

★ ★ ★ Miami Blues

Oaks Four West

Hoke Moseley is the central figure in a series of crime stories by the late Charles Willeford. They're modest but sturdy novels with a gift for sharp characterization. Hoke is a South Florida policeman who rambles through his cases with a mixture of diligence and insight. But Hoke (Fred Ward) never will advance in the department. He's too scruffy, too unassuming and he has terrible taste in clothes.

So does Junior (Alec Baldwin). He's a pleasantly psychotic criminal who's missing that little bit of humanity that keeps the rest of us in line. Junior arrives in Miami with just a stolen credit card and a slightly crooked smile. He isn't there five minutes before he attacks and accidentally kills somebody.

When Hoke begins to dog the murderer's trail, Junior beats him up and steals his gun and badge. Junior uses the badge to indulge in his favorite type of crime — robbing people who rob from

other people. If some kids break into a pawn shop, he scares them off with his gun and then strolls away with a TV set and a popcorn bucket. If someone grabs a woman's handbag, he'll knock down the thief, accept the victim's heartfelt thanks and then take the purse himself.

Junior also hooks up with Susie (Jennifer Jason Leigh), a young prostitute who takes night classes and hopes to save enough money to buy a Burger World franchise. She's an oddly compelling character who yearns for domesticity. Susie acquiesces quietly when Junior tells her they're engaged and moves them both into a furnished house in Coral Gables.

All she asks is that he give up a life of crime. Junior can't, of course. So what follows is an odd mixture of scenes where he coldly goes about the business of violent crime, only to return home and play the dutiful husband.

It's all presented in brisk, economical fashion by B-movie director George Armitage. He filmed some crucial moments with

a hand-held camera, giving them an edgy immediacy well-suited to this story.

Armitage also elicited good performances from Baldwin, Ward and especially Leigh. She's heartbreaking and memorable as Susie. When Junior whisks her away to a new home, she's almost afraid to step inside: Her dreams

seem too close to fulfillment. When Susie finally goes in, she stares lovingly at the pots and the pans and the big white sink.

That feel for what's important to a character gives *Miami Blues* an unexpected emotional depth. It's a taut, funny and thoroughly satisfying action film.

BY MICHAEL GILTZ