

An American Treasure

James Lee Burke pens another dark masterpiece

Suspended Sentences

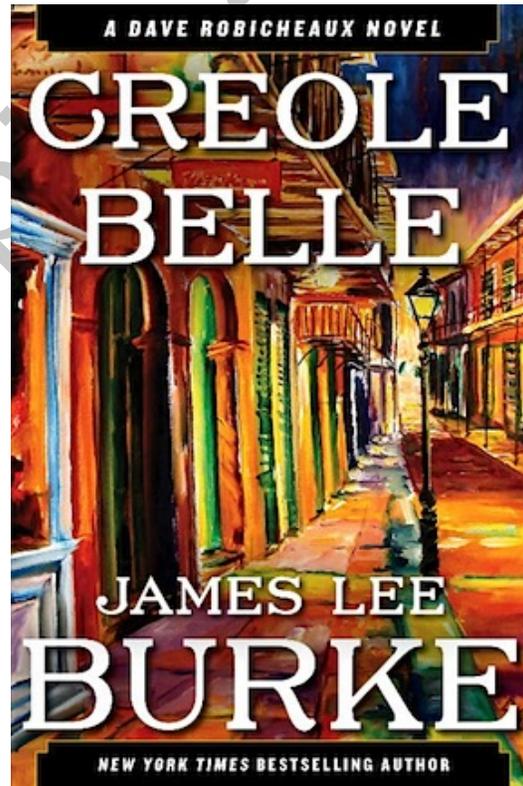
by Jim Napier

IT IS NOT STRETCHING A POINT to say that James Lee Burke is an American literary institution. For a long while it looked very much like his work would never see the light of day: his novel *The Lost Get-Back Bookie* was famously rejected 111 times over a nine-year period. But when it was finally published it was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. So much for the judgment of editors.

Burke has since gone on to win two Edgar Awards for Best Crime Novel of the year, and his short stories have been published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Antioch Review*, *Southern Review* and *Kenyon Review*. In addition to five standalones he has over two dozen novels in three series. *Creole Belle* is the 21st and latest entry in Burke's Dave Robicheaux series of tales.

Detective Dave Robicheaux of the New Iberia Police Department lies in a New Orleans hospital, hooked to a morphine drip that allows him to cope with the excruciating pain caused by taking a bullet in his back a month earlier. Drifting in and out of reveries, his mind playing tricks on him, he is unsure about whether his experiences are real or not. He thinks he's been visited by a Cajun singer named Tee Jolie, who leaves him an

iPod with some songs she recorded on it. The problem is, no one else can hear the songs, and Tee Jolie disappeared weeks ago. When he learns that her sister Blue has turned up dead, Dave decides he has to look into it.



ROBINCHEAUX SHARES HIS TALE with his ex-partner, Clete Purcel. Purcel is retired, in large measure due to an uncontrollable temper, and because when he senses an injustice he's just got to deal with it, consequences be damned. Purcell has a new worry: a

young woman named Gretchen has shown up in his life, and she turns out to be his illegitimate daughter, although she doesn't know it. They say the acorn doesn't drop far from the tree, and that's certainly true in this case: she's a contract killer, and her next target may just be someone Cleve loves.

In an intricate, macabre dance of death Robicheaux and Purcel work their respective ways through the mystery that each has chosen, until, inevitably, their paths intertwine and events come to a heart-stopping, violent climax. Along the way they will encounter a body in a block of ice floating in the bay, and confront villains ranging from a pair of two-bit street hoodlums to oil company executives, an evangelical minister, and a patriarch with a dark past who rules his parish with an iron grip. And before this grim morality tale is played out, the body count will rival that of a biblical apocalypse.

BURKE'S PRODIGIOUS NARRATIVE powers are the stuff of legend, and from the opening paragraph it is

evident that he has lost none of his skills:

For the rest of the world, the season was still fall, marked by cool nights and the gold-green remnants of summer. For me, down in South Louisiana, in the Garden District of New Orleans, the wetlands that lay far beyond my hospital window had turned to winter, one characterized by stricken woods that were drained of water and strung with a web of gray leaves and dead air vines that had wrapped themselves as tightly as cord around the trees.

Whether Burke is discussing the impact of offshore oil spills, the quiet menace of the bayous, the persistence of evil, or aging and the imminence of death, there is more meat in almost any single paragraph of *Creole Belle* than in an entire book by most writers, and his writing puts to rest the tired cliché that a novel must be either genre fiction or literary fiction. *Creole Belle* is a thick, rich gumbo of a tale, immensely satisfying on many levels, but not for the faint of heart.

A slightly shorter version of this review was first published on *Reviewing the Evidence*, December, 2012.

Jim Napier is a crime-fiction reviewer based in Canada. His book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian papers as well as on such websites as *Spinetingler Magazine*, *The Rap Sheet*, *January magazine*, *Reviewing the Evidence*, *Crime Time*, *Shots Magazine* and *Type M for Murder*, as well as on his own award-winning crime-fiction site, <http://deadlydiversions.com/>