

Saving the Queen Short Guide

Saving the Queen by William F. Buckley

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Characters

The hero of *Saving the Queen* (and its sequels) is Blackford Oakes, known familiarly as Blacky or Blackie. He is a perfect boy who grows up to be a "perfect" young man. First of all, he is amazingly handsome. To compare him to a movie star is totally inadequate; not only his mother, who may be expected to be biased, but Sally, his steady girl friend, as well as his more casual sexual partners, routinely describe him as a Greek god.

In addition, Blackford is amazingly intelligent, a magna cum laude graduate of Yale who has, of course, read Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* (1951). He is also very lucky. A good deal of his success consists of being at the right place at the right time — such as at a shop when the villain whom everyone thought dead is ordering his distinctive brand of cigarettes.

He is rich, confident, charming, and well connected socially. Everyone, except the villains, likes him very much. Of course, he is as sexually talented as he is charming so he never lacks beautiful, usually intelligent and always sexually avid female company.

What sets Blacky off from other fictional contemporary American or British spies is the fact that he is secure in his moral choices. There are no doubts in his mind that his country is right and its enemies murderously wrong. His outfit, the CIA, is run efficiently and honestly; it is thoroughly deserving of support and approbation.

He, and it, will save not only democracy but Western civilization itself given half a chance by misguided liberals. Another unusual facet of Blacky's character is that he is religious. Whenever he faces serious difficulties, he prays. He also reads the Bible and translates Psalms as an intellectual and spiritual exercise.

Buckley means Oakes not only to be physically and mentally perfect, but also to be without any ethical doubts.

He has said that he deliberately set out to create an anti-antihero. The novel is semiautobiographical in that Buckley's hero shares with Buckley a year at an English boarding school and a college education at Yale, as well as a stint serving in the CIA. They both fly planes, although Oakes is by far the more expert pilot. The CIA training Oakes receives is patterned on the training Buckley really did receive.

Oakes shares Buckley's right wing views, of course.

Although Blackford Oakes loves Sally Partridge, in each novel he has an affair with another woman while he and Sally are temporarily apart. In *Saving the Queen*, his temporary liaison is with the Queen of England, no less.

She is not Elizabeth II, obviously, but the fictional Caroline, a young, beautiful, intelligent and, of course, sexy woman who ascends the throne, when the actual royal family is killed in a plane crash. Although Oakes and the Queen spend a very active night



together, in the long run, he remains faithful to Sally Partridge, a graduate student at Yale who specializes in nineteenth century English literature, particularly the works of Jane Austen, and who does not approve of Blacky's job, war or other forms of violence. As a matter of fact, she is a World Federalist, a member of an organization devoted to the eventual dissolution of the individual nation in favor of world government, a perfect example of what Buckley considers wrong-headed liberal irrationality.

Rufus, the fictional spy master, and Allen Dulles, the actual director of the CIA in the 1950s, epitomize the skill and devotion to duty of the Agency.

Anthony Trust, Oakes's friend and very slightly older mentor, initiates him into Greyburn (the English public school which in American terms would be considered an exclusive private school), Yale, the CIA, and various brothels; their relationship seems to represent Buckley's ideal of male bonding.

The villain is James Peregrine Kirk, a Viscount, the Queen's second cousin, as well as the Queen's closest friend. A traitor to his class as well as his country, he has become a Russian spy, stealing secrets relating to the production of the hydrogen bomb. Besides this, he has been Blacky's enemy from boarding school days. Blacky persuades Kirk to commit suicide during a simulated air duel.

The Soviet agent to whom Kirk reports is Boris Andreyvich Bolgin, a member of the Russian security apparatus since the early 1930s who at one time was falsely accused of disloyalty to Stalin and sent to a forced labor camp in Siberia. He was rehabilitated and is now determined to do everything he can to maintain his comfortable position and avoid trouble with his superiors.



Social Concerns

William F. Buckley, a Roman Catholic, is a political conservative who firmly believed that the Soviet Union and the countries it dominated were the enemies of freedom and civilization. He decried the liberal refusal to recognize the threat of communism and to struggle more vigorously against it.

He particularly objected to what he saw as the moral cowardice of the West in allowing the partition of Europe after the Second World War, and in refusing to aid freedom fighters in Berlin, Hungary, or anywhere in the world men and women rise up in rebellion against communism. Although he recognized that some right-minded people can be attracted to leftist causes out of misplaced idealism, he continued to insist that all but the thoroughly benighted must learn the error of their ways eventually.

In his first novel, *Saving the Queen*, his social ideas are strongly elitist. His heroes and their allies come from the upper classes. Their families have had money for generations and they have been educated at the most prestigious preparatory schools and universities.

Buckley seems to believe that only these people can be trusted to run the world correctly — as long as they themselves believe in God and the free enterprise system. Buckley recognizes that poverty and related social problems exist, but he is certain that free enterprise capitalism is the most effective means of bringing prosperity to as many people as possible and that morality based on religion is the most effective means of easing other social problems.



Techniques

In *Saving the Queen* and in each subsequent novel, the hero solves a problem involving a threat to national security, has a sexual adventure, faces death and returns home to Sally. The threats to national security are fairly suspenseful because Buckley tells the reader who the villain really is and makes him worry until Oakes catches on. Of course the reader knows that Oakes or Rufus will certainly figure out what the villain is doing and stop him before it is too late, but the way in which this is done is enjoyable.

Blackford Oakes's sexual adventures have an interesting history. According to Buckley, Vladimir Nabokov, one of the most important writers of the second half of the twentieth century, advised him to include at least one sex scene in each novel to make it commercially successful. In this book, Oakes has sex with Queen Caroline nine times, once for each stroke he received when he was flogged at Greyburn, the English boarding school he attended.

Since Oakes is not only a highly moral man, but claims to be in love with Sally, how does Buckley justify his sexual adventures? Actually, he does not justify them. They simply happen.

They are amorous asides that Blacky enjoys but does not trouble himself about. They happen, they are a fact of life, but Blacky has no emotional investment in these sexual liaisons. They never distract our hero from his mission.

Buckley also mixes fact with fiction and gives the reader what seems to be accurate inside information on various interesting institutions, such as the CIA and the KGB, the White House and the Politburo. The other element that differentiates these novels from other espionage fiction is Buckley's dramatization of the states of mind of the historical personages involved and the humor with which these dialogues or interior monologues are presented.



Themes

Buckley explores the role of the "anointed white man" in the modern world. The protagonist, really a Buckley alter-ego, Blackford Oakes has had every privilege — breeding, looks, wealth, health, intelligence, and entry into the homes of the elite. He is a respected war hero who is recruited by a friend to "help" his country during a time of "peace."

The questions that Buckley asks are important ones. He asks, what is the role of a citizen during "peace time?"

What is acceptable behavior? What are the bounds of morality? What is the difference between Blackford Oakes and the dreaded agents of communism who feel that the end justifies the means? These questions are as valid today as when Buckley wrote this novel.



Key Questions

This novel raises some important questions about morality, loyalty, and ethics. It also reveals a great deal about the background of the hero Blackford Oakes. The reader learns about his experiences in British boarding school, his activity as a war hero and his subsequent indoctrination into the C.I.A.

during peace time. Oakes is portrayed as a moral, upright, young man who believes in his country and the free world.

1. Buckley says that, "Often, the main purpose of 'humanitarian' groups was to relieve themselves of effective concern for those who have suffered."

Why do you think that he says that?

Do you agree or disagree? Why or Why not?

2. Anthony Trust is Oakes's oldest friend but Oakes admits that Anthony has a quality that is difficult to describe. What quality is this? Why does Oakes find it so difficult to describe? Is there any irony in Anthony's last name?

3. Describe Blackford. What qualities does he possess that would make him a good candidate for the C.I.A.? What qualities does he possess that might make him a bad candidate for the C.I.A.?

4. One of the books which Blacky is given to read during his training is about a young Nazi soldier who decides he is shooting the wrong people and eventually gives secret information to the U.S. Intelligence Agency. Why do you think Blacky was given this book to read?

5. When discussing Darkness at Noon with Blacky, "Rudolph" tells him that Stalin "operated without any predictable restraints." What did he mean?

6. In a flashback describing the time he met his stepfather for the first time, the two "men" decide what they will call one another. Blacky's stepfather also says "I resist modernism in all its forms." Do you feel that Buckley is making a comment about the British? A certain class of people? Why do you feel he included this story?

7. Oakes and his family attend a film in which Walter Pidgeon nearly shoots Hitler but does not have the courage to follow through. Would you have killed Hitler? Would this action have been morally correct? Why or why not?

8. Describe James Peregrine Kirk.



Why does this former British war hero who is so close to the Queen give secrets to the Soviets? Is there a flaw in his character that makes him do this?

9. Peregrine Kirk is portrayed as the villain of this novel and yet he kills himself rather than bring ultimate dishonor upon the crown. Why does he do this? Why does the government permit him a hero's burial? Why is Blacky asked to speak at his funeral?

10. Blacky is portrayed as a moral individual yet he has an affair with the Queen of England although he professes to love Sally, and he participates or is instrumental in the death of Kirk.

Why does Buckley feel these acts are permissible or does he? Do you feel these are ethical acts? Why or why not?

Literary Precedents

As the work of a politically conservative novelist, Buckley's fiction is in the tradition of Ayn Rand, the later John Dos Passos, and the popular novelist Alan Drury. Also, Blackford Oakes must remind the reader of Ian Fleming's James Bond except that he is far more religious and moral. Reviewers have derogatorily called him a Boy Scout, but this is precisely what Buckley means him to be. He is a superman who may be seen as Buckley's answer to the exhausted, no longer young, no longer handsome, far from enthusiastic heroes of John le Carre or Graham Greene. Indeed, it has been noted that Blackford Oakes, as a moral and a religious young man, bears a much closer resemblance to the hero of an old fashioned boys' tale, than to the hero of a contemporary espionage novel, and his sexual adventures have been compared to the Hardy boys in the boudoir.



Related Titles

There is a bit more moral ambiguity and political thought in *Stained Glass* (1978), Buckley's second Blackford Oakes novel. In this book, Oakes is assigned to destroy a heroic figure, a young man almost as handsome and courageous as Blacky himself who will reunite East Germany with West Germany. This takes place in 1952. Because of their fear of a world war for which the West is unprepared, the leaders of the United States do not permit Axel Wintergrin to challenge the Soviet Union by unifying Germany. Oakes is terribly upset about having to assassinate a man who considers him a friend, and who is incidentally also a second cousin of Queen Caroline of England.

He relieves his anxieties by making love to a gorgeous, superintelligent Russian agent pretending to be loyal to Wintergrin. He also does a certain amount of praying about his moral position and finally, years after the events described, questions Allen Dulles as to their necessity.

In the spring of 1980 *Who's on First* appeared. This novel features affecting scenes of the aftermath of the Hungarian rebellion and the misery of those in Soviet prison camps juxtaposed with amusing dialogues, fictional of course, between the former Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA and brother of John Dulles, then (1957) Secretary of State.

In this novel, the spotlight is not quite so firmly focused on Blackford Oakes who is suffering both from guilt over the death of a friend and the hostility of Sally, a convinced pacifist. The novel explains, excitingly, why the Russians orbited their space vehicle Sputnik before the United States could orbit her own. It is a moving as well as an entertaining novel.

Buckley's 1982 success, *Marco Polo, If You Can*, takes the reader up in a U2 airplane, down to the cells of Lubyanka prison, and through the vicissitudes of a Soviet trial for espionage as Blackford Oakes plays the Gary Powers role in the U2 incident of 1960. Because of the consummate skill of Rufus, Buckley's super spy master, Soviet penetration of the National Security Council is discovered and eliminated, while Blackford Oakes, fired for having saved a friend at some cost to national security in *Who's on First*, is reinstated at the Agency. Oakes, facing death, becomes a bit more vulnerable and human and takes his place in literary history as the modern world's most religious spy. Sally, although still not married to Oakes, now realizes that the Soviet Union is the enemy of peace, freedom and human dignity. Ideology aside, the plot is intricate and involving, and the forays into the minds of historical figures, from J. Edgar Hoover to Eisenhower to De Gaulle, are clever and entertaining.

The Story of Henri Tod (a best seller in early 1984) takes the reader to Berlin with Blackford Oakes in 1961. The East Germans have to stop the flow of their citizens to the West and they also must cope with an engaging anti-Communist leader, Henri Tod. The fact that the reader knows how they did the first, by building the wall, does not lessen the suspense, and Buckley almost manages to convince the reader that if the



West had reacted a bit more courageously, the East Germans would never have erected the wall. The most entertaining episodes of this book involve love scenes inside Hitler's private railroad car and the interior monologues of John F. Kennedy, the engaging young American president, and the wily Nikita Khrushchev.

Kennedy's interior monologue begins *See You Later Alligator* (1985). He is struggling with the problem of Cuba after the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion and he senses that the virile, handsome and intelligent Blackford Oakes is just the person to negotiate with Che Guevara (who is presented sympathetically) in order to wean Cuba away from the Soviet Union and particularly to remove Soviet missiles from Cuban soil. Guevara has to cope with Cuban domestic problems and worst of all, Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader, who is presented here as a megalomaniacal sadist. Ultimately, Che leaves Cuba, aware that in fomenting a Communist takeover of the island, he has merely replaced one form of tyranny with another, in order to try his luck at assisting other revolutions in South America. While negotiating with Che, Blackford enjoys a love affair with their translator, winning her over politically as well as sexually, but she is executed after showing Oakes the missile sites, thus saving him for Sally Partridge. Oakes himself is nearly executed, but he is saved by the personal intervention of President Kennedy and five years later witnesses the execution of Che Guevara in Peru.

There is some violence and an exciting boat chase but this book is slower going than the others because Buckley supplies a great deal of historical background and the principal characters spend most of the book debating the merits of their respective political systems.

In *High Jinx* (1986) Blackford Oakes returns to some scenes of early triumphs, such as Buckingham Palace.

Queen Caroline remembers him, but at the royal garden party, which he attends with his mother and stepfather, she cannot let on. She is still having problems with security risks in high places and Oakes must save her once again. Oakes's revenge on the evildoer is nasty, but very clever. This takes place in 1954. Oakes's great good luck, as well as talent, enables him to join with Bolgin, his archfoe in the earlier novels, to trap Beria and establish the less bloodthirsty Malenkov as Soviet chief of state. Oakes is still in love with Sally but while they are apart he occupies himself by causing an unusually talented prostitute to fall in love with his great beauty and equally great sexual prowess.

Ideologically, this book is interesting as Buckley's last word on the late Senator Joseph McCarthy, who accused many Americans of being Communist sympathizers, disloyal to the United States. Buckley has the all-knowing Rufus announce that although McCarthy had a slovenly mind, if anything, he underestimated the number of Soviet spies who had been able to penetrate American security. This novel, too, is eminently readable and very entertaining as it affords the reader glimpses of CIA training sessions, Eisenhower administration Cabinet meetings, meetings of the Politburo, and luncheons at Buckingham Palace.



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