

The Funny Side of *Beowulf*

By Dave Barry

I believe that we parents must encourage our children to become educated, so they can get into a good college that we cannot afford.

I try to help my son, Rob, with his schooling, but over the years this has become more difficult. Back when he was dealing with basic educational issues such as why the sky is blue and what a duck says, I always knew the correct answers ("It doesn't matter" and "Moo"). But when Rob got into the higher grades, he started dealing with complex concepts such as the "hypotenuse," which hadn't been invented yet when I was a student. So these days I'm useless as an educational resource, except on those rare occasions when Rob is studying a topic I'm familiar with. For example, last year, in history class, he studied The Sixties. That's right: The Sixties are now considered a historical period, just like the Roman Empire, except that as far as modern kids are concerned, The Sixties featured stupider haircuts. Because I lived through that era, when Rob asked me about it, I was able to give him helpful information.

"What did you do during The Sixties?" he asked.

"None of your business," I informed him.

Other than that, my main contribution to his education is to provide encouragement. For example, the other day I asked him if he had any homework, and he told me he had to read *Beowulf*. "Yuck!" I said, encouragingly. I was exposed to *Beowulf* when I was a student. If my memory serves me correctly (and I believe it does, because I am copying this directly from the encyclopedia), *Beowulf* is an Old English epic poem concerning a hero who freed the court of the Danish king Hrothgar from the ravages of the ogre Grendel and Grendel's mother and thus became king of the Geats.

This raises some questions, including: Who are "the Geats"? And why would anybody want to be king of them? I mean, the word "Geat" sounds like an insult, doesn't it? As in: "Some stupid Geat put salami in the disk drive!"

(Let me just state, before I get a bunch of hate mail, that I myself am two-thirds Geatish.)

My point is that I have never been a huge fan of "Beowulf," or epic poems in general. "Epic," in my opinion, is a code word that English teachers use for "boring," the same way they use "satirical" when they mean "you will not laugh once." Nevertheless I stressed to Rob that he should make this homework his absolute highest priority, allowing nothing to come ahead of it, but that first we would go out for Italian food. I like to do this with Rob because he always orders pizza, which I am not allowed to eat because it contains cholesterol, but it is a scientific fact that your body will not absorb cholesterol if you take it from another person's plate.

Rob drove us to the restaurant. I like to let him drive because it improves my circulation by causing my heart to beat 175,000 times per minute, although this particular trip was fairly relaxing right up until Rob made the rookie error of actually stopping at a red light rather than

accelerating through it, as is customary in Miami, the result being that we were rammed by the car behind us. The other driver, as required by local law, was uninsured and spoke no English. This gave us an educational opportunity to brush up on our Spanish by engaging in a dialogue with the other driver, which went like this:

US (pointing at the light): Rojo! ("Red!")

OTHER DRIVER: No! Amarillo! ("No! Yellow!")

US: Like heck-o! ("We disagree!")

OTHER DRIVER: Que son? Guitos? ("What are you? Geats?")

It took two hours and two police officers to sort it out, with the outcome being that the other driver received a ticket-o. Fortunately, my car sustained only superficial damage, which I'm sure at today's bodywork prices can be repaired for no more than it would cost to purchase the entire contents of the Louvre at retail.

Because of this delay, we were late getting back from the restaurant, but Rob still would have had time to do his homework, except that—this is true—the police had set up roadblocks around our neighborhood and were not letting anybody in. An officer told us there had been several reports of shots fired, and police were going house-to-house with dogs. I was concerned about this, but Rob took it well; I think he was hoping that one of the dogs would eat his copy of *Beowulf*.

The police never found the source of the shots (it was probably just some innocent thing—perhaps a neighbor who couldn't locate his remote control and decided to turn off his TV with his AK-47). But we had to wait at the roadblock for over an hour, which meant that Rob did not start reading *Beowulf* until after midnight. So basically, this entire column is really just a note to his English teacher to say: Please excuse Rob if he was unprepared. And I hope you were not offended by my tone.

It's satirical.

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