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BOOK SECTION

SEE YOU LATER ALLIGATOR

By William F. Buckley Jr.

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By Peter Andrews

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.'S fictional C.I.A. agent, Blackford Oakes, is an estimable character in many respects. For one thing, when Oakes is in really desperate trouble, he says his prayers. To the best of my knowledge, no secret agent has sought divine advice since John Buchan's novels and it's rather nice to see Heavenly guidance again. In a time when most fictional secret agents are busy staving off the imminent incineration of the planet, Oakes is content to measure his job in small and reasonably credible triumphs. Oakes generally manages to bed down with at least one beautiful woman during the course of his travails, but he is not the sort of fellow to break any furniture while doing so. If there is killing to be done in a Blackford Oakes novel, the mayhem is doled out judiciously so the reader is not forever tripping over dead bodies. Compared with the wholesale bloodletting that is the hallmark of so many novels in this genre, a visit with Blackford Oakes is like a weekend at the shore.

Heaven knows all of us in the Western world sleep more comfortably knowing that Blackford Oakes is on the prowl. But, considering all of his admirable qualities, I wish I liked him more. The problem, I suspect, is that in common with many virtuous people, Blackford Oakes is just a little bit on the dull side. He is an awfully good man and you never get a chance to forget it.

This time, Oakes is sent by President Kennedy to Cuba to engage in secret negotiations with Che Guevara in the months immediately preceding the missile crisis. And as it turns out, it was a good thing he was there. Mr. Buckley is too meticulous a scholar to twist history around just to suit the purposes of a spy story; and he sticks to a basic outline of the affair, while providing a loophole just large enough for Oakes to make his contribution. Since the novel cannot provide us with any major surprises, it has to rely on execution for its effect and here the work is surprisingly leaden. Very little of the deft Buckley prose style evident in his columns is

present here, and even less of his sharp-edged wit. Although Mr. Buckley probably has not constructed a graceless sentence since he was in prep school, there isn't much energy here. "See You Later Alligator" is not full of sound and fury but, then again, it doesn't signify much either.

Perhaps Mr. Buckley needs a looser story line to show off his good moves. He is so busy setting the historical background of the missile crisis that he has little room for novelistic maneuver. Oakes spends nine months and some 100 pages chatting with Guevara, swimming nude in the ocean and making love to a Cuban apparatchik until one night she takes him to see the hidden missiles. At one point, Mr. Buckley gets so

mired in his story the only way he can push the plot forward is to have the brilliant Blackford Oakes make a stupid security blunder. It is a fairly good indication that a spy story may be in trouble when the reader is smarter than the hero.

Mr. Buckley mixes fictional and historical characters with indifferent results. Having Mr. Buckley write dialogue for Jack Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev should have been fun but here the execution is lackluster. Guevara is the only one who comes off with any kind of vitality. A man with an interesting mind who chafes Oakes for his genteel manners in the face of revolution and gives his adversary all the debate he can handle. Guevara is a well-drawn character whom one remem-

bers even after the plot is forgotten. So Mr. Buckley knows how to do the job when he sets his mind to it. "See You Later Alligator," however, sometimes reads as if it had not always fully engaged the author's attention.

Which is not to say there are not some very good things in this novel. Mr. Buckley blows up an airplane as neatly as anything I have read in a long time and there is a crackerjack boat chase. The final scene, in which Oakes meets Guevara for the last time in Bolivia, when the string has run out for the troubled visionary, is touching and fine. But essentially these are grace notes in a routine story. This Oakes outing is a bit off form; but form counts a lot for Blackford Oakes and doubtless we shall see him in fitter fettle the next time. □

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