



On the Bookshelf



BY MICHAEL GILTZ

The Story of Henri Tod/William F. Buckley, Jr.

Some movies are generally considered "better" than others. Even a good horror or science fiction movie somehow seems inferior to foreign films or "important" movies, like *Amadeus*.

The same can be said for literature because certain genres (like general fiction) are subconsciously held in higher esteem than other categories (like science fiction).

Of course, gifted writers can excel and be recognized in whatever area they choose. Even the spy genre can produce an important work of fiction.

One spy novel series that is gaining considerable critical and popular acclaim is the account of the travails of Blackford Oakes, a dashing spy for the CIA.

His adventures are penned by William F. Buckley, Jr., that bastion of ultra-conservatism who also authors the syndicated column *On the Right*, is editor of the *National Review* and has published numerous other works of nonfiction.

Blackford Oakes is a handsome young man who is intelligent, completely dedicated to his work (which happens to be the protection of Freedom), the brightest star in the CIA's galaxy, a favorite of Kennedy and, above all, a Yale man. (Heaven help the poor fool who ever mistakes him for a Harvard man). In all, he is the perfect alter ego for the author.

Oakes works for the American

government during the Cold War years, and is involved in events that the reader is familiar with from that era, such as the building of the Berlin Wall. Buckley's main plot device is to invent behind-the-scenes subterfuge that is plausible in the



context of what is actually known to have happened.

For instance, in *Marco Polo, If You Can*, Buckley postulated that the U-2 incident of 1960 was carefully planned by the United States. The result is that historical events, with their inevitable foregone conclusions, are given a crucial element of suspense.

In *The Story of Henri Tod*, that element of suspense is injected by the creation of the title character, a mysterious and almost messianic man who leads a shadowy army called the Bruderschaft in a continuing struggle against communism. His is an imaginatively conceived past that cannot be properly revealed in this context.

Suffice to say that Henri Tod is a complex and driven man who grabs our attention and sympathies from the beginning.

Tod is also Oakes' contact, for our hero is sent to Berlin because trouble is brewing: Khrushchev is clearly planning something, but we don't know what and Oakes *must* find out.

But as tension mounts, Tod mysteriously disappears, his long-lost sister, who was believed to have perished in a Nazi concentration camp, reappears and Oakes must juggle his responsibilities between his country and his new-found ally.

At the climax of the story, Oakes even finds himself being tempted into abandoning his duties and engaging in "a daring plan to change the nature of the free world."

Buckley's style is clean, witty and erudite. Our intrepid hero seems to casually bed beautiful strangers almost as an aside. The author also occasionally winks broadly at his readers: at one point, Oakes comments on an editorial in the *National Review*, saying, "Rufus, read this. Buckley is almost always right. But on this one he (isn't privy to the important information)."

He even has an enjoyable romp through President Kennedy's brain by way of a series of internal monologues carried on by the President that pepper the novel.

But, above all, Buckley's style is fast-paced. His canny sense of timing ensures that *The Story of Henri Tod* is lively and thrilling.

Spy novels like this illuminate the fact that the only distinction to be made between books is whether one is a good novel or a bad novel.

This is a good novel. ■