

Biography Resource Center

James Lee Burke

Birth: December 5, 1936 in Houston, Texas, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer, Novelist

Source: *Contemporary Novelists*, 7th ed. St. James Press, 2001.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Biographical Essay](#)

[Personal Information](#)

[Source Citation](#)

[Works](#)

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

In his thirteen novels, James Lee Burke sets up a basic confrontation between the beauties of the natural world and the stark, cruel, marginal existence of his characters. When he writes about the natural world of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast with its swamps and bayous, or the blue mountains of Montana, he produces a poetic and lyrical prose, filled with affirmation and awe, based solidly on his descriptions and evocations of the weather, light, aromas, and colors. Such a world appears Edenic and, for the most part, unspoiled. Burke writes with a Thoreauvian attention to detail and a Whitmanic delight in the sheer boundlessness of nature, as in Burke's *To the Bright and Shining Sun*. Such a romantic sense of oneness and transcendence parallels his characters' often thwarted desire for escape, sex, occasional love, country music, and jazz. Titles such as *A Morning for Flamingos*, *A Stained White Radiance*, *Sunset Limited*, *Neon Rain*, and *Heaven's Prisoners* illustrate this core juxtaposition of nature's timeless beauty with the transient kitsch of the twentieth-century human struggle.

Burke's characters pollute the world they inhabit. The ex-cons, prostitutes, mobsters, drug dealers and runners, alcoholics, bad cops, psychopathic killers, and mindless thugs occupy a Darwinian combat zone of existence, of life at the edge. Burke's men are crude and violent, driven by their own testosterone tactics in a raunchy moral wasteland that portrays violent predators in a sprawling, sleazy underworld of society and the soul. His women often partake of the same characteristics, except for the few who manage to love and survive. Burke depicts this world in a hard-edged, Hemingway-style prose that is cryptic and often crude, a style that balances precariously between sadism and sentiment, terror and tenderness.

The hero of many of Burke's novels is Dave Robicheaux, a former cop on the New Orleans police force, who stakes his claim to New Iberia, a small town in southern Louisiana. He is a barely reformed alcoholic still suffering from the dark depressions and nightmares from his service in the Vietnam War and the murder of his first wife, Annie Ballard, a social worker. As

one of the walking wounded, he continually examines his own existential doubts and uncertainties. In recent books he has married Bootsie, the widow of a mob boss who has lupus, and they have adopted Alafair, a Salvadoran orphan rescued from a plane crash. Robicheaux displays a tough Cajun code of honor and emerges as a kind of knight errant in the seedy underworld that is his life.

Burke's plots are sprawling and elaborate with their interlocking network of rednecks, racists, and raunchy hit men, served up in an intricate labyrinth of betrayals, double-dealings, frame-ups, and set-ups. In this grimly realistic and often nihilistic world, Robicheaux is usually able to find the connections beneath the murky mayhem, that touchstone of the mystery formula that assures us that some kind of rational order and moral victory can be achieved, however fitfully.

In *The Lost Get-Back Boogie*, an earlier novel that does not feature Robicheaux, Burke carefully lays out his landscape of prisons, dreary bars, holding cells, pickup trucks and gun racks, oil rigs and sleazy roadhouses, in which the ex-con, Iry Paret, tells the tale of his parole, released after having stabbed a man in a bar, and his journey to Montana from Louisiana to work on the ranch of his prison-buddy's father, Frank Riordan. In the course of the novel Paret, writing in the first-person, replaces Buddy Riordan, his friend from prison, by working well on the ranch and finally marrying Buddy's ex-wife Beth. In effect the story of this redneck's redemption is a complicated psychological process, for Iry's survival depends upon Buddy's death. Such Oedipal conflicts between "killer brothers" provide the novel with its terrible economy and vision: that personal triumph necessarily involves personal betrayal. That dark psychological subtext pervades all of Burke's subsequent novels.

An example of this kind of plot can be seen in one of the later books, *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead*, published in 1993. Here Burke mixes the Robicheaux milieu and mystery with gothic overtones that involve the apparition of a Confederate general, John Bell Hood, who appears in an eerie hallucinatory manner to become Robicheaux's advisor and conscience. The circuitous and labyrinthine plot involves the murder of a hooker, Robicheaux's memory of having witnessed the murder of a black man in the Atchafalaya Basin, and the return to New Iberia of the malignant mobster, Julie Balboni, to finance a Hollywood film there. Several murders and betrayals abound, Balboni is finally set afire in prison, and Robicheaux uncovers all the right solutions to the crimes.

James Lee Burke's novels build upon the "hard-boiled school" of American crime and detective fiction that was begun and carried on by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Kenneth Millar writing as Ross Macdonald. Other contemporary writers continuing this tradition include Robert B. Parker, George V. Higgins, and Elmore Leonard. Such novels directly depict violent action in a world of total violence, corruption, and psychological mutants. Such writers create Dickensian characters who speak a tough, crude, naturalistic dialogue. Their vision of the world remains cruel, often heartless, relentlessly paranoid, and instinctually chaotic. Like Raymond Chandler, Burke emphasizes the thoughts and feelings of the main character, often in the foreground of the sizzling, danger-filled action.

In *Black Cherry Blues*, the winner of the 1990 Edgar Award for best mystery novel, Robicheaux is pursued by a professional killer and flees his home on the Bayou Teche to find a new life in Montana near the Blackfoot River Canyon. The ex-police officer's escape from the corrupt institutions of New Orleans crime into the anonymity of a fish and tackle business becomes another journey of self-reflection haunted by the memories of his wife's murder and father's death. His personal struggles are complicated by a surprise visit from an old Cajun friend, Dixie

Lee Pughe, after which Robicheaux begins investigating an underworld scheme by the Mafia to take over Indian lands. Robicheaux is again involved with the violent world of Mafia thugs and federal agents. "The plot crackles with suspense," reported the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* about *Black Cherry Blues*, which is among the best of the Robicheaux series.

In novels such as *Purple Cane Road*, *The Lost Get-Back Boogie*, *Burning Angel*, *Cadillac Jukebox*, *Cimarron Rose*, *Dixie City Jam*, *Half of Paradise*, and *Lay Down My Sword and Shield*, Burke infuses his language with descriptive metaphors born of Louisiana's lush landscapes in combination with the "funky" music and myth unique to the culture of the state. He is not averse to exploiting the commercial potential of the genre, but infuses it with descriptive writing as lush as the settings he describes and as colorful as the denizens of the area. His is a genre writing grounded by a strong sense of place, one where the metaphysical and other-worldly events are commonplace and validated, as they are in Louisiana.

Burke brings to the hard-boiled school his own lyrical descriptions of the natural world, his own sense of loss for the Edenic world of his childhood in southern Louisiana, and his sounding of the psychological depths of guilt, obsession, and self-loathing that infect his characters. In using the mystery formula with its process of calculated revelation, he consistently exposes the darker, more frightening side of contemporary America, and even though the guilty may be captured and/or killed, that violent darker landscape remains brutally and masterfully intact.

From novels published earlier in his career during the 1980s with relatively nondescript titles such as *Sabine Spring* and *Two for Texas*, continuing to his 1999 novel, *Heartwood*, a Billy Bob Holland mystery, it is obvious that James Lee Burke is interested in commercial success. Choosing the mystery genre does not guarantee book sales, yet the simple and powerful eloquence that Burke brings to mystery writing elevates his novels toward comparisons with great literature while also increasing sales. He transforms an ordinary plot with a commercial edge into quality writing using metaphorical descriptions that ordinary writers of any genre can only envy.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Nationality: American. **Born:** Houston, 5 December 1936. **Education:** University of Southwest Louisiana, Lake Charles, 1955-1957; University of Missouri, B.A. 1959, M.A. 1960. **Family:** Married Pear Pail; four children. **Career:** Social worker, Los Angeles, 1962-64; reporter, Lafayette, Louisiana, 1964; U.S. Forest Service, Kentucky, 1965-66; English instructor, University of Southern Louisiana, Lafayette, Louisiana; English instructor, University of Montana, Missoula; English instructor, Miami-Dade Community College, Florida. Currently English professor, Wichita State University, Kansas. **Awards:** Bread Loaf fellowship, 1970; Southern Federation of State Arts Agencies grant, 1977; Guggenheim fellowship, 1989; Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe award, 1989, 1998. **Agent:** Philip Spitzer, 788 Ninth Ave., New York, New York 10019, U.S.A. **Address:** 338 North Quentin, Wichita, Kansas 62708, U.S.A.

WORKS

- **Novels (series: Dave Robicheaux, Billy Bob Holland)**
- *To the Bright and Shining Sun*. New York, Scribner, 1970 ; New York, Hyperion, 1995.
- *Lay Down My Sword and Shield*. New York, Crewel, 1971.
- *The Lost Get-Back Boogie*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1986.
- *The Neon Rain* (Robicheaux). New York, Holt, 1987 ; London, Mysterious Press, 1989.
- *Heaven's Prisoners* (Robicheaux). New York, Holt, 1988 ; London, Mysterious Press, and London, Vintage, 1990.
- *Black Cherry Blues*. Boston, Little Brown, 1989 ; London, Century, 1990.
- *A Morning for Flamingoes* (Robicheaux). Boston, Little Brown, 1990 ; London, Arrow, 1993.
- *A Stained White Radiance* (Robicheaux). New York, Hyperion, 1992 ; London, Arrow, 1993.
- *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead*. (Robicheaux) New York, Hyperion, and London, Orion, 1993.
- *Dixie City Jam* (Robicheaux). New York, Hyperion, and London, Orion, 1994.
- *Burning Angel*. (Robicheaux) New York, Hyperion, 1995.
- *Half of Paradise*. New York, Hyperion, 1995. c1965....the first novel!
- *Two for Texas*. New York, Hyperion, 1995. c1982
- *The Convict: A Novel*. New York, Hyperion, 1995. c1985
- *Cadillac Jukebox*. (Robicheaux) New York, Hyperion, 1996.
- *Cimarron Rose: A Novel*. (Billy Bob Holland) New York, Hyperion, 1997.
- *Sunset Limited*. (Robicheaux) New York, Doubleday, 1998.
- *Heartwood*. (Billy Bob Holland) New York, Doubleday, 1999.
- *Purple Cane Road*. (Robicheaux) New York, Random House, 2000.
- *Bitterroot*. (Billy Bob Holland) New York, Simon and Schuster, 2001.
- *Jolie Blon's Bounce*. (Robicheaux) New York, Simon and Schuster, 2002.
- *White Doves at Morning*. (Historical, Reconstruction Period) New York, Simon and Schuster, 2002
- *Last Car to Elysian Fields*, (Robicheaux). New York, Simon and Schuster, 2003.
- *In the Moon of Red Ponies*, (Billy Bob Holland) New York, Simon and Schuster, 2004.
- *Crusader's Cross*, (Robicheaux) New York, Simon and Schuster, 2005
- *Pegasus Descending*, (Robicheaux) Summer 2006
-
- **Other**
- *The Convict and Other Stories*. Boston, Little, Brown, 1990.

SOURCE CITATION

"James Lee Burke." *Contemporary Novelists*, 7th ed. St. James Press, 2001.
Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2006.
<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>
Document Number: K1659000093