

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

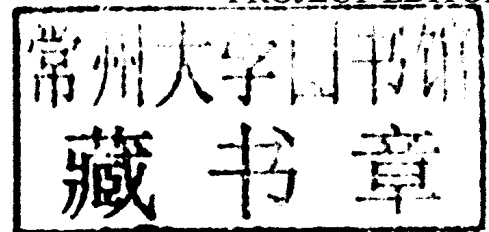
322

Volume 322

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82. Print.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

James Lee Burke 1936-	1
<i>American novelist and short story writer</i>	
Carolyn Chute 1947-	137
<i>American novelist, short story writer, and journalist</i>	
Michael Ondaatje 1943-	175
<i>Sri Lankan-born Canadian novelist, poet, director, playwright, memoirist, critic, and editor; entry devoted to the novel Anil's Ghost</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 349

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 469

CLC Cumulative Nationality Index 489

CLC-322 Title Index 505

James Lee Burke

1936-

American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents criticism on Burke's life and works.

INTRODUCTION

Burke is an American novelist and short story writer who is best known for his Dave "Streak" Robicheaux series of crime novels. Critics praise the character of Robicheaux for his strong moral and religious vision and commitment to political and social justice. Moreover, they laud Burke's vivid evocation of place, particularly Robicheaux's native New Iberia, Louisiana, and the beautiful landscape of rural Montana. In addition to the Robicheaux novels, Burke's Hack Holland and Billy Bob Holland series have also garnered critical praise for their compelling characters, fast-paced action, clever and exciting plots, and lush descriptions of small-town Texas.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Burke was born on December 5, 1936, in Houston, Texas. At an early age, he started writing stories and was interested in becoming a writer. In 1955 he enrolled at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, but then moved on to the University of Missouri, where he earned his B.A. in 1959. He went on to graduate work, receiving his M.A. in education a year later. After graduation, he worked a variety of jobs, including social worker, surveyor and pipe fitter for an oil company, newspaper reporter, and an English teacher at several colleges. Burke utilizes many of the experiences he had during that time for his later novels. By 1961 he had completed his first novel, *Half of Paradise*, but it didn't get published until 1965. In 1987, *The Neon Rain*, the first novel featuring his popular hard-boiled detective Dave Robicheaux, was published. The next, *Heaven's Prisoners* (1988), was published the following year. Burke's creation of the conflicted alcoholic New Orleans cop cemented the author's position as one of America's top crime novelists. A prolific writer, Burke has received several awards for his work, including an Edgar Allan Poe

Award for Best Novel for *Black Cherry Blues* (1989) and *Cimarron Rose* (1997); a 2006 Pushcart Prize for his story "Why Bugsy Siegel was a Friend of Mine"; and a Grand Master Edgar Award in 2009. Burke lives in Montana and New Iberia, Louisiana, which also serve as the settings of the Robicheaux series.

MAJOR WORKS

Burke is best known for his crime novels featuring the hard-boiled ex-New Orleans police officer, Dave Robicheaux. As described by critic Rob Carney, the character of Robicheaux "seems as much descended from chivalric prototypes as a son of the hardened urban fathers in [the crime] genre, seems governed more by moral impulse and personal circumstance than by profit. He's a family man; a befriender and defender of the put-upon; almost a watercolor artist in his attention to and cataloging of the Acadian landscape in all its certain slants of light" Robicheaux was introduced in the 1987 novel *Neon Rain*, which follows his quest to solve the murder of a young African American woman whose corpse he found floating in the bayou while fishing. In the process, he attracts the enmity of the New Orleans mafia, who put a hit out on him. Through the book, Robicheaux, a Vietnam veteran and churchgoing Catholic, struggles to maintain his sobriety and put his life in order. The second Robicheaux novel, *Heaven's Prisoners*, involves a rescue and subsequent adoption of a young Salvadoran girl, Alafair, from a plane crash near his home in New Iberia, Louisiana. Now retired from the New Orleans police department, Robicheaux is drawn back into detective work when he investigates the plane crash and finds government involvement. His probing turns tragic, however, when his wife, Annie, is killed by the criminals. In *Black Cherry Blues*, Robicheaux joins the New Iberia police force to avenge Annie's death. He also fights against a greedy, corrupt oil company that has aligned with the mob and is wantonly polluting the pristine natural environment of Montana. The success of *Black Cherry Blues* enabled Burke to become a full-time writer.

In subsequent Robicheaux novels—*A Morning for Flamingoes* (1989), *A Stained White Radiance* (1992), *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead* (1993), and

Dixie City Jam (1994)—the Cajun detective gets shot, remarries, works undercover for the DEA, has visions of a long-dead Confederate general, rescues Alafair from kidnappers, and battles a cruel neo-Nazi criminal. In *Burning Angel* (1995), the ghost of a murdered local hood contacts both Robicheaux and his wife, Bootsie, providing information and warnings to the detective as he investigates the crime. The past once again intrudes on the present in *Purple Cane Road* (2000). Robicheaux uncovers new information on his mother's death, and the subsequent investigation reveals some unpleasant truths about her life and murder. In *The Tin Roof Blowdown* (2007), Robicheaux probes the murder of two looters in post-Katrina New Orleans and explores the racial tension, government corruption, and ineffective political, economic, and social policies that hindered recovery and rebuilding operations in New Orleans during the months following the storm. Robicheaux flees the frustrating rebuilding of the city in *Swan Peak* (2008), traveling to Montana to fish and relax. Once again, his past intrudes on the present when a pair of murders is tied to some New Orleans mobsters. In *The Glass Rainbow* (2010), Robicheaux is suspicious of his daughter's new boyfriend and suspects that he is connected to the murder of several young women.

Burke has also written a number of other novels and two collections of short stories. *Lay Down My Sword and Shield* (1971) and *Rain Gods* (2009) feature the character of Hack Holland, a Korean war veteran and crusading lawyer and politician. In *Rain Gods* Holland, now a sheriff in a small Texas town, investigates the murder of several Thai women buried in a shallow grave. *Feast Day of Fools* (2011) explores Holland's strong attraction to a dangerous woman, Anton Ling, who harbors illegal immigrants and might be involved in a brutal murder. The novel also features the return of the serial murderer Preacher Jack Collins. Burke has also written a series of novels featuring Billy Bob Holland, a former cop and Texas Ranger and Hack Holland's cousin. In *Cimarron Rose*, Billy Bob Holland, now a lawyer, must defend his son against a murder charge. In *the Moon of Red Ponies* (2004) involves Billy Bob's encounters with a former enemy, the criminal Wyatt Dixon, and a rash of burglaries and crimes surrounding Dixon's reappearance.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The popularity of the Robicheaux series has established Burke's reputation as one of America's most popular crime novelists. Reviewers praise his evocation of place in the Robicheaux novels, particularly his vivid

descriptions of the lush, exotic landscape of his native New Iberia and the fast-paced urban setting of New Orleans. The character of Dave Robicheaux has garnered much critical attention, as critics consider his place in the crime fiction genre and debate whether he fits the hard-boiled detective archetype. Viewing the crime novels as morality tales, critics examine the moral and religious vision of Burke's novels, often drawing parallels between Burke's life and the protagonists of his stories. Many underscore the political and social themes in Burke's work, finding echoes of the author's political perspective on topics like the corruption of corporations and the government, the exploitation of the economically and politically powerless, racial and ethnic discrimination, and the political, social, and economic policies of post-Katrina New Orleans. Investigating Burke's appeal, Samuel Coale observes that "his characters inhabit a Darwinian combat zone of existence at the edge or margin of conventional society. His Vietnam vets, psychopathic killers, redneck racists, and corrupt cops lead a crude and violent life, driven by their own testosterone tactics in a raunchy moral wasteland of compulsive predators. Burke's knack for raunchy dialogue skewers his characters in their own disturbing realm between sadism and sentiment, terror and tenderness. And his elaborate plots, served up in an intricate labyrinth of betrayals, double-crossings and double-dealings, frame-ups, and set-ups, embody this often nihilistic domain, even when the mystery formula is constantly at work, assuring us (barely) that beneath the murky mayhem lies some kind of rational order and moral victory, albeit shifting and often elusive."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Half of Paradise* (novel) 1965
- To the Bright and Shining Sun* (novel) 1970
- Lay Down My Sword and Shield* (novel) 1971
- Two for Texas* (novel) 1982; also published as *Sabine* Spring 1989
- The Convict and Other Stories* (short stories) 1985
- The Lost Get-Back Boogie* (novel) 1986
- The Neon Rain* (novel) 1987
- Heaven's Prisoners* (novel) 1988
- Black Cherry Blues* (novel) 1989
- A Morning for Flamingos* (novel) 1989
- A Stained White Radiance* (novel) 1992
- In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead* (novel) 1993
- Dixie City Jam* (novel) 1994
- Burning Angel* (novel) 1995

Cadillac Jukebox (novel) 1996
Cimarron Rose (novel) 1997
Sunset Limited (novel) 1998
Heartwood (novel) 1999
Purple Cane Road (novel) 2000
Jolie Blon's Bounce (novel) 2002
White Doves at Morning (novel) 2002
Last Car to Elysian Fields (novel) 2003
In the Moon of Red Ponies (novel) 2004
Crusader's Cross (novel) 2005
Pegasus Descending (novel) 2006
Jesus out to Sea: Stories (short stories) 2007
The Tin Roof Blowdown (novel) 2007
Swan Peak (novel) 2008
Rain Gods (novel) 2009
The Glass Rainbow (novel) 2010
Feast Day of Fools (novel) 2011

CRITICISM

James Lee Burke and Steven Womack (interview date spring 1996)

SOURCE: Burke, James Lee, and Steven Womack. "A Talk with James Lee Burke." *Armchair Detective* 29, no. 2 (spring 1996): 138-43.

[In the following interview, Burke discusses his development as a writer, the origins of character Dave Robicheaux, and key themes in his novels.]

By almost anyone's definition, James Lee Burke's second rise to literary prominence has been a long, tough climb. First published to great acclaim in 1965 at the ripe age of twenty-nine, he descended into a painful obscurity some five or six years later. During this time, he continued writing while working at a number of different professions—"jobs" might be a better word—while struggling to support himself and his family.

Then he met a fellow named Dave Robicheaux, and what followed was an almost Lazarus-like climb back to the top. With *Dixie City Jam*, the seventh Dave Robicheaux novel, Burke finally achieved what many writers only dream of: a place on *The New York Times* Best-Seller list. Last year saw the publication of the eighth Robicheaux novel, *Burning Angel*, and in 1996 the ninth, *Cadillac Jukebox*, will be published. Now he's at work on a new series, which he was kind enough to talk about in the following interview.

[Womack]: Let's go back to the beginning. You published your first novel *Half of Paradise* to great acclaim when you were very young. Two more books followed. Then you went through a period in your evolution as a writer that was difficult for you. Can you tell us about that?

[Burke]: Yeah, that's right. I'd published three novels by the time I was thirty-four and then went, I believe, thirteen years before I published in hardback again.

During those thirteen years, did you publish in soft-cover?

One paperback, and that was *Two for Texas*.

You worked at a number of other jobs. You were a newspaper reporter, a social worker in South Central L.A. How did those experiences contribute to your development as a writer?

Well, I think the work a person does outside of his art is a relative matter. The story is there in any human situation. It's a matter of recognition. A person can indicate that he has all kinds of exotic and romantic experience, but sometimes the more grandiose the experience, the less contributive it is to a person's art. It was Dr. Johnson, I believe, who said that the strength of a nation is in its yeomen. I just know that I met some of the bravest, most hard-working and loyal people in my life in some of those early jobs.

And you continued writing throughout this time. After *Half of Paradise* came *To the Bright and Shining Sun and Lay Down My Sword and Shield*, then *Two for Texas*, *The Convict*, and *The Lost Get-Back Boogie*. How were those books received and how do you feel about them now in light of *Hyperion's* republication of them?

It's wonderful to see the books resurrected, to see them have another life. My earlier work did well enough. The hard period was between *Lay Down My Sword and Shield* and *The Lost Get-Back Boogie* and *The Convict*. It was being out of hardback for so many years that was difficult. I don't know how many novels I wrote during this thirteen-year period. I literally collected hundreds of rejection slips. The *Lost Get-Back Boogie* was under continuous submission for nine years. It received rejections in New York.

Did you ever feel like quitting?

No, never. I couldn't imagine not writing.

Ever get discouraged?

(laughing) Well, yeah, I got discouraged. It gets discouraging when people reject your work for thirteen years.

*With **The Neon Rain** you created the character and began the series of books that's gained you your widest readership and greatest success as a writer. Where did Dave Robicheaux come from?*

During this period when I couldn't sell in hardback in New York, I wrote two unpublished novels. One dealt with the search for the Holy Grail in modern times and the other dealt with a young Cajun prizefighter. Those books contained many of the characters and elements that eventually became the series.

*With the third Dave Robicheaux novel, **Black Cherry Blues**, you won an Edgar. What effect did that book have on your career?*

It was my breakthrough novel. It enabled me to become a full-time writer.

Were you surprised to discover that you were a mystery writer? Is that what you set out to do with those books?

Well, I never thought of my books as essentially changing directions. The themes have always remained the same; I've always written about the same people, the same situations. The only fundamental change is the use of a first-person narrator who was a sometimes police officer. But otherwise, there's very little difference from the earlier work. The series and the earlier work are one story.

*As the Robicheaux novels have evolved and developed, it seems that with each one, elements of spirituality and mysticism become stronger. The ghost of Confederate General John Bell Hood was a character in **In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead**. In **Dixie City Jam**, you have the ghosts of the doomed sailors on a sunken U-boat. In **Burning Angel**, the ghosts of long-dead slaves play an influence. This sense of characters, especially Dave, being almost haunted is powerful in your work.*

There are no ghosts of slaves in **Burning Angel**.

*Not actual ghosts, but the presence of the dead slaves in **Burning Angel** is pervasive, isn't it?*

Well, there's an area outside of New Iberia that seems to have a kind of aura above the ground that Dave associates with the legacy of slavery. The mystical side of the book, to use the word a little bit loosely, has its origins in St. Paul's admonition about the possibility of angels living in our midst. And St. Paul tells the listener there may indeed be angels in our midst, so it becomes quite important as to how we treat each other. That's a paraphrase, but I believe that's what in effect he says. And of course Sonny Boy Marsallus seems to possess metaphysical properties.

*In the last few books, with **Dixie City Jam** and **Burning Angel** especially, the underlying element of violence and loss of control that seems to be just beneath the surface in Dave Robicheaux comes to the fore. Speaking as a reader, Dave seems stressed almost to the breaking point at times. We wonder how much more he can take.*

Well, the violence that we see in Dave's life is inherent to the situation of a police officer. But in all the novels, Dave indicates one conclusion about violence: that it's reprehensible, that he's repelled by it. And even though on occasion he has acted violently, he always indicates to the reader that violence is a failure, that it represents the failure of everything that is decent and good in human beings. He says it degrades all the participants, the perpetrator as well as the victim. And he also tells us that violence is the first resort of the ignorant and the depraved and the frightened and the hateful. It's never held up as a viable alternative. He acts violently only in the defense of another.

What's next for Dave?

It's called **Cadillac Jukebox**. It'll be out in August 1996, and it's based on the Greek legend of Orpheus. Orpheus descended into the underworld to free his wife, Eurydice, who was the prisoner of Hades and Persephone. And they tried to get free of Hades but she looked back and Hades got both of them.

Does Dave descend into hell in the next book?

(laughing) Well, if that's what you want to call Louisiana politics.

That's a great segue into my next question. Another thread, or theme, in your work is the contrast between the idyllic yet threatened Louisiana bayou country and the decay and corruption of New Orleans, Louisiana politics, and crime. This is perhaps a personal question and not a question about your work, but do you see New Orleans as unsalvageable, as too far gone?

Well, again, the books are set in Louisiana, but the themes aren't meant to be regional. Instead, New Orleans and the environment, the area around which much of the story takes place, are meant to be emblematic of the country itself and the problems that beset people throughout the nation. In other words, nothing happens in an isolated fashion in the United States, and finally in the world these days. Some guy sneezes in the Sahara desert and the bottom drops out of the oil market.

As Dave indicates, it would be a mistake to associate the problems of New Orleans and Louisiana simply with the problems that are endemic with Louisiana

politics. A causal relationship between all the things you describe in New Orleans and our federal government and simply the direction of our society, are to my mind quite visible—the relationship in the books between national tendencies in our country and the consequences that Dave sees at work in Louisiana.

For example, we meet in *A Stained White Radiance* the racist demagogue Bobby Earle. Often, interviewers ask if he's based on a biographical character there, a living person, who's rather notorious in Louisiana. But the story actually came out of the George Bush campaign. That's where the book had its genesis; it was the Willie Horton ads in the campaign. I'm fifty-nine, I grew up in the South, but that was the most blatant, overtly racist campaign that I ever saw conducted. I mean, it was far more virulent than anything George Wallace ever did, and the guy got away with it. He was the President of the United States. This wasn't the Deep South; this was a national election. And that's the point: it is easy, always, to associate the problems in our society with those who are most unlike us, so we create a caricature. We paste the face of a Southern demagogue on it and say "See this, the racial problem originates down there where people speak with a mouthful of collard greens." But the problems of race in this country are pervasive ones. They are not regional.

The South is usually portrayed only in caricature. If you think about it, X. J. Kennedy pointed out years ago that most screenplays written for either TV or the theatrical screen are created by people who live in New York and Los Angeles. In those scripts, the most violent, dangerous misanthropic people in the world live in small town America, usually in the South. So whenever we see something on TV about the South, we meet all these awful human beings. But the truth is, we have to ask ourselves if our car were to break down late at night, would we rather it break down north of Central Park in New York City or in a small town in Tennessee. (laughing) What is the answer? Would a person rather see his car break down on the Harbor Freeway in South Central Los Angeles or, perhaps, in a small town north of Atlanta?

And, of course, I mean, that's just the nature of mythology. Unfortunately, it's easier simply to see Judas Iscariot as someone who has a horrid physiognomy, someone who looks like Iago, who's unlike ourselves. What we cannot recognize is that evil insinuates its way into our lives always in an innocuous fashion. As Dr. Martin Luther King pointed out, one of the most debilitating evils that can ever afflict is the sin of racism. It not only destroys those whom we injure, it

destroys us. Jefferson talks about this in his letters to John Adams. He wrote that ultimately the victim of the institution of slavery would be not the black man but the white. The white man would become effete and decadent, spiritually corrupt, that he would become dependent on the labor and the product of the labor of a man whom he has exploited. It's a great letter that he wrote before his death to Adams.

New Orleans has terrible problems, but it was not always that kind of city. Here's a statistical fact: the New Orleans city budget today is half what it was in 1981. That's due to Reagan's cutting back on funding to the cities. A police officer in New Orleans enters the job at thirteen thousand a year. Ask oneself: what kind of people are you going to hire to dodge bullets for thirteen thousand a year?

(laughing) You're going to get the guys who are shooting the bullets. . . .

Yeah, you could always live cheap in New Orleans, but nobody can live that cheap.

(laughing) Nobody. . . .

You're known for being an incredibly hardworking writer. As you once said to me in another conversation you "chop cotton" seven days a week, virtually throughout the year except when you're touring. Does burnout ever become a problem? Do you and Dave ever get tired of one another?

Well, I don't plan ahead in my books. I don't outline. I write a day at a time. The story is always there and I've never felt that I didn't have more to write. That's just never happened. I finish a book and I can go about two weeks without writing and then I start something new. I don't think I could ever let more than two weeks pass. I've started a new series now. I'm working on a book called *Cimarron Rose* that's narrated by a Texas lawyer and an ex-Texas ranger named Billy Bob Holland.

And this will be the first in a projected series?

It's the beginning of a new series. It will be a parallel series to the Louisiana series.

Got a projected pub date?

Oh, I haven't finished it. I just started it in October.

*Last question. Your book **Heaven's Prisoners** has been made into a movie starring Alec Baldwin. What do you think of the film and what's going to happen with it?*

Well, it's funny. Since we last talked, I got a call out of nowhere from the director. Savoy, the distributor, is out of the film business and the film is up for sale. He's supposed to send me a cassette of *Heaven's Prisoners* so I guess I'll get to see it. But I don't know if it will be sold or not to another distributor.

So the film is complete. It's just looking for a distributor.

Yeah, they spent thirty million dollars on it. It's finished. I just don't know if it will ever see the light of day. I've been assured by one producer that it will because so much has been spent on it. We'll just have to wait and see.

Rob Carney (essay date summer 1996)

SOURCE: Carney, Rob. "Clete Purcel to the Rampaging Rescue: Looking for the Hard-Boiled Tradition in James Lee Burke's *Dixie City Jam*." *Southern Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (summer 1996): 121-28.

[In the following essay, Carney explores *Dixie City Jam* as a hard-boiled detective novel, maintaining that while the moralistic protagonist Dave Robicheaux has evolved past that stereotype, the character of Clete Purcel provides a much-needed hard-boiled presence in the story.]

In Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* there is an unforgettable and characteristically hard-boiled scene: private eye Jake Gittes, played by Jack Nicholson, repeatedly slaps the film's femme fatale (Faye Dunaway) across the face. It is a climactic, painfully tense moment during which Gittes—by slapping the contradictory truth out of her—discovers that she is not lying, that she is, in fact, both mother *and* sister, that she had been the victim of incest. But it was the slapping that struck me, how Gittes finally resorted to hitting as both a way to vent frustration and as an investigative method. Similarly, Nicholson as both the leading man in and director of the much less successful sequel, *The Two Jakes*, creates a scene which leaves a lasting impression: Madeleine Stowe's character, Lillian Bodine, suddenly comes on to Gittes in his office and, after tearing away from a kiss, he shrugs, rolls his eyes, sighs with accommodating exasperation, then mechanically tells her to lift her ass as he loosens his belt. It is a strange and jaded way to handle her grief, and I am not sure that I buy this characterization of Jake even if he is a "divided" man.

I mention these two scenes as a way of contextualizing the Cajun sometimes-ex-cop, Dave Robicheaux, James Lee Burke's memorable contribution to the

hard-boiled, *noir*-ish canon. Robicheaux, especially lately, would act and react differently. He seems as much descended from chivalric prototypes as a son of the hardened, urban fathers in this genre, seems governed more by moral impulse and personal circumstance than by profit. He's a family man; a be-friender and defender of the put-upon; almost a watercolor artist in his attention to and cataloging of the Acadian landscape in all its certain slants of light; and he is a brooder whose reflections, more often than not, arrive at an empathy less characteristic of Jake Gittes than of Jake Barnes and which usually goes beyond that. Or as Will Dana puts it in his essay in *Murder Ink*, "Catholic guilt, tempered by 12-step-program hope, suffuses the [Dave Robicheaux] books" (26). This, particularly the link to 12-step programs, is especially true in *Dixie City Jam*.

The plot of Burke's seventh Robicheaux novel, *Dixie City Jam*, revolves around a sunken U-boat elusively slouching across the floors of the Gulf of Mexico and around several characters' interests in finding and hauling it up. But the most important resurrection of the novel is Clete Purcel, now back after a hiatus in *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead*. His presence is an especially important one since Robicheaux's tendency to lean away from "hard-boiledness" toward a softer, social worker impulse has finally, in *Dixie City Jam*, achieved critical mass. In contrast to Robicheaux's reflections on apocalyptic poetry, Clete storms through the private lives of New Orleans's Mafia kingpins like an apocalypse all their own. And out of control as it is, his behavior seems warranted—at least in terms of proportion—in a novel whose criminal element is so violent. Violence, too, seems used to strengthen ties to the "hard-boiled" genre. Burke has been gradually upping the ante this way in his three novels since *A Morning for Flamingos*. All of these strains are brought together, ultimately, "on the salt" off the South Louisiana coast.

The story begins on the salt, as well, and in retrospect first. Robicheaux, taking the role of historian, folklorist, storyteller, relates; "Not many people believe this, but in the early months of 1942 Nazi submarines used to lie in wait at the mouth of the Mississippi for the tankers that sailed without naval escort from the oil refineries at Baton Rouge into the Gulf of Mexico. It was a shooting gallery. Because of wartime censorship," he continues,

the newspapers and radio carried no accounts of the American ships sunk off the Louisiana coast, but just after sunset people could see the oil fires burning on the southern horizon, like a quickening orange smudge low in the winter sky. As a little boy in New Iberia, I

heard shrimpers talk about the burned, oil-coated bodies of four merchant sailors who had been found floating like lumps of coal in an island of kelp, their sightless eyes and poached faces strung with jellyfish.

(3)

These opening paragraphs are so similar to Burke's short-story "Lower Me Down with a Golden Chain" that turning to it briefly seems appropriate. For instance, the narrator of Burke's earlier tale says, "In 1942 I was frightened by the stories that I heard adults tell about Nazi submarines that waited in the mouth of the Mississippi for the oil tankers that sailed unescorted from the refineries in Baton Rouge. People said you could see the fires at night burning low on the southern horizon" (*Convict* 127). Further, the speaker witnesses the effect of these fires on the survivors from two torpedoed freighters, describes how "[t]hey vomited sea-water and oil, cried out for morphine, stared wild-eyed out of poached faces that had no eyebrows or hair. . . . I couldn't accept that the war, the Nazis, had reached into my world" (128). In *Dixie City Jam*, Burke returns to and fully explores this local legend, and this time his protagonist, Robicheaux, has no choice but to accept that the Nazis have indeed done just that.

Dave has twice located a sunken German submarine while scuba diving, a submarine which, he later learns, is rumored to have a giant swastika aboard made from the gold "pried out of the mouths of Polish Jews . . . a gift from Heinrich Himmler himself (298). The novel's sociopathic, sadistic antagonist, Will Buchalter, wants to salvage the swastika and use it as a totem for his Aryan group, The Sword. Throughout *Dixie City Jam* he therefore haunts Robicheaux and his wife, Bootsie. When he is not moving silently in and out of their house playing Robicheaux's rare jazz records, or watching them sleep, or scrawling "DAVE, I'LL LOVE YOU IN A WAY THAT NO WOMAN CAN, W. B." (163) across their bathroom wall, Buchalter lurks like a ghoul in Dave's mind.

So does Buchalter's half-sister, Marie Guilbeaux. She is able, in the guise of a nun, to creep into and poison Dave's home the same way she creeps past police into the hospital room of one of Buchalter's apprehended henchmen in order to dispatch him (she drives a syringe-full of roach paste into his throat) before he can talk. Robicheaux is able to resist her direct, perverse attempts to seduce him. And although her carefully orchestrated efforts to tempt him into falling off the wagon are likewise unsuccessful, (Sister) Marie Guilbeaux is able, before being unmasked, to turn Bootsie toward alcoholism while maintaining an appearance of personal concern. Guilbeaux's small vic-

tory is important because it introduces a greater tension and distraction into Dave's personal life.

Robicheaux's response to Bootsie's constant drinking is, as one might expect of a reformed alcoholic, a bit too heavily twelve-step, less like a concerned husband than a self-appointed AA sponsor. By itself, this is not a major issue. After all, Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op helped Gabrielle kick her opium habit in *The Dain Curse*. Similarly, in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*,¹ Philip Marlowe indirectly helps Carmen Sternwood with her own addiction; instead of turning Carmen over to the police for murdering Sean Regan and for making an attempt on his own life, Marlowe asks her sister, Vivian, "Will you take her away? Somewhere far off from here where they can handle her type, where they will keep guns and knives and fancy drinks away from her? Hell, she might even get herself cured, you know. It's been done" (247). What makes Burke's detective different from the genre's hard-boiled archetypes, however, is that much more than Marlowe and even the Op, Robicheaux loses himself in a social worker role. Over the course of the previous three novels, his exterior walls were breached. By the time one reaches the epilogue of *Dixie City Jam*, the idea that Dave Robicheaux is a traditional hard-guy has been almost entirely erased.

It seems worthwhile here to review a few of the characters Dave takes in, looks after, counsels, protectively befriends, and there are several. It is as if he has found that everyone in the world hurts somehow, or has been hurt, and has decided that he will have to be their rescuing knight. Starting with *A Morning for Flamingos* and working forward chronologically, Robicheaux forms a protective fondness for Kim Dollinger, a beautiful New Orleans stripper and girlfriend to gangster, Tony Cardo—what cements this relationship is Kim's story about a childhood experience in Miami from which the novel takes its tide. She tells Dave that she had gone to work with her father whose job it was to take care of the flamingos at the Hialeah racetrack and had strayed away to feed them shrimp from a bucket nearby. When her father yanked her back by the hair, a horse trainer pulled her away from him. The horse trainer took her to see the flamingos at Crandon Park, bought her ice cream, then undid her blouse in the car (135-36). Robicheaux's fondness extends to Tony Cardo, too, despite the fact that he is working undercover in order to bust him. What does it for Dave is seeing Tony C. around the house, especially with his son—a child stricken by what is likely spina bifida.

Finally, *A Morning for Flamingos* leads Dave back to his first love, Bootsie. Dave and Bootsie had lost their