

Burke blows the roof off in 'Blowdown'
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By Cheré Coen

Just when I thought I couldn't read another word about Katrina, New Iberia's James Lee Burke enters the scene with one of his finest books to date.

The Tin Roof Blowdown (Simon & Schuster, \$26) continues the story of Burke's recurring private eye and sometimes lawman Dave Robicheaux as he battles rabid corruption and crime, eccentric police personalities and his ongoing battle with alcoholism in New Iberia. As in his previous books, Robicheaux has occasional dealings with the underworld of "the Big Sleazy," again facing street punks, drug lords and members of the mafia.

This time, however, Katrina adds a new perspective to Robicheaux's — and no doubt, Burke's — vision of the two-sided New Orleans, where dark criminal elements mix with the beauty and romanticism of America's Most Interesting City.

After Katrina barrels through the Gulf Coast, a group of looters begin using neighborhoods as a buffet line. When four black men hit a high-end uptown street and discover a fortune in the walls of one of the homes, they encounter a host of problems that set the plot into motion: white supremacist vigilantes, a resident whose daughter was a victim to three of the looters and whose father wants revenge and a mafia leader as owner of the house they rip apart.

In the meantime, Robicheaux is searching for his old friend, Father Jude LeBlanc, a junkie who seeks redemption in his work in the Lower Ninth Ward, last seen aiding church members from the attic of a flooded Catholic church. His good friend Clete Purcel is hunting down two 23-year-olds who skipped bail who tie into the story, while two other men are held in the New Iberia jail that connect to both LeBlanc and the looters.

Since Robicheaux must assist New Orleans law enforcement agencies, he and Purcel find themselves in the devastated city and it's their perspectives on the hurricane, the government's abandonment and the following "piggy feet clattering to the trough" of out-of-state contractors that make *Tin Roof Blowdown* resonate with a heightened emotional frequency.

"It became obvious right after Katrina that the destruction of New Orleans was an ongoing national tragedy and probably an American watershed in the history of political cynicism," Robicheaux reflects. "I knew early on that the events taking place in New Orleans now would lay large claim on the rest of my career if not my life."

Even though Burke shows the unconscionable actions of the looters who have little regard for human life as well as property, he offers his readers a look into their origins in poverty, violence and neglect. When one of the looters works to repent for his sins, he finds little acceptance and death as an only option. Upper-class white men with guns looking upon their fellow black residents with blind disregard and hate rate no higher than the ones doing the crime.

Burke doesn't use a soapbox, nor does he offer simple explanations of the societal ills of New Orleans, yet he doesn't hold back on his views of deeply entrenched Louisiana racism and its result of poverty.

“The boarded-up windows, the junker cars, the wash lines, and the open drainage ditches full of trash were like photos taken by Walker Evans during the Great Depression, as though seven decades had not passed,” Robicheaux thinks as he drives through a poor area of Iberia Parish. “Who was responsible? I have trouble with the notion of collective guilt. But if I had to lay it at anyone’s feet, I’d start with the White League, the Knights of the White Camellia... and all the people who did everything in their power to keep their fellow human beings poor and uneducated and at one another’s throats so they would remain a source of cheap labor.”

I always find fault with Burke when he paints a solid dark picture of New Orleans in his Robicheaux novels, one that seems devoid of light. In *Blowdown*, however, he laments the death of a beautiful city with such insight that I shall forgive his past regressions, particularly when he blames years of poor federal funding and the introduction of crack cocaine into the projects as the beginning of the city’s destruction, showing this time that the evil that lurks in the shadows has various degrees of darkness. In *Blowdown*, as in Katrina’s New Orleans, those who are committing the crimes are not necessarily the ones in jail.