

Good and evil and somewhere that's in between

Haunted characters look for hope as James Lee Burke heads back to Louisiana

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In Dave Robicheaux's world, violence is a form of moral failure. And in "Jolie Blon's Bounce," the latest Robicheaux book from James Lee Burke, everyone fails. "Jolie Blon's Bounce" follows two astonishingly violent murder-rapes in New Iberia, La., where Robicheaux is a cop. One of the victims is a sweet, hard-working 16-year-old, the other a strung-out prostitute with a stand-up, mobster father. The suspects range from a heroin-addled black musician to a 70-year-old Cajun who once oversaw the field workers on the local plantation. And of course, the past, too, is suspect; in New Iberia, old injustices bruise and break generations of families as effectively as any blackjack. "Closure is a word that does not work well with the victims of violent crime," Dave says. (That and something about the sins of the father . . .)

Burke writes for the senses: You hear the ice clink in a whiskey glass the way an alcoholic would, see the rundown Louisiana shacks with the sharpness of a con man selling Bibles, feel the crack of bones like a gun butt had hit your dreams. The real reason to read Burke's books, however, is not the electricity of his prose, but the moral failings and complexities of his heroes.

Robicheaux is a recovering drunk who lives, always, with an "insatiable white worm" eating a hole in his brain. In this book, as in the dozen other Robicheaux books, Dave struggles with desire to drink and an inclination to violence so strong that he breaks into another man's house and places a gun to the unarmed man's head. This man, it should be said, is evil, has in fact violated Robicheaux physically and psychologically. "I felt my palm sweating on the grip of the .45. I cleared my throat and widened my eyes, like a man trying to stretch sleep out of his face," Dave says. But he doesn't kill him. "You're going down," he tells the man, ". . . but it'll be by the numbers." It may be only half a victory for Dave, but it's a victory nonetheless.

Clete Purcel, as offhandedly violent as Dave is explosive, is more fully realized than ever before. Clete is Dave's old New Orleans PD homicide partner; he's a tough guy, with the fierceness — and subtlety — of a bulldog. But this time around we get an aching glimpse into his loneliness. As he makes love to a beautiful woman he adores — Clete's an ugly guy — she tells him he's a sweet man, and shatters him: "He knew there were other words that women used in certain moments, words that were intimate, naked in their expression of vulnerability and love and surrender, words that were used rarely in an entire lifetime and that marked a contract with a man that no wedding ceremony ever provided. But these were not the words he heard." We see how he breaks, and his moral failings become reason for compassion.

The murders unravel in much the way we've come to expect from Burke: chats with lowlifes; brokenhearted parents; busted faces and arms and legs; ghosts from the past, metaphorical and corporeal; racial tensions and social class distinctions. The wealthy never fare well when Burke draws them, and here the scion of New Iberia is as weak and morally pathetic as any character he has created.

But as Dave himself says, "It's never over." Murders may get resolved, but the questions of human weakness and the nature of evil remain. A man I know told me he gave up counseling prison inmates because he once met a man who was truly evil, that one look into that inmate's eyes terrified him to the point where he gave up counseling forever. Robicheaux finds that guy in this book, a villain who reeks of tobacco and cold power, whose breath is like a "soiled, wet handkerchief." The real mystery is not about the murders, but about uncovering who this man is;

in doing so, Burke draws a clear line between weakness and evil, all the while acknowledging that there's hope, however small and unexpected, that both can be defeated.

Moira Muldoon is an Austin free-lance writer whose work has also appeared in salon.com and wired.com.