

# 'Beowulf' new edition to be released in U.S.

NEW YORK (AP)—In the United States it's been one of those books you had to read for English lit. But in Britain it's hotter than Harry Potter. It's topped the best-seller list and won the high-profile Whitbread Prize, beating out J.K. Rowling herself.

So will U.S. readers catch "Beowulf" fever?

This week, Farrar, Straus & Giroux is releasing a new edition of the epic Anglo-Saxon poem, written more than a thousand years ago. Translated by Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney, "Beowulf" has sold more than 50,000 copies in Britain and already has reached the Top 20 on Amazon.com, virtually unheard of for a work of poetry.

"We think we can have a pretty broad reach with this book," said Laurie Brown, FSG's vice president of marketing. "'Beowulf' is part of the canon, and we think there are some readers who rarely buy poetry that will find themselves inclined to buy this and give it a thorough reading."

New translations of classics come out all the time, with the great majority only reaching the classroom. But occasionally a book attracts general readers. A re-issue of Stendhal's novel "The Charterhouse of Parma," translated by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Richard Howard, sold thousands of copies last fall. A few years ago, Robert Pinsky's translation of "The Inferno" also sold surprisingly well.

Like literary novels or art-house movies, such publications depend on reviews and word of mouth. Publicity, too, plays a role. At year's end, Miramax Films is expected to release a movie adaptation.

Meanwhile, the Whitbread prize brought the book some invaluable, and unusual, attention.

The nine-judge panel split 5-4 last month, with supporters of "Beowulf" exchanging insults with backers of Rowling's "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban."

Biographer Anthony Holden, who voted for "Beowulf," labeled the Potter book "derivative, traditional and not particularly well-written." A Potter voter was heard dismissing "Beowulf" as "a boring book about dragons."

Among those in the majority: model Jerry Hall, known to rock fans as the longtime wife of Mick Jagger.

"Beowulf" is the elegiac narrative of the adventures of a Scandinavian hero who saves the Danes from the seemingly invincible monster Grendel and later from Grendel's mother. He returns to his own country and dies in old age in a vivid fight against a dragon.

More than 3,000 lines long, the poem was believed written in England sometime between the seventh and 10th centuries.

The author is unknown and "Beowulf" exists in only one manuscript, charred by a 17th-century fire and currently stored in the British Library in London.

Two different U.S. publishers are using Heaney's translation. The new "Beowulf" already appears in W.W. Norton's latest anthology of English literature, which came out recently. Norton, whose English anthologies long have dominated the academic market, commissioned Heaney for "Beowulf" in the mid-1980s.

"His translation is a wonderful achievement and event," said John D. Niles, a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley and director of the school's medieval studies program. "Other professors are just as excited at this very artful rendering."

Niles also noted that some Anglo-Saxon scholars look upon Heaney as an "interloper." But he defended the Irish poet, saying that the "Beowulf" translation was a "culmination of decades and decades of engagement with the early cultures of Northwest Europe."

Heaney has admitted that he found himself as concerned with the spirit of the work as with the literal translation. He writes in the book that he didn't always listen to a "Beowulf" expert, Alfred David, appointed by Norton to help him.

"Al's responses were informed by scholarship and by a lifetime's experience of teaching the poem, so they were invaluable," Heaney explains. "Nevertheless, I was often reluctant to follow his advice and persisted many times in what we both knew were erroneous ways."

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