Purple Cane Road Short Guide

Purple Cane Road by James Lee Burke

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

Detective Dave Robicheaux, like other hardboiled heroes before him, walks a fine line between the world of ordinary people who he seeks to protect and the world of criminals which he seeks to protect it from.

A sober alcoholic, the same self-destructive tendencies that drove his drinking seem often to influence his behavior on the job and in his family life. He believes in absolutes, but remains steadfastly unwilling to sacrifice any individual—even a hardened criminal—on the altar of idealism. He seeks refuge in his family, in his past, and in the bayous where he grew up, but the fallen nature of his world follows him into even those places most sacred to him. He knows the nature of the real world, having learned it first in the jungles of Vietnam and later on the streets of New Orleans, in the way that one must know one's enemy to fight effectively, but seems consciously to choose to ignore reality in favor of his concept of the way the world ought to be.

Clete Purcel, Robicheaux's former partner and his best friend, also knows the nature of the real world, but tends to view it less romantically than Robicheaux, so that when Robicheaux believes that the New Orleans Police Department has been cleaned of its corruption, Clete sardonically replies with a simple "Right." Even more than Robicheaux, Clete tends to solve problems with violence, whether during the interrogation of a witness or revenging a personal affront from an ex-coworker. Whereas Robicheaux chooses selectively to ignore the ubiquity of the world's corruption, Purcel acknowledges it and copes with alcohol; as he tells Robicheaux in The Neon Rain, "Stay off the booze. I'll drink it for both of us. It's a lousy life." He knows and respects Robicheaux's attempt to separate his family life from his work, and deeply regrets it when he falsely believes that his presence at dinner with Robicheaux and Alafair has endangered them both. Nonetheless, Clete's pragmatic tactics—like throwing several suspects out of a room before interrogating another—often seem to result in useful information that Robicheaux might otherwise have been unable to obtain.

Robicheaux's family, Bootsie and Alafair, allow him to continue his faith in a world other than the one in which he works as a police officer. Alafair, while struggling with his rules and attempting to define herself in her teen years, openly admits that she loves Robicheaux, despite his sometimes embarrassing over protectiveness. Bootsie, a realist in her own right, has been married twice before, the second time to a Mafioso, and well understands the existence of the Louisiana underworld in which Robicheaux is forced to operate. Nonetheless, she supports Robicheaux's attempts to create some sort of separation between his work and his home life, in part by working to limit the degree to which both her past and Robicheaux's present in that underworld invade their home. Thus, Bootsie seems to resent the intrusion of Johnny Remata in Alafair's life more for the danger he represents to her soul than to her body.

Jim Gable represents the most unambiguously evil character in the novel. An important police official with political connections, Gable has married an aging former screen star whom he constantly plies with alcohol in the hope that she will die soon, leaving her

fortune to him. In the meantime, Gable keeps a long list of "Mexican, Puerto Rican, and black girls who one way or another had come under his sway."

His connections to organized crime go back at least thirty years, when, as a street cop, he collected for a prominent loan shark and murdered at least two individuals—Mae Robicheaux and her boss. He manipulates Robicheaux into attacking him over Bootsie's honor, and, although he did not serve in Vietnam, maintains a collection of trophies from the conflict, including the preserved head of a communist Viet Cong soldier brought back for him by his cousin.

If Gable exemplifies evil by nature, Johnny Remata may represent evil by nurture. Sold repeatedly by his father to two pedophiles for the price of a bar tab and later raped repeatedly in prison, Remata has learned to respond by victimizing others. He almost seems to admire Robicheaux, and to seek his approval, repeatedly insisting on the similarities between them. Some of those similarities may in fact be real rather than imagined, as Robicheaux has killed before, and has even found a sort of pleasure in the adrenaline rush associated with the act.

However, Robicheaux finds some stability, or at least the illusion of it, in his wife and family, and finds particular solace in loving intercourse with his wife. Remata has no such connection with anyone outside himself, and, in fact, appears incapable of the sexual act, a deficiency he attempts to make up for with violence.

Social Concerns

Tames Lee Burke's first detective novel I featuring Dave Robicheaux, The Neon Rain, begins with an interview between Robicheaux and a death row inmate. Robicheaux returns to the question of capital punishment in Purple Cane Road, the eleventh novel in the series, and his comments on the evils of placing social expedience over respect for individual people remain strong. Purple Cane Road opens with a description of Vachel Carmouche, an executioner referred to in official government documents as "the electrician." Thus, in the opening lines of the novel Burke also introduces another of his main themes: the ability of both society and individuals to blind themselves to the reality of a cruel, sometimes random world, mitigated only by the warmth of friendship and family.

Burke makes his attitude towards capital punishment clear in the novel by carefully choosing its supporters and detractors.

Carmouche, clearly a villain in the novel, loses his job over his comment to the press that electrocution does not inflict enough pain and suffering on its victims to do justice for their crimes. Likewise, Jim Gable, one of the two people responsible for the murder of Robicheaux's own mother over thirty years earlier, says virtually the same thing about the more modern method of inflicting death by lethal injection: "Letty Labiche doesn't deserve to die by lethal injection. She killed a lawman. I think she should be put to death in the electric chair, and not all at once, either." Belmont Pugh, a sympathetic but not particularly admirable character, takes a middle-of-the-road view, favoring capital punishment in general but objecting to it in this instance only because it is to be inflicted on a woman.

On the other hand, Robicheaux has witnessed executions before, and was "sickened and repelled" at the sight, even though he had helped bring the men to justice. He recognizes the change in method of execution for what it is—a method designed to be more palatable to the institution: she would "die inside her own skin with no sign of discomfort being transmitted to the spectators." Robicheaux's good friend and former partner from the Homicide Department of the New Orleans Police Department, Private Investigator Clerus Purcel, likewise has witnessed his share of executions, specifically of political prisoners in Vietnam, and he also generally disapproves of the practice. Also, Robicheaux's wife, Bootsie, condemns the death penalty because it "empowers the people we execute. We allow them to remake us in their image."

Robicheaux's outlook on this issue is more complex, however, than it may first appear. Although he agrees with Bootsie's basic premise that, as a society, we "can't solve all our problems with violence," he tends to solve them just that way. In fact, after attacking Jim Gable for offensive behavior towards Bootsie, Robicheaux seems to echo him when he states that the relatively minor injuries inflicted on Gable did not fit the crime. Moreover, Robicheaux himself sets out to murder an assassin who threatens his family, particularly his sixteen-year-old daughter, Alafair (who he rescued from a plane crash in the Gulf of Mexico in Heaven's Prisoner's and later adopted). At the last minute,

however, Robicheaux finds himself unable to pull the trigger—unwilling, perhaps, to cross the line over into the world represented by the man in his sight. In fact, although Robicheaux has killed in the past, in Purple Cane Road he does not kill anyone. In this book, it is most of the criminals, including a number of corrupt police officers, who shoot each other.

Robicheaux also comments extensively on political and social corruption, a theme that is common in Burke's fiction as well as many other hardboiled crime novels. The two most important criminals in the novel both occupy positions of power within the established political structure of Louisiana— one as the state's Attorney General and the other as a senior police official destined to become the next head of the state police.

Attorney General Connie Deshotel assisted her partner, Jim Gable, in the murder of Mae Robicheaux in 1967. She then hires hit man Johnny Remata to murder Gable himself, also giving orders to investigators that Remata be shot on sight. Gable, a racist, womanizing gold-digger himself, apparently operates "a whole network of whores and dope peddlers." Three New Orleans police officers attempt to murder a potential witness against these two individuals, only to be thwarted by Robicheaux. Governor Pugh, a former preacher, drinks heavily and enjoys the company of numerous mistresses and senior political advisors and lobbyists who have been indicted on federal racketeering charges.

Set against this world of corruption, however, is Robicheaux's home and family life, in which he wishes he could retreat from the reality which he faces daily as a police officer. Although he knows better in his heart, Robicheaux lives under the illusion that these two worlds exist separately, and his greatest anger derives from incidents, like Remata's threatening of Alafair, that are likely to bring the two worlds together.

Burke undermines this illusion through a complex series of relationships that demonstrate the close interconnections between the characters inhabiting the two worlds.

For example, Gable murdered Robicheaux's mother, and also had a relationship with Bootsie prior to her relationship with Robicheaux; Bootsie took a night school class with Connie Deshotel, Gable's former partner and a close associate of Governor Pugh; Pugh attended college with Robicheaux, whose daughter is seduced by Johnny Remata; Remata in turn is seduced by Connie Deshotel, who knew the parents of Letty Labiche, the woman whose life can only be saved by a commutation from Governor Pugh—and so forth. Control is impossible in such a complex world, bringing the random nature of both worlds to light.

Clete Purcel also suffers from the breaking down of the illusory separation between these two worlds when he becomes involved with Passion Labiche, the twin sister of the woman on death row. Normally a resident of the darker world, Purcel allows himself to believe in the warmer world of family through his close relationship with Passion, who will soon die of cancer. Passion's sacrificial act on behalf of her sister at the end of the novel drives Purcel to levels of drinking and violent behavior excessive even for him.

Whereas Purcel's temporary belief in the dichotomy of worlds, and his eventual return to his normal view, impair his ability to function, Robicheaux's belief in the separateness of the apparently safe and ordered world of family and the dangerous and corrupted world of crime allows him to continue to cope, even though he realizes that only one world really exists, a "big blue mental asylum."

Techniques

As in some of his other work, Burke uses the technique of doubling to blur the lines between good and evil in order to represent a modern world with few, if any, absolutes.

Thus, Johnny Remata displays some traits similar to Robicheaux, including intelligence, a distrust of authority, and a fondness for Alafair. Both men come from rural Southern roots—Robicheaux from the Louisiana bayou, and Remata from the backwoods of Southern Appalachia. Robicheaux sets out to murder Remata to prevent him from further threatening his family, but finds himself at the last minute unable to pull the trigger. Similarly, Remata fails at one of his contract assignments, unable to kill a young woman with a small child. When three corrupt New Orleans police officers attempt to murder Remata, Robicheaux saves his life and one of the three officers dies. When Axel Jennings, one of the two remaining officers, attempts to murder Robicheaux, Remata saves him by killing Jennings.

Burke also continues his experiments with shifting point of view and setting, overcoming the weaknesses of first person narration by, in effect, ignoring them. In some cases, Robicheaux merely repeats the stories that other characters have told him—if the information seems exceptionally detailed in places, one grants, perhaps, some poetic license. Similarly, when Robicheaux richly describes the events of the last few hours of his mother's life based upon rather sketchy data, one forgives his understandable desire to connect with her by embellishing the tale. However, Robicheaux also describes the last few minutes of Jim Gable's life in minute detail despite the fact that there are no witnesses to this period and that both Gable and his killer are dead—in short, he provides apparently accurate details despite the fact that he cannot possible know anything about them. Nonetheless, Burke makes these transitions so smoothly that the reader virtually misses them—and, given the fact that Robicheaux seems often to receive pertinent information in his dreams, one cannot take too much exception to the fact that some of his sources may not follow strictly the laws of the physical universe as they are commonly understood.

Themes

Burke revisits some of his most important themes in Purple Cane Road, particularly that of the significance of close, interpersonal relationships to help combat the inherently corruptible institutions forced upon individuals by society. Thus, Robicheaux, a man who clearly believes in and values the spiritual, is deeply suspicious of institutionalized religion, even holding it in contempt. He suggests to more than one character the cleansing of the conscience that religion can sometimes offer, but considers the representatives of a Christian cable television channel "exploitative charlatans." He resents the pollution of his home state inflicted by the oil industry, but particularly the fact that neither the federal nor the state government regulates such activity adequately—or even at all—because of the importance of oil money both for political campaigns and for helping to maintain a strong economy and, thus, reelection of incumbent candidates. One such incumbent, Belmont Pugh, represents the institution of government in his decision to sacrifice Letty Labiche, whose sentence he has the power to commute, for political expediency.

In fact, the idea of Labiche's execution as political currency exemplifies Burke's indictment of those who would make commodities of human beings. The opening chapter in the novel includes a description of the Labiche family patriarch, Jubal Labiche, "a French-educated mulatto" who "both owned and rented slaves and worked them unmercifully and supplied much of the brick for the homes of his fellow slave owners." The parents of Letty and Passion Labiche both worked as procurers, and many of the women in the novel are or have been prostitutes—Robicheaux even fears that his mother might have been "in the life" before her murder. Vachel Carmouche treats both Labiche twins as his property, exploiting them until he moves away after losing his job, and it is his apparent resumption of such activity with another young girl upon his return to New Iberia leads to his murder. Johnny Remata, the young hit man in the novel, also suffers exploitation by two pedophiles as a young boy, and later by fellow prison inmates as an adult. His hatred of his mother, who Remata blames for allowing his father to sell him to the pedophiles for alcohol, drives much of his homicidal impulse.

Burke also comments on race throughout the novel in the matter-of-fact manner common to his work. His description of Louisiana includes racism because racism exists more openly in his Louisiana than in many other places. Burke apparently feels no need to preach on the subject, however, accepting its evil nature as given and allowing his more sympathetic characters to form important relationships across racial lines, thus doing what they can to heal the schism.

Therefore, while acknowledging a business owner who in the 1960s "would not allow people of color to even stand in line with whites, requiring them instead to wait in the concourse until no other customers were inside," Burke also allows a nurturing relationship between the Creole Passion Labiche and the Irish Clete Purcel. Moreover, Robicheaux's own life reflects something of Burke's multicultural ideal—he has an African-American employee whom he treats more like a partner, a woman partner on

the police force, and an adopted Hispanic daughter, all of whom live in harmony—or, at least, in as much harmony as Burke portrays as possible in Louisiana.

Burke also investigates the nature of the past and its affect on the present. He may declare the past "meaningless and unthreatening," but he describes it as neither. Robicheaux spends the novel investigating two crimes, both of which occurred in the relatively distant past, as far as criminal investigations generally go—the eightyear-old murder of Vachel Carmouche and the thirty-year-old murder of Robicheaux's mother, Mae. This leads to entire chapters of history involving both deaths, and the events leading up to them. Robicheaux particularly revisits his own past, remembering both times his mother walked out on his father, an alcoholic who, though loving in his own way, made married life difficult.

When a jailed criminal tells Robicheaux that his mother, who he always thought had worked as a waitress before leaving Louisiana, actually worked as a prostitute and died because of her related role in a con game, it calls into question Robicheaux's image of his own past, and therefore of himself. His belated search for her killers allows him to redeem her past, and when he learns that, after abandoning her married name for years, she retook it just before her murder, he believes that his connection to her remains intact. In fact, his connection has become stronger, as he vindicates her belief, expressed in the final moments of her life, that her son would track down her murderers and exact his revenge.

Robicheaux also attempts to repair the damage to his relationship with Bootsie caused by the same types of arguments that drove his parents apart—his doing so allows him to imagine them, their bodies both committed to water, commingling in a peace that life denied them. However, Burke portrays the ability of individuals to redeem their own pasts not only through Robicheaux, but also through many of the other characters in the novel. Mae's reaffirmation of her married name in her last moments serves as her best effort to reclaim and redeem her own past, as well as to provide a connection to the future through her son. The Labiche twins commit murder, but they do so to prevent their own history of victimization from repeating itself in the life of another twelve-year-old girl. Passion Labiche, dying of cancer, also sacrifices herself to save her sister, thus reaffirming their bond and preventing yet another unjust killing from occurring in New Iberia.

Most importantly, perhaps, Burke explores the way in which single decisions made in the past affect the present, and therefore the way in which decision made in the present affect the future. Remata's decision to deal with the trauma of his past turns him into a monster; the Labiche twins, confronted with remarkably similar childhood circumstances, display a love and nobility that Remata can only parody.

Robicheaux, who had seen Carmouche with the Labiche twins when they were still children, regrets not having involved himself to a greater degree. Batist, who also faced difficult circumstances as a child, expresses the need for family and laughter—two things that were apparently denied Remata—as a remedy for possible negative consequences.

Like the Labiche twins, Robicheaux's partner, Helen, has also suffered molestation as a child, yet she overcame at least some of the obstacles that such a background presented and has become a successful law enforcement officer. Alafair, at sixteen, must begin to make decisions about how her present will affect her future, decisions in which both Robicheaux and Bootsie wish to make sure that Johnny Remata is not involved.

Adaptations

In 2000, Simon & Schuster Audio released an abridged audio book version of Purple Cane Road read by Will Patton.

Key Questions

James Lee Burke's reputations both as a Southern writer and as a member of the hardboiled school have continued to grow with each successive work. His fiction incorporates some of most important themes and constructs from both traditions, and each new novel seems to explore in greater detail the genres in which he writes. In fact, Burke has been considered one of the most innovative contemporary hardboiled writers—in part, because he has interwoven the two genres so flawlessly into one body of work, without being limited by either set of conventions.

Burke has said that his themes are universal, and transcend any one particular region. Certainly, neither racism nor the problems of crime or of the apparent evil in human nature limit themselves to the South, and Burke's enormous popularity argues for some level of transcendence beyond the borders of the old Confederacy. Nonetheless, he seems especially cognizant of the importance of understanding the past and its effect on the present, and his novels demonstrate his awareness of the lingering legacy of slavery and the Civil War on the New South.

1. Burke certainly argues for the existence of evil in humanity, but from where does he seem to think that evil originates? Is it a part of human nature, as Jim Gable may indicate, or does it have to be learned, as in the case of Johnny Remata?

2. Robicheaux, having witnessed two executions, seems convinced of the wrong of capital punishment. Why? How, in light of this conviction, should we interpret his acceptance—even his occasional embrace—of violence short of killing?

3. Discuss the novel as belonging to the hardboiled school of literature. In what ways does Burke carry on the hardboiled tradition? In what ways does he depart from it?

4. Discuss the novel as an example of Southern literature. Beyond the obvious fact that the novel takes place in Louisiana, why does the novel appear to belong to this body of literature? In what ways does the novel differ from "typical" Southern literature?

5. Remata and the Labiche twins, despite similar childhood circumstances, mature to be very different people. To what, if anything, does Burke seem to ascribe their differences?

6. Robicheaux's religion does not seem to bear much direct relevance to his life other than the fact that he and his family attend regular mass. Nonetheless, the novel contains numerous religion references. Why? What is Burke saying about the role of the religion, and specifically Christianity, in the New South?

7. Remata wishes he could have lived during the Civil War. Axel Jennings wishes he could have lived during World War II. Jim Gable wishes he could have served in Vietnam. On the other hand, Clete, Robicheaux, and the Sheriff all served honorably in

foreign wars. Is Burke saying something about the military, about the past, about war, or about all three?

Literary Precedents

Like the other novels in the Robicheaux series, Burke's Purple Cane Road includes fundamentals of both Southern and detective literary traditions. Edgar Allen Poe, himself a southerner, invented the detective story with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), even if other early detective fiction, like Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson (1899), seems more characteristically Southern than Poe's tales of French ratiocinator Auguste Dupin. Burke has been called "the Faulkner of crime fiction," and he represents a legitimate heir to William Faulkner's tradition of detective fiction including Intruder in the Dust (1948).

Practically any novel involving Louisiana political figures requires comparison to Robert Perm Warren's All the King's Men (1946), but in this case the similarities between the two works are numerous and manifest. Governor Belmont Pugh shares not only Willie Stark's overindulgence in women and alcohol, but also his histrionic public speaking style, his rather ersatz iconoclastic appeal to the working class man, his career as a door-to-door salesman, and his lost innocence and idealism. Moreover, a number of scholars have observed Warren's interest in, and his use of, the same types of hardboiled technique of which Burke demonstrates his mastery in this novel.

Certainly, Purple Cane Road most obviously follows some of the conventions of such seminal hardboiled crime stories as Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon (1930), Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep (1939), Mickey Spillane's I, the Jury (1947), Ross MacDonald's The Moving Target (1949), and Robert B. Parker's The Godwulf Manuscript (1973). Robicheaux's alcoholism and his recovery with the aid of Alcoholic's Anonymous bear a strong resemblance to those of the exceptionally hardboiled Matt Scudder in Lawrence Block's The Sins of the Fathers (1976) and later novels. Burke's ambivalence towards violence, his doubling of his characters, and his intermittent ventures into environmentalism all carry on the themes and techniques of John D. MacDonald's lengthy series of hardboiled adventure novels featuring another houseboat-dweller, salvage expert Travis McGee, who first appeared in The Deep Blue GoodBy (1964).

Related Titles

The series that James Lee Burke began in 1987 with The Neon Rain has become one of the most popular and critically acclaimed detective series of the last decade. In the first novel, Robicheaux leaves the New Orleans Police Department for what he imagines to be the relative quiet of his hometown of New Iberia. Robicheaux marries Annie, a social worker he meets in the first novel, and they adopt Alafair in Heaven's Prisoners (1988). Burke carries on the doubling theme in this novel when Robicheaux acknowledges his similarities to the boyhood-friendturned-crirninal, Bubba Rocque. Black Cherry Blues (1989) furthers Robicheaux's inquiry into the past and its consequences for the present, and returns Cletus Purcel to the series, now working for organized crime.

Burke delves into a new form of doubling in A Morning for Flamingos (1989), in which Jimmie Lee Boggs (whose name bears strong resemblance to that of the author) shoots Robicheaux, who then goes undercover to capture fellow Vietnam veteran and family man Tony Cardo. In A Stained White Radiance (1992), Burke adds incest to the list of recognizably Southern themes incorporated in the series, and continues to describe his appreciation for the environment of the Louisiana bayou that he expresses in his other novels. The sixth Robicheaux novel, In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead (1993), Burke seems by design to dissociate himself somewhat from the Southern literary tradition, permitting the ghost of a Confederate officer to renounce Robicheaux for behavior he considers ignominious. In Dixie City Jam (1994), Burke more straightforwardly explores the challenge of race in the south, as Robicheaux concentrates on the quest for a World War II Nazi submarine sunk in the Gulf of Mexico. Once again, the dead commune directly with the living in Burning Angel (1995), possibly the most surrealistic novel of the series and one that most powerfully calls attention to the influence that the past bears on the present. Burke revisits race and doubling in Cadillac Jukebox (1996), as Robicheaux recognizes that he shares some of the attitudes of the racist accused of the homicide of a renowned civil rights leader thirty years earlier. Burke's Sunset Limited (1998) switches from past to present and back again in such a way as to unite the two as intensely as in Burning Angel, although in a very dissimilar manner.

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