



Good Guys

Steven Brust

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A snarky, irreverent tale of secret magic in the modern world, the first solo standalone novel in two decades from Steven Brust, the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Vlad Taltos series

Donovan was shot by a cop. For jaywalking, supposedly. Actually, for arguing with a cop while black. Four of the nine shots were lethal—or would have been, if their target had been anybody else. The Foundation picked him up, brought him back, and trained him further. “Lethal” turns out to be a relative term when magic is involved.

When Marci was fifteen, she levitated a paperweight and threw it at a guy she didn’t like. The Foundation scooped her up for training too.

“Hippie chick” Susan got well into her Foundation training before they told her about the magic, but she’s as powerful as Donovan and Marci now.

They can teleport themselves thousands of miles, conjure shields that will stop bullets, and read information from the remnants of spells cast by others days before.

They all work for the secretive Foundation...for minimum wage.

Which is okay, because the Foundation are the good guys. Aren’t they?

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Good Guys Details

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From Reader Review Good Guys for online ebook

Bookwraiths says

Originally reviewed at Bookwraiths.

Good Guys is an urban fantasy take by Steven Brust, author of the *Vlad Taltos* fantasy series; it is light, fast-paced, and readable in the vein of other detective focused UF out there. Unfortunately, I didn't find this Brust novel as interesting as his fantasy offerings, so much so, in fact, that I kept finding reasons to put off writing a review. But, at the end of the day, I decided to put my views on the screen since everyone who wants to deserves an opportunity to read my thoughts – even if you don't agree with them.

The focus of the story here is a secret group of people from a mysterious and magical Foundation: their job to police the world and keep rogue magic users under control, as well as keep normal people from realizing magic is very real and very dangerous. Naturally our heroes are underpaid and under appreciated, but they are still out there risking their lives, attempting to track down a serial killer who is committing magical murders across the globe. The bureaucratic red tape of their organization nearly as unnerving as the actions of their shadowy adversaries.

Like most UF, this novel is very detective/mystery oriented, but it also has a strong dose of cold war spy themes and a good number of deaths. Grizzly ones. Murders where forensics play a key role in deciphering the clues. All of the killing wrapped up in shadowy conspiracies. And what makes it worse is our heroes begin to doubt themselves, their purpose. Are they really even the good guys? Or, are they merely ignorant pawns being shuffled across the board by people in power who are, in reality, the bad guys!

If you love urban fantasy, I'm sure all that sounds decent enough. And, overall, I have to admit *Good Guys* is a readable story; it had more than a few twists and turns, even provided some interesting tweaks on the standard magical investigations so familiar by this point. As I said earlier though, I was a bit underwhelming by it.

First off, there are a lot of point of view characters and a lot of viewpoint shifts. The author jumping from Donovan, our team leader, to our criminal to other recruits to other bosses to . . . Lots of people. You get the point. And it was annoying as hell. At least, for me. Mainly because I never got to spend enough time with anyone to actually care at all about them. And when I don't care about characters I lose interest in the story.

Second, the time Brust spent showing the motives of the criminal really added nothing to the plot for me personally. Okay, maybe it helped me understand this person's thoughts and feelings, but I didn't need to be in the bad guys head for me to understand these things. Honestly, Donovan and the investigation could have shown me the villain's true motives just as easily and probably better.

Lastly, I grew tired of the bureaucratic conspiracies. I know that bureaucracy can be bad. Evil people can hide in bureaucratic systems. Politics – especially office politics – sucks. But I live those things every day, so a story focused around them wasn't terribly exciting for me.

Ultimately, your decision to read *Good Guys* will hinge on whether you love detective/mystery type urban fantasy. If your answer is a resounding "Yes" then this one is a book you will probably enjoy. If your answer is "No" then skip this and give Brust's *Vlad Taltos* a go.

I received this book from the publisher in exchange for a fair and honest review. I'd like to thank them for allowing me to receive this review copy and inform everyone that the review you have read is my opinion alone.

Mike says

I've had people enthuse to me about Steven Brust more than once, but his main series is large and sprawling and not exactly my thing, and I've never found a point of entry to his work. When I saw this on Netgalley, a new series starter in a new genre for Brust, I thought I'd give it a try and see if he was actually as good as I'd heard.

He is. Not only is this written with assurance and strong craft, not only does it have highly entertaining banter among the diverse, distinct, and non-generic characters, but it also pulls off the difficult feat of having both moral complexity and a clear moral stance. The characters are imperfect and troubled, the reality they're dealing with is imperfect and complicated, and ultimately there isn't a "side" that is unambiguously and definitely the "good guys"; and yet most of the key characters, in their different ways, are striving to be "good guys" in their own terms, and some are even succeeding. It's noblebright, not grimdark, but it's noblebright with a lot of nuance and some extensive grey areas - yet ultimately hopeful.

I found the author's choice to write first-person sections from the perspective of the antagonist, and mix them with omniscient narration about the protagonists, an interesting one. I'm not sure exactly what it does; perhaps its function is to humanise the antagonist, so that we can see how he, too, in his distorted way, thinks he's a good guy, or at least a justified one.

The plot - agents of a secret cabal of sorcerers hunt down an assassin - is well paced, with good tension. Overall, excellent, and I would definitely read a sequel.

Mark Gardner says

So I feel it necessary to emphasize that I got an early copy via NetGalley. I think that perhaps the publisher should've waited until after another edit before making ARCs available. I must assume that the edited version to come out in March 2018 will have fixed many of the issues I encountered. And issues there were many. Including editing notations within the body of the text. Indies are universally panned for the slightest faux pas, and there is this feeling by both readers and publishers that indie publishers are somehow not good enough to get a traditional publishing contract. There are a lot of people who see self-publishing as garbage. While I've read some really wonderful indie books over the years, I've run into some real clunkers. Stories full of clichéd storytelling, bad formatting, and an overall inferior product. Those books don't usually end up on this blog. For every 100 books I do read and review, there are probably 25 or so that I don't finish.

The Good Guys may have well been one of those poorly published indie works that so many people poo-poo. The story premise wasn't bad: A team of secret underpaid people track down rogue magic practitioners in modern America (and Europe) and give the smack-down to those that don't come quietly. Yep, read that story time and again – and by better authors. I've been told that the author of The Good Guys, Steven Brust, is quite popular. I've never read any of his other works before. But The Good Guys was terrible. Not terrible enough to DNF, but it was a grind to finish reading. Many of my complaints were likely the result of some

very poor formatting and/or editing. The POV seemed all over the place. I'm not sure if there was just some missing scene break art or what, but I found myself having to re-read to figure out whose POV I was reading. On top of that, of the many character POVs, one was in first person, while the rest were in third-person perspective. The singular first-person perspective makes sense at the very end of the book, but while reading it, it's just annoying. I'd rather read the exact same story from Clara Coulson. A much more polished manuscript, and frankly, a better story – one not full of dated clichés, and views better left in the 1950s.

My suggestion is to skip the overpriced TOR ebook (I just looked, \$13? What the fucking fuck, TOR?), and get all four City of Crows books by Clara Coulson. Coulson's stories are better, and for only a dollar more, you get a much longer and more satisfying read. I would probably check out another book by Brust, but if it's a stinking turd like this one, I'm out. I'm not just disappointed by this book; I'm offended that anyone would put it out there. Two stars is my rating, and unless the rest of this review is unclear about how I feel, don't waste your money on The Good Guys.

Karl Griffin says

Awesome

Very good book. A little over the top about how the protagonist views being black in the US, but otherwise a very good novel.

Susan says

If you want an author to carefully explain to you who his characters are and how they relate to each other, this is probably not the book for you. Donovan Longfellow and his team of two are North American investigators for the Foundation, a secretive group that split off from an even more secretive group called the Mystici, their rivals and, in ways that Donovan doesn't yet know, their colleagues. The main thrust of the Foundation is to keep the existence of magic a secret, so when an assassin starts targeting individuals connected to the Mystici and using magical means to kill them, Donovan must find out who is doing it and why. We're also privy to the purposes of the assassin, who is being manipulated in his turn by a mysterious man named Charlie. Donovan fears that there are those within the Mystici, and even within the Foundation, who are in league with, or manipulating, Charlie. Wonderfully funny, with enough action to keep everyone on their toes.

Melissa Jane says

Not bad, but not great. I can't help but comparing this book to the Vlad Tatos books and having this fail spectacularly. The author has proven how well he can write fantasy and I urge him to go back to it.

I enjoyed that the Foundation and the Mystics were pretty much the same with differing philosophy. I liked how the MC and his crew had strengths that complimented one another. There was way too many POV and I feel something vital was taken from the story because of this.

One of the things that I enjoyed best was Matt's turnaround after being caught by the team. He decided he didn't want to be the "bad guy" anymore and started making changes to become a hero, or one of the good

guys. Mildly entertaining but I am not interested in reading a sequel if there is one. 3.5 stars.

Chip says

3.75 stars. A very quick read, somewhat reminiscent of Brust's early Vlad Taltos books - slightly hard boiled. Also dialogue, rather than description, heavy - like Gregory McDonald's Fletch (but decidedly less constant humor). Enjoyable enough, but I don't think anything that's going to stick with me.

Jeffrey says

Steven Brust's "Good Guys" is a mashup of the private investigation fantasy subgenre, a subgenre that is right in my wheelhouse. Brust is an old pro, the author of the famous "Vlad Taltos" novels, who has published 30 novels. He knows how to write. This book has a cool sort of vibe, kind of an old style detective story. Its stripped down of a lot of unnecessary chatter. Kind of a spare Dashiell Hammett style but with all kinds of Brustian flourishes, including a group doing the investigation, a female Schwartznegger and no female love interest. So while it's grounded in classic detective mode, Brust dots the prose and story with his own style. It works very well as a detective novel, but at the same time, Brust has a monologue with the readers, do we think the investigators are really working for the right side? Keep that in the back of your mind as you read it.

We first meet the team, Donovan Longfellow, aka Laughing Boy, Marci, the mage, and Susan, aka Hippie Girl, the muscle as they investigate how a man was has been killed in broad daylight in a restaurant and no one saw a thing. They all work for the "Foundation". Donovan reports to Becker, his handler in the Foundation that Marci thinks a magical stop motion spell of some kind was used to kill the victim. The Foundation, seems to be run like a business. Donovan works for a field unit that investigates the use of magic in the field.

Brust does not use big information drops to explains things. Rather as part of the story little dollops of information are revealed merely as part of the story. So when Becker suspects that there might have been a magical device used, he goes to the Foundation's Artifacts department to have someone do research. It seems Donovan's job, in part is to stop the leaking of knowledge of magic to the public.

But now a man has died of a mysterious heart attack, and when the team investigates, they are ambushed by a gunman. Hippie Chick disables the gunman. So the killer seems to be trying to stop any investigation. But Donovan just lets the man go after questioning him, as he is merely a hired gun.

It seems the killing is tied to the Mystici, another magical organization. Donovan knows of the Mystici, who also have magical employees, but they are not nice people. Donovan owes the Foundation his life so he works for them, and he likes to think they are the good guys. As Hippie Chick explains, they pay us so little money we must be the good guys.

As the case progresses, Donovan's group discovers that the people getting killed are all associated with the Mystici, whose magicians, sometimes help out bad people. And that the people killed are all dying via magical means in worse and worse ways.

And Donovan and his team are also being confronted by the killer or his associates.

So the good guys are both trying to stop the killers and at the same time trying to survive the killers themselves. But the killers are not killing good people. And Donovan works for the Foundation, that knows the Mystici sometimes lines its pockets by helping bad people. But the Foundation is also employed by the Mystici to protect them.

So who really are the bad guys here. It's a gray world out there.

It's a conundrum that Brust leaves for us to figure out. But I like Donovan's style, and when the real bad guys hurt the good guys, an eye for an eye still is justice.

Keary Birch says

Short enjoyable book about a small group of investigators looking into a murder. Good characterisation and character development with a great story.

Read this.

Kate Stone says

It's hard to separate multiple kinds of impressions of this book into a coherent review. Maybe from another author I'd think this was a promising four-star start with some rough edges, but from Brust it's merely interesting with significant flaws.

The context for the story was certainly intriguing, with yet another take on our world where magic exists and is hidden from most people's awareness. It's not a simplistic fantasy or alternate take on a Dresden-files like world, but something more subtle and full of potential. If this is the start of a setting shared with future works I'm definitely intrigued enough to read the next one when it comes along.

Part of my problem was that I didn't really connect enough with the characters here for the story to have the kind of emotional impact it probably deserved. Perhaps because there were too many key players without enough pages to fully connect with them? The otherwise intriguing perspective (more below) likely played a role here, muddying things enough to get in the way of a deeper connection.

The viewpoint doubtless made for an interesting challenge while writing the book and I'd be tempted to say it wasn't entirely successful. The character you'd be tempted to think of as the protagonist is written primarily in third person, while initially only brief glimpses from another character whose purpose intersects with our "protagonist" are written in first person. As the novel proceeds it gets a little too chopped up in brief sections written to carry this disjoint narrative, and when we eventually get into muddying some second-person aspects of the writing it just feels like it was all a little too contrived. Your mileage may vary.

I've always appreciated Brust's willingness to try something new. It's something every artist should indulge in, but it won't always produce something that is universally praised for its efforts. I'm sorry to weigh in on the critical side here, but I've usually enjoyed the result more.

Judy Lesley says

Thanks to NetGalley and Macmillan - Tor/Forge for the galley.

Definitely 4.5 stars.

Okay, this was so very, very good! I've been trying to figure out how to begin reading some of the Steven Brust books but there are so many my head would just spin around whenever I tried to decide on a jumping off point. So this book, a new series, proved to be just the right place. I was definitely impressed with the writing, plotting and just general storytelling ability of Brust. I want this crew back entertaining me as soon as possible.

There are two organizations which work to keep the existence of magic from becoming general knowledge. The Foundation and the Roma Vindictus Mystici were once a single organization until they had a disagreement about what Franco was doing in Spain. They still work together in a way, both still wanting the same things but the old scars keep the two organizations separate. The crew we are concerned with each have specific abilities that allow them to handle magic-gone-rogue. Somebody is killing and using magic to help. Our team has to use all their magical abilities and the resources of the Foundation to stop this rampage without knowing who the assassin is or how he chooses his victims. The answers will cause a whole lot of shake-ups in the world of magic.

These were characters I came to like in a very short time. They aren't perfect, they aren't even admirable in some instances, in fact they are pretty rough all over, not just around the edges, but I just couldn't help but want everybody to come out of the magic fights in good shape. This story is a rock-um-sock-um magic street fight and I would have liked to have a little more explanation from the author of what forces/actions had happened during the fight scenes. Most of that wasn't spelled out and I needed some explanation. Maybe in the next story? I hope so because I want to know more than just who died or was maimed or injured in the fight. Other than that observation, I just enjoyed the heck out of this book!

Marlene says

Originally published at Reading Reality

If you take Magic Ex Libris by Jim C. Hines SPI Files by Lisa Shearin, Paranormal Scene Investigations by Laura Anne Gilman, and mix them with a bit of cold war spy fiction and a heaping helping of noir, you'll get something like Good Guys.

Both SPI Files and Paranormal Scene Investigations involve organizations that investigate and clean up after crimes in magical versions of our own world. Libriomancer and its Magic Ex Libris series are part of the mix because in that version of our world, magic is hiding in plain sight, and part of the duty of the magical organization is to protect the world from the knowledge that magic exists. Add in that the libriomancers are fighting a conspiracy both from without and from within, and the magic side of Good Guys is pretty well covered.

Because the story in Good Guys follows one particular operations team for the mysterious and magical

Foundation as they chase around the world making sure that a magical serial killer does not expose the existence of real magic in the world, even as they investigate the patterns to see if they can both figure out what his game is – and catch him before he reaches its end.

Or his. Or theirs.

The more they discover about the whys and wherefores of the crime spree, the more they have to ask themselves, are they really the good guys? Or are they just battling their own bureaucracy and running around the world on behalf of an organization that is no better than the one they fight against.

Escape Rating B+: It's been a long time, possibly too long, since I read anything by Steven Brust. I'll admit that I was expecting a bit more snark. (If you love snarky fantasy with an epic-ish/urban-ish feel, his Vlad Taltos series (start with *Jhereg*) is marvelous reading crack as long as you don't try to swallow too many of them at once.)

The story in *Good Guys* is a fairly deft mixture of mystery/investigation with magic, and very much a part of the urban fantasy tradition of magical detectives solving mysteries in a contemporary world that is just a bit sideways from reality.

What keeps the reader glued to their chair is the way that the whole thing works. Because we're both following this one rather eclectic, or possibly eccentric, team of investigators while also watching them plumb the depths of their own organization – and not liking what they find in those depths.

There's a lot of murk, and the frequent changes in perspective between the team leader, the criminal, the new recruit and the bosses on all sides of this mess occasionally muddies waters that are already pretty clouded. While the reader gets invested with Donovan and his team, the perspective shifts sometimes make it difficult to retain that focus. Especially as the author attempts to keep the reader in the dark while showing the criminal's own thoughts and feelings. It might have worked a bit better, or it would certainly have worked a bit better for this reader, if we'd stayed with Donovan.

Which does not mean that the story wasn't absolutely fascinating, and a whole lot of fun – because it certainly was. The investigation was every bit as twisting and convoluted as the best mystery, while the magical additions gave the forensic side of the equation lots of new toys to play with. Of course, that magic also gave the criminals new toys to play with as well.

And Donovan's constant fight with, and continued attempts to work around, the bureaucracy that is as big a problem as it is a game, will find resonance with anyone who has worked in an organization containing more than three people. Paper-pushing procedures and internal politics are enemies that we all face.

In the end, the question of whether Donovan and his mysterious Foundation are really the good guys remains an open one. But their search for the answer is a whole lot of fun.

Bradley says

Fairly light UF superhero fiction with traditional powers, relics, and mystery.

Of course, it's fueled by quasi-governmental agencies and assassinations that may or may not be justified, but

the real joy in the novel comes from the mystery.

Murder.

Increasingly interesting and gory effects murder.

But to whom? And why?

The guilty. :) You know all those bank people who busted the economy, or the a-holes who focused on all their specialty pet projects but completely ignored the plights of the common man? Yeah. Deaders.

Feeling conflicted? Me, too.

But that's the joy we can gleam from this superhero novel. Magic, relics, and the common man. Minimum wage superheroes???? Come on. You KNOW this has to be a gimmick. A fun one, too. :)

I've been a big fan of Brust for a long time now and this modern rendition of the comic tradition is fun as hell. Just bring the beer. Please. The good stuff. Don't get all pansy ass on me.

Thanks to netgalley for the ARC!

Tim Hicks says

Meh. A decent read, but I expect more from Brust.

This one felt as if it could have used more work in the planning stage.

I agree with the many people who said "too many points of view."

Also too many convenient links between the characters.

I did like the idea of the two sides not being so much opposed as just not in agreement.

We got a big setup about the characters being paid minimum wage for a rare skill, but in the end it turned out not to matter much, other than establishing a relationship between Donovan and the Finance guy that mattered later.

Finally, I wondered about the magic. These folks can do BIG things. OK, we're told more than once that "we're trying not to get noticed." There are brief mentions of healing and small good works, but mostly it's about murder and stopping murder. Hey folks, if you were the CEO of a magic group, would you not spend a bit more time on "how should we use this?"

The above is always a challenge in urban fantasy, because you can't just say "hey, that's how it is in Fairyland."

Also, perhaps over-reliance on the artifacts, and despite a careful explanation of how they are found, there's nothing about how they are created and activated (and what the death rate was among the experimenters). In

fact, there's probably a book in that, called something like "The Discovery of Magic." (authors, I'll take two percent of gross, OK?)

Lauren says

This book was really good and definitely had me thinking throughout the entire story. I want to see what happens next with these characters as I don't feel that this is really finished. There were parts of the book that were confusing, but as the book went on, they didn't necessarily make complete sense, but didn't affect the story line in any way.

Overall a good mystery book with a fun scifi twist that I could see branching out into more books and a whole series.
