

# **Heaven's Prisoners Study Guide**

**Heaven's Prisoners by James Lee Burke**

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## Plot Summary

Dave Robicheaux and his wife Annie inadvertently become involved in a underworld power struggle when they witness a small plane crash and rescue a young orphaned girl from the wreck. They take the girl home and Dave sparks the ire of an unknown criminal boss when he asks questions about the cause of the plane wreck. The situation spirals out of control and results in the murder of Annie during an attempted hit on Dave. Dave investigates as the criminals turn on each other until only one is left—whom Dave then arrests for murder.

Dave and Annie are fishing when they witness a small plane crash into the water. Dave dives down to the wreck and rescues Alafair, a young illegal immigrant who he immediately decides to adopt as his own—outside of official channels. Realizing that the plane was brought down by an explosion, Dave—an ex-cop—begins to investigate. He is told by law enforcement authorities to mind his own business but ignores their advice. He is then beaten by local thugs, a clear message that he shouldn't poke his nose into other people's business. Annie begs Dave to leave well-enough alone, but he is incapable of walking away from insult. Dave tracks down one of his assailants and beats the man up in retaliation. A few days later, the man and an accomplice break into Dave's house and murder Annie while looking for Dave.

Dave responds by joining the local police force and actively investigating his wife's murder. First one and then another of his assailants turn up dead in ways that somewhat implicate Dave. Dave pursues his investigation as his friends beg him to stop endangering his life. During this stressful period Dave briefly returns to his alcoholic ways to help him deal with his grief and rage; he also takes in an ex-prostitute as a lover and housekeeper. Dave finally tracks down the man who killed his wife and in a brief but violent encounter shoots him dead.

Acting on an intuitive understanding of the local criminal paradigm, Dave deduces that the local crime lord's wife has been the motive power behind the various events. Confronting the local crime lord—also a childhood friend—Dave spells out the man's wife's betrayal. The man responds by beating his wife in public—an entirely inadequate control over the ambitious and amoral woman. She responds by murdering her husband, an action anticipated by Dave who is on the spot to make the final arrest. The situation thus satisfied, Dave quits the police force and returns to his life. As his ex-prostitute lover moves on, Dave pieces back together his former existence as a retired cop and bait shop operator.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Dave Robicheaux and his wife Annie inadvertently become involved in a underworld power struggle when they witness a small plane crash and rescue a young orphaned girl from the wreck. They take the girl home and Dave sparks the ire of an unknown criminal boss when he asks questions about the cause of the plane wreck. The situation spirals out of control and results in the murder of Annie during an attempted hit on Dave. Dave investigates as the criminals turn on each other until only one is left—whom Dave then arrests for murder.

The novel opens with Dave and Annie Robicheaux fishing and shrimping off Southwest Pass near New Iberia, Louisiana. Dave owns the boat and runs a local bait shop, and the couple has been married for one year. Dave is powerfully built but aged past his physical prime, with dark hair and a penetrating gaze. He is a Viet Nam veteran and an ex-police officer, having worked in the New Orleans Police Department for several years. His employment there ended in a violent shootout in which several people were killed including one government witness—the events are referred to but are not fully developed in this novel (they are featured in a prior novel). Dave's father, now deceased, was an uneducated and in fact illiterate Cajun man. Annie is younger, from Kansas, and blond. Dave finds her irresistibly attractive and describes her as well-endowed and sexually aggressive. Dave refers to Annie as a Mennonite, apparently jokingly, and the two share an obviously intimate, sexual, and close relationship.

Annie makes lunch on the boat and then the couple starts sexual foreplay when Dave sees a distressed aircraft coming in low over the water. The couple watches in horror as the plane crashes into the water, flips over, and sinks near their location. Dave weighs anchor and drives the large fishing boat to the crash site, guided by a spreading oil and gas slick. Annie radios the coast guard and relays information. At the site, Dave dons scuba equipment and dives down to the wreck which he estimates lies in twenty-five feet of water. Annie keeps the boat close by. Dave reaches the wrecked airplane and discovers that it is lying in the mud, flipped upside down. Looking in through the windshield, oddly still intact, he sees the pilot and a female passenger in the front seat, obviously dead. He opens the door and looks inside to find another female passenger and a male passenger, also dead. While moving the male passenger aside, Dave notices a green-and-red snake tattoo on the man's chest, and is reminded of something in Viet Nam. He observes that the two female passengers are Hispanic and subconsciously surmises they must be illegal immigrants.

Dave then sees a young girl who has survived the crash—she is positioned with her head stuck into a rapidly vanishing air pocket trapped against the airplane's floor. Dave grabs the young girl and pulls her from the wreck. He surfaces as quickly as possible and hands the girl to Annie who revives her. Dave boards the boat and the couple makes a run to land where they take the girl to a hospital. At the hospital, Dave claims



the girl is his daughter, named Alafair, even though the nurse informs him the girl speaks nothing but Spanish. After a quick checkup the girl is discharged and Dave and Annie take her to their home. When Annie questions Dave about retaining the girl, he surmises that the girl is an illegal immigrant and now an orphan, and he somewhat weakly falls back upon his father's philosophy of "When in doubt, do nothing" (p. 12). Thus, Dave and Annie retain the girl and determine to keep her as their own.

The next day a government official named Monroe calls at Dave's house. He speculates about the presence of a child—coast guard divers had found children's luggage on the wreck. Dave denies any especial knowledge. Monroe then tells Dave only three people were on the plane—the pilot, a priest named Melancon, and two women, illegal immigrants from El Salvador. Dave insists that a man was aboard, but Monroe says there was not. After Monroe leaves, Dave boats out to the wreck site again and does another dive. He discovers that the airplane appears to have suffered from an internal explosion of some force—doubtless causing the crash. He also locates the shirt that the man was wearing—the man who Monroe had claimed was not aboard. He retrieves the shirt and aboard his boat examines it closely to discover a swizzle stick from a local bar.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

As with any work of fiction, the first chapter is critical to the narrative construction. It establishes a sense of time and place, establishes the tone and texture of the work, and introduces several of the main characters. Additionally, the first chapter of the novel starts the story, or plot, off with an exciting incident that immediately engages the reader and plunges Dave Robicheaux into an unforeseen adventure. The Robicheaux's presence on the water is entirely credible and the subsequent incidents are all fairly believable. That Dave dives with empty tanks adds an element of suspense that might otherwise be lacking. The entire episode sets up the remainder of the novel by introducing the young girl—Alafair, named for Dave's mother. Dave's natural suspicions and law enforcement training are obvious in his encounter with Monroe—he is standoffish but not offensive, and he answers questions evasively without seeming to be overtly evasive. Prompted by Monroe's visit and strange twist of facts, Dave revisits the wrecked plane and recovers a slip clue—a swizzle stick—which is linked to the suspiciously missing dead man.

The weakest part of the chapter, and indeed of the entire novel, concerns Dave's and Annie's impromptu decision to "keep her" (p. 14), referring to Alafair. Taking her to the hospital is intelligible, but the hospital's decision to release the child seems peculiar. Then, taking her home and not informing the authorities is extreme, even given Dave's penchant for mistrusting government officials. His only defense to Annie is that he isn't sure what to do, and thus is doing nothing is not accurate. Doing nothing would be to act conventionally and call the police. Within a few hours, Annie's reticence has given way to a fondness for the girl something akin to a child finding a stray kitten and the couple has effectively absconded with the orphan. While the event sets up an exciting plot, it is not easily credible. On the other hand, Dave's dislike of Monroe and his return to the crash are credible.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

A few days later, Annie mentions that a white Corvette with two men in it is parked down the street. Dave approaches the car but it drives away. Dave decides to investigate further, even though Annie requests that he take no further interest in the situation. Following the lead of the swizzle stick recovered from the dead man's shirt, Dave proceeds to a bar in downtown New Orleans and speaks with Jerry Falgout, the barkeep. Jerry slowly recognizes Dave who had arrested him years earlier as a policeman. Dave then waits around until Robin Gaddis, a stripper for the bar, arrives in the evening. Robin is intoxicated and presented as an attractive alcoholic, a drug addict, a stripper, and a prostitute. Robin and Dave have an apparent but vague relationship from the past, when Robin was interested in Dave; apparently, the feelings were not reciprocated. Dave quizzes Robin about the identity of the man he found dead on the plane, noting the tattoo on his chest. She eventually admits that his name must have been Johnny Dartez and that she has heard he had been working as a drug carrier, or mule, for Bubba Rocque. During the conversation, Jerry provides Robin with several drinks and she gulps them down. Jerry also makes several sarcastic comments and eventually Dave's temper flares.

Later, Dave is called by one Minos P. Dautrieve, a Drug Enforcement Agency agent. Dautrieve was a college basketball star, is an imposing man, and is a fairly straight-shooting and bluff agent. Dave agrees to call on Dautrieve in his office, and finds the man not busy but straightforward. Dautrieve repeatedly suggests that the DEA and Immigration and Naturalization Services are both aware of the plane crash and Bubba's involvement, admits that the DEA does not know what INS is pursuing, and strongly suggests that Dave's best possible course of action is total non-involvement. Dave plies Dautrieve for information and vituperates law enforcement for being restrained by the law itself. Dautrieve suggests that one of the men watching Dave's house in the white Corvette was probably Eddie Keats, a local strong man and suspected hit man, known to occasionally work for Bubba. While Dave is away from his house he asks a trusted friend and employee, Batist, to keep an eye on Annie and the house.

Later, Dave and Annie explain to Alafair that her mother has died but that they will be her new protectors and surrogate parents. Dave feels that rituals are important and bring closure, and he takes Alafair and Annie to a local Catholic church and has Alafair light a candle and they sit and gaze at the altar and ceiling artwork. Dave reflects on Bubba Rocque—a local leader of organized crime and shady business. Dave and Bubba grew up together and are old boxing partners. They eventually parted ways but still keep in touch from time to time. Their complex and subtle relationship is apparently based on begrudging admiration, a certain deal of mutual respect, and the decision to compartmentalize their professional roles. Bubba's criminal activities include drug running and prostitution, but usually do not extend into contract murder. As Dave



considers recent events he decides he must give up his pursuit of clarity in the situation in order to protect Annie and Alafair.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 continues to establish the basic plot and introduces a host of additional minor characters including Robin Gaddis, Jerry Falgout, the late Johnny Dartez, Bubba Rocque, Batist, and Minos P. Dautrieve. The chapter introduces tension into the relationship between Annie and Dave, and this theme will continue to be developed until Annie is murdered. In brief, Annie wants Dave to live a life resigned of all involvement in the shady side of life. She wants him to remain sober and entirely detached from any police-type involvement—and she is very verbal and increasingly forceful about her desires in this regard. On the other hand, Dave is simply unable to resist plunging back into the seedy world of crime and once involved—no matter how tangentially—he cannot simply let it go. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious that Dave is willing to sacrifice his simple and enjoyable life in order to become involved with the ugly side of life in Louisiana and to set things aright, as he sees it. His momentary decision to step back from events does not last long and, even as formed, is tentative and shaky.

Dave's past history—largely detailed in a predecessor novel—is obviously widespread. He walks into a seedy bar in New Orleans and not only recognizes the barkeep but has arrested the man previously. Some time later a stripped walks in that he knows well. He is not the least bit surprised by these events, indicating that in probably any seedy bar in New Orleans similar events might occur. He knows local criminals and crime bosses, knows 'how things work' in the underworld, and is very well known by the various law enforcement officers with whom he comes in contact.



# Chapters 3 and 4

## Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Dave enlists the assistance of a Spanish-speaking acquaintance to hold a family conversation with Annie and Alafair. Alafair tells her story with a special emphasis of the brutality of growing up in war-torn Central America. Alafair does the talking through the interpreter. Shortly after Dave decides to let the situation alone, Batist calls him and explains that a man who rented a boat from their bait shop has run it aground in the bayou and needs assistance. Dave gets in the rescue boat and travels to the site of the apparent grounding. Not expecting anything out of the ordinary, Dave casually turns his back on the strange man claiming the need for help and is blindsided with a bottle. The huge man named Toots then hits and kicks Dave a few times before pinning him in a wrestling hold and forcing his face into the ground. Then another man walks up and delivers a lengthy and somewhat bizarre lecture, in essence telling Dave to mind his own business or he will get hurt. He says they heard Dave was pumping Robin for information, and that Robin was punished by having her fingers broken. He again warns Dave to mind his own business. The man then kicks Dave in the testicles and the two assailants walk away into the bayou. Eventually Dave calls for help, Batist rescues him, and he is admitted to a hospital where he spends the night recovering from his beating. During the night, Dave and Annie have sex. During an interview with the local sheriff, Dave quickly concludes that the sheriff has no intention of doing anything. Dave suspects his assailant to be Eddie Keats but did not see his face; he knows the other man's name is Toots but nothing else.

The next day Dave calls on Dautrieve and again pumps him for information. Dautrieve largely repeats himself from their prior conversation but does tell Dave that Keats owns a few run-down bars. Annie continues to beg and demand that Dave ignore the situation but Dave is now convinced that he alone can set things aright. Fearing for Robin's safety after his next contemplated actions, Dave withdraws some money from the bank and calls on Robin at her home, warding off a John in the process. Robin, fingers bandaged, is drunk and stoned; Dave gives her the money and tells her he has arranged a job for her in Florida, and gives her transportation arrangements. Robin agrees to go. During their conversation Robin reveals that Johnny Dartez and Victor Romero, another man, had been working as drug runners, or mules, for Bubba Rocque when they had been arrested by INS; both men were quickly released. Dave finds this information startling but Robin flatly states it is widely known on the streets. Robin cannot provide further information about Romero and Dave is unfamiliar with that man. Dave next returns to the bar and accosts Jerry, roughing him up and pushing a gun into his face. Jerry confesses that he had reported Dave and Robin's earlier conversation to Bubba for a reward; he denies knowing that Keats was involved and denies knowing anything about Romero. Dave returns home and fights with Annie, later walking out and spending the night in a bar not drinking.





The next day Dave calls on Bubba, driving out to his home and speaking to him directly. Dave more-or-less accuses Bubba of being behind the assault; Bubba flatly denies it, saying that although he knows Keats he does not control him. Dave asks about Johnny Dartez and Victor Romero, and Bubba admits he knows them but does not express much interest in them. Bubba is congenial, blunt, and fairly open with Dave. At the end of the visit Bubba's new wife, Claudette, arrives. She is a sultry woman, aware of her sex. She talks dirty and drinks heavily and openly flirts with both Bubba and Dave. Claudette says she had once dated Dave's brother. Bubba explains that Claudette's mother ran a brothel where Dave and he had called on occasion as youths. Dave finds Claudette seductive and attractive but he is not a man led about by sexual desire.

## Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

Alafair's story is brutally graphic and presented at some length, but has no involvement with the remainder of the plot. The division between Dave and Annie continues to deepen; Annie implores Dave to remain uninvolved but he simply refuses to do so after his beating. The beating itself proves mostly superficial in that Dave has no lasting damage beyond stitches and soreness. As a plot device, the beating gives Dave a credible reason to pursue involvement against Annie's wishes. The local sheriff's obvious reluctance to do anything spurs Dave on. The beating itself, and the resultant injuries, are considered at some length. Although they contribute little to the narrative structure, they do establish a gritty texture and mark Dave as someone capable of sustaining a terrific physical beating without being mentally cowed. Dautrieve's continued conversations with Dave suggest that the DEA agent has some type of hidden agenda involving Dave as a "loose cannon," but Dave does not seem to care. Given their prior discussions and Dave's hazing of Dautrieve regarding INS, it seems only logical that Dautrieve hopes Dave will somehow interfere with INS activities. Dave's Viet Nam flashback during the hospital gives further characterization and also weds his sympathy for Alafair to his prior military involvement. Further characterization is provided Dave during a lengthy recollection about Niccole, his ex-wife, and his hard-drinking days as an alcoholic and violent-prone policeman.

At one point Dave reminisces about "the smell of cordite" (p. 83) in the air at a shooting scene—an unfortunate but common literary mistake referencing an obsolescent British propellant not used in modern ammunition. Chapter 3 and 4 nearly complete the back story of the narrative plot and introduce most of the remaining characters including, notably, Bubba and Claudette Rocque. Dave's relationship with Bubba is close enough to allow him to call directly on the crime boss and openly accuse him of criminal activity—but not close enough that Bubba tells him much information. Bubba appears to be confused by recent events and although he knows most of the people involved he declines having direct involvement in the events, noting truthfully that the criminal underworld is made up of many components—many beyond his influence.



# Chapters 5 and 6

## Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Annie and Dave continue to argue about Dave's desire to be involved in an investigation of the events, even as Dave decides he has squared himself with the nebulous bad guys and can once again withdraw into peaceful life. Dave slowly heals and recovers, and spends some time with his wife and Alafair. He calls Dautrieve on the telephone one night and pumps him for information. Dautrieve, apparently inadvertently, supplies Dave with some information including where to find Keats and the fact that Claudette is bisexual and connected with various figures in the world of crime. Later, Dave travels to Keats' rundown bar and pumps some of the strippers for information and then intimidates them into going home early while he waits for Keats to arrive. Eventually Keats come into the bar and sits at the bar, talking loudly and obnoxiously. Dave grabs a pool cue and blindsides Keats with a single massive blow to the head—Keats goes down as if pole-axed and Dave walks out of the bar. The next day Dautrieve calls on Dave; they talk and exchange information. Dautrieve warns Dave to stay uninvolved because, he says, the INS men involved could be trouble. Dave is flip in his disregard but that evening calls at the Catholic Church and confesses, also stating the obvious—he has a burning desire for alcohol. Later still, Dave asks Annie to visit home for several weeks for her own protection, but she refuses. A few days later, Claudette and Annie and Dave all meet at a local baseball game and Claudette and Annie size each other up.

A few days later a storm runs over New Iberia and Dave can't sleep. He prowls around his property in the night, wandering several hundred yards from his house. Then he sees two men sneak onto the porch and open the door with a crowbar. He starts running to the house and yelling at them, but because of the constantly crashing thunder and driving rain they don't hear him. The men quickly move into the bedroom and open fire with pump shotguns, killing Annie instantly. Dave reaches the house as they begin to exit. Knowing he can do nothing, he hides and overhears the men discussing the botched hit. A few moments later headlights are seen on the road and the men flee into the storm. Dave runs into the house and finds Annie's body shot full of holes. Batist then comes inside—he had heard the shotgun blasts despite the storm. He prevents Dave from taking a gun and running after the men, knowing that it is useless. Batist then helps calm Alafair and Dave.

Dave exists in a kind of haze for about a week and a half, during which Annie is buried. Alafair is shuttled from house to house in the community. Dave then relents to his burning desire to get drunk and goes on a multi-day binge. During his drinking binge he applies for a job at the local sheriff's office and is received favorably because of his past history. He then flies off to Key West and finds Robin. She takes him home after work and, at his request, they have sex. He then pumps her for information about Keats and Toot, his friend, and she makes an attempt to cook for him. He stays with Robin for a day and sobers up a little, and then returns to New Iberia.



## Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

The novel's first phase concludes in Chapter 6—Dave has become tangentially embroiled in some type of criminal activity, has danced around becoming involved, and has decided to remain apart in order to secure his family life. However, he is unable to resist evening up the score with Keats and thus pays back his own beating by smashing Keats with a pool cue. Obviously, a violent sociopath like Keats will not see this as quid-pro-quo and, as expected, Keats seeks revenge, accompanied by a man later determined to be Victor Romero. By happenstance, Dave is near home but not at home when the two thugs come calling and thus he escapes becoming a murder victim. No such luck for Annie, and she is pumped full of lead while in bed. Once again, the narrative makes several unfortunate references to 'cordite' (p. 140 and p. 153) in considering the events. The foreshadowing of Annie's death is fairly heavy-handed and can be easily seen in various passages. The meeting between Claudette and Annie foreshadows Claudette's more menacing role in the latter part of the novel—a role that Dave does not suspect for quite some time.

Note that Dave's various flashbacks to Viet Nam and life as a young man with his father provide interesting parallels to his current situation. He recalls events because they were morally equivalent to his current situation. Thus, for example, finding himself alone without Annie he muses about a time when he was alone without his father. Alafair continues to function within the narrative as a type of reality-check to Dave, but her significance dwindles away after Annie is murdered. Her care is given over to Batist and then one of Dave's cousins.

Dave succumbs to his inner demons and engages on a prolonged bout of serious drinking. Throughout this period he spends many nights passed out in the bayou and many days drinking in a bar. He also flies to Key West and seeks solace in the arms of Robin. She treats him with an interesting mix of motherly love and whorish accessibility; she is accomplished as a prostitute and even infers that Dave's sexual liaison is a freebie. She is not adept in the kitchen, but at least tries. Robin has been fairly successful in getting herself cleaned up during her stay in Key West, and she has lost touch with former associates. The plot takes a turn when Dave applies for a job as a policeman. In another moment of strained credibility, the obviously drunken Dave is seriously considered by the sheriff who knows that Dave's first official work will concern investigating the murder of his wife Annie. The sheriff is apparently as incompetently goofy as Dave suspects him to be because he concludes that hiring Dave would be a sensible thing to do. In return, Dave promises to not work drunk and promises to not pursue vengeance over justice. At least, not too much of either.



# Chapters 7 and 8

## Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

Dave canvasses Lafayette for information but comes up empty. He ponders Bubba's potential involvement and decides the man is probably not involved. His background check completed and approved, Dave then starts working as a policeman again. Nearly immediately he goes to New Orleans for a two-day stint and canvasses the city looking for clues. He is alerted that a man has been found dead in a bathtub and investigates the scene. Dave identifies the man as Toot, and it appears that he was murdered—inasmuch as he was electrocuted in the bathtub. Dave finally calls on Monroe, convinced that if INS is somehow behind events that Monroe might offer up information. Instead, Monroe babbles apologies but does not offer information. Confused, Dave returns home. His new boss, the sheriff, is infuriated that Dave has gone out of his patrol area and so forth, and retaliates by assigning Dave a partner—Cecil Aguillard. Cecil is a dim-witted monster of a man, and Dave thinks he is a mixture of Cajun, Negro, and Chitimacha Indian; he refers to him as a redbone. Dave and Cecil get along fairly well and Cecil slowly comes to respect and even like Dave.

One evening as Dave walks around his property a man—later determined to be Victor Romero—attempts to murder him by shooting him with a high-power, scoped rifle. Dave avoids the attack and returns fire with his pistol, putting several rounds into the escape vehicle. Some few days later Dave returns home from work and finds Claudette sitting on his porch; she claims her car had a flat nearby and asks for a ride into town. Dave obliges but remains cool and distant as Claudette flirts and then openly propositions him. Dave states he is not a fool and drops an angry Claudette at a bar. Later on, Dautrieve visits Dave's house and they exchange minor news.

The next day Bubba blindsides Dave on a street corner and the two men exchange brutal blows until they are both exhausted. Cecil stops the fight and cuffs Bubba, who claims to be enraged because Dave has putatively had sex with Claudette. Dave denies this, and then lets Bubba go. Bubba responds by telling Dave flatly that he has had no involvement in the various goings on, even though most of those who are involved are tangential associates. Dave accepts this as fact and Bubba walks. A few hours later the shot-up escape vehicle is found. Dave calls Dautrieve and, with Cecil, they investigate the scene. It is the vehicle and a corpse is inside—but it is Keats and not Romero. It appears that Keats was shot through the heart at point-blank range.

## Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

Chapter 7 begins a new phase in the novel—Dave is now a policeman and as such is exempt from many minor annoyances and simultaneously privy to some additional information. He travels extensively and spends many, many hours canvassing various neighborhoods looking for clues about Annie's murder. In short, he comes up empty-



handed nearly all of the time. However, fortuitous events combine to lead him haltingly forward. His trip to New Orleans makes his boss mad, and it is a bit of a stretch of believability in the narrative that after his strong initial misgivings he nevertheless tolerates such blatant misbehavior.

With Toot's and Keats' deaths it becomes fairly obvious that the higher-level man involved must be Victor Romero, but whom Romero takes orders from is still cloudy; Romero's second attempt on Dave's life indicates that somebody above Romero is giving orders. Logically, Romero must work for Bubba. However, Dave knows Bubba well enough to know when he is telling the truth and after their fisticuffs, Bubba's flat denial convinces Dave that Bubba has not been involved—at least, not knowingly. Dave's suspicions haltingly then go to some sort of governmental conspiracy. Dautrieve, still developing a slow friendship with Dave, scoffs at this idea. In the end, Dave's wilder speculations prove baseless.

Claudette again appears in the narrative and once again is presented as a sleazy drunk, attempting to manipulate Dave by climbing into his truck cab and spreading her legs apart. Dave realizes, however, that Bubba is not to be trifled with and brusquely dismisses Claudette's advances—which angers her and makes a minor spectacle which is quickly reported to Bubba. These chapters of the novel, with the death of Keats and Toot, propel the narrative beyond the initial 'bad men doing bad things to innocent people' stage toward the conclusion and the resolution of the overarching plot.



# Chapters 9 and 10

## Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Dave continues his job and begins to drown in unwanted paperwork; he is good street cop but the administrative side of the job is definitely not his strong point. Going home early one day he happens upon Robin, suitcase in tow, just arriving at his house. She explains that she had told off her boss about illegal activity and has been fired. She says that she must either come to Dave or return to prostitution. He invites her to live with him and Alafair and work at his boat and bait shop. Robin moves in and they become lovers; Dave contemplates why men fall in love with different types of women.

One night Dautrieve calls. He states that Dave's enemies keep turning up dead and asks if Dave is involved—Dave says no. Dautrieve then says that some people in the government are willing to cut a deal with Romero; in exchange for leniency he will provide much information on many people. Dave states that he will not cooperate. Over the next several days Dave and Robin pursue the semblance of a family life. Then, Romero calls Dave and says that he has cut a deal with Federal agents, except that Dave's refusal to come on board has stalled the process. Romero says that Dave must help him with the plea bargain or pay the consequences. In exchange, he offers to tell Dave all the particulars about Annie's death. Romero gives Dave a few days to think about the offer, but Dave immediately makes up his mind that he will not cooperate. During the call, Dave hears a streetcar bell and strange noises in the background and concludes the streetcar must be a New Orleans streetcar. He then spends days in New Orleans and Lafayette canvassing the streets for information about Romero, but he comes up empty-handed.

Then, Dave learns that Jerry has been arrested in a town far to the north. He drives to the local jail and talks to Jerry, offering to pull strings for information. Jerry racks his brain and is only able to remember that Romero has a first cousin who runs a laundry somewhere in New Orleans; it's scant information. The next day Dave prowls around New Orleans, moving up and down the only remaining streetcar line and looking at laundry operations. There are only four and he quickly eliminates three as unlikely. He spends the remainder of the day staking out the fourth, and passes the time by tormenting himself with various negative mental exercises. Finally, he sees Romero walking back to his apartment with a bag of groceries. Dave discerns that Romero is armed, and so he follows him stealthily to an upstairs apartment located over the laundry. Dave enters and surprises Romero, who then flees into another room and starts blasting away with a shotgun. Dave returns fire and hears Romero run up stairs. Dave pursues and sees weak floorboards slowly bending down as Romero creeps around upstairs. Dave fires several shots through the ceiling and hears Romero scream and then fall down the stairs. Dying, Romero tells Dave that he murdered Annie. Dave calls the police and makes a statement. With the police, Dave searches Romero's apartments for any clues but doesn't find anything substantive. Dave does notice, however, rings on Romero's table. Tasting the dried residue, Dave discerns lime. Dave





then returns home—helping out a homeless man on the long drive. At home he talks to Robin and they have sex.

The next day Robin cleans up the room where Annie was murdered. Dave, reflecting that his father had built the house, becomes angry with Robin's actions but she flares back at him and the let the moment pass by. Later in the day Dautrieve appears and Dave takes him fishing. They talk and fish while Dautrieve offers sincere advice which Dave will, later, disregard nearly entirely. Obviously, the two men have become friends.

## Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

The main sub-plot in Chapters 9 and 10 consists of Victor Romero's involvement in Annie's death. Dave and Annie witnessed a plane crash; Dave has since discovered that the plane was sabotaged by a bomb in order to kill Jonny Dartez, a drug-runner for Bubba turned informant. Against the advice of literally everyone he knows, Dave investigated the plane crash and discovers that the DEA and the INS are both involved. Dave gets a subsequent warning to back off by receiving a beating from Keats and Toot. Instead of taking the warning, Dave returns the favor and beats Keats. Dave gets a subsequent serious warning when Keats and Romero murder Annie while attempting to murder Dave. Then Toot shows up dead and Dave is moderately implicated. Romero then makes a second attempt on Dave, after which Keats shows up dead and Dave is again implicated. All signs point to Romero operating on Bubba's orders, but Dave knows Bubba and Bubba assures Dave that he is not involved. The narrative provides two possible explanations for the events. First, either INS or DEA is running some type of governmental conspiracy, which seems incredible and dismissed by both Dautrieve and Monroe. Second, perhaps someone besides Bubba partially is running Bubba's affairs. Bubba dismisses the second option as idiotic. Claudette's repeated appearance in the narrative, seemingly without purpose, strongly foreshadows her later involvement and ultimate culpability. In any event, Dave pursues Romero relentlessly, tracks him down, and kills him in a gunfight. Dave then notes the single most-important clue in the novel—dried out condensation rings on Romero's table. Rings that taste like lime, and are the large size of Claudette's habitual thermos. Dave realizes that Claudette has called on Romero on at least one occasion, and that she is in a position to be running Bubba's affairs without Bubba's knowledge or permission.

The writing through Chapter 10 is remarkably strong and Dave's bleak introspection just before and subsequent to Romero's death by shooting is particularly well-written. Another unfortunate reference to cordite (p. 264) contrasts poorly with otherwise exceptionally accurate firearms writing throughout the book. During his transition period, Dave increasingly turns to Robin for support, sexual release, and companionship. She acquiesces even as she comes to realize that Dave's interest in her is fairly non-committal. Also throughout this period Dave gets back on the wagon and cleans up his behavior. The fact that Dave has now been implicated in two deaths and involved in one death of men he has a reason to want dead is treated rather lightly by law enforcement officials in and around New Orleans, perhaps as a nod to his distinguished career, but this element of the narrative is difficult somewhat to accept.



# Chapter 11 and Epilogue

## Chapter 11 and Epilogue Summary

Dave returns to New Iberia and has conversations with his boss, Dautrieve, Batist, and Robin. He then goes and talks to Bubba, and spells out Claudette's involvement with Romero. Bubba brushes off Dave's accusations, but Dave also notes that Bubba has recently become involved with the mafia and that Claudette is apparently running many things that Bubba is unaware of. Bubba blusters and balks, but does not attack Dave directly. A few days later Dautrieve calls Dave and tells him that Bubba has publicly beaten Claudette; Dautrieve again suggests Dave remain entirely uninvolved. The next day Dave drives out to Bubba's house. As he approaches the house, he sees one of Bubba's cars streaking away from the house and, in the rear view mirror, sees the car pull into a bar's parking lot. Dave finds the house locked up tight and vacant, and finds a fire burning behind a shed—on the fire is a mostly-burned mattress, but he recovers some mattress covering soaked in blood. He smashes out a window and enters the house. Looking around, he finds the shower curtain missing, the bed stripped of linen and even a mattress, and large wet spots on the floor from a recent scrubbing. He easily determines that either Bubba or Claudette has murdered the other. He then looks around the grounds and sees where body-sized area of the garden has been recently turned up. He gets a rake and digs down several inches only to discover Bubba's body wrapped in the shower curtain, the murder weapon—a cane knife—buried alongside. Dave calls the police and tells them of his discovery.

Dave then drives to the bar where he saw the car park. Entering, he sees Claudette at a table smoking and drinking, her face bruised and swollen. He handcuffs her to the chair, arrests her, and telephones the police. While Dave is on the phone, Claudette smashes the wood chair and runs outside. Dave finishes his call quickly, pursues Claudette, and stops her flight. She collapses onto the muddy ground, and looks sad and bedraggled in the rain. Dave covers her with a piece of dirty tarpaulin he finds nearby. The police arrive and Claudette, blustering with obviously false bravado, is taken away. Dave continues to work as a policeman for about two weeks and then quits. He spends the next weeks fishing with Robin until she leaves him one morning with a note telling him she knows he doesn't love her and it's time for her to move on. She does tell him where he can find her. Later, Dave and Batist go out to the place on the open water where Dave's father had been killed in a drilling accident on a platform. Dave drops flowers into the water and reminisces about his childhood.

## Chapter 11 and Epilogue Analysis

Note that the novel closes with Dave musing in the present tense, indicating that the narrative has brought the reader fully 'up to date' in Dave's life. Although the novel does not follow a rigorous timeline, it is evident that the events described have consumed about one summer season. Dave's life being interrupted, it appears that the significant





personal changes involve only the loss of Annie and the acquisition of Alafair. With his background, it is unlikely that his involvement in the events will otherwise impact him personally.

Dave 'handles' his situation by realizing that criminals like Bubba and Claudette will always turn on each other when the going gets tough. After using Toot and Keats, Claudette ordered Romero to kill them in such a way as to implicate Dave. Romero, a smart and amoral man, complied. Obviously, had Dave not done the job Claudette would have subsequently turned on Romero. The Federal agencies wanting to bring Romero in on a plea bargain were obviously looking toward Bubba's recent ties with the Mafia, in which Romero was putatively involved. Dave thus simply tells Bubba of Claudette's machinations and lets the married couple sort it out. Bubba is predictable and responds by smashing Claudette's face in. She responds in a colder and far more calculated way, and murders him in bed, probably while he was sleeping. She then hides the body and presumably thinks she's getting away with murder, except that she's done exactly what Dave figured she would do.



# Characters

## Dave Robicheaux

Dave Robicheaux is the dominant character in the novel by any standard. He is the protagonist, the narrator, and is present in every scene. Much of the novel is given over to his personal introspection, personal history, and emotional consideration of events. He describes himself as middle-aged, physically fit, strong and fast, an accurate natural shot, and a recovering alcoholic. He has black hair with a whitish streak on one side—explaining why Robin Gaddis refers to him often as Streak. Dave is a man of action and finds paperwork and routine boring and irritating. His Catholic upbringing finds him often in church and he is devoted to and taken in by the bayou and the culture surrounding New Iberia. Dave has a complex history and is a subtle and interesting blend of devoted friend and husband, and vicious predator of evil-doers.

Dave has a compelling need to right wrongs and discover the causes of situations. Thus, when Alafairs plane crashes, Dave simply must find out why, regardless of the cost. On several occasions in the novel he decides that he must abandon his pursuit for the safety of others—but every time he gives in to his unrelenting passion to fix what is wrong with the world. Dave's past history includes pitching in local baseball, boxing in high school, avid hunting and fishing with his father, a tour of duty in Viet Nam, a stint as a prison guard, and several years with the New Orleans police department. Dave is divorced from Niccole prior to marrying Annie. He is also a recovering alcoholic and is frequently consumed with a burning desire to drink—a desire he usually sacrifices to his Higher Power to avoid the predictable consequences. Dave's successful and compelling characterization is one of the obviously enjoyable aspects of the novel.

## Annie Robicheaux, nee Ballard

Annie Robicheaux, nee Ballard, is a thirty-something white woman from Kansas. Nominally raised a Mennonite, Annie does not fit in with the dominant social milieu of New Iberia but is nevertheless widely accepted because of her graciousness, intelligence, and kind heart. She is described as physically attractive, with golden hair, white skin and large breasts. She has a well-developed sex drive and likes having sex in the open and is generally unconcerned about being seen having sex. She and Dave have been married only a few years when the novel opens, but Annie is fully accustomed to her new life and moves with ease around the house and area. She is particularly beloved by Batist and his family and has managed to settle down Dave's wilder streak.

Annie quickly grows attached to Alafair and mentions that she has always desired to be a mother while being biologically incapable of having her own children. When Dave begins to pursue his old career as a policeman, Annie vehemently objects and flip flops between angry resentment and resigned acceptance though on a few occasions she



threatens to leave Dave if he doesn't give up his pursuit of revenge. Annie murdered by Eddie Keats and Victor Romero, who pump her full of buckshot while she sleeps in bed. Her funeral is attended by her parents who are distant from Dave, blaming him in part for the death of their daughter. Annie is a major character prior to her death and is an intelligent, gracious, and beautiful woman.

## Alafair

Alafair is a young girl who flees Nicaragua with her mother to escape the violence of civil war. Alafair is the only survivor of the plane crash witnessed by Dave and Annie in the opening scene of the novel. Alafair is subsequently, and unofficially, adopted by Dave and Annie and subsequently lives with them. After Annie is murdered Alafair is shuttled between Batist and one of Dave's cousins until Robin Gaddis arrives and provides stable home care. Alafair speaks only Spanish but learns some English by the end of the novel. Although present in many scenes she is not a notable character in the book and functions mostly as motive force for Dave's desire to right the wrongs of the world. Because she is a war refugee, she awakens in Dave many memories of Viet Nam.

## Robin Gaddis

Robin Gaddis is a thirty-something alcoholic white woman who works as a stripper and prostitute in order to support her drug habit. She is very vulgar and usually speaks of herself in an abstracted third-person as 'mommy'. Robin is convinced that her best asset is her large bosom and when she is not displaying her breasts she is usually talking about them. Fairly intelligent and insightful, Robin does not consider herself as capable of much more than being an object of sexual desire. At the opening of the novel Dave seeks out Robin for information and this contact endangers her. She has her fingers broken for talking to Dave but is not otherwise harmed because she is, as Eddie Keats says, "money on the hoof" (p. 58). Knowing that she will not escape so easily after he takes revenge on Eddie Keats, Dave effectively rescues Robin by buying her a ticket to Key West, Florida, and securing a job for her there. Robin responds by cleaning up her act, getting sober, and working—a fairly surprising twist for such an inveterate drinker.

Dave calls on Robin after Annie is murdered and she comforts him by having sex with him. Some weeks later she returns to New Iberia and moves in with Dave, acting as his lover, friend, and housekeeper. Some weeks later Robin drifts away, leaving a note for Dave and telling him he's been a good friend. While Robin is a well-developed character but her remarkable turn-around, free of relapse, is somewhat unbelievable. Her character's appearance in the novel is somewhat episodic, and she is not present for most of the middle portion of the book.



## Batist

Batist is Dave's closest friend and works with Dave at the bait shop that Dave owns. Batist is married and has kids and lives more-or-less next door to Dave. Batist is described as a veritable giant of a man—Dave is a big man but is at least a head shorter than Batist. Batist speaks an enjoyable patois of Cajun and English, is uneducated but intelligent and insightful, and has a good sense of humor and remains devoted to duty and friendship. Indeed, Batist is the most moral character presented in the book and represents a positive side of humanity that is nearly entirely lacking in any of the other characters. Batist is a minor but recurrent character and arrives at several key points to interrupt the action—for example, he literally saves Dave's life by driving up after Annie is murdered and while the hit men are looking for Dave.

## Bubba and Claudette Rocque

Bubba and Claudette Rocque are a married couple who run the local organized crime rackets in and around New Iberia. Dave and Bubba grew up together and often fished, played, fought, and boxed with each other in their youths. Bubba knew Dave's father, and Dave knew Bubba's father. Bubba is described as pure muscle and possessed of strength, dexterity, and a violent temper. His grey eyes appear not to focus and his face rarely shows any emotion. Bubba is preoccupied with retaining his youthful physique and boxing prowess and in most respects is what one would expect of a crime boss—greedy, selfish, uneducated, and besotted with loose women and expensive toys.

Claudette is Bubba's recent wife. She is described as a dominant and aggressive lesbian who has served prison time and is not above hiring contract murderers. If murder won't solve the problem she opens her legs to influence men. Claudette is described only in sexually charged terms and like all women in the novel has a good body, heavy breasts, and a constant sex drive. Claudette has a particular fondness for lime rickey and likes to drink it from a thermos.

The novel's plot's causative tension concerns a power struggle between Bubba and Claudette. Claudette is attempting to take over Bubba's crime network and join it to the Mafia—Bubba remains entirely ignorant of these machinations until informed by Dave. Bubba thereupon beats Claudette publicly and she responds by murdering Bubba as he sleeps.

## Eddie Keats and Toot

Eddie Keats is a thug and contract killer who owns a few bars, pimps, and sells drugs. Vaguely associated with Bubba Rocque, Eddie Keats is a more-or-less free agent who keeps out of others' business and lives a life of crime. Originally from New York, he talks with a funny accent, uses strange idioms, and is glaringly out of place in the bayou. He wears cowboy boots and jeans. He is loud, obnoxious, and full of bluster. Keats works as a strong man for Claudette Rocque and is directed by Victor Romero. Keats and Toot



beat up Dave early in the novel, and Dave then seeks out and beats up Keats. Keats accompanies Romero on the attempted murder of Dave and participates in the murder of Annie. For his troubles, Keats is in turn murdered by Romero who attempts to frame Dave for Keats' death.

Toot is originally from Haiti and is a strong adherent of a vaguely defined type of witchcraft. Toot enjoys torturing and killing women and keeps a collection of Polaroid photographs of past victims. He helps to beat up Dave and then breaks Robin Gaddis' fingers by slamming them in a door. Toot is little more than a violent thug who does what Keats tells him to do. For his troubles, Toot is murdered by Romero who attempts to frame Dave for Toot's death.

## **Minos P. Dautrieve and Monroe**

Minos P. Dautrieve is an ex-college-basketball player who works as a law enforcement officer for the DEA. Dautrieve is described as a muscular man in excellent shape with blond hair worn in a crew cut so short that his scalp is always visible. Dautrieve befriends Dave and the two men develop a working relationship and, later, genuine friendship. Throughout the novel, Dautrieve functions as a voice of caution, restraint, and reason to offset Dave's rash behavior—Dave consistently ignored Dautrieve's advice. Dautrieve is a minor but recurrent character who acts as a sounding board for Dave and who occasionally provides crucial pieces of information.

Monroe works for the INS and is little more than a governmental functionary. At some points in the novel Dave suspects Monroe of spearheading a nebulous governmental conspiracy, an idea that Dautrieve correctly dismisses as fantastic.

## **Victor Romero**

Victor Romero is of vague Hispanic origin and is described as a strong but wiry man, of thin build, with light skin and many curly ringlets of black hair which he wears oiled. Romero served in Viet Nam as a sniper and at one point brags of a prolonged field operation during which he collected human ears as grisly kill trophies. Dave verifies at least that aspect of Romero's story by examining the wizened ears after killing Romero. Romero's intelligent behavior throughout the novel indicates he is a dangerous man capable of inflicting enormous wrongs upon any who cross his path.

Romero works for Claudette Rocque and is the brains behind her goon squad. Romero in turn directs the actions of Keats and Toot, two small-time scumbags who haze and then beat up Dave. Romero and Keats later attempt to murder Dave, instead finding Annie home alone and murdering her by shotgun. Romero later kills Toot and Keats both, and does it in such a way as to implicate Dave. Romero also attempts a second time to murder Dave by sniping at him in the woods. Of all the bad guys presented in the novel, Romero easily is the least sympathetic and is wholly given over to crime and hate. When Dave tries to arrest him, Romero forcibly resists and is killed in the ensuing gunfight.



## Cecil Aguillard and the Lafayette Sheriff

After Dave is assaulted by Eddie Keats and Toot, the Lafayette Parish sheriff visits the hospital to process forms. It becomes quickly apparent that the sheriff is not going to pursue much of anything. Later, Dave applies for a job with the sheriff's office and gets it. The sheriff appears to have brain damage because he knows Dave is on an alcoholic binge and is only interested in taking the job so he can get revenge on the men who murdered his wife. After Dave vanishes for a few days of quasi-legal activity, the sheriff assigns him a partner named Cecil Aguillard.

Dave described Aguillard as a gigantic man of mixed extraction and usually refers to him as a redbone. Cecil is slow-witted but loyal, and not against roughing up a bad guy from time to time. Cecil is involved in much of Dave's early detective work and the two men have some respect for each other and quickly learn how to effectively operate as a team. Cecil remains a minor character and plays little significant role in the novel.



# Objects/Places

## New Iberia

New Iberia is a city, and the parish seat, of Iberia Parish in Louisiana. A portion of the parish borders the sea along an expanse of bayou, and Dave's house is located in this wetlands area. The town was settled at the end of the 1770s and has a long and colorful history, much of which is tangentially addressed in the novel. New Iberia is the dominant setting for most of the novel and is particularly beloved by the protagonist.

## Dave's House

Dave Robicheaux, the protagonist and narrator, live in a wooden house built by his father. The house is fairly well described and is well-built, sturdy, and of fair size. It is surrounded by an expansive piece of property and has been Dave's home for his entire life. Dave's house is the specific setting for most of the non-violent scenes of the novel, as well as the scene of Annie's murder.

## Lafayette

Lafayette is a city, and the parish seat, of Lafayette Parish in Louisiana. Lafayette parish borders Iberia Parish and within the novel the two locales share many similarities. Eddie Keats operates a bar in Lafayette, and it is in this city where much of the early violent scenes of the novel are set. In the latter portion of the novel, Dave obtains a job working for the Lafayette sheriff's office.

## New Orleans

New Orleans is a world-famous city and is co-extensive with New Orleans Parish in Louisiana. New Orleans is some distant east of New Iberia but in many ways shares the same characteristics of that locale. Within the novel, New Orleans functions as a place of medium distance where various criminals flee during periods when they desire to be anonymous. Dave travels to New Orleans on several occasions, most of which are uneventful. On his last visit to the big city presented in the novel, Dave is involved in a shootout which leaves Victor Romero dead and Dave in a black depression.

## INS and DEA

Immigration and Naturalization Service, INS, and Drug Enforcement Agency, DEA, are two Federal governmental organizations that take a role in the novel's early plot development. Both organizations have vague dealings with minor criminals and therefore come under Dave's scrutiny. Early on, Dave suspects one or both of the



organizations are involved in some type of grand conspiracy but this is not the case. Minos P. Dautrieve, a minor but recurrent character, works for DEA while Monroe works for INS.

## The Shot-up Toyota

Victor Romero steals a Toyota and uses it during his attempt on Dave's life. Dave responds by shooting at Romero while he is fleeing in the Toyota. Dave's accuracy ensures that the Toyota is well shot-up before Romero makes good his escape. The Toyota is subsequently found in the bayou and when salvaged is discovered to contain the body of Keats. The shot-up Toyota is a major link between two plot elements and the car and its salvage are particularly well described in the novel.

## Alcohol

Nearly every character in the novel drinks alcohol, most to excess. Alcohol is rarely presented in a social setting within the book, and instead forms the basic rationale behind most gatherings in the book—in other words characters in the novel get together in bars so they can get drunk. For many, sex with a prostitute follows. Alcohol is Dave's particular demon and as a recovering alcoholic he thinks often about the burning allure of alcohol.

## Dave's .45

Dave has a .45 ACP Colt's pistol dating from his military service in Viet Nam. He uses the gun nearly exclusively in the novel and prefers it over the .38 Smith & Wesson Special revolver that is issued to him by the police department. Dave uses his .45 on several occasions including the shootout with Victor Romero. The gun functions within the narrative as a source of concentrated violent power and Dave's fascination with the gun and hollow-point ammunition is nearly fetishistic.

## Claudette's Thermos

Claudette is an alcoholic who prefers to drink cooled lime rickey from a thermos. The thermos is larger than a standard glass and because it is insulated the outside sweats. Claudette uses the thermos to gain attention on one occasion, throwing it clattering down the street so that everyone around will see her getting out of Dave's truck. Later, Dave notices the large thermos rings dried on Victor Romero's table and that tiny clue brings the entire plot development together.



## **Victor Romero's Many Ears**

Victor Romero represents the worst of the worst—an intelligent and completely amoral man devoid of scruple who glories in brutality and torture. His evil nature is represented most visually by his one prized possession—a string of severed and desiccated human ears borne on his G.I. dog-tag chain. The ears date from the Viet Nam war where Romero operated as a sniper.



# Themes

## Bad Things Happen

The dominant theme of the novel is driven by plot and is itself fairly simple—bad things happen because bad people act selfishly. The novel presents a nearly endless string of horrible occurrences, from the brutal murder of Annie to the earlier death of Dave's father—a death caused by insufficient safety precautions caused by cutting corners to make an oil company more profitable. The book discusses prostitutes being burned alive; prison inmates being homosexually raped; women being blown up by bombs; scenes of torture in Viet Nam; pregnant women being ritually murdered by machete; incessant drug, alcohol, and tobacco use; endless streams of prostitutes, con men, thieves, and human scum; and even senile old women being shoved down stairways. Beside all of these horrific details, the gunfight killing of Victor Romero seems a minor event involving some minor use of force. The knifing of Bubba seems a nearly idyllic end to a career of disgusting activity leaving a swath of destruction as a wake of personal prosperity.

Faced with this overwhelming theme set against a larger backdrop of corruption and organized crime, Dave faces life with a steely resolve to get payback when possible, set what wrongs to right one can, and make do as best as one is able. The novel offers no maudlin solution to the problem but does establish the fact that some choose to be good despite the influence of culture, society, and black side of human nature.

## Burning Desire

Dave is consumed by a desire to be up against the seedy and evil aspect of humanity. In several memorable passages, he describes himself as being worn away by friction as a stripped gear or bolt. The friction in Dave's life is an exciting element and is derived from his direct involvement with criminal activity—but as the opponent, not the participant. Thus, when his wife threatens to leave him if he does not remove himself from being a policeman, Dave is ready to let her walk away. When she later begs and argues that he is putting her at risk, he is willing to accept that risk. After her murder there is little thought of changing course—instead, Dave's desire for revenge is intensified. He sacrifices his family and well-being to his burning desire for the gloomier things in life. This theme of haunted desire is supported by several elements in the novel—the most obvious being Dave consuming passion, nearly a genetic need, for alcohol. Although a recovering alcoholic, he is still tormented by the desire for drink nearly every day and occasionally succumbs to it.

Other elements that contribute to this theme are Dave's passionate sexual encounters with Annie and, later, Robin. These encounters are described as agonizingly prolonged waits for release and fulfillment of his typical male desire. Robin acts as a good support to Dave in this manner, being herself consumed by desire for alcohol, drug highs, and



sex. In many ways, nearly every character of the book is controlled by their passions and, unfortunately for the innocent, their passions are typical of human failure.

## Parents and Children

Dave is a very introspective character and spends much of his personal time remembering his father. Mr. Robicheaux was an uneducated, Cajun man who liked whiskey, women, and fun. He also was a hard-worker and felt responsible for his son. Dave was raised in the bayou by his single father. Their relationship was exceptionally close and they spent most free time fishing, hunting—especially for waterfowl, and camping. Dave's worldview is largely informed by his father's simple and small conception of the world, where right is simply right and wrong is wrong. Dave has little gray zone of morality and finds the ineffectiveness and strictures of legal due process ridiculous; this is inherited from his father who was a hard-charging man of little remorse. Dave's father died in an oil platform accident when Dave was an adult, but Dave has keenly felt the loss ever since. This theme of the novel is persistent and stands fairly apart from other elements in the narrative. It explains, however, who Dave is and where he comes from.

The theme is echoed by Alafair and her arrival in Dave's life—quite literally dropping out of the sky and into Dave's and Annie's life. They immediately decide to 'keep' Alafair (Dave names her after his mother) even though that course of action obviously raises several serious issues, not the least of which is their inability to speak with the Spanish-speaking infant. Dave proves a devoted and nearly doting father, though frequently absent. In most ways, Dave has matured to become the man his father once was and it is interesting to see him realize this as the novel progresses.



# Style

## Point of View

The narrative is offered from the first-person, limited, point of view, with a past-tense verb construction familiar to any reader. The narrator is Dave Robicheaux, the protagonist and principle character in all of the scenes of the novel; he is entirely reliable as a narrator. The narrative frequently reveals the inner thoughts, feelings, and recollections of Dave but not of other characters. The narration is offered in the same tone and gritty texture as the novel's dialogue and Dave's world-view, values, and perception heavily colors the narrative construction and the novel's flow. This method of construction yields an incredibly textured novel that is simultaneously interesting, engaging, and accessible.

The novel's plot relies heavily upon a series of chronological events that transpire subsequent to the opening scene of an airplane crash. Most of the developments are credible—in fact, many appear inexorable—though some few strain credulity (for example, Dave and Annie's decision to simply keep Alafair, and the Lafayette sheriff's hiring of Dave to investigate Annie's murder). The novel presents few surprises and most events are fairly heavily foreshadowed by Dave's statements, observations, or reminiscing about past times.

## Setting

The novel's development of setting is unquestionably one of its strongest elements. The novel opens on the water off New Iberia, Louisiana, and is subsequently generally contained within a few score miles of that area. The narration is confined nearly entirely to Dave Robicheaux, the protagonist and narrator, and he moves through Lafayette Parish, New Orleans, and some surrounding areas with the casual familiarity of someone who was born and bred to the area. The narrator has a strong attraction to the natural world and spends much time outside, never missing an opportunity to closely examine some natural object or take in the natural splendor of the bayou. Indeed, much of the novel is given over to lengthy descriptions of the region, descriptions that border upon the poetic.

The narrator also has a keen eye for taking in urban details, with a predilection to focus on blight and the seedy side of concentrated humanity. Of course this predilection is only magnified by the novel's setting of New Orleans and surrounding urban areas. Thus, the narrator usually begins each scene by describing the setting and establishing a moody, brooding texture that colors the subsequent action.



## Language and Meaning

The novel features a rich and textured language derived from mainstream crime thriller narratives touched with Cajun and street slang. Several passages are presented in Cajun French, usually with English translation, and most dialogue is gritty and believable. The novel presents numerous profanities, usually delivered through dialogue, and numerous graphic descriptions of violence, sex, and sexual situations. Scenes of beatings, murder, sexual mutilation and sexual murder, and prostitution are presented. Drug use, alcohol use, and smoking are pervasive. Female characters are nearly always sexualized and their descriptions rely heavily upon a description of their merits of physical attractiveness. Most of the few female characters are strippers, prostitutes, or aggressively sexual lesbians. Conversely, male characters are described in non-sexual terms and their descriptions rely upon comments on personal cleanliness, physical conditioning, and tendency toward criminal activity.

Within the novel meaning is derived in an easily conventional manner—the narrative construction is typical and unexceptional. Events are foreshadowed fairly heavily and decisive events are fully described in easily-understood detail. The only area in which meaning becomes fuzzy concerns the prevalent use of slang terms and casual innuendo to imply meaning; these cases are common but never refer to critical plot components.

## Structure

The 308-page novel is divided into eleven enumerated chapters and a concise epilogue. Chapters are arranged in a chronological order such that events in Chapter 2 transpire after events in Chapter 1 but before events in Chapter 3, and so forth. Exceptions to this are presented in recollections of characters and are clearly indicated as such. Because of this traditional chronological approach, events in the novel are easily placed in time, relative to other events. Much of the plot's suspense is derived from the narrator's gradual piecing together of the entire series of events that leads to his involvement in the situation—these non-chronological events are described by other characters and nearly always are offered in dialogue.

In addition to strong plotting and a remarkably developed setting, the novel's success relies heavily on characterization and this is excellent, if predictable, throughout. Nearly every character's first appearance includes a paragraph-length description of physicality and notable behavioral traits. Later characterization includes the narrator's comments and, often, reminiscing about the characters in the novel. This results in most characters—including even minor characters—being fairly developed. Of course, the characterization suffers because of the fact that nearly all characters are fairly stereotypical. It is critical to realize that the novel is part of a series of novels, and hence Dave has been characterized in prior works.



## Quotes

"Why did you lie back there?" Annie said.

"I'm not sure."

"Dave..."

"She's probably an illegal. Why make problems for the nuns?"

"So what if she's an illegal?"

"Because I don't trust government pencil pushers and paper shufflers, that's why."

"I think I hear the voice of the New Orleans police department."

"Annie, immigration sends them back."

"They wouldn't do that to a child, would they?"

I didn't have an answer for her. But my father, who had been a fisherman, trapper, and derrickman all his life, and who couldn't read or write and spoke Cajun French and a form of English that was hardly a language, had an axiom for almost every situation. One of these would translate as "When in doubt, do nothing." In actuality he would say something like (in this case to a wealthy sugar planter who owned property next to us), "You didn't told me about your hog in my cane, no, so I didn't mean to hurt it when I pass the tractor on its head and had to eat it, me." (pp. 11-12)

"I have to go to Lafayette for a couple of hours," I say, "I want you to watch for a couple of men in a Corvette. If they come around here, call the sheriff's department. Then go up to the house and stay with Annie."

"Qui c'est une Corvette, Dave?" he said, his eyes squinting at me in the sun.

"It's a sports car, a white one."

"What they do, them?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing."

"What you want I do to them, me?"

"You do nothing to them. You understand that? You call the sheriff and then you stay with Annie."

"Qui c'est ti vas faire si le sheriff pas vient pour un neg, Dave? Dites Batist fait plus rein?" He laughed loudly at his own joke: "What are you going to do if the sheriff doesn't come for a Negro, Dave? Tell Batist to do more nothing?"

"I'm serious. Don't mess with them."

He grinned at me again and went back to cleaning his fish. (p. 40)

The only Spanish-speaking person I knew in New Iberia was a pari-mutuel window seller named Felix who worked at Evangeline Downs in Lafayette and the Fairgrounds in New Orleans. He has been a casino card dealer in Havana during the Batista era, and his lavender shirts and white French cuffs, crinkling seersucker suits and pomade-scented hair gave him the appearance of a man who still aspired to a jaded opulence in his life. But like most people I knew around the track, his chief defect was that he didn't like regular work or the world of ordinary people. (p. 51)



"I've got news for you. You're still talking now because I'm in a good mood. Second, you brought this down on yourself, asshole. When you start talking to somebody else's whores, when you poke your nose into other people's shit, you got to pay the man. That's the rules. An old-time homicide roach ought to know that. Here's the last news flash. The chippy got off easy. Toot wanted to turn her face into one of his Polaroids. But that broad is money on the hoof, got people depending on her, so sometimes you got to let it slide, you know what I mean? So he put her finger in the door and broke it for her." "Hey," he said in an almost happy fashion, "don't look sad, I'm telling you, she didn't mind. She was glad. She's a smart girl, she knows the rules. It's too bad, though, you don't have a pussy between your legs, 'cause you ain't money on the hoof."

"Get finished," the black man said.

"You ain't in a hurry are you, Robicheaux? Huh?" he said, and nudged me in the genitals with his boot.

The blood dripped off my eyelash and speckled the dirt.

"Okay, I'll make it quick, since you're starting to remind me of a dog down there," he said. "You got a house, you got a boat business, you got a wife, you got a lot to be thankful for. So don't get in nobody else's shit. Stay home and play with mama and your worms. If you don't know what I'm talking about, think about screwing a wife that don't have a nose."

"Now let the man pay his tab, Toot." (pp. 58-59)

But maybe the most important lesson I had learned about addressing complexity was from an elderly Negro janitor who had one pitched for the Kansas City Monarchs in the old Negro leagues. He used to watch our games in the afternoon, and one day when I'd been shotgunned off the mound and was walking off the field toward the shower, he walked along beside me and said, "Sliders and screwballs is cute, and spitters shows 'em you can be nasty. But if you want to make that batter's pecker shrivel up, you throw a forkball at his head." (p. 95)

"That's like saying a black tumor on your brain will get better if you don't think about it." The kitchen was silent. I could hear the blue jays in the mimosa tree and the wings of the ducks beating across the pond as Alafair showered bread crumbs down on their heads. Annie turned away, finished wrapping the fried chicken, closed the picnic hamper, and walked out to the pond. The screen door banged on the jamb after her." (p. 112)

They had had reservations about me when I married Annie. I was a divorced older man with an alcoholic history, and as a homicide detective I had lived in a violent world that was even more foreign to rural Kansas than my Cajun accent and French name. I felt they blamed me for Annie's death. At least her father did, I was sure of that. And I didn't have the strength to argue against that unspoken accusation even with myself.

"The funeral is at four o'clock," I said. "I'll let you all rest up at the motel, then I'll be back for you at three-thirty."

"Where's she at now?" her father said.

"The funeral home."



"I want to go there."

I paused a moment and looked at his big, intent face and his wide-set gray eyes.

"The casket's closed, Mr. Ballard," I said.

"You take us there now," he said. (pp. 147-148)

I can't answer. Maybe because it's unholy to wash away the blood of those we love. Maybe because the placement of a tombstone on a grave is a self-serving and atavistic act. (Just as primitive people did, we weight the dead and their memory safely down in the earth.) Maybe because the only fitting monument of those who die violently is the memory of pain they've left behind. (p. 183)

Instead, I sometimes recall a passage from the Book of Psalms. I have no theological insight, my religious ethos is a battered one; but those lines seem to suggest an answer that my reason cannot, namely, that the innocent who suffer for the rest of us become anointed and loved by God in a special way; the votive candle of their lives had made them heaven's prisoners. (p. 212)

"I've had cops give me the shuck before. It always comes from the same kind of guys. They go no case, no evidence, no witness, so they make a lot of noise that's supposed to scare everybody. But you know what their real problem is? They wear J.C. Higgins suits, they drive shit machines, they live in little boxes out by an airport. Then they see a guy that's got all the things they want and can't have because most of them are so dumb they'd fuck up a wet dream, so they get a big hard-on for this guy and talk a lot of trash about somebody cooling out his action. So I'll tell you what I tell these other guys. I'll be around to drink a beer and piss it on your grave."

He took a stick of gum out of his pocket, peeled off the foil, dropped it on the ground, and fed the gum into his mouth while he looked me in the eyes.

"You through with me?" he asked.

"Yep." (p. 221)

A deputy started to pull him by his wrists onto the grass, then wiped his palms on his pants and found a piece of newspaper in the weeds. He wrapped it around Keats's arm and jerked him out on the ground. The water sloshed out of Keats's suede cowboy boots, and his shirt was unbuttoned and pulled up on his chest. There was a black, puffed hole the size of my thumb in his right ribcage, with a seared area around the skin flap, and an exit wound under the left armpit. The deputy nudged Keats's arm with his shoe to expose the wound better. (p. 226)

Now I had to wonder what it was I really planned if I caught Victor Romero and learned that he had killed Annie. In my mind I saw myself spread-eagling him against a wall, kicking his feet apart, ripping a pistol loose from under his shirt, cuffing him so tightly that the skin around his wrists bunched like putty, and forcing him down into the back seat of a New Orleans police car.

I saw those images because they were what I knew I should see. But they did not represent what I felt. They did not represent what I felt at all. (p. 260)



## Topics for Discussion

The novel presents Alafair but she plays a vanishingly minor role in the narrative. Yet on page 212 Dave Robicheaux muses that Alafair, like other innocent victims of inhumanity, is loved by God in a special way and is one of heaven's prisoners. As the novel is entitled *Heaven's Prisoners*, this passage clearly is intended to have significant meaning within the narrative. Discuss Alafair's indirect role as causative agent in Dave's pursuit of the bad guys.

The novel is one of several novels dealing with Dave Robicheaux as protagonist and narrator. Discuss how this influences your reading of the novel, and how it impacts the way that Dave is presented as a character.

The narrative spends a great deal of space and attention on the natural environment of New Iberia and its surroundings. Dave always looks out of windows toward the natural world, and often introspects about hunting, fishing, and camping. How does the focus on the natural world of the bayou ground the novel in a particular setting?

Fiction relies heavily upon a process often known as "the suspension of disbelief," in which the reader becomes complicit with the narrator in creating the alternate reality of the novel. At several points in the novel, the plot becomes somewhat strained because facts are presented that make "the suspension of disbelief" difficult. What parts of the plot did you find difficult to accept without questioning?

Annie—and everyone else in Dave's life—begs Dave to avoid involvement with the seedy criminal world of the New Orleans area, but Dave is drawn to it like a moth to a flame. Is Dave partially responsible for Annie's death?

Annie is a cultivated, intelligent, and educated woman who could easily pass in 'respectable' society. Robin is a foul-mouthed, drug-shooting prostitute without an education and who sticks out like a sore thumb in any type of normal gathering. But Dave finds both women appealing. Discuss what makes people like one another. Is Dave's love dependent upon the situation?

The novel presents several 'red herring' sub plots that distract Dave—and the reader—from the real issues. For example, at one point Dave becomes convinced that INS is spearheading some type of government conspiracy, and that Monroe is the real bad guy. On the other hand, Monroe appears to be nothing more than a scared civil servant. Discuss other plot elements that distract Dave from the real issues at hand.

Discuss how the author creates such a realistic sense of place and time through the use of narrative construction, the development of tone, and the establishment of setting. Although the book is largely driven by plot, would you agree that the novel's plot is actually one of the weaker points in its construction? Why or why not?