

Boomsday

By Christopher Buckley
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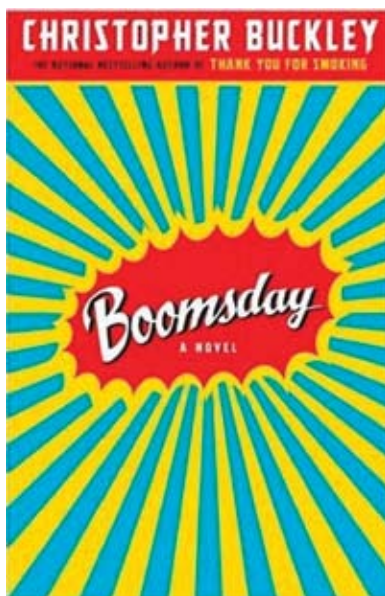
YOU SNOOZE, YOU LOSE. My mother never taught me that bit of wisdom; the phrase wasn't used by her generation, for goodness' sake! Whatever.

You catch my drift.

Christopher Buckley must have access to, as well as an ear for, the pidgin English we all use to keep other generations from participating in our conversations. I've picked up a smidgeon of pidgin myself, covering several generations, by eavesdropping on my three daughters (two baby boomers and one current teenager) and my parents (we Depression babies don't warrant our own generation, as there are only a few dozen of us). This has helped me read and comprehend Buckley's latest novel, *Boomsday*. While the language gap isn't the book's central theme, it's illustrative of the yawning chasm that can develop between generations. *That* is the central theme of the book.

But the language gap *is* thematic to *Boomsday*, and the author uses it aptly. While it's dubious that a boomer would say "they will rue the day that they tangled with (me)," it strikes my ear as authentic to have a series of post-boomers say that a "dude was postal," that a boomer scam "totally sucks" and, of course, that various evident inanities warrant a heartfelt "duh!" Best of all, though, is the multi-purpose conversation stopper "whatever," to which Buckley pays homage by saying, to the post-boomer heroine of the novel, "It's useful. It may actually be your generation's major semantic contribution so far. It's pure Teflon." He even goes so far as to dub her age group "Generation W," and the political party she spawns the "Whatever Party."

Even the Fort Sumter moment in the book uses language rather than cannon for the declaration of war between the



generations. The assault is launched during a presidential debate and leads to a Whatever Party slogan and campaign buttons that read STFU, which may stand for "Straight Talk Frees Us." Or not. Whatever.

The public response to the slogan, and to the campaign, splits nicely and credibly along generational lines, and the war is on.

The underlying cause of the *Boomsday* war is, of course, the irresponsible and dishonest financing of Social Security, used generically by Buckley to also encompass Medicare and Medicaid, the greater and more intractable problems by far. While baby boomers weren't the original perpetrators of the national social insurance financing fraud, they and

their politicians have been masterful perpetrators of the scheme, and it's credible that they'll try to continue feathering their nests by plucking their children. An eventual STFU button is no flight of fancy.

Christopher Buckley has managed to turn this manifestly unfunny subject—fiscal child abuse—into a very funny book. As the only child of William F. and Patricia T. Buckley, he's hard-wired for wit, and *Boomsday* has more than its share. For example, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what your country has done for you lately." Or, "He was the Anodyne Man—the perfect person to head a commission convened to decide whether mass voluntary [sic] suicide was the answer to Social Security's intractable insolvency." Or "Thanks to the boomer generation, people around the world can now find decent coffee on practically every street corner."

I found *Boomsday* captivating, in part no doubt because I've been railing about the irresponsible and dishonest financing of our national social insurance plans for over 40 years. The *Los Angeles Times* in 1964 published my letter

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on the subject, although it changed my “trillion-dollar” deficit to merely “huge.” My interest and passion concerning the problem probably arose out of my growing actuarial knowledge (2 plus 2 will never equal 5, even if you pray) and my new status as a parent. (As late-boomers, my two older daughters are more likely to pull than ride on the gravy train.)

I did find the book to be barren in terms of charts, graphs, and other actuarial exotica, even though I found no flat-out actuarial errors. I then realized that Buckley and I have effectively divvied up the reading public, the terms of our agreement being that I’ll write for actuaries, and he’ll write for the other half of the population. Fifty-fifty. Rather like the proverbial horse and rabbit stew.

You snooze, you lose? Yes, I’ll admit that I’m bitter over Christopher Buckley’s inadvertent purloining [sic] of my idea, our agreement notwithstanding. Roughly two years ago, I approached the editor of this magazine with a modest proposal for an article promoting elder suicide as a means of balancing Social Security and Medicare. Then I snoozed. Whereas *Boomsday* uses tax inducements to encourage Voluntary Transitioning at age 70, however, my plan was to offer enhancement of the overall quality of your life for early departure (say, a year or so before your time would otherwise run out, with you serving as your own actuary and actuator). Both plans could use some actuarial (and other) tinkering, I’ll admit, but the game is joined and can only escalate. Should the success of *Boomsday: The Movie* demand a sequel, I can only predict that it’ll introduce the concept of geezer suicide bombers as a means of responding to one 21st-century problem or another.

But what about the plot, the characters? The heroine is named Cassandra, inevitably, and she comes by her disdain for boomers honestly. On being accepted by Yale, she learns that her boomer father has pilfered her college fund for his

dot-com start-up (subtle, Chris) and that she’ll instead be joining the Army. There she meets the hero (well, more or less, mostly less) of the story, a Massachusetts boomer politician, who is the cause of her discharge from the service and subsequent descent into the hell of a public relations career in the nation’s capital.

But her salvation is her blog, wherefrom she leads her generation’s revolution against the financial irresponsibility and dishonesty of the older generations. This gives Buckley the opportunity to have fun, some of it at our expense.

Applied Predictive Actuarial Technologies, for example, develops BADMAP (Bio-Actuarial Dyna-Metric Age Predictor), which leads to RIP-ware, whereby dear old Dad (his dot-com took off!) makes an even bigger fortune by selecting, for his CCRC’s (continuous care retirement communities), only those applicants who are about to die unexpectedly (to them).

He even introduces the AAA (American Association of Actuaries) in a list including NABPEN (the National American Body Part Exchange Network), NALI (the National Association for Lethal Injectionists), and the AEEPBB46-64 (the Association for the Economic Enhancement of Persons Born Between 1946 and 1964).

My personal favorite, however, is another of Dad’s money-makers: Spider Repellent; software that brings up all Google references you find offensive (for example, “stupid remarks by Fred Kilbourne”) and deletes them forever!

Boomsday’s characters are multidimensional, although none displays as many dimensions as three. Buckley does name them carefully, however, taking a cue from that unfunny author Ayn Rand, who makes several cameo appearances in the book. The quasi-hero, for example, is Randy, a name that suits him in several respects. Another example is Foggo Farquar, the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, who’s charged with presenting the actuarial support for his conclusion that

“Social Security will exhaust its resources approximately two and a half months from now. As of noon.”

There’s a silver lining to the cloudy character development, however, in that the author’s witticisms are shared widely among the players. The result is that, on finishing the book, the reader has the feeling of having just spent an enjoyable if exhausting evening in the company of a room full of Christopher Buckley clones. I do not mean that to be a criticism of the book.

I do mean to be critical of the epilogue, on the other hand. Cassandra would never have accepted the position foreseen for her. That would have required her to become compliant in the irresponsibility, if not the dishonesty, as must be known by any observant student of the Washington scene, such as the author. It’s as though Buckley had to meet a deadline, or heard another siren call, or simply tired of the project, and so applied a tourniquet and left, rather than carefully preparing the stump for a prosthesis (read the book). My problem is that he took Cassandra and all my other dinner guests with him when he left, abruptly, without so much as a fare-thee-well.

If I may be permitted an unfunny but pertinent close to this review, I will leave you with the last paragraph of a long letter I wrote to my grandson, published in these pages 14 years ago.

“I must admit,” says the letter, “I was taken aback recently to see you and a group of other children happy and smiling, seemingly oblivious to the problems ahead of you. It occurred to me that maybe you and your peers know something that I and other grown-ups tend to forget: that mankind has always struggled against adversity, that America thrives when challenged, that you have the strength to overcome all obstacles. But then another truth dawned on me: You kids are happy and smiling because you trust us. Well, don’t.”