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Sagas Of Warrior-Poets



Synopsis

Lovers, poets, and dragon-slaying heroes populate the gripping Icelandic sagas included in this collection. Part of Penguin Classics' eight-volume Icelandic Saga collection, this volume includes stories that were composed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and are set more than two hundred years earlier—a time when the old Viking ethos of honor and heroic adventure merged with new ideas of romantic infatuation. Set in the farmsteads of Viking-age Iceland, each of these sagas features poet heroes, complex love triangles, and travels to foreign lands. In her informative introduction, Diana Whaley highlights these important themes and reveals how the authors used these tales to entertain, to preserve and shape traditions about the past, and to explore vital social issues. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

It's a collection of five Icelandic Sagas which share thematic similarities: the main character of each is a skald (poet) and each story contains a troubled love affair. They were written in the 1200s about semi-historical people and events of the 900s and 1000s (around the time Christianity was adopted

in Iceland and Scandinavia.) One of the sagas (Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue) is also included in the massive "Sagas of Icelanders," which I recommend highly. However, if you're curious about Icelandic Sagas and are leery of investing in such a huge book, this volume of "Warrior-Poets" is a good one to start with. The five sagas are all of manageable length and the plots are neatly focused around the main character of each, which makes for easy reading. The plain-spoken, efficient saga style of narration can be compared to Hemingway or Hammett and feels quite modern. Sagas were unique in the Middle Ages for being prose narratives in a vernacular language about people who were NOT of the nobility (during a time when literature was dominated by Latin, and by epic poetry whose main characters were of noble blood.) Though the stories are told in prose, these being sagas of warrior POETS, they are sprinkled generously throughout with verses of skaldic poetry. The skaldic style was very formal and consisted of lots of "kennings" which are ways of describing something by allusion and metaphor, without naming the thing itself. Some kennings are almost like riddles and have to be carefully deciphered (surely listeners in the cultural context of the Viking age understood them much more readily than we do today.) The translators have opted to render the verses as literally as possible, to preserve their integrity as Poetry.

The Icelandic Sagas are among the greatest works of Western literature, but these translations do not do them justice. To begin, the text is clotted with numerous endnotes, which I utterly abhor. It is extremely disruptive to have to be constantly flipping to the back of a book while reading it. And what's worse is that many of the endnotes tell one things that an astute reader will already have gathered or things that the reader doesn't even need to know in order to make sense of the text, so one's attention to the story is constantly being distracted for no good reason. Due to this, trying to read this book is a lot like trying to read a book while sitting next to someone with Tourette's syndrome who keeps shouting out irrelevancies every minute or so. I realize that there is sometimes a need to apprise readers of things that are not in the text but in my opinion, notes should be used judiciously and they should always be formatted as footnotes in order to not overly distract the readers attention to the story. The translations themselves are difficult to follow, do not move along very smoothly and are filled with just plain bad writing. Due to various unexplained ambiguities, the reader is often left wondering where a certain character is or how he got to where he is or why he's doing what he's doing. Here is an example: In one place it is written that "...one summer when [Hallfred] had arrived from Iceland, he and his companions were anchored off Agdenes" without stating exactly what country he had arrived in--and it's not clear, either, by the context. I had to scrutinize the surrounding text for a minute or two to figure out that Hallfred was back in Norway

where he was then living.

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