

Mongoose R.I.P. Short Guide

Mongoose R.I.P. by William F. Buckley

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Characters

U.S. intelligence agent Blackford Oakes remains the handsome, brave, and talented hero of the earlier novels.

He is still in love with Sally Partridge, a college English professor, specializing in Jane Austen. The novel describes the tragic events of Sally's earlier life: the death of her brother in World War II and the subsequent deaths of her parents. The area of Connecticut where she grew up is the same area in which Buckley himself grew up.

Despite the fact that she loves Blacky, Sally marries Antonio Morales, a wealthy Mexican, and becomes pregnant by him. This breaks Blacky's heart but does not interfere with his mission.

Blackford's American colleagues include Rufus, the real head of American intelligence, a counsellor to presidents since World War II, and Anthony Trust, Oakes's former schoolmate.

Although they have their idiosyncrasies, Buckley portrays them as brilliant and capable. Oakes's Cuban colleagues originally supported Castro's fight against the corrupt regime of Fulgenico Batista. Now, however, they are disgusted by Castro's brutality and the misery he has brought to Cuba. One anti-Castro Cuban, Pano Iglesias, is fictional, but Rolando Cubela, who attempts to assassinate Castro, was a genuine historical figure. The son of a bull fighter, Cubela is a doctor loyal to Castro. After Castro has him murder a Cuban humanitarian leader, he reverses his loyalties and decides to murder Castro to revenge this killing and Castro's brutal treatment of Cubela's friend and mentor.

As always, Buckley's most interesting characters are well-known historical figures such as President John F. Kennedy and Soviet Chairman Nikita Khrushchev. Their musings about world affairs and their personal lives, while obviously fictional, are never implausible. Indeed, Buckley humanizes the Russian leader, and portrays him as less of a menace than Castro.



Social Concerns/Themes

Although the novel *Mongoose R.I.P.*

is concerned with saving the world from Communist aggression, it also focuses on the illegal and self-defeating actions of the United States.

Buckley is certain that American intelligence agencies, under the direction of then President John F. Kennedy and his brother Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, made several attempts on the life of Cuban Premier Fidel Castro. Buckley has titled his novel after the code name for this operation: *Mongoose*. Buckley's novel emphasizes, however, the fact that the absolute denial of human rights by Cuba's totalitarian government under Fidel Castro and the Soviet Union's brutality toward its own citizens are far worse than any misdeeds committed by the United States.

Buckley is also concerned with the threat of nuclear war and the danger posed by a Communist dictatorship so close to our shores. He effectively demonstrates how easy it would be for Castro to destroy American cities with Soviet missiles.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

Mongoose R.I.P. is an adventure-espionage novel in the tradition of Eric Ambler and Ian Fleming. But unlike Fleming's James Bond, Blackford Oakes is neither sexually promiscuous nor supplied with advanced technological gadgets. Blackford also differs from the heroes of Len Deighton and John le Carre, who suffer from a fundamental doubt about the moral superiority of the West over the East. Oakes, like Buckley himself, has no such moral qualms. He never denies that whatever the follies of the Western democracies (and in this novel they involve not only immoral but idiotic attacks on the life of a foreign leader), Communism's terrifying brutality and its disdain for human rights and dignity are far worse.

Buckley employs historical detail effectively, as an aid to characterization, and to make a plausible case for Cuban involvement in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Buckley suggests that Castro was trying to avenge the attempts on his life ordered by John and Robert Kennedy.

Buckley's novel possesses a sense of humor not found in the works of Ambler, Deighton, or le Carre. Blackford's attempted impersonation of an Orthodox Jewish rabbi is amusing in light of Oakes's rather aristocratic background.

Buckley also manages to have his characters discuss and quote one of his own books. Naturally they approve of the ideas expressed in the book.

Connected with Buckley's use of humor is his catering to many readers' love of gossip. He hints at secrets involving Castro's first wife and alludes to John F. Kennedy's sexual adventures with the mistress of a Mafia figure. His tone is amused and nonjudgmental as he invites the reader to share his sense of moral superiority. Here he brings to mind the narrative tone of William Thackeray, who often reminded his audience that most people were imperfect.

Less of Buckley's conservative economic philosophy surfaces in Mongoose R.I.P. Buckley takes the economic superiority of capitalism for granted, believing that Cuba's poverty is a convincing demonstration.



Key Questions

Buckley skillfully weaves historical fact and fiction together in this novel.

Sometimes this is so seamless that we have difficulty distinguishing one from the other. This novel gives the reader an opportunity to look back at the Camelot years of the Kennedy administration and to compare JFK and Buckley. Two men had a similar background: both were wealthy, both were educated at expensive private schools and both dedicated their lives to public service. It also gives the reader an opportunity to compare JFK and Castro and their administrations.

1. Take a close look at the way Buckley describes JFK. In light of recent revelations about him, do you feel that this is an accurate portrayal? Is it a fair one? Why or why not?
2. Buckley's portrayal of Castro is interesting. How would you describe Castro, and why?
3. Women often play a very minor role in Buckley's novels. They usually are just sexual objects for Blacky. Look at the women in this novel. Are they one-dimensional? How well developed is Sally? Can you describe her in detail?
4. Why do you feel that Buckley had Sally marry Antonio Morales?
5. Many Cubans and Americans originally supported Castro against Batista. Based upon your knowledge of that time period, why do you think that happened? Why did public opinion change?
6. Buckley seems to portray Khrushchev as less of a threat to American society than Castro. How and why does he do this?
7. Compare Buckley's attitude toward communism in this book with another of his early novels, for example, *Saving the Queen* (1976). Do you see any change in his attitude? Why or why not?
8. Discuss the character of Cubela.

How does Buckley portray him? Why is he integral to the plot?



Related Titles

Buckley's earlier adventure-espionage novels traced Blackford Oakes' exploits during the 1950s and early 1960s. Mongoose R.I.P. picks up the saga of Blackford Oakes in 1963. The Cuban missile crisis is over; President Kennedy is still alive. Neither heroes nor villains have changed from those of previous books. The change in some of the female characters shows evidence of the rise of the feminist movement.

Several have attended prestigious graduate schools such as Yale or The Wharton School. There is also a new awareness of historical fact, as Buckley documents the CIA's role in attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994