

This is a printer friendly version of an article from **timesofacadiana.com**
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Article published Jul 23, 2008
Books: Burke peaks with latest thriller

By Cheré Coen
timesedit@timesofacadiana.com

New York Times best-selling and award-winning author James Lee Burke alternates his home between Missoula, Montana and New Iberia, even though his main character, Detective Dave Robichaux, prefers the bayous to the mountains.

Like all of Burke's novels, the "Bobbsey Twins of NOPD Homicide" encounter anything but peace. While Clete tackles inner demons acquired from Vietnam and Katrina, two college students are found brutally murdered behind Hollister's cabin.

Connecting this story to a past Robichaux-Purcell trip to Montana is the bodyguard of the rich Wellstone family who lives nearby. Lyle Hobbs believes Clete is responsible for the death of mob boss Sally Dio, and both he and the Wellstones are suspects in the minds of the Louisiana detectives.

Interspersed into the mystery are two disturbed Wellstone brothers, one who's married to a country-western singer with old ties to a lover sent to prison in Texas. The con in question has escaped the molestations of a contract prison guard and the guard is hot on his tail, following him to Montana. On top of all that, the FBI is in town trailing Clete.

Confused? As intricate as it sounds, the many plots work magically together, producing a page-turner that's insightful as well as entertaining. As in his previous novels Burke examines the darker side of human nature, born from sexual molestations and the resulting self-loathing, then matured on society's prejudices and hatred.

As Dave and Clete hunt for the monster who tortured the college students and burned other victims in separate cases, Dave tries to make sense of humanity:

"... when people use the term 'random' or 'serial' in referring to a type of homicide, they are leaving out the element that is central to pathological behavior. The motivation is not financial. It's not even about power. The attack on the victim is almost always characterized by a level of ferocity that is out of proportion to any

apparent cause. Its origins reside in the id and are sexual and perverse in nature. The perpetrator's appetites are insatiable, and his desire to do more injury increases as he releases his self-loathing and fury on his victim."

Of course, where would a good PI novel be without some sick criminals while our heroes, who are anything but faultless but we admire them anyway, chase after the injustices while causing a few themselves by their violent nature? Robichaux, himself, still fights his own demons from Vietnam, as well as the constant aching of alcoholism. *"We had traded off our youth for Vietnam and brought back a legacy of gall and vinegar that we could not rinse out of our dreams,"* thinks Robichaux. *"We had learned little from the past and were condemned to recommit most of its mistakes."*

Throughout the book, Burke's writing is filled with creative imagery. We can visualize a man's scraggly beard when Burke likens it to lines of ants crawling up his neck to his ears or see the light in a character's eye when he makes a vital connection, described as *"a red light flashing at a train crossing."*

When Purcell has a tryst with a married woman and then kicks himself in the morning, Robicheaux reflects, *"She had made Cleve feel that he had been used and used badly, led into a tryst and discarded like yesterday's bubble gum. Even worse, she had left him with uncertainty about her motivation. She had fixed it so he couldn't simply close the door on what had happened and mark off the whole episode as bad judgment, the kind of mistake that men over forty line up to commit again and again. Instead, he would repeatedly sort through each sordid detail with tweezers, wondering if he was being too severe in his judgment of her or if he wasn't simply an over-the-hill fool."*

Burke's intricacies of plot, character and message are masterful. It's a rollercoaster ride where we should doubt those driving the train but we trust them anyway and urge them on. Swan Peak is one of his best.
