

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

- Gilgamesh was composed over 3,000 years ago. Is it still relevant to us today and in what ways?
- Gilgamesh tells the stories of two heroes: Gilgamesh and Enkidu. In what ways do their individual stories contrast or comment upon each other?
- Gilgamesh can be seen as a failure as a hero. He doesn't achieve immortality, he can't preserve his friend's life, and he loses the plant that restores youth. Do you agree that Gilgamesh is a failure? If not, how does he succeed? If you do, why do think anyone would write an epic poem about a failed hero?
- Some readers see Gilgamesh as essentially the same person at the end of the poem as he was in beginning: selfish, impulsive, and violent. Do you think he learns anything or grows as a person or king in the course of the poem?
- The tablets containing the standard version of Gilgamesh were found in the ruins of an Assyrian king's library. Do you think the poem contains any useful lesson for leaders?
- Gilgamesh includes several responses people can have to the fact of their own mortality. What are these responses and what are their limitations?
- There are three worlds in Gilgamesh that we can call the City, the Wild, and the Divine. How are these worlds distinguished and where do they intersect? What are the good and bad points of each? Where do Gilgamesh and Enkidu fit in these worlds?
- What are the functions of the female characters in the poem such as the temple prostitute Shamhat, the tavern keeper Siduri, the unnamed wife of Utnapishtim, and the goddess Ishtar? In the center of the poem, Gilgamesh rejects the sexual advances of Ishtar and hurls abuse on her. What do you make of this puzzling episode?
- What do you make of the ending of the poem? Is it at all satisfying?
- In what ways does Gilgamesh prefigure later literary works such as Homer's epics and stories in the Bible?



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