

An Open Letter to Lemony Snicket (and Robert Bork) in Modest Defense of Edgar Guest

October 14, 2004

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Dear Mr. Snicket:

Each year, my daughter Jenny and I look forward with great anticipation to the publication of the latest installment of your Series of Unfortunate Events. So it was with considerable disappointment that I saw on pages 147, 224 and 280-281 of *The Grim Grotto* that you have decided to join Robert Borkⁱ in disparaging the poet Edgar Guest. Like Phil, the poems of Edgar Guest may be overly-optimistic. But like Phil, and citations for bravery, they sometimes provide encouragement in the face of adversity, a word which here means 'obstacles that wear us down in our pursuit of the best within us.' As a determined chronicler of the Baudelaires' adversities, I would have thought you would have been kinder toward the good-hearted Guest, rather than side with the arrogantly misanthropic academic guardians of literary sophistication, whose Olaf-like voices drip with condescending contempt whenever they utter the words "Edgar Guest."

You write (pp. 280-281) that "every noble reader in the world agrees that the poet represented on Fiona's uniform was a writer of limited skill, who wrote awkward, tedious poetry on hopelessly sentimental topics." Is that an attempt to pressure the reader into agreeing with you before the reader has had a chance to read the poetry of Guest, and been able to judge for themselves? If so, is that a good way to treat those for whom you have respect?

Perhaps "every noble reader" agrees with you.ⁱⁱ But as for me, I agree with my late father whose favorite poem was Edgar Guest's "It Couldn't Be Done."

In honor of my father, and in honor of all noble readers of independent judgment, I reproduce below: "It Couldn't Be Done" by Edgar Guest.ⁱⁱⁱ

Somebody said that it couldn't be done
But he with a chuckle replied
That "maybe it couldn't," but he would be one
Who wouldn't say so till he tried.
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin
On his face. If he worried he hid it.
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn't be done, and he did it!

Somebody scoffed: "Oh, you'll never do that;
At least no one ever has done it";
But he took off his coat and he took off his hat,
And the first thing we knew he'd begun it.
With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin,
Without any doubting or quiddit,
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn't be done, and he did it.

There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done,
There are thousands to prophesy failure;
There are thousands to point out to you, one by one,
The dangers that wait to assail you.
But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,
Just take off your coat and go to it;
Just start to sing as you tackle the thing
That "cannot be done," and you'll do it.

With all due respect,

Art Diamond

ⁱ "It would be overhasty to say that the *Brown Shoe* opinion is the worst antitrust essay ever written. The connoisseur of bad antitrust opinions must take into account *Fortner Enterprises I*, *Utah Pie*, *Sealy*, *Schwinn*, *Procter & Gamble*, *Von's Grocery*, and many others, to cite only some of the more recent cases. Still, all things considered, *Brown Shoe* has considerable claim to the title. It is not merely a bad case, it is also a trend setter---as if the poems of E.A. Guest had determined the course of modern literature." (Bork, Robert H. *The Antitrust Paradox: A Policy at War with Itself*. N.Y.: Basic Books, 1978, p. 210.)

ⁱⁱ Yet Eric Stott seems noble enough when he asks: ". . . aren't you being a bit hard on Edgar A. Guest? Yes, most of his poetry is undistinguished, but some is charming and enjoyable. What did he do to be held up (as it seems in this book) as a symbol of evil mediocrity? Did your mother force you to recite "It takes a heap o' livin to make a house a home" before you could go out and play?"

(http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/customer-reviews/0064410145/ref=cm_rev_next/102-2756882-0750547?%5Fencoding=UTF8&customer-reviews.sort%5Fby=-SubmissionDate&n=507846&customer-reviews.start=21&me=ATVPDKIKX0DER)

ⁱⁱⁱ One readily available source for the text of the poem is:
<http://eirlibrary.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem901.html> Some of the sentiments in "It Couldn't Be Done" have been similarly expressed, elsewhere, by others. For example,

in the song “Defying Gravity” from the hit musical “Wicked,” the wicked witch Elphaba sings:

I'm through accepting limits
'Cuz someone says they're so
Some things I cannot change
But till I try, I'll never know!

“Wicked” was enthusiastically praised in a *New York Times* review (“Hey, Watch Who You're Calling Wicked,” Section 2, Sunday, June 29, 2003, p. 5) by Daniel Handler, who suggests that “It is hard not to wonder if the witch, a difficult figure transformed by difficult times, isn't precisely what our stage needs.”