

James Lee Burke Can Kiss My Sweet Patootie

By George Cunningham

I don't want to get carried away here, but I am a little angry at author James Lee Burke. So angry in fact that I will not buy any more of his books. Burke has stepped over the line for me, and I no longer wish to do business with him.

I have no illusion that James Lee Burke cares or is even aware that I am no longer buying his books. But buying or not buying a book is like casting a vote for somebody. If you buy a book, you are voting, thank you, keep them coming. And if you don't, then you are voting I don't care if you keep them coming or not. There are way more books published than I can ever hope to read, so why should I waste my time with a man who has both disappointed and cheated me.

Don't worry for James Lee Burke. He has plenty of people still lining up to buy his books. Just not me.

Burke is going on my list of best-selling authors who have seen the last of me. People like James Patterson and Patricia Cornwell, who are just bad writers. Burke is not a bad writer. Although he has never been my favorite, at times he was strikingly eloquent in his descriptions of life in the bayous of Louisiana. He was a person worth reading.

Not now. Not anymore. Not by me.

So what did Burke do that's gotten me so steamed?

Burke made a fortune weaving tales about his protagonist, police detective Dave Robicheaux, who lives in an old house on Bayou Teche in New Iberia, La. As written by Burke, Robicheaux is a Vietnam veteran, a recovering alcoholic, a man haunted by his past, but dedicated to the righting of wrongs.

The thing is, I'm a Vietnam veteran too. And one thing I've noticed about Vietnam veterans is that we are all getting old. Robicheaux's time running around in the swamps, fighting bad guys is coming to an end. It's the same with his sidekick buddy Clete Purcel, also a Vietnam vet and a much more interesting character than Robicheaux.

Each time one of these guys goes mano-a-mano with a bad guy and wins, I find myself asking "really?" It's not entirely impossible. I have known some bad old men, but there comes a time when even tough guys are reduced to whacking their opponents with a cane or stamping it on their toes.

So in his last Dave Robicheaux book, *The Glass Rainbow*, Burke killed off his hero along with his sidekick Purcel. In that book, Robicheaux spent a lot of time reviewing his life and having premonitions of things coming to an end, almost as if he were making his peace with the world.

To be honest, Burke never said, Dave and Clete are now “officially dead” in those words. But at the end of the book, they were both onboard a river boat to heaven along with Dave’s mom and dad and all his dead friends from the old days. It was very sad yet also satisfying. Dave had been true to himself to the very end and he died, as he should have, fighting evil.

It was the perfect way to end the series and the book. I was impressed. At least I was for a few weeks.

Then, last week I was looking at Burke’s Facebook page and it turns out he has another book coming out called Creole Belle. And guess what. In the new book, Dave is in the recovery unit in a New Orleans hospital healing from the wounds received at the end of The Glass Rainbow. And he’s off on a new adventure.

The one thing I had admired about Burke was the integrity of his writing. He tended to wander off track sometimes, but he never descended to blatant trickery to sell books. Not until now.

It’s as though the guys in marketing organized a focus group and found out in the murder mystery demographic that tends to read Burke’s books, that 63 percent of the male and 71 percent of the female readers would have preferred for Dave and Clete not to have been killed off.

The problem is, I feel as though Burke tricked me into spending numerous hours over the course of several books, making an emotional investment in his character, Dave Robicheaux. I understand that Dave Robicheaux doesn’t really exist. He is a figment of Burke’s imagination, but for fiction to work, you have to be willing to make a connection to the characters in the book. You have to care about Rhett and Scarlett, Robert Jordan, Travis McGee, Robinson Crusoe, Romeo and Juliet, Jack Ryan, and Howard Roark.

If you can’t make an emotional investment in the characters, you are wasting your money buying fiction. Fiction is truth as seen through the eyes of the characters.

Burke steps over the line when he lets us bond with one of his characters, kills the character off, and then brings him back in a subsequent book. It’s kind of like that season of Dallas, where the writers killed off Bobby Ewing by having him run down by a car and the brought him back a year later with the explanation that his death and the entire subsequent season had been a dream by Bobby’s ex-wife, Pam.

Frankly, I expected more than that from James Lee Burke.

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