similarities it depicts. However, we cannot say how much is fundamental similarity and how much is the influence of Gilgamesh on later works. It is either an influence on early stories of The Bible, or both books share a common ancestor. It may also have been an influence on the Greek epic tradition. There are many works and historical figures that are mentioned or referenced by other texts, but which no longer exist for us. To have one transformed suddenly from rumor to legendary tale is rare to say the least. To think that now, in the land of Uruk--once a garden, now a desert--American combat boots pound the sand, American bombs level ancient temples, and American soldiers fill sandbags with ceramic fragments. We do not need Gilgamesh to show us how little things change with mankind. We can see for ourselves that ignorance, war, and profit still can take precedence over history, humanity, and culture. As in his mortal fury Gilgamesh smashes the unknown stone things, we must seek to snatch up the unknown before the sword takes it. We cannot save what is already gone, but at least we can treasure what we find. I had the pleasure of reading N.K. Sandars translation (the Penguin edition), which is actually his reworking (for the non-academic) of several direct translations. Her introduction is informative, though as usual, I thirsted for more footnotes.

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