We drove across the river into Algiers and parked on a narrow street lined with ancient buildings that looked like impacted teeth. The foundations had settled and the upper stories leaned into the sidewalks, the rooftops tipping downward against the light like the brim of a man's fedora. The hotels were walk-ups with stained sacks of garbage propped by the entrances, the taverns joyless, dark places where fortified wine was sold by the glass and where a person, if he truly wanted to slip loose his moorings, could create for himself the most violent denouement imaginable with a casual flick of the eyes at the bikers rubbing talcum into their pool cues.

But the real business on this street was to provide a sanctuary that precluded comparisons, in the same way that prisons provide a safe place for recidivists for whom setting time in abeyance is not a punishment but an end. The mulatto and black girls inside Maggie Glick's bar rejected no one. No behavior was too shameful, no level of physical or hygienic impairment unacceptable at the door. The Christmas tinsel and wreaths and paper bells wrapped with gold and silver foil stayed up year round. Inside Maggie Glick's, every day was New Year's morning, sunless, refrigerated, the red neon clock indicating either the A.M. or the P.M., as you wished, the future as meaningless and unthreatening as the past.

–James Lee Burke, *Purple Cane Road* 152-53

The passage above comes from *Purple Cane Road* (2000), the nineteenth of James Lee Burke's twenty-five novels to date and the eleventh of his fifteen detective novels focusing on Dave Robicheaux, the novel’s narrator-protagonist. I would like to think that no one could read these two paragraphs without sensing that he or she is in the presence of a major talent, someone who deserves to be read and studied in the company of America's best writers since World War II. This recognition has eluded Burke, however, for while he has won two Edgar Awards for the year's best crime novel and received glowing reviews for almost all of his newly-published works, he is still virtually ignored in studies of contemporary American literature, even Southern literature. There are no references to Burke in Matthew Guinn’s *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South* (2000), Suzanne W. Jones’s *Race Mixing: Southern Fiction since the Sixties* (2004), and Martyn Bone’s *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005). Indeed, one can count on a single hand the serious critical essays on Burke's novels.

The most obvious explanation for this critical neglect is that Burke's major achievements have been detective novels, still not quite eligible for serious critical discussion. Burke himself has apparently accepted the critical bias against "genre" fiction by insisting that the Robicheaux novels are not traditional "mysteries"; indeed, Burke has remarked repeatedly that he knew little about crime fiction when he started to write the Robicheaux novels and he makes no claim to know much about the form now. In Burke’s view, the novels are “meant to be as much about one man’s struggles with his demons as they are books about criminals” (Williams 61). Before turning to detective fiction, Burke published five so-called mainstream novels and one collection of stories, and he believes that “the books, all of them, deal with the search for redemption” (my emphasis) (Coale 162). For Burke, “the story, the locale, the themes, the people” of the later detective novels are “no different from the people, the themes, that we meet in the earlier work” (Coale 166).

Burke’s best critics have either accepted his own view that the novels are best read as “literary” efforts rather than as crime fiction (Williams 60) or argued that they succeed despite the inherent limitations of “the mystery formula” (Coale 148). In his excellent overview of the Robicheaux novels through *Sunset Limited* (1998), Frank W. Shelton sees the books as “a potential vehicle for serious comment on society” (233), specifically the Southern society that Burke traces in the novels set in New Iberia, Louisiana, but Shelton says virtually nothing about the author’s use of the detective format. Samuel Coale sees Burke’s admirable complexity as inevitably compromised by
his use of "the mystery formula," which has "distorted and stunted" the full expression of Burke's vision (129). And J. K. Van Dover, while accepting the fact that the Robicheaux books are detective novels, spends as much time attacking Burke's handling of the relevant conventions as he does pointing out Burke's accomplishments: "He is not a master of plotting; by detective story standards, he is barely competent" (223).

Elsewhere I have cited Sheldon Sacks's annoyance that critics have praised Ross Macdonald for transcending the limits of his chosen form, the detective novel, whereas it seems to Sacks that Macdonald's "worth and quality depend precisely on the de-gree to which he has realized magnificently potentialities al-laws latent in detective stories" (233). I think that much the same argument applies to Burke. I see no point in ignoring the fact that Burke's major achievements — as individual novels and as a series — are detective novels. Nor do I think Burke succeeds despite his use of a lowly form of "genre" fiction. I hope to show that Burke succeeds much as Ross Macdonald did: by wedging his story, locale, themes, and people to a certain kind of de-tective novel, in Burke's case one that de-emphasizes the kind of "plotting" Van Dover looks for in vain but which nonetheless maximizes the potential effects of the detective novel as Burke reinvents it. In pursuit of these claims, I want to generalize about the most distinctive features of Burke's novels, then to dis-cuss at some length what I believe is Burke's greatest claim on us as a writer: his creation of the most important series of de-tective novels written by an American. In this final section, to modify Sacks's remarks on Macdonald, I will try to show that the worth and quality of the Robicheaux novels depend precisely on the degree to which Burke has realized potentialities always latent in detective series but never quite realized even by such major detective novelists as Dashiel Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Ross Macdonald himself.

"Why live in conflict and endless self-examination?"

— Billy Bob Holland, in James Lee Burke, In the Moon of Red Ponies 171

II

The Dave Robicheaux novels focus on a man who periodically tries to live by the sentiments embodied in the quotations provided above (chosen from among dozens of similar passages in all of the novels). As we shall see, many of the novels conclude with Robicheaux reasserting the "mature" wisdom of these two quotations, as though Robicheaux, after the intense turmoil depicted in the novel from beginning to end, finally achieves something like perfect peace — with himself and with the world he doesn't like the way it is. He gets to this point by resolving (more or less) the several "mysteries" he has pursued in his role as a detective for the Iberia Parish Sheriff's Department. This is in fact one of the things Coale holds against Burke's use of the detective format: "In a mystery the resolution has to be much clearer [than is the case in Burke's earlier, non-mystery novels]. Whatever tensions and ambiguities arise, the ending or solution has to defuse them, resolve them, and in some way dismantle them" (142).

In point of fact, however, the tensions and ambiguities of the Robicheaux novels are not dismantled at the end; if anything, Burke's plots reveal only a fraction of such things remaining and the conclusions, for we are made to understand that Robicheaux can only temporarily set aside conflict and endless self-examination. The novels confirm beyond any real doubt that conflict and self-examination are the very stuff of a meaningful life, the life we share with Dave Robicheaux in each of the novels devoted to him so far. The novels demonstrate as well that it is very far from foolish not to like the world as it is and to miss the past. Indeed, Robicheaux's heroism, however flawed, derives precisely from his inability to turn away from the world's injustices and his knowledge that it wasn't always so and didn't have to become what it is. It is understandable that at novel's end, when all seems "resolved" and is a fit subject for philosophical reflection, Robicheaux is tempted to adopt the serene perspective of someone at peace with his world. At the beginning of the next novel, however, Robicheaux will be aroused anew by the radical imperfection of things, and the cycle will begin again.

This is to confirm Burke's claim that his novels are about the psychology of Dave Robicheaux (Stroby 40) as dramatized in the course of Robicheaux's enquiries. The problems Robicheaux faces are deeply personal. Some of the novels primarily concern people Robicheaux has known most of his life (e.g., A Stained White Radiance [1992], Burning Angel [1995], Cadillac Jukebox [1996], Sunset Limited), and others depict Robicheaux's efforts to avenge or defend the powerless victims he identifies as "heaven's prisoners" (e.g., The Neon Rain [1987], In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead [1993], Last Car to Elysian Fields [2003]). The better novels usually include a strong personal element, however. In Heaven's Prisoners (1988), Robicheaux joins the sheriff's office so that he can pursue the killers of his second wife; in Black Cherry Blues (1889), he tracks down a killer to avoid being sent to prison for someone else's crime; in A Morning for Flamingos (1990), he is nearly killed at the beginning of the novel and searches for his attacker as well as for others embedded in the criminal world; in In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead, he searches for a contemporary serial killer and also for someone responsible for a murder he himself witnessed thirty-five years previously; and in Dixie City Jam (1994), he seeks a man who has assaulted his third wife. The personal element in Purple Cane Road is even more intense, as Robicheaux pursues the New Orleans police officers who killed his mother thirty-two years earlier.

The stories Robicheaux relates are usually quite complicated and typically involve at least two cases or problems to be resolved. This narrative feature recalls the common practice of the better-known hardboiled detective novelists, especially Raymond Chandler, whom Burke surpasses in a number of ways. As Van Dover has remarked, both Burke and Chandler "move their stories forward primarily through a sequence of dramatic confrontations rather than through evidence presented in the course of a study of the facts," thus emphasizing how the detective "interacts with his world" rather than his intellectual discoveries or deductions (223). Neither Robicheaux nor Philip Marlowe is Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot. Van Dover's insight applies to both novelists but especially to Burke, for a Robicheaux investigation often seems to be nothing but a sequence of confrontations, typically violent and seemingly unhelpful in advancing Robicheaux's grasp of his problem(s). In Burke's better novels, however, Robicheaux's efforts do lead, however violently and however slowly, to discoveries and deductions that are crucial to his understanding both of what happened in the past and of what is all too often still happening.

The better novels highlight well as the struggles with his demons Burke wants us to see above all else in Robicheaux's relentless search for the truth. One of the strongest ties among Robicheaux's cases is the guilt he brings to each enquiry. Robicheaux is a recovering alcoholic whose addiction figures throughout the series as a problem to be overcome but also as a prod to redemptive action. Like his creator, Robicheaux believes we are responsible for our actions and our failures to act: "Unless we confront the mistakes we made and atone for them, we can never extricate ourselves from the misdeeds of our ancestors" (McCurg EB). Burke speaks here of our collective responsibility to such misdeeds as slavery, but it follows that when the mistake in question is one's own, as is often the case with Robicheaux, the sense of guilt is even more oppressive and motivating. Robicheaux's desire to confront his mistakes and to atone for them motivates nearly everything he does in novels such as Purple Cane Road.

This points up one of the strongest recurring patterns in the series: Robicheaux's violent reactions to the world's many injustices, followed by feelings of self-disgust at his violent acts and, ultimately, his troubled efforts — sometimes successful, sometimes not — to reconcile the need to confront evil with often shattering consequences. Burke once said that Robicheaux "acts violently only in the defense of another" (Womack 141), but not everyone has been so sympathetic. Van Dover compares Robicheaux's "vigilantism" with that of Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, citing numerous instances of violent behavior only distantly in defense of someone else (221, 225). Indeed, Robicheaux himself condemns his own anger, "my old enemy," as he calls it in Sunset Limited (256). In Heaven's Prisoners, Robicheaux wonders if he is not drawn to "a violent and aberrant world" (66). In A Stained White Radiance, Clete Purcell says that Robicheaux "loved" the action when they worked homicide together in New Orleans, and Robicheaux does not dispute his claim (70). In Last Car to Elysian Fields, the novel's most sympathetic character, Father Dolan, says to Robicheaux, "You're a violent and driven man" (301). In novel after novel, Robicheaux assaults those who intimidate others and comes to feel that perhaps he is "drawn to this world in the same way that some people are fascinated by the protean shape and texture of fire" (Dixie City Jam 95). At several points in
the series it is noted that Robicheaux has killed five men. One may well wonder whether Van Dover’s view is not more accurate than Burke’s on this crucial matter.

Purple Cane Road and the other novels finally resolve this issue in Burke’s favor. The violence in the Robicheaux series is no doubt a major motif, for Robicheaux’s violence is perhaps unprecedented in the history of the American detective novel. As Burke notes, however, Robicheaux almost never behaves violently except in someone else’s defense, usually someone virtually powerless, and those assaulted are almost always gangsters or contemporary aristocrats who turn out to be deeply implicated in the novel’s crimes. Perhaps it is relevant that, by the end of The Neon Rain, the first of the Robicheaux novels, Robicheaux has killed four of the five men he will kill in the series. Of those two (of whom were killed before the series opens, during Robicheaux’s fourteen-year stint working homicide in New Orleans), a fact which should remind us that after The Big Sleep (1939), the first novel in Chandler’s Philip Marlowe series, Marlowe never kills anyone. Moreover, the narrative progression of novels such as Purple Cane Road ultimately emphasizes Robicheaux’s self-restraint, not his ‘vigilantism.’

Robicheaux is no candidate for sainthood, however, and the series makes clear that significant forms of violence will accompany him to the very end. Indeed, in one of the latest novels, Crusader’s Cross (2005), Robicheaux ponders his continuing “bloodlust” in response to injustice (105), savagely attacks the insufferable Valentine Chalons (242), and plays Russian roulette with himself and an uncooperative adversary (307). As Robicheaux is, by my count, sixty-six-years-old in Crusader’s Cross, I think we know absolutely that Robicheaux’s demons are not about to evaporate. Indeed, it is very much to Burke’s point that a realistic crime fiction can never be ethically unambiguous. At the end of Purple Cane Road, for example, Robicheaux plants a gun on the dead body of Johnny Remeta to suggest that Remeta has killed Connie Deshotel, thereby protecting his partner, Helen Soileau, who has in fact shot Connie by mistake. Of this action Robicheaux thinks, “It was dishonest, certainly, but I don’t think it was dishonorable” (336), which should remind us that Robicheaux is still trying to live by the advice of the ghostly General John Bell Hood in In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead: “never consider a dishonorable act as a viable alternative” (290). We might quarrel with Robicheaux’s distinction between honesty and the honorable, but by his own lights — and Burke’s — Robicheaux manages to complete this most traumatic of his cases more or less true to the general’s admonition. In the course of solving Purple Cane Road’s several mysteries, Robicheaux offers the best evidence in Burke’s canon that he is in fact what Burke once called him: “a moral man living in an amoral world” (Williams 60). The conclusion suggests that Burke has successfully shaped his detective plot to give life to this distinctly Chandlerian proposition.

Burke has said that the novels are primarily interested in Dave Robicheaux’s psychology and demons, his personal growth or failure to grow. What Joan G. Korker says of P. D. James’s Adam Dalgliesh could easily be said of Robicheaux: “our interest in him lies not in the answers he can give us but in the sort of person he is and the answers he will find for himself, in his own life” (151). But it is also true that Burke has abandoned the hardboiled detective tradition in favor of his own. Burke follows the hardboiled detective tradition associated with twentieth-century England. As Jerry Palmer points out, even Spillane has his deductions (102), and the more important hardboiled American detective novelists — Hammett, Chandler, and Macdonald — go beyond Spillane to preserve the basic investigative structure, with its mysteries to be solved, which derives from Agatha Christie and her peers.

Burke does minimize his reliance on these classical elements, however. In many of the novels, including Purple Cane Road, there are very few “suspects” under investigation. Occa-sionally, in fact, as in A Morning for Flamingos and Burning Angel, there is no mystery as to who committed the novel’s principal crimes and suspense focuses entirely on how Robicheaux will manage to survive serious threats to himself and bring the culprits to justice (if indeed he is able to do so). On other occasions, there are really only two characters who could have been responsible for the novel’s crimes, and the narrative cli-max reveals which of the two is guilty. In Heaven’s Prisoners, for instance, the person behind the murder of Robicheaux’s sec-ond wife, Annie, is obviously Bubba Rocque or his wife Claudette; no other characters are even considered for the dubious honor of being outed at the end. It seems to me that Burke retains the mystery element, however simplified, because he wants to retain the basic investigative structure of the detective novel, clas-sical or hardboiled. As Purple Cane Road illustrates supremely, Burke uses this fictional structure to immerse us in the discov-ery of life’s more painful realities as experienced by his hero.

Several of Burke’s more striking technical innovations in-clude his reliance on very short, often highly confrontational scenes; the introduction of numerous third-person accounts which complement the primary first-person narrative; and the use of a concluding epilogue, one of Burke’s most distinctive narrative features. The brevity of Burke’s more recent scenes has surely been noticed by all readers, but especially by those familiar with his earlier works. The Robicheaux novels from The Neon Rain to Dixie City Jam, the seventh book in the series, gradually in-crease in length up to the 500 pages of Dixie City Jam, as Burke’s plots become more and more complex and his handling of each subplot remains the same as his practice in the earlier novels. In the last eight Robicheaux novels, Burke has abandoned the complexity of the large cast of characters needed to support plots but he has radically shortened the length of the dramatized scenes. In Purple Cane Road, there are 76 scenes in a novel of 341 pages. Many of those “scenes” are no more than a paragraph or two, often reporting what has occurred rather than rendering the scene in detail; but as many as 100 of the scenes are dramatic in nature, often dominated by dia-logue, as Burke renders the essence of Robicheaux’s confronta-tion with one or more characters (usually one).

As Burke has become more adept with this method, his novels have managed to retain the richness of the earlier stories while relying on short narratives of 300-350 pages. The fictional mix of many short scenes immerses us in Robicheaux’s case(s) as well as in his personal life, with numerous points co-necting the two. The result is intensely dramatic even as Burke retains the largely descriptive or meditative passages which have always marked Robicheaux’s narrations (nicely illustrated by the two paragraphs I quote at the beginning of this essay). As in Chandler, Burke’s novels emphasize the lyricism of the meditative passages and the blunt force of the dramatized scenes by alternating the two.

Burke’s third-person episodes and reflective epilogues take up fewer pages but are no less crucial to what distinguishes his books. In the four Robicheaux novels prior to A Stained White Radiance, Burke’s stories are told strictly from the first-person perspective of Dave Robicheaux. Since 1992, however, Burke has increasingly relied on extensive third-person accounts of events Robicheaux did not personally witness. In A Stained White Radiance, Lyle Sonnier offers an almost twenty-page summary of the abuse he and his siblings experienced as children (102–20). Here we are told that the narrative incorporates what Lyle told Robicheaux, thus accounting for Robicheaux’s knowledge of the ma-terial. With Sunset Limited, however, Burke begins to include episodes in the third person written from the point of view of another character. Here nine characters other than Robicheaux relate such an episode and Burke devotes 42 pages to their collective accounts. By now, Burke has given up trying to tie the third-person episodes to Robicheaux’s “sources” and, without apology, offers the third-person material as enriching his narrative.

Finally, Burke’s epilogue deserves notice as one of his more characteristic and successful narrative features. He first employs an epilogue in his third published novel, Lay Down My Sword and Shield (1971), where he uses the device as he has con-tinued to use it in all subsequent novels: to bring his reader up-to-date, Victorian-novel style, with the fates of his char-acters; to permit his narrator to mediate upon the dramatized events, now seen from a more detached perspective; and to drama-tize, as I would put it, the narrator’s efforts to come to terms with the novel’s several outcomes, including those for the cases he has pursued, but also with his emotional investments in the novel’s characters. A Stained White Radiance concludes with Robicheaux’s suddenly more intimate and meaningful relationship with his adopt- ted daughter Alafair, who has not been central to much of the preceding novel, as Burke reinforces our sense
of Robicheaux’s appealing humanity and his determination to preserve personal values beyond the often ugly details of his cases. Similarly, the epi-logue to Cadillac Jukebox closes with Robicheaux’s dancing with his wife Bootsie, alone together at their home and away from the novel’s violent, often sordid, social world. At the end of In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead, by contrast, Burke goes out of his way to authenticate the novel’s supernatural elements, most crucially the “reality” of General John Bell Hood and his Confederate soldiers. Though Hood is not necessary to the resolution of the novel’s crimes, he is a crucial figure in Robicheaux’s continuing struggle with those personal demons that Burke highlights here instead of the resolutions to Robicheaux’s detective cases.

It should be acknowledged that no individual novel represents all of Burke’s recurring interests. Two of his abiding themes are the remarkably ugly realities of the American prison system and the redemptive effects of Southern music, especially rhythm and blues classics from the 1940s and 1950s, but these motifs are very lightly developed in a novel like Purple Cane Road. Nor does Burke deal here with America’s tawdry involvement in Central America, especially during the Reagan years, a major theme of several early stories and the first Robicheaux novel, The Neon Rain, and a recurring topic through the other novels up to and including Crusader’s Cross, in which Robicheaux marries Molly Boyle, a veteran of the political and military disasters of El Salvador and Guatemala. Moreover, there are no supernatural events in Purple Cane Road, whereas Burke’s engagement with the supernatural haunts at least six of his novels (Black Cherry Blues, In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead, Burning Angel, Jolie Blond’s Bounce) [2002]. Last Car to Elysian Fields, and Crusader’s Cross). Finally, Purple Cane Road is relatively free of Robicheaux’s — and Burke’s — argument that the really bad guys in the modern world are not gangsters or recidivists but rather the heads of corporations, politicians, and other power elites responsible for the periodic dramatic social and environmental decline. Though I think Purple Cane Road is Burke’s best book, no single novel embodies everything to be found in Burke’s rich dramatization of what it has been like to live in America and more particularly in the South since World War II.

Only the series as a whole speaks to all of Burke’s concerns.

III

“T reckon the story of us all is an on-going one.”
— Sam Morgan Holland, in James Lee Burke’s Cimarron Rose 169

“I am in the eye of the storm.”
— Diane Arbus, in Diane Arbus Revelations 17

Laurie Langbauer has rightly remarked that “linked novels that make up a series have gotten no serious critical attention as a literary form” (3). Langbauer’s Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850 – 1930 (1999) does treat this subject, but her concern is Victorian and Edwardian fiction, and her chapter on Arthur Conan Doyle tells us little about the detective series as a form. Ed Wilsie’s essay on Sherlock Holmes and “seriality” focuses on Doyle’s claim to have invented a new form in The Strand when he hit upon a serial character (Holmes) whose “adventures,” as Doyle called them, would be told in “in-stallments which were each complete in themselves” (105). Prior to Holmes, as Wilsie notes, crime series tended to focus on the criminal (121, n.13). With Holmes, Doyle’s new detective genre “consists of intermittent episodes in a potentially infinite series” (111). One might add that “a potentially infinite ser-ies” is especially imaginary if the series protagonist never ages, let alone changes in other ways. As time was to tell, Holmes is only the first of many series protagonists who neither age nor change significantly.

Indeed, it is an odd fact that very few twentieth-century series detectives, classical or hardboiled, develop in what two recent crime novelists call “real time.” Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are elderly at the beginning of their lengthy careers and only seem to age a bit very late in their fictional lives. Efforts to discern changes of character in these famous sleuths are very hard to sustain. Dorothy L. Sayers’s Peter Wimsey does change noticeably in the later novels involving Harriet Vane, but not in other novels written at the same time. Sayers’s comments make clear her determination to “hu-manise” Wimsey in the presence of Harriet, but no one would try to trace such efforts in the earlier novels. Even when classical detectives acquire wives, as with Ngaio Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn, the series detective resists change and the effects of aging as successfully as Shakespeare’s Cleopatra.

Classical detective fiction is not famous for its realism, however, it is far more noted for the absence of evolving serial detectives among the hardboiled candidates. Ham-mett stopped developing his first detective, the Continental Op, after his second novel, The Dain Cure (1929), and thereafter invented a new detective or investigator for each of his final three novels. Chandler stuck with Philip Marlowe for each of his seven novels, but the changes in Marlowe are not impressive. As others have noted, Marlowe does age somewhat and becomes rather grimmer, even a bit cynical, with The Little Sister (1949) and The Long Goodbye (1953). I think it is no accident, though, that Chandler studies have not taken up Marlowe’s evolution in the course of the series, for the changes are minor and seldom cen-tral to the novel at hand. Similarly, Ross Macdonald’s Lew Archer seems more or less the same character with each new case, much like Holmes and his adventures. More recent detective novelists such as Lawrence Block, Sarah Paretsky, Michael Connelly, and Ian Rankin have rivaled Burke in developing the protagonist through a series of some length, but Burke seems to me the most important figure for this new form.

As in any series, some of the striking effects in the Robicheaux novels derive from repetition rather than from alteration or evolution and do not directly involve the protagonist. Two motifs mentioned earlier, prisons and Southern music, are good examples. Burke’s first novel, Half of Paradise (1965), describes with relish the bitter experiences of two men sentenced to the Angola, and prison figures in nearly every novel since, including the Robicheaux novels. Whether dramatizing a character’s typically brutal encounters with prison life or, through Robicheaux, reflecting on the nature and history of American prisons, Burke has no peer in rendering the horrific realities of the American prison, a cumulative portrait to which he will presumably continue to add as long as he writes.

Burke’s take on Southern music is also cumulative, from the lyrics quoted in Half of Paradise and sixteen later novels to the epigraphs drawn from Merle Travis and Sam “Lightning” Hopkins for To the Bright and Shining Sun (1967) and The Lost Get-Back Boogie (1986). Southern music provides fewer than five of Burke’s titles: The Lost Get-Back Boogie, Black Cherry Blues, Dixie City Jam, Cadillac Jukebox, and Jolie Blond’s Bounce. Indeed, the song “Jolie Blon” is alluded to, characterized, sung, danced to, or quoted in nine of the Robicheaux novels, first as Iry LeJeune’s 1945 “La Jolie Blonde” (The Neon Rain 166), then as “Jolie Blon” (Cadillac Jukebox 114, 208, 253–54), and most recently as Harry Choate’s 1946 “Jolie Blon” (Crusader’s Cross 101, 158, 161).

Burke lends authority to many other details, as when Robicheaux’s second wife Annie tells him he will never leave police work (Heaven’s Prisoners 113), his third wife Bootsie says, “You’ll always be a cop, Dave. Always” (Burnng Angel 195), and a more recent female colleague, Clotilde Arceneaux, remarks, “Dave likes to pretend he can stop being a police officer” (Last Car to Elysian Fields 334). These echoing comments notwithstanding, I remember thinking at the end of the very dark Last Car to Elysian Fields that Robicheaux could be done with policing. Burke, who knows better, brought him back to the detective’s role in the next two novels, Crusader’s Cross and Pegasus Descending (2006).

Repitition also figures in the more important series elements involving Robicheaux, his family, and his vocation or “mission,” but it is repeti-tion with a difference as Robicheaux’s fortunes ebb and flow. Burke has managed to chronicle the lives of Robicheaux, his family, and his acquaintances with remarkably few errors over the novels. In In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead, Robicheaux recalls meeting and falling in love with Bootsie in July, 1957, the summer of his freshman year at college (9), whereas other references make clear it was his soph-more year (see A Morning for Flamingos 91–94; A Stained White Radiance 21–22; Dixie City Jam 420). In Heaven’s Prisoners, Baton Rouge, the black man who helps run Robicheaux’s boat-rental and bait business outside New Iberia, is said to be 50
In any case, Burke's minor problems with "real time" should not prevent us from recognizing the many wonderful e-fects he achieves by tracing certain characters and narrative developments over many years and many texts. Clete Purcel, Al-affair, and Bootsie offer three excellent examples of the use Burke has made of his recurring characters. Clete is the most often deployed figure after Robicheaux, as he appears in all of the novels except In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead. He saves Robicheaux's life on several occasions, both before and after the series opens, but his primary role is to illus-trate the choices Robicheaux might have made, is often tempted to make, and in fact cannot altogether escape because his values are very much like Clete's. On many occasions Clete commits the violent acts against wrongdoers Robicheaux is tempted to commit and occasionally does commit. Yet Clete is fundamentally "a good person," as Robicheaux comes to see (A Morning for Flamingos 126), fiercely loyal to Robicheaux and to the inner drive for justice both men honor throughout their lives, and willing to tell Robicheaux he is wrong on occasion and to warn him against Clete's own excesses. Clete is above all a great friend, and it is crucial to the series that we experience this friendship again and again, whatever the circumstances of the moment, so as to appreciate the sort of man Robicheaux is over the entire length of his career and of the series itself.

AfaI air figures less often in the novels' turbulent events, but she represents one of Burke's finest achievements. She enters as a five-year-old in Heaven's Prisoners, when Robicheaux saves her from drowning in a sinking plane which has just crashed, and through the body of the series she grows up before our eyes, as Burke is careful to note her age in each new book and to capture the many interesting variations in her growth toward the intelligent, attractive young woman she has become when she goes off to attend Reed College after Jolie Blon's Bounce and before Last Car to Elysian Fields. AfaI air embodies the concept of heaven's prisoners in the most intimate form Robicheaux will ever experience, and his love and concern for her in each novel are the best evidence of Robicheaux's values Burke has offered to date.

Finally, Bootsie is the most prominent of the three wives depicted in the series, first alluded to, but unnamed, in Black Cherry Blues (177–78), more or less central in the next nine novels, and then said to have died at the beginning of Last Car to Elysian Fields (3). Her roles vary in these many novels, but there is a good argument that she is the most underdeveloped of the major characters. Nonetheless, no moment in the entire series is so affecting, even shocking, as Robicheaux's first acknowledgment that Bootsie has been dead for several months, and this despite the fact she has suffered from lupus for more than ten years — from A Morning for Flamingos to her last appearance in Jolie Blon's Bounce. (Bootsie's "last" appearance is not quite final, however, for she speaks to Robicheaux as he visits her grave in Last Car to Elysian Fields [301–303], and the brown pelicans she tells him to expect back in New Iberia do, in fact, return in Crusader's Cross [313, 325].) With Bootsie's death, the cumulative impact of the series is driven home as nowhere else.

The fourth and best example of Burke's recurring charac-ters is, of course, Dave Robicheaux himself. Shelton suggests that "the series has taken a turn toward the social and historical" since the introduction of Bootsie (239), and Coale sees the later novels as emphasizing "Burke's interest in taking on racism and Southern politics" (152), but it seems to me that Burke's primary focus has always been Dave Robicheaux, his mysteries, his demons, and his recurring struggle to do the right thing in a world rarely inclined to assist him.

I have already noted the recur-ring pattern in which Robicheaux pursues a just solution to his case(s), suffering and inflicting great violence as he does so, ultimately questioning whether the effort has been worth the travail and, in any case, resigning himself to a more serene, evenquietistic acceptance of the way things are, especially of the natural world which surrounds him in southern Louisiana.

Like Diane Arbus, Dave Robicheaux is in the eye of the storm in each novel. In The Neon Rain, for example, he pursues gangsters responsible for drowning a young black woman he does not even know, kills a major drug dealer in a shootout, finds himself the target of the police. The lyrical but brooding epilogue leaves Robicheaux unsatisfied but clearly in control of his life again.

Robicheaux's serenity at the end of The Neon Rain will be repeated periodically throughout the books to come: in the epi-logue to the third novel, Black Cherry Blues, when his ghostly wife and father withdraw because he is again able to function by himself (289); in the epilogue to A Morning for Flamingos, in which he marries Bootsie, yet again gives up policing, and as-sets that he has "grown old enough to feel at home in the natural world" (485). And so it goes. The tone in the epilogue to Dixie City Jam is celebratory, almost ecstatic (497), whereas that in the epilogue to Burning Angel is deeply respectful of the Civil War veterans whose presence he feels almost as concre-ly as General Hood and his men in In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead (338–40). As mentioned above, the epilogue to Cadillac Jukebox finds Robicheaux dancing with Bootsie to the old tunes of the 1940s and 1950s, the era Robicheaux truly reveres (374). Here Robicheaux concludes, "But I think I've learned not to grieve on the world's ways, at least not when spring is at hand" (375).

Even the epilogue to Last Car to Elysian Fields, the darkest of the novels, asserts that the natural world is a fine place, as Hemingway argued, to be ac-cepted on its own terms (332). It should be no surprise that the epilogue to Crusader's Cross, as

(35), but in Jolie Blon's Bounce he is characterized as being "well into his seventies now" (39), despite the fact that Heaven's Prisoners is set in 1987 and Jolie Blon's Bounce takes place in 2001. More seriously, perhaps, the more recent novels suggest that Robicheaux was kicked out of the New Orleans Police Department (Last Car to Elysian Fields 22) or "fired" from the force (Last Car to Elysian Fields 307; Crusader's Cross 128); indeed, it is Robicheaux him-self who speaks of being "fired" (Pegasus Descending 13). In fact, however, Robicheaux is first suspended, then reinstated, before he finally resigns on the day he is scheduled to return to duty (The Neon Rain 238). As the Robicheaux series now runs to more than 5,000 pages, and these and a few other minor errors in fact point up Burke's overall care in orchestrating even the details of his massive, on-going saga.
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NOTES

1. As this essay was accepted for publication, Burke published his twenty-sixth novel, the sixteenth Robicheaux book. This most recent work, The Tin Roof Blowdown (2007), is one of the best novels in the series and deserves the kind of critical attention it will not receive here.  

2. In his interview with Steven Womack, for example, Burke says that as a young man he read only Mickey Spillane among modern crime writers (42). In his interview with Dale Carter, Burke says, “I haven’t read many crime books,” though he does acknowledge reading Charles Willeford, James Crumley, and Lawrene Block (49). In yet another interview with John Williams, Burke claims to have known few crime novels except for the works of Willeford before starting one himself (60).  

3. See Merrill 3. In this essay I apply Sacks’s point about Macdonald to the novels of Raymond Chandler. Burke’s problems in receiving adequate recognition of his literary achievement very much resemble Chandler’s.  


5. See Michael Connelly’s remarks in Weber 40, and Ian Ran-kin’s in his Rebus’s Scotland: A Personal Journey 31. Rankin is Scottish, not American, but the excellence of his works tempts me to Americanize him for my purposes here.  

6. The first Mrs. Robicheaux is mentioned several times but appears only briefly in very short flashbacks. In The Neon Rain, she is simply Robicheaux’s first wife ‘from Martinique’ (12); in Heaven’s Prisoners, she is given a name, Niccole, as Robicheaux recalls attacking her lover at a party (66–68); in Black Cherry Blues, she is again unnamed but is referred to as one of the three women who have figured prominently in Robicheaux’s “adult life” (244); in Dixie City Jam, she reemerges as Nicole, as Robicheaux again recalls the humiliating fight with her lover (207–208). In later novels, she disappears from Robicheaux’s memory no matter how her name should be spelled.

WORKS CITED

James Lee Burke (born December 5, 1936) is an American author of mysteries, best known for his Dave Robicheaux series. He has won Edgar Awards for Black Cherry Blues (1990) and Cimarron Rose (1998), and has also been presented with the Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America. The Robicheaux character has been portrayed twice on screen, first by Alec Baldwin (Heaven’s Prisoners) and then Tommy Lee Jones (In the Electric Mist). Burke was also nominated for a Pulitzer award for his novel James Lee Burke is a New York Times bestselling author, two-time winner of the Edgar Award, and the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts in Fiction. He’s authored thirty-six novels and two short story collections. He lives in Missoula, Montana.

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