

Bibliographic Good vs. Evil

KNOWLEDGE
PREVAILS OVER
THE FORCES
OF DARKNESS,
THANKS TO
RUPERT GILES,
SCHOOL
LIBRARIAN



SuperLibrarian characteristics:

- Respects the sacredness of the book.
- Saves the world daily through information.
- Invests the mundane with a fierce joy.
- Stands for adult comfort and reassurance.
- Knows that some days, evil prevails.

I am not alone in the belief that the appearance of school librarian Rupert Giles on television's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has done more for the image of the profession than anything in the past 50 years, with the possible exception of Katharine Hepburn in *Desk Set*. Giles, this wily and attractive professional, is our hero librarian: a pop culture idol whose love of books and devotion to research hold the key to saving the universe—every week.

I know librarians who use quotations from the episodes in their e-mail signature files; even the Internet Public Library (www.ipl.org) has named all of its office computers after characters in the show. For those who might inexplicably have missed it, here is a rundown of the dramatis personae in the Buffyverse over the past three seasons.

Giles is The Watcher: the source of training, counterintelligence, and guidance for high-school student Buffy Summers, the one of her generation chosen to be Vampire Slayer. Giles is school librarian at the

high school in Sunnydale, a balmy southern California town most notable for being situated on the Hellmouth—a place where vampires, demons, and the forces of darkness gather as bees to honey.

Buffy, a small, delicate-looking blonde of superhuman strength, relies on Giles not only for adult support and coaching, but also for the research necessary to do that for which the Vampire Slayer has been chosen. In the third season, Giles was officially relieved from his Watcher duties, but he ignores that and continues as Buffy's trainer, confidant, and father-figure.

Buffy's buds (called affectionately the Slayerettes or the Scooby Gang) include the never-cool Xander; his best friend, the brilliant and fashion-impaired Willow; Xander's reluctant sweetie and later nemesis, the gorgeously shallow Cordelia; and Willow's genius (and occasional werewolf) boyfriend Oz the musician. They comprise Buffy's support group. They meet and conduct much of their research in the school library. Giles, whose collection-development policy must be an extraordinary document, has access in the stacks to a vast number of volumes on vampire and demon lore, the occult, witchcraft, spellcasting, and other rarities not usually found among the copies of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Weetzie Bat*. (That gets him into trouble with censors, too, as we have seen in the "Gingerbread" episode.)

Others in the cast definitely hail from the dark side. Buffy's own love (and sometimes ex-honey) is a brooding, beautiful, 243-year-old Irish vampire named Angel, who has been cursed with a conscience. There are many vampires, demons, and Evil Guys, some of whom make multiple appearances. High-school principal Snyder is a regular bad guy, while the town's mayor is an evil of monumental proportions.

Giles: our great sage and sex symbol

It is a heady experience for any professional to find itself an integral part of a wildly popular TV series. How much more so for librarians, who have been bedeviled with a poor public image since at least the 19th century. Giles moves across the stereotype in other, not necessarily positive ways—he is both male and technologically inept.

Giles is tweedy, occasionally befuddled, and very wise, with a certain amount of darkness in his own past. He dropped out of Oxford to pursue high magick, but then moved to the British Library and thence to Sunnydale when duty called. He comes from a family of Watchers, reads multiple languages, and, until her untimely death,

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in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

By GraceAnne A. DeCandido



Buffy the Vampire Slayer's high-school librarian Rupert Giles holds strategy meetings in his library, where rare reference resources are within reach. Left to right: Giles, Buffy, Willow, Oz, Xander, and Cordelia.

had a passionate relationship with the Romany techno-pagan computer instructor, Jenny Calendar.

Here is a librarian model who is elegant, deeply educated, well (if fussily) dressed, handsome, and charged with eroticism. In a world of teens where parents rarely make an appearance, he is a stable, friendly, and supportive adult. He stands by Buffy even when the powers that be require him to step down. He lives the faith that answers can be found, and most often found in the pages of a book.

Giles is icon and image for us; in him we see our quotidian struggles to provide the right information and the right data resolved into a cosmic drama with the forces of darkness (some of which are extremely attractive, by the way). We love Giles because at last we have a pop image for our uneasy relationship with dark and light, information and story, books and technology.

We mourned when—and this is as emotionally complicated as it gets—the vampire with a soul who loved Buffy murders Jenny, whom Giles loved. We see Giles struggle valiantly with information sources, we can see his love of story, we can see, as Xander says, that “knowledge is the ul-

timate weapon” and that format is the least of our problems when there are vampires and demons about.

“I believe the subtext here is rapidly becoming text”

The librarians who follow *Buffy* discover much library lore and information-seeking behavior, as well as an occasional drop of genuine wisdom, in the words of the denizens of Sunnydale.

Willow: How is it you always know this stuff? You always know what's going on. I never know what's going on.

Giles: Well, you weren't here from midnight until six researching it.
—“Angel”

The plodding nature of most research cannot be eliminated, even by brilliance and magic, even when we might not want to know what it is we are seeking. It is Giles's particular gift to cast a glamour over the kind of dogged reference we practice daily. He invests the methodical search for the fact that will solve the problem at hand with a kind of fierce joy, but he never underestimates its cost in time or care. ☐

Giles: I'm sure my books and I are in for a fascinating afternoon.
—“Phases”

Giles, echoing Buffy: Get my books. Look stuff up.
—“The Pack”

Willow: I'm sure he will. He's like... Book Man!
—“Passion”

Books are central. It is in books that Giles, as the Watcher, finds the images, the information, the incantation, the lore that will assist Buffy in her struggle against the Hellmouth and its universe of monsters. While Giles relies upon Willow to search the Internet for materials, like newspaper records and police logs not easily accessible in print, Giles believes that what he needs to know for Buffy's sake lies in his many volumes at home and at work. Giles also makes that necessary leap of faith common to all good librarians: He bridges the chasm between the information as it lives in the text and the transfer of that information into a form the Slayerettes and Buffy can actually use. Sometimes that means literal translation, other times it means recasting what he reads into stories, tag lines, or aphorisms that make sense to the teens he serves. The sacredness of the book, the literal power of words, underscore the action in Buffy's world. They form the matrix and latticework for all that terrific “pow! kick! stake!” stuff that happens later.

Xander: He's like SuperLibrarian. Everyone forgets, Willow, that knowledge is the ultimate weapon.
—“Never Kill a Boy on the First Date”

Willy: So, what can I do for you? Couple of drinks?

Xander: Yeah. Let me get a double shot of, um . . . of information, pal.
—“Amends”

While snide comments about Giles's profession abound, the core belief that knowledge is the answer underlies all. This is apparent from Xander's remarks, even though he and others are often cavalier about regular school assignments. There are many weapons to be had in Sunnydale. Buffy uses the classic cross and stake, among others, and Giles has an array of medieval weaponry, most of it stored at the library. The Slayerettes have a very high level of rapiers teen wit, peppered with pop-cult references and sly asides. The thirst to know, however, is at the core of it all: to know the forces of darkness, to name them, and hence to defang them; to know themselves, as they dance on the edge of maturity; to search out the specifics of how to overmaster a particular demon along with the principles of how knowledge can lead to larger truths. That's a wonderful message for us to emblazon on our t-shirts and on our hearts.

Angel: They're children, making up bedtime stories of friendly vampires to comfort themselves in the dark.

Willow: Is that so bad? I mean the dark can get pretty dark. Sometimes you need a story.
—“Lie to Me”

Willow places her hand precisely on a central truth of Buffy and of librarianship. Sometimes these teens need a story to cover themselves for a lost assignment or a lost weekend. Sometimes, though, they need a story to tell themselves to get through the latest horrific vision or ghastly demise. Sometimes it is the story itself that brings both comfort and information: In the beginning of the third season, a voiceover from Jack London's *Call of the Wild* was used to great effect.

Buffy also identifies her role as a storybook hero in “Killed by Death,” when she tells the child in the hospital, “We both know there are real monsters. But there are also real heroes that fight monsters. And that's me.” The story enables us to see not only the teen Buffy as a true hero, but Giles—Book Man, SuperLibrarian—as a hero also.

Jenny (to Giles): The divine exists in cyberspace the same as out here.

—“I Robot, You Jane”

Giles has definite issues with computers and online technology. He is a living metaphor for what those of us *d'un certain âge* might

have gone through as the profession we thought we had joined transmuted itself into something very, very Else.

The core of librarians who got their MLS degrees 25 years ago and more are now doing things professionally that were unimaginable to the selves we were then. We came to librarianship because we loved the sound of words talking to each other, rubbing up against each other; or because the world inside a story was far more real to us than the world inside our neighborhoods; or because we loved chasing an idea around. For many of us, librarianship originally was a choice to separate ourselves from workplaces that were less humane, less involved in the drama of people's lives.

It came as a shock to some of us, as it does to Giles, that the glass box (the computer Jenny refers to as “the good box”) could also be a tool in the search for knowing, and an increasingly indispensable tool. In “I Robot, You Jane,” Giles tells Jenny, “If it's to last, then the getting of knowledge should be tangible” in the smell and texture of old volumes. In the same episode, Giles confesses to Buffy that computers fill him with “childlike terror.” Jenny gently chides him for living in the Middle Ages, and assures him he will enter the new century with a few years to spare. We do see him, much later, yelling at a computer that has wantonly disconnected him from the Frisky Watchers Chat Room (“Gingerbread”).



Though computers fill Giles with a “childlike terror,” his protégés are proficient in using the Internet to combat the forces of evil.

Giles: They're confiscating my books.

Buffy: Giles, we need those books.

Giles: Believe me, I tried to tell that to the nice man with the big gun. . . .

Giles: This is intolerable. Snyder has interfered before, but I won't take this from that twisted little homunculus.

Principal Snyder: I love the smell of desperate librarian in the morning.

Giles: You get out . . . and take your marauders with you.

Snyder: Oh, my. So fierce. . . .

Snyder: Just how is *Blood Rites* and *Sacrifices* appropriate material for a public school library? Chess Club branching —“Gingerbread”

Giles knows about challenges to the school library, too. In the chilling episode above, mothers turn against their own children, attempting to burn the books that the principal and the parents see as harmful, occult, or just plain weird. There's an aborted plot to torch teens along with titles in the guise of chasing after child murderers (the ghost children turn out to be demons themselves, sent to sow discord).

Buffy: You're the Watcher, I just work here.

Giles: Yes. I must consult my books.

—“When She Was Bad”

Buffy: But, Giles, it's one thing to be a Watcher and a librarian. . . . The point is, no one blinks an eye if you wanna spend all your days with books.

—“What's My Line (Part 1)”

Giles takes a lot of kidding because of his perceived stuffiness, his single-minded approach to problems, and his apparent lack of current awareness. However, the kidding doesn't negate how fully the Slayerettes are invested in Giles as both a mentor and a symbol of adult comfort and reassurance. He knows what his job is, so do they, and so do we.

YA reference librarian Lesley Knieriem of the South Huntington Public Library in Huntington Station, New York, said it well in an e-mail: “Giles is appealing to librarians in that he portrays us as we like to think we are: enormously intelligent, literate, genteel, sensitive, devoted to our patrons, with a sexy, ferocious ‘ripper’ concealed within, only to be let out when needed to slay the demons of ignorance. Yes, he does fit many of the stereotypes: bookish, stuffy, reserved, technophobic (this last isn't any of us!). Giles embraces his stuffiness, pokes gentle fun at it, and transcends it.”

Giles: To forgive is an action of compassion, Buffy. It's not done because people deserve it. It's done because they need it.

—“I Only Have Eyes For You”

We have all had supervisors who have done unforgivable things to us; we may have done a few ourselves to those we supervise. We have all had patrons who have fought their particular demons right in front of the checkout desk, and we wanted to avert our eyes. Giles, given to pronouncements but rarely to exhortation, here states a truth as cleanly as any prophet. We hope it comforted Buffy; it can certainly comfort us.

Giles: You mean life?

Buffy: Yeah. Does it get easy?

Giles: What do you want me to say?

Buffy: Lie to me.

Giles: Yes, it's terribly simple. The good guys are always stalwart and true. The bad guys are easily distinguished by the pointy horns or black hats. And, uh, we always defeat them and save the day. No one ever dies, and everybody lives happily ever after.

Buffy: Liar. —“Lie to Me”

Textual analysis of the bad guys can also provide us with stories wherein we conquer the demons and go forth. Giles reminds us that some days, the dragon wins, and that good and evil are rarely so separate that we can distinguish them clearly without the white light of study and analysis.

Giles: You did good work tonight, Buffy.

Buffy: And I got a little toy surprise.

Giles: I had no idea that children en masse could be gracious.

Buffy: Every now and then, people surprise you.

—“The Prom”

INDISPENSABLE BUFFY REFERENCES

- ➔ Christopher Golden and Nancy Holder, with Keith R. A. DeCandido, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Watcher's Guide* (Pocket/S&S, 1998).
- ➔ There are many Buffy Web sites, official and not-so. For Giles groupies, however, there is nothing like Sonja Marie's Official Giles Appreciation Society Panters Home Page (www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/7728/gaspers.html) and its “Words of Wisdom from the Watcher.”
- ➔ Other good sites are The Buffy Cross and Stake (slayer.simplenet.com/tbcs/main.html) and Jonah Kanter's *Buff* episode guide, with sound clips (gorf.simplenet.com/buffy/index.htm).
- ➔ The official *Buff* the Vampire Slayer site is at www.buffy.com.
- ➔ Two excellent articles from *Salon* magazine about Buffy are at www.salon.com/ent/log/1999/05/26/buffy_rant/ and www.salon.com/ent/tv/mill/1998/06/08mill.html.

Named as class protector during her senior prom, Buffy has a moment of solace and Giles sees the teenagers he serves in a new light. People surprise us all the time, in the questions they ask, in the way they use the answers, in their need to know, and sometimes in their gratitude.

Buffy and her friends have now graduated from high school, in a spectacular denouement that banished Angel and provided us with ample reason to wonder what Giles's next career move will be. He says Buffy no longer needs the Watcher's Council, but it is clear she still needs a librarian. ❖