

It's All Goodkind

by Paul Di Filippo

“[Terry] Goodkind’s books are popular in part because, in a complicated world, he boils things down to stark contrasts—good is good, evil is evil, and heroes are studly, hyper-rational armies of one.... In a speech he delivered a few years ago at a bookstore in Virginia ... he jumped all over an unnamed novel (and the critic who praised it) because it featured a protagonist involved in a drug deal in Southeast Asia. ‘The author and the reviewer are saying that a drug dealer is a normative value,’ Goodkind said. ‘That is assigning value to the destruction of life. I instead write about people being the best they can be.’”

—Dwight Garner, “Inside the List,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2006.

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I was dreading my appointment with Commissioner Goodkine, but there was simply no avoiding it. If I wanted my novel published, the manuscript would have to clear the Federal Board of Literary Normative Values. And the fact that the Commissioner himself had demanded a meeting with me, I believed, did not bode well.

So I dressed as conservatively as possible, affixing to the bosom of my suit jacket a cheap tin lapel pin that represented the image of the FBLNV’s “Sword of Truth” (a broad Crusader’s blade gripped by a studly hand and slicing off a turbaned heathen’s head). Then I stuffed my manuscript in a battered satchel and headed downtown.

The fat, heavy manuscript dragged my arm down and I grew even more depressed, if that were possible. I had never written overstuffed books this big, back before the establishment of the FBLNV. I had been something of a miniaturist, a composer of slim modern fables and surreal allegories. But such forms were proscribed nowadays, and the only acceptable fictions were uplifting paeans to man’s nobility.

The FBLNV was housed in a magnificent classical-style marble structure only a few years old. Occupying an entire square city block, it boasted enormous domineering columns at its portico. Inscribed on the lintel above the entrance was the First Rule of the FBLNV, adapted from Goodkine’s own fiction, where it had been known as “Wizard’s First Rule.”

PEOPLE ARE STUPID.

I stared at the inscription, shaking my head in ironic bemusement. Then I realized that several video cameras were aimed at me, and that ironic bemusement was not an approved reaction to Federal institutions. So I straightened my shoulders and went inside.

Displaying the official letter demanding my presence to several functionaries quickly earned me passage straight through the vast warren of busy clerks vetting the recreational prose of the nation and into the anteroom of Commissioner Goodkine's office. I sat alone there in a fairly comfortable chair, heavy satchel in my lap, with nothing to look at but a large wall plaque bearing the other nine Rules of the FBLNV, also borrowed from Goodkine's enormous "moral and philosophical" saga. I admired them for one reason: they packed more sententious twaddle into fewer words than any prose I had ever seen.

After half an hour, the inner door to the Commissioner's sanctum swung soundlessly open of its own accord. The manly and assured albeit somewhat Mister Rogers-esque voice of Commissioner Goodkine himself summoned me inside.

The office was decorated with many original paintings, both samples of the Commissioner's own amateur work—marine and wildlife studies—and canvases from his second-favorite artist after himself, Thomas Kinkade.

Behind a broad expanse of mahogany sat Commissioner Goodkine, the ultimate objectivist arbiter of the nation's entertainment in prose form. His dense but micrometer-thick beard, eerily perfect, reminded me of the flocking that used to adorn the cheeks of the early G. I. Joe dolls, while his auburn pony tail invariably brought thoughts of Naomi Judd to my mind.

Commissioner Goodkine did not arise, but offered me a seat in kindly tones. His stern yet beatific face remained neutral. I tried to summon up some anger at being called on the carpet in such a humiliating and potentially career-destroying fashion, but couldn't yet get fully aroused.

And Commissioner Goodkine's next words disarmed me completely.

"Mr. Badway, you have the authorial potential to be a best-selling force for the spiritual uplift of our glorious nation. That's why I chose to consult with you personally."

"I—I do?"

Commissioner Goodkine steepled his fingers and allowed a small fatherly smile to grace his lips. "Yes, you do, if you can only come to believe in the rightness of the Goodkine method and principles, which the entire American publishing establishment has seen fit to adopt, under legislative fiat accompanied by severe penalties of jail time and monetary fines for contravention. Remember the Wizard's—I mean, the FBLNV's Sixth Rule: 'The only sovereign you can allow to rule you is reason.' And the Goodkine program is the essence of reason."

"Can I—can I assume then that you've seen some merit in my manuscript? That it might be published someday?"

"Indeed. But not as it stands. Please, bring out your novel. The copy you

provided to the Bureau is currently being examined by our third tier of vetters, that group personally trained by me in objectivist rigor.”

I dug the mass of printout from my satchel and placed it before the Commissioner. He rifled through it knowledgeably, before holding up a page.

“Here’s the kind of thing we’ll need to fix. Your protagonist, Rodolpho—at one point he encourages a wounded man to chew on a root to assuage his pain.”

Commissioner Goodkine fell silent, obviously awaiting me to volunteer what was wrong with that scene. But for the life of me, I couldn’t come up with any response except, “And...?”

Now Commissioner Goodkine looked a little irritated. “Don’t you realize that such a scene could be construed as advocating drug use, Mr. Badway? Do you consider drug use a normative value?”

“No, no, of course not. Well, I suppose the wounded man could just suffer stoically, especially if I make him hail from a culture that embraces such a philosophy.”

“Excellent!” More pages were shuffled. “Now, how shall we interpret this passage, where Rodolpho embraces his fellow soldiers before battle?”

I began to get the gist of what types of things would bother Commissioner Goodkine. “Uh, I take it that perhaps that display of affection might be seen as encouraging homo—”

Commissioner Goodkine held up a hand. “No need to actually use that word, Mr. Badway, we understand each other perfectly. There are other Federal laws we must pay lip service to, after all—for a while yet, anyway. Let’s move on. What about here, where a woman is shown with her child, but no mention is made of the existence of her legal spouse? And here, where peasants attempt to overthrow the lawful ruler of their kingdom? And here, where wizards decide to form a union? And here, where music is described as ‘pleasantly atonal?’ ‘Atonal,’ Mr. Badway, indeed! All instances of non-normative values, I think you’ll agree.”

I stood up then and reclaimed my manuscript with a cold precision. All thoughts of giving in to the FBLNV’s insane directives had fled my head.

Commissioner Goodkine looked startled. “Mr. Badway, what’s the matter? I thought we had come to an understanding?”

“Do you recall your own Wizard’s Tenth Rule, Commissioner Goodkine?”

“Why, naturally. ‘Willfully turning aside from the truth is treason to one’s self.’”

“That’s fine, so far as it goes. But you never stopped to consider that one

man's truth might be another man's lies.”

My words had the same effect upon Commissioner Goodkine that logical paradoxes used to inflict upon thinking machines in cliched science fiction. His mental processes ground to a halt, and I was able to leave his office without further discussion or argument.

“The greatest harm can result from the best intentions,” said the Second Rule on the plaque in the anteroom.

Good point, I thought, and went home to write—non-normative all the way.