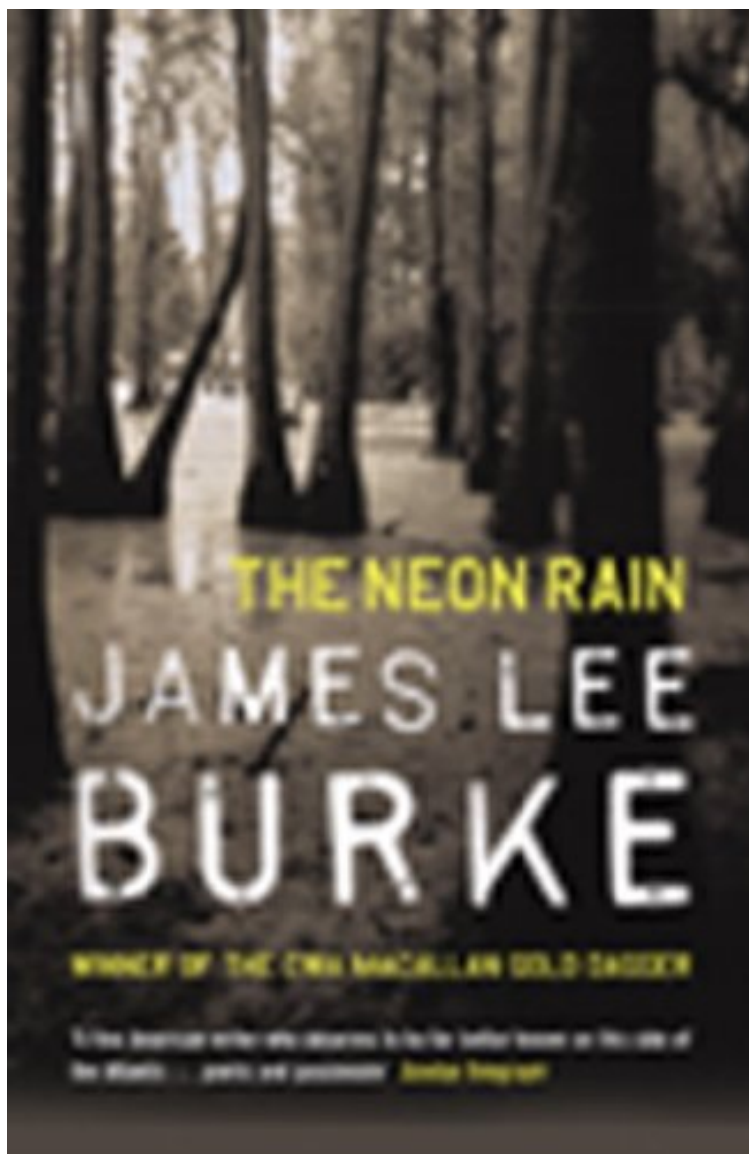


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The Neon Rain



Par James Lee Burke
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Description : Description du produit NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR JAMES LEE BURKE THE NEON RAIN Detective Dave Robicheaux has fought too many battles: in Vietnam, with killers and hustlers, with police brass, and with the bottle. Lost without his wife's love, Robicheaux's haunted soul mirrors the intensity and dusky mystery of New Orleans' French Quarter -- the place he calls home, and the place that nearly destroys him when he becomes involved in the case of a young prostitute whose body is found in a bayou. Thrust into the world of drug lords and arms smugglers, Robicheaux must face down a subterranean criminal world and come to terms with his own bruised heart in order to survive.

Prsentation de l'diteurThe outstanding first book in the ever-popular Dave Robicheaux series.Introducing the New Orleans detective Dave Robicheaux.Johnny Massina, a convicted murderer bound for the electric chair,

has warned Dave Robicheaux that he's on somebody's hit list, and now the homicide detective is trying to discover just who that is before he ends up dead. Meanwhile he has taken on the murder investigation of a young black girl found dead in the Bayou Swamp - a case no one seems keen for him to investigate. But

Robicheaux persists and uncovers a web of corruption that some would kill to protect, leading him to a terrifying confrontation with the one horror he fears most of all. Praise for one of the great American crime writers, James Lee Burke: 'James Lee Burke is the heavyweight champ, a great American novelist whose work, taken individually or as a whole, is unsurpassed.' Michael Connelly 'A gorgeous prose stylist.' Stephen King 'Richly deserves to be described now as one of the finest crime writers America has ever produced.' Daily Mail Fans of Dennis Lehane, Michael Connelly and Don Winslow will love James Lee Burke: Dave

Robicheaux Series 1. The Neon Rain 2. Heaven's Prisoners 3. Black Cherry Blues 4. A Morning for Flamingos 5. A Stained White Radiance 6. In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead 7. Dixie City Jam 8. Burning Angel 9. Cadillac Jukebox 10. Sunset Limited 11. Purple Cane Road 12. Jolie Blon's Bounce 13. Last Car to Elysian Fields 14. Crusader's Cross 15. Pegasus Descending 16. The Tin Roof Blowdown 17. Swan Peak 18. The Glass Rainbow 19. Creole Belle 20. Light of the World 21. Robicheaux Hackberry

Holland Series 1. Lay Down My Sword and Shield 2. Rain Gods 3. Feast Day of Fools 4. House of the Rising Sun Billy Bob Holland Series 1. Cimarron Rose 2. Heartwood 3. Bitterroot 4. In The Moon of Red Ponies * Each James Lee Burke novel can be read as a standalone or in series order * Extrait Chapter One

The evening sky was streaked with purple, the color of torn plums, and a light rain had started to fall when I came to the end of the blacktop road that cut through twenty miles of thick, almost impenetrable scrub oak and pine and stopped at the front gate of Angola penitentiary. The anti-capital-punishment crowd -- priests, nuns in lay clothes, kids from LSU with burning candles cupped in their hands -- were praying outside the fence. But another group was there too -- a strange combination of frat boys and rednecks -- drinking beer from Styrofoam coolers filled with cracked ice; they were singing "Glow, Little Glow Worm," and holding signs that read THIS BUD IS FOR YOU, MASSINA AND JOHNNY, START YOUR OWN SIZZLER FRANCHISE TODAY. "I'm Lieutenant Dave Robicheaux, New Orleans police department," I said to one of the guards on the gate. I opened my badge for him. "Oh yeah, Lieutenant. I got your name on my clipboard.

"I'll ride with you up to the Block," he said, and got in my car. His khaki sleeves were rolled over his sunburned arms, and he had the flat green eyes and heavy facial bones of north Louisiana hill people. He smelled faintly of dried sweat, Red Man, and talcum powder. "I don't know which bunch bothers me worse.

Those religious people act like we're frying somebody for a traffic citation, and those boys with the signs must not be getting much pussy over at the university. You staying for the whole thing?" "Nope." "Did you nail this guy or something?" "He was just a low-level button man I used to run in once in a while. I never got

him on anything. In fact, I think he screwed up more jobs than he pulled off. Maybe he got into the mob through Affirmative Action." The guard didn't laugh. He looked out the window at the huge, flat expanse of the prison farm, his eyes narrowing whenever we passed a trusty convict walking along the dirt road. The main living area of the prison, a series of two-story, maximum-security dormitories contained within a wire fence and connected by breezeways and exercise yards and collectively called the Block, was as brilliantly lit as cobalt in the rain, and in the distance I could see the surgically perfect fields of sugar cane and sweet potatoes, the crumbling ruins of the nineteenth-century camps silhouetted against the sun's red afterglow, the

willows bent in the breeze along the Mississippi levee, under which many a murdered convict lay buried. "They still keep the chair in the Red Hat House?" I said. "You got it. That's where they knock the fire out their ass. You know how the place come by that name?" "Yes," I said, but he wasn't listening. "Back

before they started putting the mean ones in lockdown in the Block, they worked them down by the river and made them wear striped jumpers and these red-painted straw hats. Then at night they stripped them down, body-searched them, then run them into the Red Hat House and threw their clothes in after them. There

wasn't no screens on the windows, and them mosquitoes would make a Christian out of a man when a baseball bat couldn't." I parked the car and we entered the Block, passed through the first lockdown area, where both the snitches and the dangerous ones stayed, walked down the long, brilliantly lit breezeway

between the recreation yards into the next dormitory, passed through another set of hydraulic locks and a dead space where two hacks sat at a table playing cards and where a sign overhead read no guns beyond this point, into the rec and dining halls where the black trustees were running electric waxers on the gleaming

floors, and finally walked up the spiral iron steps to a small maximum-security corner where Johnny Massina was spending the last three hours of his life. The guard from the gate left me, and another one pulled the single lever that slid back the cell door. Johnny wore a white shirt, a pair of black slacks, and black Air

Force shoes with white socks. His wiry gray and black hair was dripping with sweat, and his face was the color and texture of old paper. He looked up at me from where he was seated on his bunk, and his eyes were hot and bright and moisture was beaded across his upper lip. He held a Camel cigarette between his yellowed fingers, and the floor around his feet was covered with cigarette butts. "Streak, I'm glad you come. I didn't know if you were going to make it," he said. "How you doing, Johnny?" His hands clutched his thighs and he looked at the floor, then back at me. I saw him swallow. "How scared you ever been?" he said. "In Vietnam I had some moments." "That's right. You were over there, weren't you?" "Way back in '64, before it got real hot." "I bet you were a good soldier." "I was just a live one, that's all." I felt instantly stupid at my remark. He saw the regret in my face. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I got a whole bunch of shit to tell you. Look, you remember when you took me to a couple of those AA meets, that step you guys take when you want to confess something, what'd you call it?" "Step Five, admitting to yourself, God, and somebody else the exact nature of your faults." "That's it. Well, I done it. To a colored preacher, yesterday morning. I told him every bad thing I ever done." "That's good, Johnny." "No, you listen. I told him the truth and I come clean with some really heavy shit, sexual things I always been ashamed of and I never understood. You know what I mean? I didn't keep nothing back. I also told him about the two guys I whacked in my life. I dumped one guy over the rail of a passenger liner on the way to Havana, and in 1958 I took out Bugsy Siegel's cousin with a shotgun. You know what it means to ice a relative of Bugsy Siegel? After I confessed it to the preacher, I told the guard and the assistant warden about it. You know these dumb cocksuckers couldn't care less?" "Wait a minute, let me finish. I told all this stuff because somebody's got to believe I didn't snuff that broad. I wouldn't throw no young girl out a hotel window, Streak. I got no kick coming about being fried. I figure it all comes out even in the end, but I want these bastards to know I only pushed the button on guys that played by the same rules I did. Can you relate to that?" "I think so. I'm glad you did a fifth step, too, Johnny." He smiled for the first time. His face glistened in the light. "Hey, tell me something. Is it true Jimmie the Gent is your brother?" "You hear a lot of bullshit in the street." "You both got that black Cajun hair with a white patch in it, like you got skunk blood in you." He laughed. His mind was now moving away from the ride he would take in three hours, manacled in a waist chain, to the Red Hat House. "Once he contracted us for some poker machines for his places. After we put them in we told him he gets all his machines from us -- cigarettes, Pac-Man, and rubbers. So he says no rubbers, he's got class clubs and he don't put rubber machines in them. So we tell him he don't have a choice, he either buys the whole line or he don't get linen service, the Teamsters put a picket up on his sidewalk, and the parish health office finds out his dishwashers got leprosy. So what's he do? He invites Didoni Giacano -- Didi Gee himself -- and his whole family for lasagna at his restaurant, and they arrive on Sunday afternoon like a bunch of cafoni that just got off the boat from Palermo, because Didi thinks Jimmie has got respectable connections and is going to get him into the Knights of Columbus or something. Didi Gee probably weighs three hundred pounds and he's covered with hair like an animal and he scares the crap out of everybody in downtown New Orleans, but his mama is this little dried-up Sicilian lady that looks like a mummy wrapped in black rags and she still hits Didi on the hands with a spoon when he reaches across the table and don't ask." "So in the middle of dinner Jimmie starts telling Mama Giacano what a great guy Didi Gee is, how everybody down at the Chamber of Commerce and Better Business Bureau think he's a big plus for the city, and how Didi don't let anybody push his friends around. For example, he says, some scumbags tried to put some machines in Jimmie's restaurants that Jimmie, a Catholic man, don't want. Mama Giacano might look like she's made out of dried-up pasta, but her hot little black eyes tell everybody she knows what he's talking about. Then Jimmie says Didi tore them machines out, smashed them up with hammers, and run a truck up and down on them behind the restaurant." "Didi Gee's got a mouthful of beer and raw oysters and almost chokes to death. He's spitting glop all over his plate, his kids are beating him on the back, and he coughs up an oyster that could plug a sewer main. Mama Giacano waits till his face ain't purple anymore, then tells him she didn't raise her son to eat like a herd of pigs and says he should go wash out his mouth in the bathroom because everybody else at the table is getting sick looking at him, and when he don't get up right away she busts him across the knuckles with her spoon. Then Jimmie says he wants to take the whole family out on his sailboat and maybe Didi Gee ought to join the Yacht Club, too, because all these millionaires think he's a swell guy, and besides, Mama Giacano would really love the Italian-American celebrations they have on the Fourth of July and Columbus Day. And even if Didi don't join, which everybody knows he won't because he hates water and pukes his guts out just crossing the Mississippi ferry, Jimmie is going to drive out and get Mama Giacano whenever she wants and sail her all around Lake Pontchartrain." He laughed again and ran his hand through

his wet hair. He licked his lips and shook his head, and I saw the fear come back into his eyes. "I bet he already told you that story, didn't he?" he said. "They didn't give me too long, Johnny. Is there something else you wanted to tell me?" "Yeah, there is. You always treated me decent and I thought maybe I could repay you a little bit." He wiped the sweat out of his eyes with the flat of his fingers. "I think maybe I got some heavy dues to pay on the other side, too. It don't hurt to try to square what you can now, does it?" "You don't owe me." "A guy with my track record owes the whole fucking earth. Anyway, here's the deal. Yesterday this punk by the name of L. J. Potts from Magazine Street is pushing a broom out in the corridor, clacking it against my bars and making all kinds of noise so I can't sleep. So I say I ain't working on the Good Housekeeping Award and would this punk take his broom somewhere else before I get my hands on it and shove it up his hole. So the punk, who's got a brother named Wesley Potts, tries to impress me. He asks if I know a New Orleans homicide roach named Robicheaux, and he's smirking, see, because he thinks you're one of the cops that nailed me. I tell him maybe, and he keeps smirking and says, well, here's some good news because his brother Wesley has it that this particular homicide roach has stuck his nose in the wrong place and if he don't stop it he's going to get whacked." "He sounds like a gasbag, Johnny." "Yeah, he probably is, except the difference with him and his brother is I think they're connected up with the greasers." "The Colombians?" "Fucking A. They're spreading around the country faster than AIDS. They'll take out anybody, too -- whole families, the children, the old people, it don't matter to them. You remember that bar on Basin that got torched? The greaser that did it stood in the doorway in broad daylight with a fucking flamethrower on his back and because he was in a good mood he gave everybody one minute to get out of the place before he melted it into a big pile of bubbling plastic. You watch out for those cocksuckers, Streak." He lit a fresh Camel from the butt in his hand. He was sweating heavily now, and he wiped his face on his sleeve and smelled himself simultaneously. Then his face got gray and still and he stared straight ahead with his palms gripped on his thighs. "You better leave now. I think I'm going to get sick again," he said. "I think you're a stand-up guy, Johnny." "Not on this one." We shook hands. His hand was slick and light in mine. They electrocuted Johnny Massina at midnight. Back in my houseboat on Lake Pontchartrain, with the rain beating on the roof and dancing on the water outside, I remembered the lines I had heard sung once by a black inmate in Angola: I ax my bossman, Bossman, tell me what's right. He whupped my left, said, Boy, now you know what's right. I wonder why they burn a man twelve o'clock hour at night. The current much stronger; the peoples turn out all the light. My partner was Cletus Purcel. Our desks faced each other in a small room in the old converted fire station on Basin Street. Before the building was a fire station it had been a cotton warehouse, and before the Civil War slaves had been kept in the basement and led up the stairs into a dirt ring that served both as an auction arena and a cockfighting pit. Cletus's face looked like it was made from boiled pigskin, except there were stitch scars across the bridge of his nose and through one eyebrow, where he'd been bashed by a pipe when he was a kid in the Irish Channel. He was a big man, with sandy hair and intelligent green eyes, and he fought to keep his weight down, unsuccessfully, by pumping iron four nights a week in his garage. "Do you know a character named Wesley Potts?" I asked. "Christ, yes. I went to school with him and his brothers. What a family. It was like having bread mold as your next-door neighbor." "Johnny Massina said this guy's talking about pulling my plug." "par" "Sounds like bullshit to me. Potts is a gutless lowlife. He runs a dirty movie house on Bourbon. I'll introduce you to him this afternoon. You'll really enjoy this guy." "I've got his file right here. Two narcotics, six obscenity busts, no convictions. Evidently one serious beef with the IRS." "He fronts points for the greasers." "That's what Massina said." "All right, we'll go talk to him after lunch. You notice I say 'after lunch,' because this guy is your real genuine bucket of shit. By the way, the parish coroner in Cataouatche returned your call and said they didn't do an autopsy on that colored girl." "What do you mean, they didn't do one?" I said. "He said they didn't do one because the sheriff's office didn't request it. It went down as a drowning. What's all this about, anyway, Dave? Don't you have enough open cases without finding work down in Cataouatche Parish? Those people down there don't follow the same rules we do, anyway. You know that." "Two weeks before, I had been fishing in a pirogue on Bayou Lafourche, flycasting popping-bugs along the edge of the lily pads that grew out from the banks. The shore was thickly lined with cypress trees, and it was cool and quiet in the green-gold morning light that fell through the canopy of limbs overhead. The lily pads were abloom with purple flowers, and I could smell the trees, the moss, the wet green lichen on the bark, the spray of crimson and yellow four-o'clocks that were still open in the shade. An alligator that must have been five feet long lay up close to some cypress roots, his barnacled head and eyes just showing above the waterline like a brown rock. I saw another black swelling in the water near another cypress, and I thought it was the first alligator's mate.

Then an outboard boat passed, and the wake rolled the swelling up into the cypress roots, and I saw a bare leg, a hand, a checkered shirt puffed with air. I set down my fly rod, rowed closer, and touched the body with my paddle. The body turned in the water, and I saw the face of a young black woman, the eyes wide, the mouth open with a watery prayer. She wore a man's shirt tied under her breasts, cut-off blue jeans, and for just a second I saw a dime tied on a string around her ankle, a good-luck charm that some Acadian and black people wore to keep away the gris-gris, an evil spell. Her young face looked like a flower unexpectedly cut from its stem. I looped my anchor rope around her ankle, threw the anchor back into the trees on the bank, and tied my red handkerchief on an overhanging branch. Two hours later I watched the deputies from the parish sheriff's office lift the body onto a stretcher and carry it to an ambulance that was parked in the canebrake. "Just a minute," I said before they put her in. I lifted up the sheet to look again at something I'd seen when they had pulled her out of the water. There were tracks on the inside of her left arm, but only one needle hole that I could see inside the right. "Maybe she gives blood to the Red Cross," one of the deputies said, grinning. "You're a pretty entertaining guy," I said. "It was just a joke, Lieutenant." "Tell the sheriff I'm going to call him about the autopsy," I said. "Yes, sir." But the sheriff was never in when I called, and he didn't return calls, either. So finally I telephoned the parish coroner's office, and now I discovered that the sheriff didn't believe an autopsy for a dead black girl was that important. Well, we'll see about that, I thought. In the meantime, I was still curious as to why the Colombians, if Johnny Massina was right, were interested in Dave Robicheaux. I went through my case file and didn't see any connection. I had a whole file drawer of misery to look at, too: a prostitute icepicked by a psychotic john; a seventeen-year-old runaway whose father wouldn't bond him out of jail and who was hanged the next morning by his black cellmate; a murder witness beaten to death with a ball-peen hammer by the man she was scheduled to testify against; a Vietnamese boat refugee thrown off the roof of the welfare project; three small children shot in their beds by their unemployed father; a junkie strangled with baling wire during a satanic ritual; two homosexual men burned alive when a rejected lover drenched the stairwell of a gay nightclub with gasoline. My drawer was like a microcosm of an aberrant world populated by snipers, razor-wielding blacks, mindless nickel-and-dime boost artists who eventually panic and kill a convenience-store clerk for sixty dollars, and suicides who fill the apartment with gas and blow the whole building into a black and orange fireball. What a bunch to dedicate your life to. But there was no umbilical cord that led to the south-of-the-border account. Cletus was watching me. "I swear, Dave, I think your feelings are going to be hurt unless you find out the greasers got the hots for you," he said. "We don't have a lot of perks in this business." "Well, I'll tell you what. Let's go to lunch early, you buy, and I'll introduce you to Potts. The guy's a delight. Your day is going to be filled with sunshine." It was hazy and bright when we drove into the Quarter. There was no breeze, and the palm fronds and banana trees in the courtyards were green and motionless in the heat. As always, the Quarter smelled to me like the small Creole town on Bayou Teche where I was born: the watermelons, cantaloupes, and strawberries stacked in crates under the scrolled colonnades; the sour wine and beer and sawdust in the bars; the poor-boy sandwiches dripping with shrimp and oysters; the cool, dank smell of old brick in the alleyways. A few genuine bohemians, writers, and painters still lived in the Quarter, and some professional people paid exorbitant rents for refurbished apartments near Jackson Square, but the majority of Vieux Carr residents were transvestites, junkies, winos, prostitutes, hustlers of every stripe, and burnt-out acidheads and street people left over from the 1960s. Most of these people made their livings off middle-class conventioners and Midwestern families who strolled down Bourbon Street, cameras hanging from their necks, as though they were on a visit to the zoo. I couldn't find a place to park by Pearl's Oyster Bar, and I kept driving around the block. "Dave, when does a guy know he's got a drinking problem?" Cletus asked. "When it starts to hurt him." "It seems I've been getting half-stoned near every night of recent. I can't seem to go home unless I stop at the joint on the corner first." "How are you and Lois getting along?" "I don't know. It's the second marriage for both of us. Maybe I've got too many problems, or maybe both of us have. They say if you don't make it the second time around, you ain't going to make it at all. You think that's true?" "I don't know, Clete." "My first wife left me because she said she couldn't stay married to a man that brought a sewer home with him every day. That was when I was working vice. She said I smelled like whores and reefer all the time. Actually, vice did have its moments. Now Lois tells me she doesn't want me to bring my gun home at night. She's into Zen, meditates every day, sends our money to some Buddhist priest out in Colorado, and tells me she doesn't want her kids growing up around guns. Guns are bad, see, but this character out in Colorado that takes my bucks is good. Two weeks ago I came in wired, so she started crying and blowing her nose into a whole box of Kleenex. So I had a couple more hits of Jack Daniel's and

told her how you and I had spent the afternoon combing pieces of a fourteen-year-old kid out of the garbage dump with a garden rake. Fifteen more minutes of tears and nose-honking. So I cruise for some booze and almost get nailed on a DUI. Not very good, huh?" "Everybody has family trouble sometimes." He was frowning out the window, his thoughts collecting in his eyes. He lit a cigarette, drew in deeply, and flicked the match out into the sunlight. "Man, I'm going to be a chainsaw by two o'clock," he said. "I'm going to have a couple of beers with lunch. Sedate the brain, settle the stomach, mellow the nerves. Does that bother you?" "It's your day. You can do whatever you want to with it." "She's going to split. I know the signs." "Maybe y'all will work it out." "Come on, Dave, you didn't get off the boat yesterday. It doesn't work that way. You know how things were just before your wife took off." "That's right, I do. I know how things were. Nobody else does. You get my drift?" I grinned at him. "All right, I'm sorry. But when it's going down the toilet, it's going down the toilet. You don't turn it around by leaving your piece in a locker. Pull into that truck zone. It's too damn hot out here." I parked in the loading zone by Pearl's and cut the engine. Cletus was sweating in the sunlight. "Tell me honestly," he said, "would you have done something like that just to please your wife?" "I didn't even want to think about the things I had done to please my wife, my pale, dark-haired, beautiful wife from Martinique who left me for a Houston oilman." "Hey, lunch is on you after all," I said. "What?" "I didn't bring any money." "Use your MasterCard." "They wouldn't renew it. Something about exceeding my credit limit by four hundred dollars." "Great, I've got a buck thirty-five. What a class act. All right, we eat on the tab. If he doesn't like it, we tell him we're calling Immigration about the Haitians he's got working in his kitchen." "I didn't know he had any." "Me either. It'll be fun to see what he says." The pornographic theater was right on Bourbon Street. Bourbon had changed since I used to come here as a college student over twenty years ago. The old Dixieland bands like Papa Celestin's and Sharky Bonnano's had been replaced by imitation country bands made up of kids in designer jeans, vinyl vests, and puffed white silk shirts with lace brocade, like mambo dancers or transvestites would wear. The burlesque houses had always been seedy places where the girls hustled drinks between sets and hooked loose Johns before closing, but the city code had required them to wear G-strings and pasties, and there hadn't been any dope around, except a little reefer among the desperate, burnt-out musicians who played in a small, dark pit at the bottom of the runway. But now the girls danced completely nude on the stage, their eyes glowing with black speed, their nostrils sometimes still twitching and wet from snorting coke through a rolled-up dollar bill. The windows of Plato's Adult Theater had been walled up with cinder blocks so no one could see in, and the interior of the small, gold and purple lobby was decorated with erotic art that might have been painted by blind people. We went through the lobby into the office without knocking. A thin man with a pointed, shiny face looked up, startled, from his desk. He wore a powder-blue polyester suit and patent-leather shoes with silver buckles, and his receding, oiled hair glistened in the light from the desk lamp. Cans of movie reels were stacked in a wooden rack against one wall. The surprise and fear went out of the man's face, and he scratched his cheek with one hand and picked up a filter-tipped cigar from the ashtray. "What do you want, Purcel?" he said indifferently. "Dave, meet Wesley Potts, our resident bucket of shit," Cletus said. "I don't have time for your insults, Purcel. You got a warrant or something?" "That's what they say on television, Pottsie," Cletus said. "You see any TV cameras, Dave?" "I don't see any TV cameras," I said. "On television some guy is always saying 'You got a warrant?' or 'You got to read me my rights,'" Cletus said. "But in big-people land we don't do it that way. You ought to know that, Pottsie." "I thought you didn't work vice anymore," Potts said. "That's right. I'm in homicide now. My partner here's last name is Robicheaux. Does that make your swizzle stick start to tingle?" The man behind the desk blew cigar smoke out in front of him and looked into it with his eyes flat, but I saw his fingers crimp together on the desk blotter. "Your little brother up at Angola says you're blabbing it around that Dave here is going to get snuffed," Cletus said. "If that's what my brother says, you ought to be talking to him. I don't know anything about it." "The people up at Angola don't like cops hitting on their convicts. Bad for their image and all that," Cletus said. "But you and us, well, that's a whole different caper, Wes." Potts's eyes were small and hot and staring straight ahead. "Lighten up," Cletus said. "You're a businessman, you pay taxes, you're reasonable. You just got diarrhea of the mouth and you been spreading rumors around, and we want to know why you been doing that. It's no big deal. Just straighten us out about this strange stuff we heard, and you can get back to entertaining the perverts. Look at the material you got here. This is classy stuff. Cletus began to bang through the film cans on the wooden rack. He picked up one in both hands and looked at the penciled title with a critical eye. "This one is state-of-the-art porn, Dave. In one scene a guy kills a naked broad with a nail gun. She screams and begs, but the guy chases her around the house and staples pieces of her all over the

woodwork." Cletus opened the can, held on to one end of the film, and dropped the reel bouncing on the floor. He held the film strip up to the light. "The funny thing, Wes, is sometimes a john goes apeshit and tears a hooker up, and I get the feeling that maybe the guy just finished eating popcorn out there in your theater. What do you think?" "I never look at that stuff. I couldn't tell you what's in it. I just manage the place. It's a movie house, with a license, with fire exits, with sanitary bathrooms just like any other movie house. You don't like the place, go talk to the people that give out the permit." Cletus began opening the other film cans, dropping the reels to the floor, and walking on them as he worked his way down the rack.

Thick tangles of film were looped around his ankles and shoes. "You cut it out, you bastard," Potts said. "How'd you get into the IRS beef?" Cletus said. "Fuck off." "You're fronting points for the spicks, aren't you?" Cletus said. "You probably don't have fifteen people out there right now, but you show profits like you have the patent on the wheel. Why is that?" "I sell lots of popcorn." "All that coke and brown scag money finds a ledger to get written down on," Cletus said. "Except the Treasury boys are about to ream your asshole." "I don't see any Treasury men. All I see is a plainclothes prick that never grew up from high school," Potts said. "Where the fuck you get off with this stuff? You smash up my films, you come down on me because of something my little brother said which I don't even know he said, and you give me some bullshit about Mexican scag, when if I remember right you never busted anybody more serious than a junkie with a couple of balloons in his crotch. Maybe you took a little juice while you were in vice, huh? You're a fucking joke, Purcel." "Listen to this man carry on," Cletus said. "We're going to have to have privacy. Does this door go into the theater? Thanks, that's what I thought." He opened a side door that gave onto a small theater that looked like a remodeled garage. In the flickering darkness a dozen or so men stared fixedly at the screen. "What's happening, geeks?" Cletus said loudly, and began flicking the light switch on and off. "I'm the New Orleans heat. I just wanted to make sure everything was working all right. Enjoy your show." They rose quickly from their seats and moved as a group up the aisles farthest from Cletus and went through the curtained exit. "Big deal. The same guys'll be sitting out there tonight," Potts said. "Could you leave me and Wesley alone a few minutes?" I said. "I thought you might say that," Cletus said, and crunched again through the tangle of ruined film on the floor and closed the door behind him. I sat on the corner of Potts's desk and folded my hands on my thigh. "How do you think this is going to end?" I said. "What d' you mean?" "Just what I said. Do you think you can tell people somebody is going to blow me away and I'm just going to walk out of here?" His sucked in his lips and looked at the wall. "Tell me what you think is going to happen," I said. "I don't know. I never saw you before. Why would I go around talking about you?" "Who wants to drop the hammer on me, Wes?" "I don't know any such thing." "Do you think I'm a dumb guy?" "I don't know what you are." "Oh, yes you do. I'm the guy you never thought you'd see, just a vague figure in your mind you could laugh about getting snuffed. I've sort of showed up like a bad dream, haven't I?" "I got nothing against you," he said. "I run a legal business. I don't cause you guys trouble." "But I'm sitting here on your desk now.

It's like waking up with a vulture on your bedpost, isn't it?" "What are you going to do? Trash the place, knock me around? Big fucking deal." I took out my five-inch, single-blade Puma pocket knife and opened it.

The blade could fillet bass like a barber's razor. It trembled with light. "Jesus Christ, man, what are you doing?" he said. I picked up his cigar from the ashtray, sliced off the burning end on the desktop, and put the still-warm stub in Potts's shirt pocket. "You can smoke the rest of that later," I said. "What the fuck! Are you crazy, man?" he said. His face had gone white. He swallowed and stared at me, his eyes full of fear and confusion. "You know who Didi Gee is, don't you?" "Sure, everybody does. Why you ask about --" "What's he do?" "What d'you mean?" "What's he do? Tell me now." "Everything. Whores, numbers, unions, y'all know that." "We're going to have lunch with him and I'm going to tell him what you told me." "What?" "He has lunch in Jimmie the Gent's restaurant every Tuesday at two o'clock. You and I are going to sit at the next table and have a chat with the fat boy himself. Believe me, he'll find you an entertaining guy." "I ain't going." "Yes you are. You're under arrest." "What for? I didn't do anything," he said desperately. "You said something about cash. That sounded like an attempted bribe to me." His eyes flicked back and forth frantically. Pinpoints of sweat broke out on his forehead. "I said 'trash.' I said 'trash the place.'" "I'm hard of hearing. Anyway, I'll think about it on the way over to the restaurant. Do you believe that story about Didi

Gee's aquarium, the one full of piranha? I heard he held a Teamster's hand in it for a full minute. Maybe that's just another one of those bullshit Mafia stories, though. Put your hands out in front of you, I'm going to cuff you. You can carry your coat across your wrists if it embarrasses you." "I don't rattle. You're running a game on me." "You dealt the hand, Wes. Play it out. But right now you put your wrists in front of you or I'm going to break open your fucking worthless face." He was breathing loudly now, his hands clenched in fists

on the desk blotter. "Listen, Lieutenant, I heard the other guys say something. Lot of times they're just blowing gas. It don't necessarily mean anything. I didn't hear it from Mr. Segura. You understand that? It didn't come from Mr. Segura. It's just street talk, a bunch of guys' bullshit." "You're talking about the Colombian?" "He's from Nicaragua." "Go on." He wiped his lips with his fingers, then pulled at the flap of skin under his chin. "It's got something to do with a nigger girl. I think she used to be a street whore. Didn't you pull a nigger out of the bayou in Cataouatche Parish?" "You just keep telling me what you know, Wes." "Jesus Christ, Lieutenant, what d'you think I am? I'm just a theater manager. Maybe once a month Mr. Segura has a bunch of guys out to his place on the lake. A buffet, a lot of booze, some broads in the pool. He shakes everybody's hand, maybe has a collins with us or plays cards a few minutes under the beach umbrella, then disappears inside." "What's the girl have to do with Julio Segura?" "You're not understanding me, Lieutenant. He don't tell me things like that. He don't talk to me about anything, in fact. Look, this is a heavy-metal cat. I think he's wired into big people. Why mess with him? The feds deal with guys like this." I continued to stare silently at him. His hands flicked on the desk blotter as though wires were attached to them. "They say you're making noise about a nigger girl you found in another parish," he said. "That ain't your territory, so they wonder why the interest. For some reason they think you're after them. Don't ask me why. I don't even like to be around that kind of talk. I walk away from it. That's the God's truth." "You really bother me, Wes. I have great concern about your sincerity. I also have the feeling you think you're omniscient." "Wha --" "Tell me if I'm wrong. You think you can intuit exactly what I'll accept. You're going to jerk me around and tell me bedtime stories, then snort a line or two after I'm gone to calm your nerves, and your day will be back intact again. That indicates a serious problem with vanity and pride. What do you think?" "Look --" he began, his mouth smiling, his eyes cast down self-deprecatingly. "No, no, it's time for Wes to listen and me to talk. You see, when you shoot off your mouth about the murder of a police officer, you invite some dangerous complications into your life. Number one, foreknowledge can make an accomplice out of you, Wes. Then, on a more basic level, there are several men I work with who would simply cool you out. Are we communicating here?" "Yes," he said weakly. "There's no confusion?" "No." "All right, Wes. We'll talk again later. You understand that, don't you?" "Yes." I stood up from his desk and walked toward the door. I could hear him expel his breath. Then: "Lieutenant?" I turned and looked at him. His face was small and pale. "Will this get back to Mr. Segura?" he said. "A couple of the Latin guys that work for him...cruel guys...they were cops or national guardsmen or something in Nicaragua...I don't like to think about the stuff they do." "No guarantees. You sniff something bad in the wind, come to us and we'll get you out of town." The sun was blazing outside. Across the street, three black kids were tap dancing for the tourists in the shade of the scrolled iron colonnade. The huge taps they wore sounded like drumsticks clicking on metal. Cletus stood out of the sunlight's glare, watching, with his seersucker coat over one arm. "What'd you get from old Pottsie?" "It was the black girl I found in Bayou Lafourche. It's got the smell of dope and the Barataria pirates. Did you ever run up against Julio Segura when you were on vice?" "You better believe it. He's your genuine, certified greaseball. The guy's got Vitalis oozing out of every pore." "I thought he was a Colombian." "He's hooked in with them, but he's from Managua. I heard he owned a hundred warehouses down there. They say the Sandinistas shot holes all over his plane just as it cleared the field. The guy's a survivor. We tried to get him two or three times. I think he's got a lot of high-up juice going for him." "We walked in the warm shade back toward Royal Street, where we had left the car parked in front of the oyster bar. I went into a small, dark grocery store cooled by a wooden-bladed overhead fan, and bought a Times-Picayune. The interior of the store smelled of bananas, coffee, blocks of cheese, and big wooden bins filled with grapes and plums. I opened the Picayune to the sports page as we walked along." "Y'all want to go to the races tonight?" I said. "Forget the races. Let's front the spick. We tell the captain about it first, then we go out to his house and flip his necktie in his face." "Nope. Too soon." "Bullshit. The only way to handle these guys is jump up and down on their nuts. In this case we want the guy to know it's personal. We deliver the Candygram right in his living room." "I appreciate it, Clete, but I'll let you know when it's time to toggle out there. Don't worry. You won't miss out on the party." "You're too laid back. I'm telling you, this guy is subhuman. He makes an animal like Didi Gee look like the archbishop by comparison." "Damn," I said. "What's wrong?" "Next time, we take your car to lunch." "What for?" "That's my car of the back on that tow truck." The light was soft on the lake as I dressed on the houseboat that evening. Up the shore I could see the palm and cypress trees blowing in the wind off the Gulf. The air smelled like rain again. I felt very alone and quiet inside, and I wondered if my feeling of confident solitude, my peculiar moment of serenity inside, was not a deceptive prelude to another turbulent time in my life. Maybe it was

just a brief courtship with narcissism. My body was still hard and lean, my skin brown, the old scar from the dung-tipped pungi stick like a broken gray snake embossed on my stomach. My hair and brush mustache were still as black as ink, except for the white patch above one ear, and I convinced myself every morning that living alone was no more a mark of age and failure than it was of youth and success. The dark purple clouds piled on the Gulf's southern horizon trembled with heat lightning. I sat alone in a box at the races that night and looked with the same quiet and tranquil fascination at the lighted track, the dampened and raked sod, the glistening clipped grass in the center field. It was the kind of vague, almost numb euphoria that I used to feel when I slid off the edge of a two-day binge into delirium tremens. I had become omniscient; my white tropical suit glowed from the arc light overhead; I cashed three place bets and two wins in a row. The peach-complexioned waitresses in the clubhouse brought me shelled shrimp on ice, and lobster and steak, and brushed their hips unnecessarily against my arm when they took away my soiled napkin and blood-streaked plate. Someone once told me that the gambler's greatest desire, knowledge of the future, would drive us insane. On that warm summer evening as I drove back home, with the moon denting the lake and the fireflies lighting in the palm and oak trees, I felt a thin tremolo inside me, like the faint tinkling of crystal or the almost silent vibration of sympathetic guitar strings, just a hint of Cassandra's tragic gift, and I tried to ascribe it to my old alcoholic fears that writhed in the unconscious as blind snakes would. But a winner at the track usually cares little for caution or moonlit nuances. Copyright 1987 by James Lee Burke From Publishers Weekly Burke's sixth novel pits New Orleans homicide detective Dave Robichaux against the mob, the contras, the Feds and just about all the other cops. The trouble starts when Robichaux insists on investigating the murder of a young prostitute and discovers that it isn't only the crooks who don't want the truth to come out: the police don't want it revealed, either. The underworld and the authorities combine to cobble up a frame against Robichaux, and suddenly he's on the run. Burke's maverick detective and his gritty, realistic dialogue and convoluted plotting are reminiscent of Elmore Leonard whose latest novel, *Bandits*, has a contra angle, too. The matter of subterranean government policy running amok suits the world of suspense fiction well, serving it in the 1980s the way Cold War themes fed the genre in earlier decades. With its fine local color and driving action, this novel is both chilling and first-rate entertainment. Copyright 1987 Reed Business Information, Inc.