

After the storm: James Lee Burke answers Katrina's wrath with his own

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20 September 2007

James Lee Burke, The Tin Roof Blowdown, Simon & Schuster and Jesus Out to Sea, Simon & Schuster

This review is a modified version of articles that first appeared in the Mobile (Alabama) Press-Register

James Lee Burke is one of America's master prose stylists, a crossover writer who transcends the genre he is working in, and has rightly been called the Faulkner of crime fiction. Like a literary Emeril, he's always kicking it up a notch, testing the outer limits of his chosen formula; and like his cousin, the late, great Andre Dubus, a short-story writer who has been compared to Chekhov, Burke has a deft literary touch. His depiction of Southern scene and setting are nonpareil (his descriptions of flora would challenge a botanist). Yet it is all nonintrusive, building a mood always evocative, at times brooding, Kierkegaardian in its memory warps and always firmly anchored in Dixie terra Firma—a terrain redolent of draping oaks, Spanish moss, gators and nutria lurking in the swamp and coulees, and summer heat lightning often interpreted by the locals as proof of the divine.

First published at age 19 and with four novels under his belt by age 34, publishers suddenly decided to ignore him. His breakout novel, "The Lost Get-Back Boogie," garnered 111 rejections over a 9-year period. The book was later nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Burke now laughs good-naturedly about it.

A huge fan of James Lee Burke, I have anxiously awaited the commentary of this fine Southern literary artist, to get the take of this local visionary Louisiana boy as seen through his fictional protagonists. New Orleans, creative and cultural mecca to be treasured, is the ground of Burke's artistic inspiration, where we follow the crucible that is Dave Robicheaux's daily lot—our working-class hero, former N.O. detective, who has wound up in his twilight years in New Iberia, La. As always, the Big Easy is just a stone's throw away, with all its attendant urgency.

The levees burst because they were structurally weak and had only a marginal chance of surviving a category 3 storm, much less of category 5 strength. Every state emergency

official knew this. The Army Corps of Engineers knew this. The National Hurricane Center in Miami knew this.

But apparently the United States Congress and the current administration in Washington, D.C., did not, since they had dramatically cut funding for the repair of the levee system only a few months earlier.

Prelapsarian New Orleans—before the fall, before the rage and woe that was Katrina. For Mobilians, there need be no explanation or explication, we lived through it. For those who stayed, there will always be a palimpsest of indelible impressions. Suffocating heat, no air. After the storm, no breeze, no relief, even the giant crepe myrtles in the backyard that were swayed 45 degrees to port by Ivan and now righted by his furious sister were no comfort—all the oxygen seemingly gone from each breath, too many windows of relief now unopenable, nailed down or furiously ungiving and unforgiving with ancient paint, mocking us, the midtown lovely boxes of our succor so woefully inadequate to give us relief.

Without power for days—the neighbors' lights inexplicably on right next door, while your own overhead fans hung fecklessly mute, a silent rebuke to one's complete dependence on modern ways.

But this was nothing compared to the tsunami misery that destroyed our Big Sister city. The Big Sleazy (Burke's usage, and in an ironic, loving way as befits the Creole ethos, accepting and nonjudgmental of human foible, *laissez les bon temps rouler*, after all) decadent, lovely, face-on in the mouth of nature's indifferent scorn, with relief woefully inadequate; forgotten of our government, even as its local heroes (one cannot say enough about the epic efforts of the Coast Guard and brave first responders) placed themselves at risk on a par with the firemen of 9/11—but it was not enough, for they too had been abandoned to an uncaring and random, yet expected, ravaging.

The Tin Roof Blowdown, Burke's sixteenth novel in the Dave Robicheaux series, takes place in this Boschean nightmare made real. The novel lives up to expectations, providing tension at every turn as Robicheaux goes after the

usual mix of psychopaths, the decadent rich and every manner of lowlife, while still trying to maintain his own decency and dignity, to keep it all together without falling off the wagon, an ever-present concern as he fantasizes about a frosted tankard of Jax with a jigger of Jim Beam floating in the middle.

In Katrina-ravaged New Orleans, he tries to solve the mystery of a missing junkie priest and figure out who opened fire on a group of young criminals, setting off a series of events where a psycho comes after the good detective's daughter, Alafair. The results, when Robicheaux loses his cookies, or even better when his former Marine sidekick and podjo from New Orleans homicide, Clete Purcel—with his bulging muscles, red face and pork pie hat—carries out some act of uberviolence against those who so rightly deserve it, are at least cathartic and at best remind us that there can be a moral reckoning in the world, a correction, even if it's only in the world of fiction.

"Did you see that big plane that flew over?"

"No, I didn't. Step outside with me."

"It was Air Force One. After three days the Shrubster did a fly-over. Gee, I feel better now."

I see a diapered black baby in a tree that's only a green smudge under the water's surface. I can smell my neighbors in their attic. The odor is like a rat that has drowned in a bucket of water inside a superheated garage. A white guy floating by on an inner tube tells us snipers have shot a policeman in the head and killed two Fish and Wildlife officers. Gangbangers have turned over a boat trying to rescue patients at Charity Hospital. The Superdome and the Convention Center are layered with feces and are without water or food for thousands of people ...

Jesus Out to Sea is a collection of short stories stretching back to the early 1990s; the majority of the tales are set in post-Katrina territory, the conjured memories hearkening at times back to the 1940s. New Orleans has always been rough—blacks subjugated, Italians hung in clumps from the lamp posts, gangs ("the Mean Machine From Magazine"), but there was always a historical understanding, an inevitable accommodation, whereby the assimilated culture yielded a unique blend of the bacchanalian set smack dab in the center of the swamp—its historical Roman and other continental influences a striking counterpoint to the reigning "theistgeist" of pure Southern Baptist ozone, the almost seamless signature of the rest of Dixie.

Herein lies the tragedy of this epic post-Katrina city that Burke mines: its abandonment by the idiot nabobs who were in complete default—the indifference of the powers-that-be, who subjugated the needs of New Orleans' afflicted citizens to the anarchy of a profit system run amok, unregulated, feeding the apparently insatiable cupidity of a predatory

financial elite. And the damage is epic, historic—a disaster which finds no exact parallel in American history—for we are not dealing here with the mere eradication of one the South's finest cities, but of a complete way of life, a culture, which may never be recaptured, the Ninth Ward succumbing to a sort of class and race triumphalism from which there may be no recovering. That there are those among us who herald the destruction of New Orleans should be cause for reflection and concern for us all.

The church up the street is made out of pink stucco and has bougainvillea growing up one wall. The water is up to the little bell tower now, and the big cross in the breezeway with the hand-carved wooden Jesus on it is deep underwater. The priest tried to get everybody to leave the neighborhood, but a lot of people didn't have cars, or at least cars they could trust, and because it was still two days till payday, most people didn't have any money, either. So the priest said he was staying, too. An hour later the wind came off the Gulf and began to peel the face off South Louisiana.

This morning, I saw the priest float past the top of a live oak tree. He was on his stomach, his clothes puffed with air, his arms stretched out by his sides, like he was looking for something down in the tree.

Of course the artist tries not to preach overmuch, is not directly didactic as the essayist or book reviewer can be, but paints his scenes using a grander and more subtle palette. Still, Burke refuses to candy-coat things for us, providing scenes of horror even in their luminescent beauty. His witness evokes images of a postdiluvian wasteland that many would just as soon forget. Burke's comments here are both reminder and indictment, even as those who seek not to be held to account pretend it never happened.

The lyric moments of what is lost, the almost dream-like memories of former times, resound with the elegiac, and provide testimony of what didn't have to happen.

That's the way it was back then. You woke in the morning to the smell of gardenias, the electric smell of street carts, chicory coffee, and stone that has turned green with lichen. The light was always filtered through trees, so it was never harsh, and flowers bloomed year-round. New Orleans was a poem, man, a song in your heart that never died.



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