



first person

with James Lee Burke

by Emily Alford

First Person is a monthly Q&A that features compelling people who excel in their chosen endeavors. Ideas for future Q&As? Email edit@thriveswla.com.

Award-winning author James Lee Burke has a haunting way of bringing Louisiana to life in his best-selling Dave Robicheaux crime novels. Through his fiction, Burke manages to explore Louisiana's culture, its history, and yes, even its crime.

And who better to write about Louisiana than Burke, who grew up all along the Gulf Coast from Texas to Lafayette and finally New Iberia? He's worked as an oilman, a reporter, and even an advertising copywriter, but stories of the Gulf Coast have always been Burke's passion. And that passion has paid off. Burke is the recipient of two Edgar Allen Poe Awards for Black Cherry Blues and Cimarron Rose. He was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for his fourth novel, The Lost Get-Back Boogie, which was rejected 111 times before being published by Louisiana State University Press.

These days, Burke makes his home on a ranch in Montana and is an internationally bestselling author. However, he still loves to talk about his home state and what draws readers to the mystery and beauty of South Louisiana.

How did you know you wanted to be a writer?

Since I was a kid I wanted to be a writer. My first cousin was [short story writer, essayist, and autobiographer] Andre Dubus II. Andre and I grew up together, and he lived many years in Lake Charles and Lafayette. We were four months apart, and we both wanted to be writers early on. We talked about writing. We never collaborated on a story, but our experiences were basically the same. What we witnessed was the passing away of a culture, a way of life, that may have had its problems but more or less it was a grand time to be around in many ways. Louisiana is emblematic of things that are occurring in the rest of the country but maybe in not as visible and dramatic a fashion.

You come from an oilfield background. How does that factor into your work?

It's everything. It's [Louisiana's] livelihood. I worked for Sinclair Oil Company as a land man. I was a pipeliner in the oil patch. My father was a natural gas engineer for 30 years and died on the job. [The oil industry] is a sacred cow. *Wayfaring Stranger* is my best work, and it deals with that. The main character is a pipeline man, and as we read the book, we discover that the issue, as far as Louisiana is concerned, is very simple: the oil industry broke the power hold of the old oligarchy. In Louisiana years ago, the disparity between the haves and the have-nots was enormous. The petrochemical industry ended that stranglehold.

You seem to care a lot about the history of the state. In what other ways has Louisiana's colorful and checkered past influenced you?

When I lived on Bayou Teche, there were three oak trees on our lawn that were around 200 years old, and I'm sure there were many balls buried in the trunks of those trees. Something like 20,000 Union troops went down that road chasing Colonel Mouton when Louisiana fell to

the Federals in 1863. Every day I would put my hand on the trunks of those trees and think, "This was a mature tree when all those Yankee soliders came right down the road, and the Confederates pulled out on what was old Pinhook Road." The Episcopal church, which is still there, was a field station for the Confederate wounded. All of that happened. The same buildings are still there. The same trees are still there. It's like William Faulkner said, the past is not even the past. It's still there. You just reach out and place your hand on it.

You're the author of over 30 novels. What's your writing process like? How can you produce such volumes of consistently engrossing work?

I've never really wanted to do anything else, so today I'm fortunate. I get to write all the time. I write literally all the time. I get up, and I start writing in the morning and through the afternoon. We have a ranch, so I have to go out and shovel horse slop, but then I work in the evening. I keep a notebook by my bed at night. I write sometimes at four in the morning, all the time. And that's a great way of life.

Do you have any advice for writers just starting out?

The real heroes are the [writers] that have other jobs. They go to work and they come home tired and try to do it. That's what really takes guts. I've written ad copy, worked as a journalist, and sometimes had experiences with people I didn't want to be in the same room with, but you do what you need to do in order to survive as an artist. It takes courage.

A lot of people fear rejection and never send their manuscripts out. They ensure that they will lose. I don't know how many rejections I've had. I had over 100 in a box at one time. But I learned this: You tell the world to break their fist on your face, but you never give an inch.

