



# The Reluctant Berserker

*Alex Beecroft*

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*Manhood is about more than who's on top.*

Wulfstan, a noble and fearsome Saxon warrior, has spent most of his life hiding the fact that he would love to be cherished by someone stronger than himself. Not some slight, beautiful nobody of a harper who pushes him up against a wall and kisses him.

In the aftermath, Wulfstan isn't sure what he regrets most—that he only punched the churl in the face, or that he really wanted to give in.

Leofgar is determined to prove he's as much of a man as any Saxon. But now he's got a bigger problem than a bloody nose. The lord who's given him shelter from the killing cold is eyeing him like a wolf eyes a wounded hare.

When Wulfstan accidentally kills a friend who is about to blurt his secret, he flees in panic and meets Leofgar, who is on the run from his lord's lust. Together, pursued by a mother's curse, they battle guilt, outlaws, and the powers of the underworld, armed only with music...and love that must overcome murderous shame to survive.

Warning: Contains accurate depictions of Vikings, Dark Ages magic, kickass musicians, trope subversions and men who don't know their place.

## The Reluctant Berserker Details

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# From Reader Review The Reluctant Berserker for online ebook

## Leanne says

4.5 stars

It's a shame this story hasn't garnered more attention. It's beautifully written. Beecroft's descriptions are gorgeous and poetic- the kind that had me reading out loud to feel the words roll around on my tongue. The romance is slow burn at best- and I would have liked more of Wulfstan and Leofgar together as a couple. But what I really loved about this story was how well it captures Medieval Britain, or, at least how I imagine it to have been. Well researched, I appreciated the small details and relished looking up the occasional word ... but I find this era fascinating.

Immersive, quietly beautiful and rather poignant storytelling.

Recommended to fans of Harper Fox's Brothers of the Wild North Sea.

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## Jerry says

Probably close to 4.5 stars.

I read his book concurrently with other books. Sometimes a writer make me so involved with a someone that if they do something stupid or something terrible is about to or has happened to them, I have to take a break. His book had several instances where I just had to get away, the action was too intense. Fascinating time period. I love reading on my iPad/Kindle where I can google a place or person or phrase or whatever, it make historical fiction written with intense research worth it to me. I can read with the flow and then go back and research whatever I didn't previously know. I am in awe of authors who can adroitly drop in facts, phrases and just words to the point that you almost don't need to look them up. I have a desire to know the etymology of words so I will always research even if I have gleaned the meaning already.

Fascinating role reversals, capturing, changes of heart, scary witches, scary forests and bogs all of which draws one into an amazing story.

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## LenaLena says

This is a historical novel that I would like to hold up as a shining example of what I crave when I read historicals: I want to be immersed in the past, spending time with people that I on one hand understand, because of our shared humanity, but who on the other hand feel unfamiliar because their life's experiences are so very different from my own. I want to see their world, live it, breathe it, try to understand it. I want to try and find the parts of that world that have survived until the present day without them being presented to me on a platter. I want to look at the ways their culture feels weird to me and I want to understand why it works like it does, without getting the feeling that it is 'because the author said so'. I want it to feel real because the author did a lot of research without it ever feeling like I am reading research or that the author is showing off said research. I want the characters to be alive in a way that goes beyond them being marionettes in a world the author is busy showing off. I want it to have a story that doesn't bore me by being loaded with era-appropriate clichés.

The Reluctant Berserker, despite having an awful title, is all that and on top of *that* it has a compelling story and it is beautifully written in a rich prose that stops just short of turning purple. Wulfstan and Leofgar are interesting, alien and human at the same time. One of the reasons I often find contemporary romances boring is that we all know how decent people ought to behave in our own world, there aren't that many valid behavioral choices when a person is intrinsically good. So most characters in those books end up behaving exactly as you would expect them to eventually. The world in this book is so different, teetering between the 'old' Saxon warrior culture and the 'new' Christian morals, that the character's valid choices are for the most part completely unpredictable for modern readers. This leaves them in that pleasant state in which they have no clue where the story is going to go next or where it could possibly go in the end. It really is wonderfully done.

I'll try to explain what started bugging me as the story progressed, though. One of the main themes in this book is that both men struggle with the fact that taking it up the ass is a) a mortal sin in the religious sense and b) a mortal insult for a warrior. Yet, that is what Wulfstan craves and what he is judged for harshly by everyone that finds out, including Leofgar. Wulfstan's world is one where early Christianity dominates but where not all forms of paganism have been eradicated. It is a given that both characters, being Christian, have firm Catholic convictions. But then the author chooses to give both characters religious epiphanies that change how they view themselves, each other and the world around them. While I am not opposed to divine intervention in most fantasy novels (which usually have made up polytheistic religions) I am not a fan of it in that genre either. Here, I found it disturbing.

First of all, I don't like that it is used to make the plot take a course that would have been almost impossible without it. It seems to be a very easy way to get the characters to change their mind and to get to an ending that is palatable for the modern reader. Secondly, I don't buy that Wulfstan changes his opinions so radically after Saint Whatsername pretty much quotes Lady Gaga's 'Born This Way' at him. Decades of social conditioning aren't reversed so easily, I think.

And last, the whole 'Hurray for the Catholic Church!' vibe in the latter part of the book makes me profoundly uncomfortable. That's probably projection on my part, being the child of fallen Catholics and all that, but I really don't do well with totally uncritical views of any major religions. If you're a practicing Christian you may love this part of the book though. And I am really curious how this book reads to non-Christians. Maybe this Disney version of Christianity is alien enough to them that they can view it from a benevolent distance, like I read my Fantasy novels. Or maybe it reads like propaganda. I don't know. I am aware that it is more than likely that it's my particular background that causes my discomfort in this case, but I'd really love to hear from other people how they experienced this latter part of the book.

For me this was a little bit like listening to a great song only to have it turn into a Praise Jesus type of Christian rock song in the last refrain. Arguably still a great song, but not something I would volunteer to listen to again.

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## **Eli Easton says**

Amazing. This book will be in my 'year's best' for sure.

First, I want to say that as a writer I admire good writing, especially as I read so heavily in m/m romance where the writing is often just serviceable (and not exactly the point). That's not to denigrate any author, because my own work doesn't always soar like the eagles, only to say that when I find a book where the

writing is as good as any book I've ever read, I'm very impressed.

I love this author's way with prose and there are so many wonderful and original analogies in this book. Here are just a few of the dozens I highlighted:

*For when he looked up, he saw that all the clouds had drawn apart. The night was on them full, and acres and acres of sharp stars were poised to fall on him with killing cold.*

*This disappointment was strange and ungrateful in him, he thought, tasting at the back of his throat like blood from a nosebleed.*

*In his frustration, Wulfstan's sodden maze of pleasure-drunken thoughts turned into a sack full of snakes.*

I could go on, but that gives you an idea. I am wary of books (and I have seen some reviewed lately) where the author's voice becomes so over-wrought and egotistically poetic that the story is lost in a vomit of flowers, but that is certainly not the case here. The story and plot are always driving forward with the strong prose supporting it but never detracting from it.

As for the story/plot itself. I don't read a ton of historical fiction, but when I do, I like it to feel authentic and take me to a time and place I know little about and make me feel like I'm there. This book achieves that. The attitudes towards homosexuality, the touches of witchcraft and religion, the characters of the scobs or musicians, all felt very true to the time and I enjoyed the texture a great deal. There was action and angst and miscommunication in the plot, but thankfully the miscommunication was not overly done and neither MC was overly weak or fearful of saying what they wanted. The plot was rich and fast-paced enough that it kept me reading til the end.

Like many contemporary m/m romances, the ultimate theme is a common one--accepting who you are. Nothing really new there, yet the journey to it was unique enough that I was happy.

*"Your father--"*

*"If he has any wisdom, would accept that our wyrd is woven for us in our very nature, and all our choices only tend to that end. Better to accept fate joyfully than to fight it, for it will win no matter what we do."*

The romance was quite good too -- both MCs were beautiful and appealing and I loved the twist of their contrary natures and how beautifully they fit together.

I would give this book more than 5 stars for the great writing and research, the fast-paced plot and taking me to another time, but I do have one nit. After 380 pages of waiting of our MCs to finally consummate their relationship, not giving us another paragraph or two of description (at least) felt a bit stingy on the author's part. The sex is basically fade to black. I don't need pages of detailed erotica, but wanted at least to be inside Wulfstan's head as he finally got his wish and experience his joy and pleasure.

Also, I will say, it is confusing the attitude portrayed about homosexuality in the book. In this story, it was acceptable for a Lord or warrior, or any older man, to keep and use a 'boy' for sex, quite openly, but somehow incredibly shameful for any 'man' to take it up the ass. So any boy or slave who was or had been so

used was reviled as womanly and weak, the ultimate insult, and would never be free of such a reputation even once grown. This may or may not be completely historically accurate in the culture portrayed in this book--which was ancient Saxony. But if accurate, the attitude is confusing as hell. I can understand the idea that a man allowing another man to f\*ck him would be considered weak and shameful to a warrior society, but the easy acceptance and common occurrence of a Lord having a homosexual relationship with a boy lover for years (when women were freely available in the hall) is less believable. In my research into medieval England, though men did use boys thus, it was not open and was typically in a situation like travel or battle where women were not available as an alternative. But whether or not it was 100% historically accurate for ancient Saxony, it worked for this plot and anyway, there were touches of fantasy in this (as with the witchcraft), so I can accept it in that light. It just left me curious!

Thanks for a great read, Alex Beecroft. I need to go get False Colors now.

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### **Walford says**

Beautifully done. Gorgeous writing and excellent plotting. Very satisfying both as historical and romantic fiction. I especially loved the way Beecroft captured people on the cusp of the Pagan/Christian transition, fully honoring both traditions.

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### **Dee Wy says**

Ms. Beecroft has the wonderful ability to set a scene so that it is vivid in your mind and then to lace it with language that puts you soundly into a different place in time. This is something we don't get in our contemporary reading and reminds me why I was hooked on MF historical romances for so many years.

Ahhhh, I could feel Wulfstan's deep sigh of happiness as I finished reading this lovely historical. Wulfstan is a warrior who wants to submit to a lover and Leofgar is a scop (musician and a poet-singer - I looked it up!) who travels from place to place to earn his living. When these two meet there is immediate chemistry but this meeting does not end well and it is some time before they cross paths again.

I loved that the author chose the manly Wulfstan to be the character who wanted to be dominated by a lover while still being a respected warrior. Wulfstan, it turns out is the character the title reflects, as he has a temper that blinds him at times, like a berserker.

Leofgar is not a submissive man, though fate gave him the delicate looks that make many men feel certain that he would want someone to master him. This gets him into trouble often and he assumes that is why Wulfstan is attracted to him as well, so he runs.

Excellent slow build romance that will take you on an adventure and reward you with a happy ending. Loved it.

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## Chris, the Dalek King says

**“I know all the songs tell us how terrible it is to be alone, without place or protector, a wanderer in the wilderness. I can recite the lament of the lordless with every syllable dripping with woe. It isn’t to be alone that I fear, it is to be caged. Bound to some man who thinks that because he feeds you he thus owns you. That his are the words that come out of your mouth, and his are your thoughts— that you exist only to praise and serve him. How can a man of pride bear that? How can any real man be content as another’s servant?”**

Wulfstan has a secret. A secret that would shame him in the sight of his family and friends. He craves the touch of a man as other men crave the touch of a woman. Except it is worse than that...he craves the touch of a man, as a *woman* crave a man’s. One can be forgiven—or at least ignored—but the other is unforgivable. For no real man would debase himself thus.

Leofgar has his pride and his instruments--but not much more than that. Anna, his master, and pseudo-father, is ailing, and it is not likely that he will last past winter, if that. When a lord offers them shelter in exchange for their fealty, Leofgar says he will do anything to insure that Anna is kept warm and fed. But the offer comes with some strings that Leofgar is unsure if he can be bound with, no matter how much he loves Anna. How can a man willingly debase himself so...and still be a man?

When Wulfstan takes a life to keep his secret, and Leofgar breaks his oath to save his pride, they throw their lives and their fates to the winds. They never expected to find their *weirds* (fates) so inexplicably tied. But Leofgar does not know if he can see past the shame of the acts they crave, no matter that Wulfstan would freely yield himself to the minstrels will. And even if he can, they are both being haunted by their pasts, and neither is willing to give up their hold lightly.

I freely admit that I have never been a big reader of historicals set in this time frame. I’m more of a tight pants, high collars, and top-hats, kind of gal (especially when they are all lying haphazardly on my bedroom floor). I also enjoy at least a nodding acquaintance with indoor plumbing and bathing practices. These are not exactly things you are going to find in the Middle Ages. But I also freely admit that I am willing to try at least anything, if it is well written and wonderfully executed. And this book really does fit that bill.

Clearly this book was well researched...or, well, it was able to *sound* well-researched. As I am in no ways a scholar on the Middle Ages, I honestly can’t say much about the facts. But when it comes to setting an atmosphere, this book had it spot on. I loved the subtle mix of archaic terms within the novel. It lent the story a sense of age, but it was done in such a way as to not leave us overly confused about what was going on. And the blending of the old pagan cultures with the Christian belief system was very well done. It was great to see the way that the two seemed to both feed off and pull away from each other at the same time.

This book also played well with the idea of wants vs. perceived roles. Wulfstan is a big brute. He is a berserker, and has extreme trouble controlling the rage that bursts out from him when he is threatened. But at the same time he desires to be taken care of. Not only in bed—though that one is a deep source of shame for him, during most of the book—but in life. Outside his is all that his society expects of a man, and inside he is everything they find shameful. It takes a long time for him to come to terms with the fact that what he craves is not by any means a weakness. It is just another side of strength.

Alternately, Leofgar is a beauty. But this is not the only thing that makes him seem weak to others. His profession, while an honorable one, is not exactly the most manly thing to undertake. That, along with his looks, leaves him open for taunting and unwanted attention. Yet, like Wulfstan, all is not what it seems, because if there is one thing that Leofgar will not do, it is bend for any man.

And here, my lovelies, is where we start running into trouble. Wulfstan wants to *be* fucked. Leofgar wants *to* fuck. It *should* be a match made in heaven. But dear lords in heaven...these two are about as thick as a block of concrete when it comes to their 'relationship.' Even when they finally—and I'm talking about 90% mark—come to realize what the other wants, Leofgar gets all righteous and refuses to bugger the poor bastard. I swear this story was a step-by-step guide on how to cock-block with the best of them. And then, when they get around to sorting all their personal shit out, the sex lasts for like half a page. The tension has been racking up for a good 300+ pages, and it has really had a lousy payout. I am a big, huge, *ginormous* fan of slow-burns...but I do expect something to catch on fire eventually. I want a flame, not a flicker.

The writing in this story was great. And the atmosphere in it was so much fun. But sometimes it just got way too flowery. I love a metaphor as much as the next girl, but when I have to re-read a fight scene three times to figure out exactly whom is hacking whom to pieces, it gets a bit tiresome. I did like that it was Wulfstan who was the more poetic of the two—I think it mirrored nicely the whole notion of misleading preconceived notions of masculinity and personal taste—but it did seem a little odd that the poet/minstrel was more down to earth in his narrative voice, than the berserker.

This book kept me glued to my Kindle, and since I wasn't expecting that at all, it was a big bonus. And it also was nice to have a few pagan rituals pop up in the story, since I am a big fan of Norse mythology. I really enjoyed reading this story, much more than I ever expected too, and will definitely be looking up more books by this author. And if liked it this much, fans of the era are going to love it.

4.5 stars

*This book was provided free in exchange for a fair and honest review for Love Bytes. Go there to check out other reviews, author interviews, and all those awesome giveaways. Click below.*

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## Mark says

**Alex Beecroft is for me one of the historical masters of M/M romance. This time she takes us back to Anglo-Saxon Britain at a time when life was a fight for survival and manages to combine into this backdrop a thoroughly convincing M/M romance.**

Wulfstan is an anglo-saxon warrior and was fostered by his master Lord Ecgbert and trained in his service. One evening when they arrive at their village Wulfstan hears a music that magically draws him. This music came from the main hall from two musicians or scops. Leofgar and his master Anna are in the hall playing for the crowds gathered there.

However, with Wulfstan all is not what it seems. Deep down he has a longing for a love that as a saxon warrior can't speak its name and he tries to suppress those feelings, however that proves in the long run an almost impossible task. Trying to be something he isn't. After a chance meeting with Leofgar and a passionate kiss with all those feelings surfacing he shuns Leofgar after nearly being discovered. The fear of



discovery is greater than the act itself and Anna needs to plead for Leofgar's life and both are thrown out of the village.

This sets them both on two very separate paths at the beginning. Anna is getting frail and they both need to find somewhere to stay for the winter. They find a place under the Saxon Lord Tatwine, where Leofgar promises to be his loyal servant if they can stay on his land. However, the price that Leofgar pays for comfortable lodgings is a high one and when his master Anna dies his Lord comes to collect.

In the meantime, Wulfstan has a brutal disagreement with Cenred his best friend which leads to a fight and Cenred's accidental death. Although it was accidental, Wulfstan finds it difficult to live with the shame and guilt and so leaves his village. He is also scorned by Cenred's mother Seawyn and as she practices witchcraft puts a curse on Wulfstan and starts to stalk him to see if the curse works.

Then fate plays a role and by a chance meeting, Wulfstan meets Leofgar and their paths are inextricably linked. Both on a kind of pilgrimage, Wulfstan trying to come to terms with his guilt and Leofgar fleeing from his cruel master and on his way to find another in the form of Anna's friend Gewis who is now a monk at the monastery of St. Aethelthryth.

I loved the way that this plot worked out. First of all they are separated, but that one passionate kiss neither can forget, keeping them thinking about each other constantly during the separation. Neither believing that their paths would once cross again.. When they eventually meet again after a number of circumstances brings their paths together, it is with caution. Leofgar still sees the warrior in Wulfstan, strong stubborn and in conflict with himself. Wulfstan soon realises that Leofgar's strength is not in his physical strength but his power with words which in Wulfstan's eyes is a mighty a weapon as any sword. I love the way Alex gets exactly the characters right, balancing each other out perfectly, but not without its tension and angst as Wulfstan battles with his feelings internally. In this respect Leofgar is more confident and outspoken, knows his own mind and exactly what he wants from life, even if this does get him into a number of troublesome escapades. His love of music is compelling and only second to the feelings he has for Wulfstan.

How do you write about an M/M romance in historical anglo-saxon Britian? Well, if I can trust anyone to get it exactly right then it's Alex. She paints such a vivid backdrop and sends the reader whirling right back in time. I find the backdrop and how it's described one of the most important aspects of any historical novel and Alex achieves this brilliantly, atmospheric and fitting to this time.

I loved the way she uses old anglo-saxon words, e.g. wyrd for fate / destiny, wycce for witchcraft / magic, scop for musician, etc. However, this does not confuse the reader as due to the brilliantly descriptive writing you know exactly what these words refer to and what is meant without having to look things up on Wikipedia. The research for such a novel is so important to get the facts right, traditions, behaviour, customs, attitudes, etc. and here Alex displays here meticulous research in getting the historical aspects just right.

Another important aspect for me is the dialogues, they should be simple and easy to understand, but also

reflect the language and conversations of this time without being too modern in their nature. Once again Alex does this with a skill that is breathtaking, bringing the characters alive; vivid, feeling, breathing, tangible and real characters although we find ourselves way back in time. Also I believe they of course wouldn't talk directly about their sexuality or feelings in this time, but more through innuendos and circumnavigating the subject, but leaving no doubt what is being referred to. This style of writing for me was the most beautiful and poetic in many ways.

So what about the "gay" aspect in a historical novel? Well, this I guess is a tricky one as it's difficult to know exactly what the attitudes were to this particular theme. However, Alex portrays something that I feel is near the truth and totally believable. In many respects they were probably not as homophobic as we would maybe think, being something that could be viewed as normal for "brothers-in-arms" or the Saxon Lord taking a "toy boy" for his nightly escapades. I really think this would be totally within in the realms of believability and feels totally natural for this time. Wulfstan is obviously having a huge internal conflict with the fact he is the tough guy warrior but his feelings towards other men could be construed as a sign of weakness. Leofgar is a lot happier in his skin, being a musician and more determined, seems to be more in touch and at home with his feelings.

Eventually they both find their path together and the book ends on a HEA with a hint of more adventures to come maybe. I would like to think so as I would love to read more about Wulfstan and Leofgar. Once again and beautifully written book from Alex; rich in detail, emotion and intricacy of plot. A must read for all historical fans of M/M.

*Alex is guest blogging with us and talks about the way she envisaged anglo-saxon England and how she manages to get the details right. There is also a chance to win an ebook copy the Reluctant Berserker. Draw ends 18th February 2014.*

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## **Kazza says**

I added in one of my status updates (*Alex Beecroft writes beautifully. You forget until you go back into one of her books.*) It's true. Every time I read one of her books I am always in awe of the prose and the overall quality of writing.

*"It will be chill tonight," he dropped down on the bench beside his friend and felt the warmth of the man's sturdy thigh against his own. "Will you share your cloak with me?"*

*Cenred laughed and ducked his head to whisper, "How little time it takes to overcome your scruples, my friend."*

*"Mock me and sleep cold." Wulfstan made to rise, nettled, but Cenred caught the hem of his tunic and urged him back down.*

This is another gloriously written book. The words evocative and thought-provoking -

*Wise men said there were demons in the forest, elf-folk and mound-folk, ettins and earth spirits. But Leofgar had journeyed in the waste place all his life and did not fear such things. It was men he feared, and now he recognised the threat by the pleasure it brought when it was withdrawn.*

The story was fascinating. The relationship(s) and people totally believable. I loved the MCs, Wulfstan and Leofgar. As individuals, they were good people with desires and *needs* that didn't necessarily fit the standard. It was a different time, and we are worlds apart, but they felt so familiar to me. As a couple, I loved them. This could have been a mess in a lesser author's hands - taking two characters in this period and flipping societal expectations of what/who they should be. How they deal with it. The place of music, the place of warriors, some action, some magic, religion, forgiveness, and love, were all lovingly written. Even the secondary characters are given the time to develop and are intriguing.

I felt completely transported to Anglo-Saxon Britain in the 9th century AD. That's what I want, fiction rooted in fact. I prefer nothing out of place. I need appropriate use of language that will allow me total immersion into another time and culture. Little things/big things about tradition, ideas, the people, the clothing, behaviour and expectations. I definitely got it all in *The Reluctant Berserker*.

Detailed review - <http://ontopdownunderbookreviews.com/...>

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### **K.J. Charles says**

Well I loved this. Beautifully written, beautifully thought out, really moving. Beecroft does an amazing job of conveying this half pagan half Christian world, and the complicated web of unfamiliar thought and belief. Wonderful vivid setting, too, and absolutely gorgeous main characters, with depth and complexity to the antagonists as well as the protagonists. Loved it.

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### **Vivian says**

A young bard with the countenance of an angel and a fierce berserker, proud and unpredictable. Their paths cross, a catalyst, setting in motion a series of events that drive them both. Beautiful language that lures one in is probably one of my favorite aspects to the story.

**The day's voices had fallen silent, and now the town was filled with the whispering of the sea.**

**The turf was soft beneath them and smelled of ancient heather and dust—long-ago vanished summers in a time of giants.**

**The grave was a black stroke on a green page behind him, as though God had drawn a line to end the tale of Anna.**

**The jangle of Fealo's harness was like a dropped plate on a flagged floor as he tossed his head up and snorted, the only sound in a world struck dumb.**

So, I was seduced. The tale unfolded much in the way one would expect of a medieval story. Measured in pace, never harried, understated, and of course, a journey. I also found out that my Middle English was incredibly rusty, but it was nice to fall back into it. Some great details for weapons and armory to trades to construction are so quietly laid down during the story telling. And the friction between pagan and Christian beliefs and their overlap was nicely done.

A thoroughly enjoyable read. This is not a wild sex-a-thon of rape and pillaging, but a more deliberate story and quite chaste in the carnal aspects.

Favorite quote:

**“Are you so very perfect yourself, son, that you must make yourself the right hand of God’s judgment?”**

**Ana\_P says**

★★ 2 *Expectations-Let-Me-Down Stars* ★★

First and foremost, before I delve into my issues with this book and go into Hulk rage mode, I do have to commend Ms. Beecroft for her wonderful world building. It's very clear that she hit the books and did a lot of thorough research for this novel. You were truly transported back in time. I actually had to turn to good ole Wikipedia a few times to look up terms that I didn't understand or know what they were referring to. I definitely don't use words like "scop," "wyrd," and "seax" on an everyday basis (or ever, really) but the Anglo-Saxons certainly did. When you are reading a historical fiction, and you have to do some extra digging around because you run across something you don't understand, then the author is doing something right. Ms. Beecroft truly did a magnificent job with bringing this world of Saxon warriors and Vikings to life centuries later.

However, the world-building is pretty much the only part I enjoyed of this book. I went into this novel with the mindset of an M/M romance reader. I didn't think that was entirely foolhardy on my part since the blurb promised a love story between the two MCs. Unfortunately, for me at least since I expected and wanted it, this book was not a romance at all and was more of an epic adventure with some gay MCs.

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Warning: The rest of this review contains deserved excessive use of synonyms for the term "douchebag" since this particular reviewer felt the need to vent her frustrations due to the unbelievably vexing douchebaggery of one of the MCs.

Ok, so, the MCs were apart for most of the book until up to about the 60% or so mark because so many other obstacles and obligations got in their way and forced them apart. They first meet in the beginning of the book

when Leofgar pushes Wulfstan up against a wall and kisses him. They don't see each other again until much later when extenuating circumstances force their paths to cross again.

When the MCs did find their way back to each other, I now wished it hadn't happened at all. Why? Because, as was mentioned above, I hated one of the MCs with the passion of a thousand burning suns. Leofgar was an annoying little twerp who was constantly bemoaning the fact that he was not seen as a man by the warriors due to his elven-like beauty that left men desiring him only as a bed companion. I get how that would grate on your nerves, dude. I really do, but your incessant whining just got on my last nerve, and, frankly, my dear,

I really liked Wulfstan as a character. He was a fearsome warrior, yes, but he also had a gentle and caring nature underneath. Also, he had a desire that brought him great inner turmoil. The thing he wanted the most in the world was to be held down and dominated by another man. However, this is an extremely shameful need because he would then be seen as soft and weak as a woman. (This was around 900AD, so of course there are going to be some shitty gender stereotypes. Moving on...). After he crosses paths with Leofgar again, he takes a chance and tells Leofgar about his desire to be dominated as if he "were a woman." Leofgar, the little asshat that he is, tells Wulfstan that he will not lay with him like that because he doesn't want to dishonor Wulfstan by letting him be used as a woman. I know that everyone else in the story thought that way; I just didn't expect one of the MCs to have such simpleminded thoughts as well, and it really chapped my ass.

This was about the 80% mark, and I completely checked out of the story and skimmed the rest of the way. The MCs were separated by forces outside of their control for the first half of the book. I get that, so I am not fuming from that. What I am incensed by is the fact that when the MCs finally reunite in the second half of the book, one of them \*cough\*Leofgar\*cough\* insisted on acting like a douchebag who treats poor Wulfstan horrendously and calls his desires, albeit in a roundabout way, "vile." Leofgar does realize the stupidity of his opinions and actions later but it is too little, too late by then for me, and I just didn't give a shit anymore about him or the story.

I just don't understand what Wulfstan saw in Leofgar at all except his beauty and the fact that he wanted to dominate Wulfstan. Leofgar really was an irritating "piss-drinking son of a sow" and a "shit-witted coward." (Yeah, that's right. I'm using your insults against you, Leofgar. What are you gonna do about it, you obnoxious turd?)

Also, there is only one sex scene between the MCs, and it happened at 91%. Mind you, I was waiting for the smexy times to start for the entire book since they were practically promised in the freaking book blurb (with the whole thing about Wulfstan wanting to be dominated). However, when we finally get it with only 10% of the book remaining, the whole interaction is basically summarized and glossed over, which equates to there being no steam in this book whatsoever.

I thought that after having to put up with that nitwit asshelmet Leofgar for the entire book, I would be rewarded with the smex. No such fucking luck.  
Argh!!!

I would say only to try this book if you want some great world-building with an epic-adventure feel and don't mind a wanker MC.  
Otherwise, avoid!

After all of that being said, however, I would still read another book by this author since she did have phenomenal writing and terrific world building.

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### **Cristina says**

I've found Alex Beecroft's *The Reluctant Berserker* to be a compelling and complex novel that skirts around the obvious structure of m/m narrative to tackle some deep concerns about identity, religion and self-perception.

The two protagonists, Wulfstan and Leofgar, are both very well rounded and presented with flaws and shortcomings that contribute to making them human and believable.

Wulfstan is a reluctant warrior, intimately troubled by his desires and deep nature while also finding himself stifled by conventions and the structure of courtly life. Leofgar, an itinerant musician, is proud and stubborn, fiercely clinging to his freedom and unwilling to accept any protection or relationship that could involve a form of submission.

In many ways, I've found the characters to be equally alien in their medieval sensitivity but also attuned to modern concerns when it comes to assessing personal identity, boundaries, fears etc.

In particular, the constant overlapping of religion and superstition, paganism and early Christianity was a very intriguing aspect for me and I really enjoyed the way the author tackled it throughout the story.

Plunging the reader into the unsettled and mutable world of Medieval England, Beecroft constructs a story that sees its MCs often separated, either by circumstances or misunderstandings and arguments.

The way Wulfstan and Leofgar follow each other, then get separated then again reunited is conducted in a self-assured manner and kept me glued to the page until the very end.

I also really liked the quality of the writing, which is sensuous and poetic in equal measure.

In some ways, this novel reminded me of one of my favourite books, Harper Fox's *Brothers of the Wild North Sea*. The atmosphere of early Christianity, the constant danger of medieval life, the depth of the main characters, are all elements I was really happy to find in Beecroft's novel.

Really recommended!

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### **Feliz says**

Poetic, magical and fully engrossing. Awesome sense of time and place, a wonderful, in-style narrative

language. The main characters fully realized and firmly set into their environment, the secondary cast vividly drawn. A smoothly flowing story interspersed with breathtaking action scenes and moments so tender they touched my heart.

Highly recommended!!

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**Alisa says**

FREE on Amazon 1/10/19

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