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The epic tale of Gilgamesh, the legendary god-king of Sumeria who discovered the secret of eternal life, has enflamed the imaginations of countless generations. In *Gilgamesh*, science fiction Grand Master Robert Silverberg gives us a vivid portrait of a courageous, lusty, sometimes reckless ruler of men. It is the majestic tale of a man haunted by gods, tormented by his passion for a woman who was his greatest rival, and driven by a thirst for immortality.

Gilgamesh the King Details

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From Reader Review Gilgamesh the King for online ebook

Susan says

This tale of Gilgamesh who was one third mortal and two thirds god. Always being the larger of men in stature and in ego, believed he could do no wrong. His journey takes him on a quest to find immortality, because he has always feared death. Interesting, but terribly slow moving. Don't think I am up to more of the series.

Christian Schwoerke says

Gilgamesh lived approximately 5000 years ago, in the Tigris-Euphrates valley of what is now Iraq, in 2800 BC. His saga was “composed” orally at roughly the same time, first appearing in Sumerian cuneiform in roughly 2000 BC, then were later copied and translated into Akkadian and Hittite versions over the next 1000 years. Tablets whose dates ranged from 1700 BC to 700 BC have been found throughout Mesopotamia and even beyond, indication of the durability and the extent of this saga. (To give further perspective, while the Bible chronicles events pre-dating and contemporaneous with Gilgamesh, the actual written sources for the Bible didn't appear until the late first millennium BC, which was also the time the events of Homer's Iliad were occurring in ancient Ionia.)

Gilgamesh's story—of a man so obsessed with grief at the loss of his friend that he tries to overcome death itself—is unique for the period because it is rife with human concerns and human activity. This is no mean accomplishment when one considers that societies in this region at this time were largely deistic. People were obliged to answer to deities whose existence permeated every aspect of their lives; obeisance to this or that god was second nature, perhaps even first nature, which in itself raises interesting psycho-historical questions about the development of contemporary thought. Theories suggest that the distinction between dream matter and waking consciousness was not clear, that it was easy to develop a world view filled with an ascending chain of being, from an underworld to a heaven.

Julian Jaynes's theory of the development of introspective consciousness comes into play in this epoch, as it is in the writings of the Bible and the Iliad that Jaynes sees the glimmers of a transition from the one sort of mental reality to the other. Jaynes's theory holds that the right hemisphere of the brain early on in man's mental development communicated with the left hemisphere via auditory stimuli, that there was a synaptic disconnect so that it was a voice (or voices) that directed a person's behavior.

While the saga of Gilgamesh focuses on the human aspects of his character and behavior, his story is still embroidered and ordered with concern for gods. Robert Silverberg removes the gods, and while they still appear in his telling as beings to whom people do obeisance, they are not vital entities or agents in his account. Gilgamesh is imagined as a strong and driven man who is compelled by unique circumstances to undertake a quest to understand the nature of death so that he might overcome it. Silverberg does an admirable job of making Gilgamesh a character with contemporary introspective consciousness, though still imbued with his time's conception of a god-driven reality.

Silverberg's conceit is that Gilgamesh is at the end of the story composing his memoirs, which begin with his father's death when he is six years old. He comes to rule the city of Uruk in alliance with the goddess Inanni (Ishtar), who is incarnate in a high priestess. Gilgamesh strength and size have always isolated him, and his energy and drive further alienate him from his people. It is only the appearance of the wild man Enkidu that brings Gilgamesh restful, joyful companionship. Their friendship leads them to adventures and trials that

ultimately bring them both in conflict with Inanni, who engineers Enkidu's death.

Gilgamesh is driven by grief and fear of his own mortality to leave the city, aimlessly heading into unknown territory. At some point his madness leaves him and he purposefully seeks answers of Ziusudra (Utnapishtim), mortal survivor of the deluge that was by the gods given immortality. This wandering in the desert and spiritual quest reveal to Gilgamesh the verities of life, that there is only living, that fulfilling one's place in the scheme of things is all that may be expected. He returns to Uruk, but first deals with the challenge of Inanni who seeks to displace him. Gilgamesh turns the tables, kills her, and replaces her with a priestess who shares the rule of Uruk at his pleasure.

Silverberg's story brings an introspective consciousness into a world where ritual and gods dictate behavior. Though his Gilgamesh is still beholden to these rituals and gods, he is uniquely able as king to transgress and to question the meaning of life itself. There are the prescribed steps in the progress to enlightenment, and very much like Siddhartha (and a legion of other transcendent thinker/moralists), Silverberg's Gilgamesh touches on them all. At the end, however, he is compelled to fulfill his destiny as king, to rule his people and see to the building of his city's walls.

By heightening the relationship of Gilgamesh with Inanni—a relationship of power, love, and reproach—Silverberg aptly uses the robust framework of the Gilgamesh saga to re-tell a timeless story of great passion, adventure, treachery, conspiracy, despair, and enlightenment.

Iset says

Silverberg is more famously known for his sci-fi works, but here he turns his hand at semi-historical – a sub-category of historical fiction utilising ancient myths and legends and attempting to retell them in a historically accurate and plausible way. Since I'd just finished reading *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, I thought I'd check out Silverberg's reworking.

In some ways, this book was just what I had been craving. Whilst I greatly appreciated the themes and importance of *The Epic*, it leaves something to be desired from a literary point of view and is clearly much better told out loud than read. I admit I longed for the story to be retold from more modern literary sensibilities, and Silverberg did just that. Like most other novels in this sub-genre, Silverberg completely eliminates all elements of the fantastical. So the gigantic demon Huwawa is transformed into a tectonic faultline where the land is dotted with fearsome volcanoes and great crevasses splitting the earth. The goddess Inanna, who becomes angry with Gilgamesh in the myth, is merely her high priestess, who is widely believed to be the goddess' mortal incarnation. And so on and so forth. I thought that Silverberg filled the gaps well, retelling the myth as close as possible to the original whilst removing all fantastical elements. I question his assertion in his author's note that there is 'no doubt' that Gilgamesh was historical – well, there is a lot of doubt, so the question remains up in the air – but I was satisfied with the retelling.

However, it was only after I put the book down that I wished it had offered more. Silverberg sticks so closely to the original legend that nothing new is really brought to the table. Maybe I'm used to it because I've been consuming a lot of stories recently that are very good at creating twists and fresh obstacles and unexpected turns – but I don't think it's unreasonable to expect that our literature be well-written, dramatic, and engrossing. Silverberg kind of just sticks to a handful of protagonists, none of whom except Gilgamesh himself are really explored in depth, and I had the sense that the story lacked a wider, more detailed, and riveting view of Uruk's life and times. Silverberg doesn't really try to do anything interesting with Gilgamesh either, he remains as the stock strongman king figure who doesn't really take an interest in the

hardships of other people so long as his life is okay and he gets what he wants. Not exactly the most fascinating protagonist ever.

I would say that the book is more satisfying than dissatisfying, to be sure; it simply could've done so much more.

7 out of 10

David says

Very different in style from his SF novels but also very enjoyable. Factional type novel set in prehistory times (approx 5000 years ago) and dealing with Gilgamesh, who became King of the Sumerians. While it deals a lot with the capriciousness of the gods and has plenty of fantasy elements these are all dealt with as would be by ancient society and all have a rational interpretation. Deals to a large extent with the lust for power and the struggle between the high priestess of the Kingdom and the King. Also deals with Gilgamesh's personnel development and his transition from all powerful monarch who tramples over all in his path to a more reflective monarch who appreciate the mutual obligations of absolute power. Much of the novel is based on the Epic of Gilgamesh written some 4500 years ago. Enjoyable read which hangs together well and shows another side of Silverberg, though maybe not, as weaving a story that hangs together well is also a province of SF authors.

Amparo says

David says

This very nearly is the type of book I was looking for for years. A story taking place in Ancient Mesopotamia, unblemished with the Holier than thou attitude of men named Daniel being condescending to Assyrians for not having the right religion. It is sad that this is such a rarity, at least it was until recently.

The background for the story is rich and is very well executed, perhaps only the fact that the amount of Gods Silverberg names at times is rather small, though of course that may have something to do with trying to put oneself into the mindset of a man of the 25th century BC, before the growth and expansion of the religious landscape in succeeding centuries. That would be a fair point, though the roster of deities invoked is surprisingly small regardless.

Some inconsistencies with more modern interpretations, given that the sources used as reference were at the latest ones from the mid 1950s, those are also completely excusable.

However the one reason I am knocking a point off, the thing I can not forgive Silverberg for having done and that is to reduce all the genuine supernatural trappings of the original myth down to visions and ecstatic possessions. Worst of all he reduces Humbaba, the one called a battering ram in some of the earlier translations (the ones I assume Silverberg must have himself been using) into nothing more than a cloud of smoke and the Bull of Heaven into nothing more than a runaway Bull that is said to have the essence of

the real thing in it. The former pains me especially as I have always, since my earliest childhood, been fascinated by Giants, and though the Greeks have more than you can shake a stick at, I would have loved to see how this would have been handled in a less realistic fashion. The set up until that moment is tense and leaves you on the edge of your seat, but to be rewarded by a simple large puff of smoke is the embodiment of disappointment.

The Flood story too is scaled down a peg and Ziusudra is not even immortal, nor is the one in the book really the genuine Ziusudra.

One wonders if Silverberg had allowed himself to write a much more fantastic story featuring Gilgamesh, as I have been told is the case with his anthologised sequel stories, edited into *To the Land of the Living*, I have to raise a slight protest and ask: why leave out the true fantasy from the genuine article, why deprive us of the sport of a gigantic, divine bull, the joy of reading of the slaying of a real giant, whose breath is death, engendered in the mountains ?

Will anyone ever try and do this theme justice ?

Suz says

This is a novelization/memoir style telling of the Epic of Gilgamesh that's totally NOT GAY.

I have not read/studied the Epic of Gilgamesh, so I don't know how well the story would roll with academics who know such things intimately, and I'm generally going to miss any subtext of what was going on or what constituted pop-culture in ancient Mesopotamia, but overall, it is hitting most of the major plot points I remember. In this story, first person told by Gilgamesh, he's the most amazing, awesomest, strongest, sexiest thing ever, and of course everything is about him. While I get that he's a hero of old, the whole thing just feels like a petulant boy stomping about, even when he's older.

The story isn't super consistent, main example: the initial driving force for Gilgamesh is that Inanna, or the priestess of Inanna, is the great love of his life, who he spends a good portion of the book freaking out about, because she's having ritual sexy times with Dumuzi the king, but then he treats her like utter shit for no particular reason (the idea of a conspiracy between her and the King of Kish is punted about, but doesn't seem to be a driving force between the two or really mentioned much in his reasoning).

Anyhoo, he rants and raves around, for a good part of the book, until we get to the bit with Enkidu, which Gilgamesh tells us is DEFINITELY NOT GAY so many times, you can't help but get the homophobia present in the book. He'll mention it several times later on, and he even doubles-down on the homophobia (initially) by bringing up homosexuality and then mentioning that homosexual relationships are less than heterosexual ones... Keep bringing it, Silverberg).

So this story is generally the Epic of Gilgamesh, with Silverberg filling in to give him a more fleshed out childhood and then ordering everything in such a way that it seems to make sense, gods and all. And totally NOT GAY. But for all of that, it's a dry and stilted tale; whether this is intentional or just shoddy writing, I'm not entirely sure, but I didn't enjoy it.

I'm not the biggest fan of Silverberg (I have many friends/acquaintances that are, which is why I'll pick his stuff up on sale like I did this work), but I was really disappointed in this novel.

And then to make matters worse - I listened to the audiobook, so I'll review the reader because I think it's

more important in this book than some of the others:

The narrator is AWFUL (William Coon). He drags out vowels and certain syllables in a way I can't get (as in, I don't understand the choice to do so). He has an American accent, but I haven't run into a regional thing where people do this, and his voice is so atonal, it feels like I'm listening to BirdPerson from Rick and Morty telling the tale. I spent more time than I'd like to admit, paying attention to the book to see if I didn't like the book/story or I didn't like the narrator. Maybe (probably not) this style of narrating would work for an actual epic poem, but not here. It's a rare, terrible narrator that is so absolutely bad that I'm not sure he's not making me dislike the book more than I already do. If you speed the narration up to 1.3x regular reading, you start to approach a more normal pacing, though the tonality doesn't improve.

James Baquet says

I have long been familiar with the classic *Epic of Gilgamesh* (I first taught it to prep-school ninth-graders around 1990 or so). Likely the earliest long work in literature, it is the first story of a tyrant gone soft (viz Scrooge), the first story of a mortal grappling with death (his own and those of his loved ones), and the first "buddy movie" (road trip included).

The original *Epic* is full of gaps, as not all the tablets it was inscribed on have been found. But that's no problem for Silverberg, as he novelized the heck out of a fairly spare story, adding characters and dialogue at will.

It was fun.

The thing I liked best about this telling was the rationalizing of all the supernatural elements. As it turns out, no demon exists except in the imagination; no god/dess exists except in the form of a priest/ess; and no immortality exists except in the "Operator Game"-like function of folk story, as well as in the sense of leaving one's legacy.

The original is considered to be a source of some of the Bible's stories; or, more likely, they both draw on a common pool of source material. Silverberg's book will not be inspiring any new religions; but for this Humanist, it's a fresh take on some dessicating old material, and reinforces some of my peculiar rationalist biases.

Read it!

Lyn says

The Gilgamesh that Robert Silverberg describes is a combination of Leonidas (as portrayed by Gerard Butler in 300), Conan (as portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Ted Nugent: he is an alpha male with an attitude, a manly man of testosterone power and ursine manliness, with a steaming hot side order of god-like virile manly manness.

I read five pages and dropped and GAVE MYSELF TEN PUSHUPS!!!

The almost pre-historic, shrouded in myth and legend setting made me think of Creation by Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer's Ancient Evenings.

I also had to check out the Gilgamesh listing in Deities & Demigods: Cyclopedia of Gods and Heroes from Myth and Legend (Gary Gygax and company describes him as having 180 hit points and is a Neutral Good 12th level ranger / 5th level Cleric –Druid / 10th level magic user / 11th level monk and 5th level bard!).

Gilgamesh (two parts god and one part man) was a legendary ancient hero king of Sumer who was likely a historical figure, living sometime between 2800 BC and 2500 BC. Silverberg bases his historical fiction account on the Epic of Gilgamesh and gives vibrant life to the tale, describing Gilgamesh's Herculean adventures in first person narrative.

Fun and entertaining.

Olethros says

-Convertir el poema épico antiquísimo en una novela y con cierto sentido del realismo.-

Género. Novela (que hace ficción sobre un mito antiquísimo, eso sí).

Lo que nos cuenta. El hijo de Lugalbanda, rey de la ciudad de Uruk, queda en una posición noble pero no real cuando su padre muere. Al ir creciendo, descubre que es mucho más fuerte, rápido y letal que cualquier hombre, y el propio rey de Uruk ve en él una amenaza al trono. Gilgamesh, nombre por el que es conocido el muchacho, escapa de la ciudad antes de que su vida corra peligro.

¿Quiere saber más de este libro, sin spoilers? Visite:

<http://librosdeolethros.blogspot.com/...>

Bettie? says

A great take on the epic - loved it. Brilliant as a primer to introduce into the full version.

AdiTurbo says

I've learned so much from this novel - about the culture, history and beliefs of the early people of Mesopotamia. Silverberg researched the subject well, and managed to bring to life the old myths of Gilgamesh, who went looking for eternal life. This modern version really helped me understand these old peoples' way of thinking, how natural phenomena connected with their religious beliefs, and how they explained them. Beyond that, there are many universal things in this story in terms of the human condition - loneliness, loyalty, fear of death, friendship and betrayal, and more. Silverberg surprised me with how good his writing is, and how well he has made everything believable and understandable, even when things are much different than in our world. All in all, he provided us with the opportunity to read this ancient story in

an enriching and enlightening way. Very enjoyable and readable.

Erik Graff says

I brought this book along for the plane trip from Chicago to San Francisco as a gift for my host (and former roommate) Tom Miley and his wife. It is a modern retelling of the Gilgamesh story and not, in my opinion, especially insightful as regards the milieu of the original. The focus is more on the character of the protagonist.

Jeff Miller says

Pretty much enjoyed the story and the audiobook version. An ancient heroes epic adapted with a nice flow to it story wise. Not quite what I expected, but that was a good thing.

Jack Pramitte says

Très belle édition, couverture imitation cuir.
