

Imagination not one of Buckley's multiple talents

By Bill Roberts

Saving the Queen, by William F. Buckley, Jr./ Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, \$7.95.

William F. Buckley has done so many things successfully. He is the editor of *The National Review*, host of the television show *Firing Line*, author of several books, and a nationally known champion of conservative causes. He should be able to write a novel, too. Right?

Wrong. *Saving the Queen* is to novel-writing as paint-by-number sets are to art. The books consist of a simple CIA adventure plot embellished with oodles of supposedly charming detail in hopes that the groping reader will think something is going on.

The time is the early 1950s. Blackford Oakes, former World War II fighter pilot and magna cum laude graduate of Yale, joins the CIA. This is no easy thing. It takes the first half of the book to explain all the difficulties that slinking into that

super-secret society entails.

But he does join the CIA, and his first assignment is to discover how the Soviets are getting information on the American development of the hydrogen bomb.

Oakes' trail leads to the court of the Queen of England. Buckley invents a wonderful young woman, Caroline, for that role. She is the bright spot in the book, unquestionably worth saving.

The informer is discovered finally, and the Queen saved, in a suspenseful episode involving Oakes' rejuvenated mastery of jet planes.

The gut appeal of *Saving the Queen* is adventure, not mystery.

The characters, again except for the eccentric Queen Caroline, are flat, boring and nearly indistinguishable. It is acceptable that CIA agents are dedicated. But surely something besides patriotism and ideology motivates even those death-defiers.

Buckley does try to develop his main character.

Following his "How to Write a Novel" directions, the author gives a psychological twist to Oakes. His dilemma is that he subconsciously hates England, because of a schoolboy incident, and yet he loves and respects the Queen.

The incident, a simple and common whipping, is silly. The resolution of the dilemma is sophomoric. And the psychological "insight" into the character is embarrassing.

But Buckley is an honorable man. He wouldn't send the publisher a simply

told story full of simple characters. He equips them for their trip to print with his uniquely profuse prose style.

The clogged writing style, intended to be impressive and charming, must account for *Saving the Queen's* best-selling status. This style makes the book unique, but only superficially.

Conservative to the core, Buckley obeyed the rules of writing a novel. Unfortunately, those rules did not specify how to come by the imagination needed to tell a really good story.

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