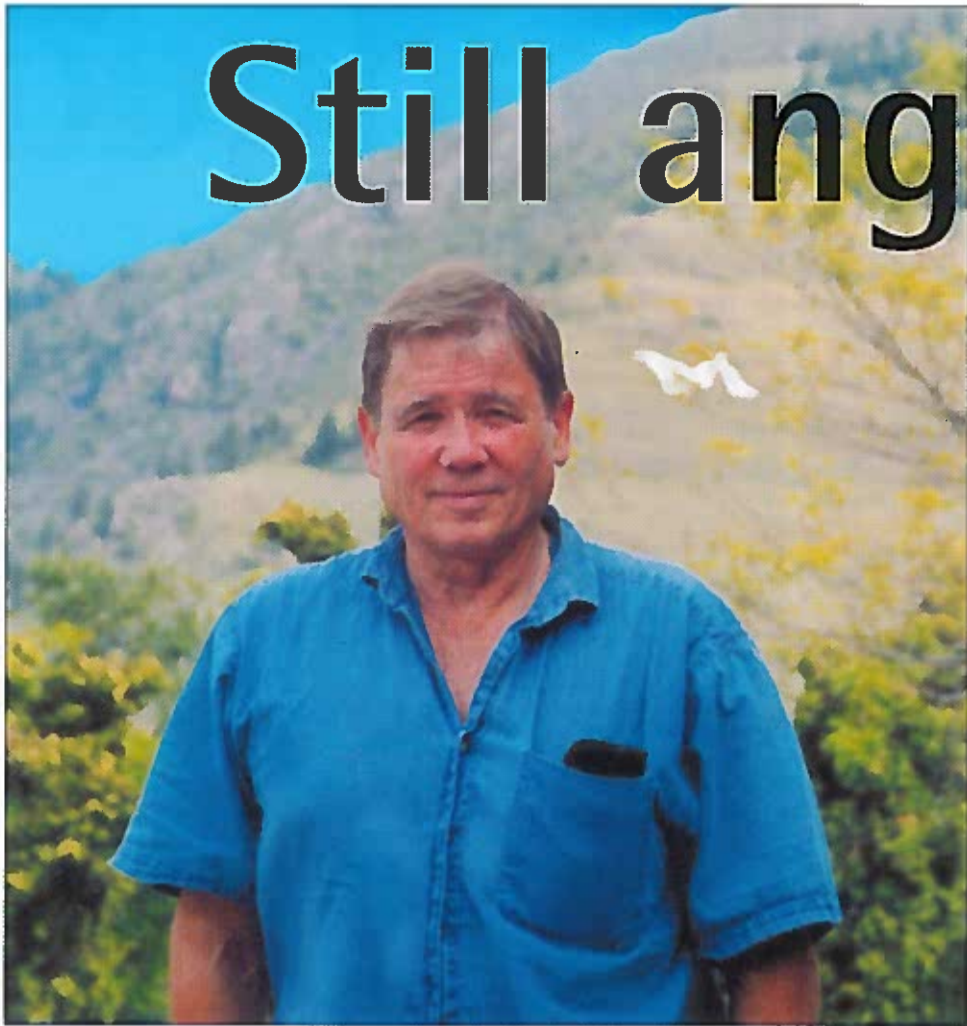


Still angry after all these years



James Lee Burke: fiction without morality is inconsequential

In Montana, Liz Thomson meets the unassuming James Lee Burke, novelist and tireless radical

Revenge is always sweet. Imagine how James Lee Burke must have felt back in '86 when, after 13 years in the literary wilderness, his novel *The Lost Get-Back Boogie* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. "It had been rejected 111 times in New York – that's accepted as a record... It was finally published by Louisiana State University Press, who also published *The Convict*, which was a collection of short stories."

Burke washes down the last of his Caesar with a swig of iced tea and laughs heartily, as well he might. "Philip Spitzer must have been the most self-destructive agent in New York, because he handled guys like me," he continues, chuckling still. "When we met, 25 years ago this December, he was driving a cab in Hell's Kitchen and running a one-man agency at night. Now he's got a house in East Hampton, on Long Island Sound – Alec Baldwin is a neighbour. I always tell him: in your neighbourhood, even the yard men are Republicans!" More laughter, as Burke remembers a Spitzer anecdote. "Philip's an ex-boxer and he used to jog in Central Park at sunset to bait the muggers out of the bushes. It was his therapy! What a great guy!"

A compact man with a face crinkled by age, sun and laughter, James Lee Burke is not as you might imagine him – or perhaps it's that he's simply not grand enough to be an internationally best-selling writer with a score of novels to his credit. Indeed, he's not grand at all. Yet without knowing anything about him, the autobiographical elements of his work are somehow obvious. Like his celebrated New Orleans detective, Dave Robicheaux, he's a devout Catholic, a reformed drinker who found his way through what's always referred to as "Twelve-Step". Like Billy Bob Holland, ex-Texas Ranger turned lawyer, the protagonist of his latest novel, *Bitterroot*, he plays guitar, a Martin, every finger-picker's dream instrument. Like both, he burns with anger at the iniquities of life, at a so-called justice system that, in Texas, gives Carla Faye Tucker a lethal injection amid a storm of national and international protest and, in the same week, pardons a man who's spent 18 years in jail for stabbing a woman 38 times. "The same week! I don't think there's any question about the lassitude and permissiveness in our courts toward men who do injury to women," says Burke, discussing an issue that could have popped straight from the pages of any one of his books. "It goes on all the time." He is venomous about Nixon, Ford and Reagan, righteously indignant about the Supreme Court casting its vote in favour of Bush, who is "evil and a moron" and "might do something really dangerous". Then, with characteristic southern politeness, he apologises for the outburst.

"I hate to use somebody's article as a forum. But the novelist treats the tendencies that produce a story that's emblematic. Politically, in this country there's a very old struggle. As Dave Robicheaux and Billy Bob would say, there are two Americas living in the same continent. One is made up of people who would like to see a harmonious, pluralistic society in which the Jeffersonian dream becomes a reality... The Moral Majority – the McCarthyites, the vigilantes – they believe in a world run by white man and they find all kinds of biblical justification for it. It's not yet an equal playing field, but that Jeffersonian dream is finally coming to pass."

Like Robicheaux, Burke is a child of the Depression who grew up in circumstances which would now be considered deprived but which seemed happy enough to him. Born in Houston in 1936, he grew up both in Texas and Louisiana, in New Iberia, where he still spends part of the year. "My daddy had a job and if your daddy had a job back then you were in tall cotton, as they say. He worked on the pipeline and my mum was a secretary for an oil company – everyone down there's involved with the petrochemical industry. We had a rented house on a wonderful little dead-end street at the end of which was a cane-break, a real thicket of bamboo. On the other side was an enormous pasture with horses and a huge grove of oaks trees. It was a great time to be a kid in many ways. The War years were years of shortages but they were years of enormous national unity, just as they were in Britain – there was no debate about right and wrong – and that's what I think we're very nostalgic for today. That and the lack of materialism. If you had a job then you were in good shape. People didn't have the angst they have today about wealth – not about access to wealth but wealth. That's the difference: we used to consider the American Dream opportunity, access. Today you can forget about access – it's 'I want the whole thing. Now!'"

Burke remembers vividly the bookmobile pulling down the end of his street. "It was a once a week treat. I fell in love with the *Hardy Boys* books and read every one I could find." A poor student at high school, he "got serious" at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, where he majored in English and journalism, and then went

on to the University of Missouri, where he took a masters in creative writing and met and married Pearl, who'd fled from Beijing in 1949.

To pay off his college bills, Burke – like his father before him – became a pipeliner, which was "a great life and the pay's good but it's not for a married person, because you go where the pipeline goes. My mind was free and I wrote every day – wrote much of my first novel, *Half of Paradise*." Then he and his wife and first child, Jim Junior, headed west to Los Angeles, where he ended up working on Skid Row as a social worker. "I'd done land surveying in Colorado and I went out to California to get in the Union, but I ran out of work. LA was a great education, oh boy. We lived in South Central Los Angeles and I learned about the other side of America – slum landlords, gangs. I hadn't been exposed at that level and I became far more sympathetic to the problems of people who live in slums. It's a completely different economy and it's all predatory. In a riot, there are two things that are never hit: the funeral home and the bail bondsman. They are always exempt. When LA blew up, it had been ripe for years."

After his first novel was published in '65, Burke and his family headed back east, to Kentucky, where he worked for the fire service and wrote a book about the coalfields, *To the Bright and Shining Sun*, and another, *Lay Down My Sword and Shield*, about the migrant farmworkers in Texas. "So when I was 34, I'd published three novels in New York and they did right well, nice reviews." Then came the 13 lean years during which time Burke never stopped writing and Pearl, a talented painter, never lost faith in him. *The Lost Get-Back Boogie* hadn't yet got to LSU when a friend suggested that he'd written every kind of novel except crime – so why not give it a go?

"So I used a first-person narrator, Dave Robicheaux, and I wrote *Neon Rain*... I'd written all these novels I couldn't publish and parts of them became the series. *Half of Paradise* had been about a 21-year-old prize fighter from New Iberia, who's Dave Robicheaux, and his love affair with Bootsie Mouton from Spanish Lake. Another one, *Before the Hills*, which was the story of the New Orleans Mob and the search for the Holy Grail in modern times, became part of it too. Then I'd written about John Bell Hood, the Confederate General, and that became *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead*. So all those books I'd thought were failures were part of something much larger."

Published in 1986, *Neon Rain* sold easily and was an immediate success. In a laudatory review, one critic noted that it was a novel about a police officer who goes to confession and attends Twelve-Step meetings, as Burke had begun doing three years before, and that "Dashiel Hammett would throw up!" Indeed, Robicheaux is cut from a different cloth than other detective heroes and Burke believes it's the flaws and qualities he now shares with Billy Bob that's allowed readers to so take him to their hearts.

"I think it's because Dave is a decent man who's Everyman," he explains. "Both he and Billy Bob have classical antecedents. They're reminiscent of the good knight we meet in Chaucer, who possessed the same virtues. I've always subscribed to the belief that for literary art to be any good ultimately it must return to the Elizabethan stage, to the golden age of Pericles, to the Aristotelian view of the tragic hero who precipitates his own denouement by his hubris... Both characters always indicate that violence is a defeat and if they participate in it it's usually in defence of another, or if there's no alternative, or if they're dealing with someone who's pretty iniquitous.

Both protagonists always indicate to the reader that violence demeans everyone. It's never glorified: it sickens, repels, disgusts." Fiction, if it is to survive says Burke, "must have a moral line or it becomes inconsequential. That's why John Steinbeck will always be read, and Hemingway and Faulkner. They were privy to some kind of light the rest of us often are not, even though their lives may not seem to indicate that."

Three years later, *Black Cherry Blues* won an Edgar (as did *Cimarron Rose*, making him the only author to win two such awards) and Burke was able to give up what had begun to seem like his career, as a university teacher. "In those days it was more fun – now everyone thinks about tax shelters and tenure," he reflects. "That's no fun. Burt Reynolds said something I'll never forget: why grow up if you can make movies?" Or write novels.

Burke pays the cheque and we head out to his pick-up, parked in Missoula's 95-degree heat, and head out of town toward his home in Grant Creek. "We live up the white trash end," he laughs as he waves a dismissive hand at a California-style gated estate that despoils the countryside. Like a tour guide, he begins a short commentary: "...a professor lives there, here two gay guys who go to our church, there a mad woman... Hey! See the white-tail deer?" he asks as he pulls into a shady spot near his porch, where he removes his cowboy boots and puts them in a line next to several other pairs.

We settle in the upstairs living room and Burke pours Talking Rain (Montana's poetically named bottled water) into two iced glasses and turns his attention to *Bitterroot*, his latest novel and his third about Billy Bob, for which he and Pearl have just been on a 5,000-mile promotional tour, driving themselves as Burke is a seriously reluctant flyer.

"The state's almost the protagonist," he agrees in response to a comment about how evocatively it's described. "For me, Montana is probably the most beautiful area of the United States – but it may possibly be the most beautiful place in the world. And it's at risk today. Some people say it's the last good place. The old way of life is passing away: family, ranch, the independent logger, the blue-collar way of life. The consequence is that many people here are frightened that they're losing they're way of life, so they're vulnerable. These fellows from the extractive industries proselytised blue-collar folk and taught them the source of their problems is the environmentalists. The truth is they're the people who will save the way of life that's dear to us. These industries are so rapacious and there are companies here who would turn this whole state into a sludge pit and their handiwork's demonstrable. The biggest logging company in the west is here and they've got a bad reputation, even among their peers. But, you see, they have their man in the White House." Their agenda, Burke believes, is to get rid of the Endangered Species Act, which currently cramps their style. As to the militia, "they're just the saw teeth on the edge of the blade and they exploit such situations." Like many, they're attracted to a state where "eccentricity is tolerated" and where "anti-government attitudes are historic ones".

"The struggle in the book is always good versus evil, between those who would turn the earth into a gravel pit and those who would keep the charge that it was given to them to be good stewards. In the Old Testament story, Man was friends with the animals before the flood. We forget that and remember what's convenient to us," Burke concludes. "Both Billy Bob and Dave Robicheaux subscribe to the historical view that Jesus was a radical egalitarian. Because he was – it's obvious. He got in trouble when he took on the moneyed interests at the temple. The die was cast and it all went sour at that juncture. He was a peasant taking on the hierarchy, both the theological and the economic interests. But he was a radical, no question about it." And with that, Burke and his wife head off to mass.

Bitterroot is published by Orion on 16 August, price £12.99 hardback. All James Lee Burke novels are available as Orion paperbacks.

