

# CSI: The Big Sleazy

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James Lee Burke's *The Tin Roof Blowdown* (Orion Books, 2007) is the 16th and most successful novel so far in a widely-acclaimed hardboiled crime series featuring Dave Robicheaux – a multiply flawed and emotionally damaged, world-weary but basically decent Sheriff's Deputy in New Iberia, 125 miles down the Louisiana coast from New Orleans. The book opens with this Vietnam veteran cursed with a recurring dream of that carnage: "Their lives are taken incrementally – by flying shrapnel, by liquid flame on their skin, and by drowning in a river. In effect, they are forced to die three times. A medieval torturer could not have devised a more diabolic fate" (p.2). On waking, he reminds himself that,

"the past is a decaying memory and that I do not have to relive and empower it unless I choose to do so. As a recovering drunk, I know I cannot allow myself the luxury of resenting my government for lying to a whole generation of young men and women who believed they were serving a noble cause ... When I go back to sleep, I once again tell myself I will never again have to witness the wide-scale suffering of innocent civilians, nor the betrayal and abandonment of our countrymen when they need us most.

But that was before Katrina. That was before a storm with greater impact than the bomb blast that struck Hiroshima peeled the face off southern Louisiana. That was before one of the most beautiful cities in the Western hemisphere was killed three times, and not just by the forces of nature" (p.2).

As this excerpt promises, there is much more in this story than typical noir thriller fare. The author's abiding concern with the struggles of the powerless to handle the larger forces, violence and depravity that confront them while retaining some semblance of dignity and honour has consistently been deployed over five decades to mull over America's conflicts of race, class, and good and evil, here seen through the deeply ambivalent prism of Cajun working-class masculinity contextualised squarely in the genre traditions handed down through Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. The first major work of popular fiction dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina<sup>1</sup>, which devastated New Orleans on 29th August 2005, *Blowdown* demonstrates both the possibilities and problems of attempting to tell the truth through drama – from a writer who does "not trust people who seek authority and control over other people"<sup>2</sup> aiming to force Americans "into an introspection that ... will lead people from dismay to anger" at a continuing tragedy which, he asserts, signposts a dismal likely future for the whole country<sup>3</sup>. And, we might add, for the globe, as corporate governance, graft and greed negotiate Nero's course through environmental ruin ...

## A Chronicle of Death Foretold

Citing literary inspirations like Faulkner, Hemingway, Orwell and Tennessee Williams, Burke's prose has always been noted for its emotive supercharge, verging oftentimes on delirium; but also for an elegaic, lyrical elegance in characterising his beloved native Gulf coast, where he still lives for part of the year. These attributes dovetail as Robicheaux bears witness to Katrina: before its landfall, in realist dread watching the telly; afterwards in disbelief, with shades of Blake, Bosch, and Ballard, as he's seconded to an overwhelmed New Orleans Police Department many of whose personnel went AWOL and/or rogue. In effect, he concludes, "The entire city, within one night, had been reduced to the technological level of the Middle Ages" (p.34). Yet, for days before the hurricane struck, "the governor of Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco, has been pleading for help to anyone who will listen. A state emergency official in Metairie has become emotionally undone during a CNN interview ... He states unequivocally that sixty-two thousand

people will die if the storm maintains its current category 5 strength and hits New Orleans head-on" (p.23).

This scale of disaster indeed transpired, with Robicheaux summarising the geological backstory: "a tidal surge ... can turn a levee system into serpentine lines of black sand or level a city, particularly when the city has no natural barriers. The barrier islands off the Louisiana coast have long ago eroded away or been dredged up and heaped on barges and sold for shale parking lots. The petrochemical companies have cut roughly ten thousand miles of channels through the wetlands, allowing saline intrusion to poison and kill freshwater marsh areas from Plaquemines Parish to Sabine Pass. The levees along the Mississippi River shotgun hundreds of tons of mud over the edge of the continental shelf, preventing it from flowing westward along the coastline, where it is needed the most. Louisiana's wetlands continue to disappear at a rate of forty-seven square miles a year" (p. 28).

Unsurprisingly then:

"The levees burst because they were structurally weak and had only a marginal chance of surviving a category 3 storm, much less one of category 5 strength. Every state emergency official knew this. The Army Corps of Engineers knew this. The National Hurricane Center in Miami knew this.

But apparently the United States Congress and the current administration in Washington, D.C., did not, since they had dramatically cut funding for repair of the levee system only months earlier" (p.32).

Charged with investigating the murders of alleged looters, Robicheaux and fellow officers navigate the institutional vacuum, infrastructural wreckage and social chaos of the stricken city, surveying victims and survivors and striving to differentiate predators from prey among the latter. Many of those unable to leave, especially from the Ninth Ward, took refuge in the Superdome and Convention Center: "The thousands of people who had sought shelter there had been told to bring their own food for five days. Many of them were from the projects or the poorest neighbourhoods in the city and did not own automobiles and had little money or food at the end of the month. Many of them had brought elderly and sick people with them – diabetics, paraplegics, Alzheimer's patients, and people in need of kidney dialysis" (p.35). Elsewhere:

"From a boat or any other elevated position, as far as the eye could see, New Orleans looked like a Caribbean city that had collapsed beneath the waves ... The linear structure of a neighbourhood could be recognized only by the green smudge of yard trees that cut the waterline and row upon row of rooftops dotted with people who perched on sloped shingles that scalded their hands.

The smell was like none I ever experienced. The water was chocolate-brown, the surface glistening with a blue-green sheen of oil and industrial chemicals. Raw feces and used toilet paper issued from broken sewer lines. The gray, throat-gagging odor of decomposition permeated not only the air but everything we touched. The bodies of dead animals, including deer, rolled in the wake of our rescue boats. And so did those of human beings, sometimes just a shoulder or an arm or the back of a head, suddenly surfacing, then sinking under the froth.

They drowned in attics and on the second floors of their houses. They drowned along the edges of Highway 23 when they tried to drive out of Plaquemines Parish. They drowned in retirement homes and in trees and on car tops while they waved frantically at helicopters flying overhead. They died in hospitals and nursing homes of dehydration and heat exhaustion, and they died because an attending nurse could not continue to operate a hand ventilator for hours upon hours without rest" (p.37).

Then a little later, a preliminary cognitive

mapping:

"It wasn't the individual destruction of the homes in the Lower Ninth Ward that seemed unreal. It was the disconnection of them from their environment that was hard for the eye to accept. They had been lifted from their foundations, twisted from the plumbing that held them to the ground, and redeposited upside down or piled against one another as though they had been dropped from the sky ... The insides of all of them were black-green with sludge and mold, their exteriors spray-painted with code numbers to indicate they had already been searched for bodies.

But every day more bodies were discovered ... Feral dogs prowled the wreckage and so did the few people who were being allowed back into their neighbourhoods" (p.199).

These and countless other vignettes throughout the novel are as powerful and evocative in their own way as Spike Lee's heartbreaking visual testament, *When The Levees Broke*, and Greg MacGillivray's meticulous documentary detailing the ecological significance, *Hurricane On The Bayou* (both 2006). However, the conventions of crime fiction offer much greater potential for situating such events in a narrative with full cultural, historical and political texture and complexity – most crucially, from perspectives towards the bottom of the social hierarchy rather than according to the agendas of the Great and the Good; Burke himself seeing the genre as "having replaced the sociological novel. We know a society not by its symbols but by its cultural rejects and failures"<sup>4</sup>. So, progressively immersed in escalating webs of malice, misdeeds and moral compromises spun long before and in Katrina's aftermath, *Blowdown's* unruly welter of unreliable characters tell variegated tales as revealing in their conceits, discrepancies, and silences as in their manifest content.

## The Big Sleep of Reasons

Initial scenes mingling mayhem, disorder, suffering, selfless heroism, and cynical opportunism utterly confuse the New Iberia contingent's senses as they descend into the flooded city, reflected in their contradictory attributions of responsibility for what they see. First, as putative public servants charged with protecting the populace, Robicheaux gives credit where most obviously due – "The United States Coastguard flew nonstop ... They rescued more than thirty-three thousand souls" (p.38) – though soon undercut by his sidekick Clete Purcel's caustic contrast with the Supreme Commander's own aerial display: "Did you see that big plane that flew over? ... It was Air Force One. After three days the Shrubster did a flyover. Gee, I feel better now" (p.41). The identification of honourable intent is similarly frustrated by reality on the ground for traumatised survivors and erstwhile saviours alike, with praise for rescue agencies unravelling in recrimination against officialdom, and the ethical superiority of law enforcers over criminals and vigilantes confounded by pervasive inept, corrupt, and lethal practice. Still, incidents of the latter tend to be described on reflex as 'rumour', with police reports, however hyperbolic or prejudicial, related as deadpan fact in Robicheaux's breathless accounts:

"Looters were hitting pharmacies and liquor and jewellery stores first, then working their way down the buffet table. A rogue group of NOPD cops had actually set up a thieves headquarters on the tenth floor of a downtown hotel, storing their loot in the rooms, terrorizing the management, and threatening to kill a reporter who tried to question them. New Orleans cops also drove off with automobiles from the Cadillac agency. Gangbangers had converged on the Garden District and were having a Visigoth holiday, burning homes built before the Civil War, carrying away whatever wasn't bolted down.



Evacuees in the Superdome and Convention Center tried to walk across the bridge into Jefferson Parish. Most of these people were black, some carrying children in their arms, all of them exhausted, hungry, and dehydrated. They were met by armed police officers who fired shotguns over their heads and allowed none of them to leave Orleans Parish ... An NOPD cop shot a black man with a twelve-gauge through the glass window of his cruiser in front of the Convention Center while hundreds of people watched ... Emergency personnel in rescue boats became afraid of the very people they were supposed to save. Some people airlifted out by the Coast Guard in the Lower Nine said the gunfire was a desperate attempt to signal the boat crews" (pp.38-9).

And the dangerous felony of desperate foraging by the starving sits awkwardly with wanton and organised neglect and execution:

"I saw people eating from plastic packages of mustard and ketchup they had looted from a cafe, dividing what they had amongst themselves ... Some NOPD cops said the personnel at Orleans Parish Prison had blown town and left the inmates to drown. Others said a downtown mob rushed a command center, thinking food and water were being distributed. A deputy panicked and began firing an automatic weapon into the night sky, quickly adding to the widespread conviction that cops were arbitrarily killing innocent people ... We heard rumors that teams of elite troops ... were taking out snipers under a black flag" (p.44).

Given minimal time to make sense of his crime scene data, Robicheaux's general conclusion resembles that famously reached by hip-hop star Kanye West<sup>5</sup>, leaving an irksome FBI agent in no doubt about the greater scheme of things: "Hundreds if not thousands of New Orleans residents drowned who didn't have to. I suspect that's because some of the guys in Washington you work for couldn't care less" (p.171). But as the specific murder case he pursues sinks into a moral quagmire linking all social strata – implicating upstanding insurance men, industrialists and clergy alongside petty thieves, Mob bosses, rapists, lone psychopaths and drug dealers – his own sanity, integrity and family come under mortal threat, triggering increasingly excessive violence to keep internal and external demons at bay. Along the way he reflects on the overarching structures and processes that both precipitate and thrive on the greater and lesser tragedies at hand:

"The images I had seen during the seven-day period immediately after the storm would never leave me. Nor could I afford the anger they engendered in me. Nor did I wish to deal with the latent racism in our culture that was already beginning to rear its head. According to the Washington Post, a state legislator had just told a group of lobbyists in Baton Rouge, 'We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did.'" (p.83)<sup>6</sup>.

By the time Hurricane Rita hit the Gulf coast three weeks afterwards, occasioning further mass evacuations:

"The original sympathy for the evacuees from New Orleans was incurring a strange transformation. Right-wing talk shows abounded with callers viscerally enraged at the fact that evacuees were receiving a onetime two-thousand-dollar payment to help them buy food and find lodging. The old southern nemesis was back, naked and raw and dripping – absolute hatred for the poorest of the poor ... [while a] tidal wave of salt water, mud, dead fish, oil sludge, and organic debris literally effaced the southern rim of Louisiana" (pp.115-116).

And as for the larger reconstruction:

"Clete had said that after Katrina he had heard the sounds of little piggy feet clattering to the trough. I think his image was kind. I think the reality was far worse. The players were much bigger than the homegrown parasites that have sucked the life out of Louisiana for generations. The new bunch was educated and groomed and had global experience in avarice and venality ... Staggering sums of money were given to insider corporations who subcontracted the jobs to small outfits that used only nonunion labor ... It became obvious right after Katrina that the destruction of New Orleans was an ongoing national tragedy and probably an American watershed in the



history of political cynicism" (p.148).

As Robicheaux judges later: "The job ahead was Herculean and it was compounded by a level of corporate theft and governmental incompetence and cynicism that probably has no equal outside the Third World. I wasn't sure New Orleans had a future" (p.196)<sup>7</sup>. But it certainly has a long, dishonourable past, and Burke excels in excavating the sins of the fathers while retaining a nostalgic faith in potential redemption (with innocence scarcely realistic) in the present.

## Crimes and Punishments

As *Blowdown's* tortuous, labyrinthine plot proceeds, unlikely leads overlap and loose ends abound. Exasperated at every turn by the refusal of suspects, victims and informants to co-operate with (or even acknowledge) his knight's errand, Robicheaux explains his embattled bafflement in terms of the simplistic worldviews of others – thus disavowing the contradictions and inadequacies of his own position as lone crusader for truth and justice floundering in the forces of darkness; maintaining self-belief via quintessential petit-bourgeois resentment:

"As Americans we are a peculiar breed. We believe in law and order, but we also believe that real crimes are committed by a separate class of people, one that has nothing to do with our own lives or the world of reasonable behaviour and mutual respect to which we belong. As a consequence, many people, particularly in higher income brackets, think of police officers as suburban maintenance personnel who should be treated politely but whose social importance is one cut above their gardeners.

Ever watch reality cop shows? ... What conclusion does the viewer arrive at? Crimes are committed by shirtless pukes. Slumlords and politicians on a pad get no play" (pp.152-3).

These manic manoeuvres of splitting, denial and projection serve to fully implicate the respectable fractions of society colluding in processes which generate and nourish patterns of foul play, while insulating the untarnished detached self from both the seething mass of ignorance below and venal dissolution above. Though a wholly artificial balance between culpability and blamelessness, this facilitates the pragmatic separation of investigative wheat from chaff, but sedimented as belief-system has a seductive, self-serving clarity requiring Herculean physical and emotional efforts to sustain when the going gets tough – so extreme, indeed, as to virtually obliterate the boundaries between good and bad guys all over again. Nevertheless, an immediate payoff is a clear-sighted appreciation of the thoroughgoing dependence of business as usual on class- and race-based contempt and domination in mainstream culture and its legitimising discourses.

History then resolves into a litany of criminal enterprise, with the fallout from Katrina entirely in keeping:

"In Louisiana, as in the rest of the South, the issue was always power. Wealth did not buy it. Wealth came with it. Televangelist preachers and fundamentalist churches sold magic as a way of acquiring it. The measure of one's success was the degree to which he could exploit his fellow man or reward his friends or punish his enemies ... In our state's history, a demagogue with holes in his shoes forced Standard Oil to kiss his ring" (p.290).

The latter refers to populist Senator Huey P. Long, gifting, we are told<sup>8</sup>, the state to the Costello crime family in the 1930s, who duly subcontracted all vice operations in New Orleans to a local Mafia outfit. The police and Mob coexisted comfortably (as elsewhere), running the French Quarter tourist area of the city as a joint

franchise where, irrespective of legal niceties, nothing was allowed to interfere with the pleasure business – a "cultural symbiosis" responsible for the locals dubbing the city 'The Great Whore of Babylon' and 'The Big Easy' as well as Purcel and Robicheaux's favoured 'The Big Sleazy'; which, however, progressively broke down after crack cocaine flooded the city in the 1980s before finally drowning in August 2005.

This socio-economic fabric, however, was always co-constituted and crosscut with the legacies of racial segregation, where, in Robicheaux's otherwise idealised post-Depression youth, "The majority of people were poor, and for generations the oligarchy that ruled the state exerted every effort to ensure they stayed that way. The Negro was the scapegoat for our problems, the trade unions the agents of northern troublemakers. With the coming of integration every demagogue in the state could not wait to stoke up the fires of racial fear and hatred. Many of their constituents rose to the occasion" (p. 187)<sup>9</sup>.

Correspondingly, Burke himself is at pains to emphasise that, "Within New Orleans' city limits, the population is 70% black. These are mainly hard-working, blue-collar people who have endured every form of adversity over many generations. But another element is ... heavily armed and morally insane. These are people who will rob the victim, then arbitrarily kill him out of sheer meanness"<sup>10</sup>. Tellingly, this stark dichotomising of a rich, complex Creole culture into sets of Manichean opposites produces one asymmetry – poor whites led astray by external forces; poor Blacks generating monsters from within – which, though never explicitly acknowledged, echoes the official bad faith the author excoriates in responses to Katrina; yet its ramifications dominate his novel's frantic denouement.

Remember, the police perspective routinely focused on Black criminality as the major problem after the storm hit, even though the bulk of supposedly factual media horror-stories were officially admitted to represent unsubstantiated paranoia. Slavoj Zizek has perceptively remarked that, here, "The official ... discourse is accompanied and sustained by a whole nest of obscene, brutal racist and sexist fantasies, which can only be admitted in a censored form"<sup>11</sup> – that is, masquerading as unfortunate truth. For all his enlightened liberal humanism, procedural protocols govern Robicheaux's working life too, and his default template for understanding and dealing with the black underclass presumes the same lowest common denominator – albeit uneasily displaced onto and attributed to his disreputable partner in crime-fighting:

"For Clete, Bertrand Melancon seemed to personify what he hated most in the clientele he dealt with on a daily basis. They were raised by their grandmothers and didn't have a clue who their fathers were. They ... thought of sexual roles in terms of prey or predator. They lied instinctively, even when there was no reason to. Trying to find a handle on them was impossible. They were inured to insult, indifferent to their own fate, and devoid of guilt or shame. What bothered Clete most about them was his belief that anyone from their background would probably turn out the same" (p.76).

Nevertheless, Purcel's job is to locate bail fugitives, and in "any American slum, two enterprises are never torched by urban rioters: the funeral home and the bondsman's office ... [whose] huge clientele of miscreants was sycophantic by nature and always trying to curry favor from those who had control over their lives" (p.72).

The conflicting characterisations here clearly signal the 'moral insanity' of traditional police culture, which dehumanises in advance those attracting its gaze, backed with baleful institutional clout obliging its targets to shape their conduct accordingly. But even choosing respectable conformism as accommodation to systemic injustice generates troubling grey areas – witness erstwhile law-abiding members of the Black community obstinately shielding less savoury relatives or neighbours from the official



attention they know as malevolent. Unable to assimilate this phenomenon, Robicheaux instead retreats to an Oakland Baptist minister's retrograde assertion that the 1960s Black "Panthers did not respect either the church or the traditional ethos of the family" (p.296), and therefore their appeal would not last. This dubious thesis was destined to remain untested, however. For its audacity in flouting stereotypes and collectively eschewing passivity, 1970s Black radicalism was crushed by a merciless police and military onslaught courtesy of the government's COINTELPRO conspiracy.

To Gary Younge, in a real-life setting far stranger than fiction, *Blowdown's* "search for black rapists and looters and their white assailants is a literary version of wasting police time" – where, although "they do not act as archetypes ... the characters must operate within the narrow confines of racial cliché"<sup>12</sup>. Unfortunately – possibly misled by lofty disdain for its artistic merits – Younge doesn't realise that Burke is specifically drawing attention to the problems this causes rather than merely reproducing them. That's why Robicheaux's favourite passage from Hemingway (in *Death in the Afternoon*) suggests "that the world's ills could be corrected by a three-day open season on people. Less heartening is his addendum that the first group he would wipe out would be police officers everywhere" (p.186). Robicheaux thus "has a classic flaw: hubris. The tragic hero takes a fall because of pride ... When Dave acts in a violent fashion it's almost always in the defense of another. But he knows violence is the last resort of an intelligent person and the first resort of a primitive person, and that everyone is diminished by it, usually the perpetrator the most"<sup>13</sup>. Acting-out violent fantasy, furthermore, has always been the stock in trade of the hardboiled detective.

## The Unsound and the Fury

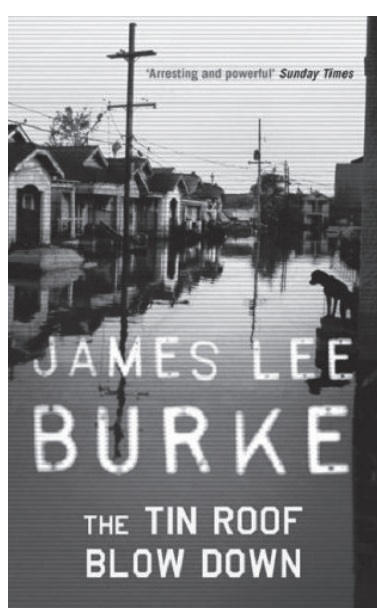
Private dicks began life as struggling entrepreneurs from blue-collar backgrounds in the utterly corrupt public miasma of the modern city. Unlike the detached aristocratic geniuses previously populating detective fiction, the hardboiled protagonist mucks in and deliberately intensifies the disorder he finds in the hope of shaking out clues. But to survive he has to be as tough and adeptly schooled as his adversaries in the evil they do – the thoroughgoing imbrication of the hero in the conduct for which he seeks to extract accounting or achieve resolution being the constitutive dilemma of hardboiled genres<sup>14</sup>. Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade and their direct descendants thus handle their contradictory positions with ironic isolation from the decadence around them, maintaining a strict regime of masculinity to bolster immunity from the dangerous seductions of *femme fatales*<sup>15</sup> – a spartan solipsism inevitably eroded, however, with the emerging social structure of consumer capitalism, which offers the seeking of pleasures and blurring of patriarchal boundaries to ordinary folk as well as the idle rich.

Hence new generations of hard-nosed investigators had to relax their masculinist certainties and rigid ego structures in order to convince their clients of professional competence (and their readers, of contemporary relevance). Yet this neo-noir worldliness and flexibility now makes it far harder to resist sinking into the moral degeneracy that they must be so intimate with to contest. As Fred Pfeil shows, the paradoxical outcome is that greater attentiveness to emotional depth and complexity necessitates ever more hysterical levels of violence to differentiate the honourably tough but vulnerable detective from the villain<sup>16</sup>. And whereas for most representatives

of the genre, this,

"sensitivity is both unproblematically positive and narcissistically self-regarding, Robicheaux's is openly riven by ambivalence, troubled by complicit desires and doubts, and obsessed with its old, unhealable wounds ... explicitly defined by its connective affiliations to and with a continuum of others, from the various white male monsters whose terrible appetites he finds within himself, to the innocent vulnerability of those morally pure women, children, and Blacks he saves and protects"<sup>17</sup>.

His creator specifies that "Dave's greatest anger is over the loss of the Cajun culture into which he was born. He's never been able to accept the fact that it's gone and won't be coming back"<sup>18</sup>. His nostalgic yearning in defence against this fury is then set against fantasies of the purity and unconditional love offered by the isolated nuclear family, but in both cases the reality is infected with exactly the same social diseases and questionable motives that he prefers only to register in those marked irredeemably criminal.



Robicheaux originates in a dysfunctional family with a capricious and cruel father and absent promiscuous mother, substituting his disappointment at a broken home with valorisation of the Cajun working class that at least had clear-cut standards to measure its failure. Similarly he idealises his intimate relationships but compulsively endangers them – his saintly second wife was slaughtered by thugs he was pursuing, and in *Blowdown* his third wife (an ex-nun) and adopted daughter very nearly suffer the same fate. The grotesque white psychopath who poses this most serious threat to Robicheaux (as in most of his novels) then obviously represents an incarnation of the alter-ego

that he could so easily have become.

Burke's evident awareness of all of these pathological dynamics is tempered by his focus on the overarching theme of redemption – sadly understood as an individual spiritual matter rather than a question of social and political dialectic, and therefore verging on vanity as well as pridefulness, where the conquering hero flatters himself on his goodness (and seeks regular reassurance to that effect from his nearest and dearest). Still, the author's genre craftsmanship is such that the story's resolution succeeds in tying all the narrative strands together, including Robicheaux's encouragement (as part of his faltering attempt to transcend the racist mythology he grew up with) of the Black fugitive's desire to atone for his many sins. Nevertheless, the scale of the central character's hysterical propensities and the hyperbolic violence he has to be willing to indulge in to end up 'on the side of the angels' heralds the self-destructive nature of a quest condemned to endlessly repeat itself so long as collective remedies remain out of reach ... In which case, as an allegory of the contortions of mainstream America avoiding recognition of its deep intrinsic culpability in the tragedy of New Orleans, perhaps *The Tin Roof Blowdown* is a minor masterpiece after all.

## Notes

1. Along with the title story – first appearing in *Esquire* in March 2006 (and so popular that the magazine reinstated regular short fiction features) – of Burke's collection *Jesus Out To Sea*. These have been swiftly followed by several other notable novels in diverse genres, as well as a crude, action-based, *Miami Vice*-style cop series (*K-Ville*) from Fox TV.
2. From an interview with Martha Woodroof on US National Public Radio, July 30, 2007 ([www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)). In an interview with Skylar Browning, 'No Regrets', *Missoula Independent Weekly*, February 8, 2006 ([www.theind.com](http://www.theind.com)), he fleshes out this conviction: "George Orwell put it much better than I. He said, 'A writer writes in order to correct history, to set the record straight.' By that he meant it's an obsession. You feel that somehow – and it's a vanity, of course – that inside you, you have trapped a perfect picture of truth, and

you feel compelled every minute of the day to convey it to someone else". More specifically, "We've given over the country to the worst people in it ... In part, it's because we've forgotten the importance of working people. ... We've given up the high road to the people who have hijacked Christianity ... We've allowed people who have no compassion at all for the working classes to pretend successfully that it is they who have Joe Bob and Bubba and Betty Sue's interests at heart ... Anyone who believes that the people running this country today care about the interests of working people has a serious thinking disorder".

3. Quotation from Burke's *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, 'A City of Saints and Sancho Panza', September, 2005 ([www.jamesleeburke.com](http://www.jamesleeburke.com)). See also interview with Jeff Baker, 'From Montana's Heartland: Redemption for New Orleans', *The Oregonian*, August 26, 2007 ([www.oregonlive.com](http://www.oregonlive.com)).
4. Interview with Jeffrey Trachtenberg, *Wall Street Journal* ([www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com)). Also, no doubt, audiences for detective stories are rather different from those for current affairs programming, however worthy – see Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives: Popular Reading, Popular Writing*, Verso 1983, for a pathbreaking account of the class connotations of popular fiction.
5. "George Bush doesn't care about Black people", during NBC's Concert for Hurricane Relief, September 2, 2005, after other unscripted remarks like: "I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it [the media] says, 'they're looting'. You see a white family, it says, 'they're looking for food'. And, you know, it's been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black".
6. And in his first town hall meeting after Katrina, New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin invited an evangelist pastor to speak first, who called it a "purging and cleansing" of the city – Nagin himself later suggesting that God had taken revenge on America for the Iraq war. Despite Burke's disgust here, though, his Catholicism also attracts him (and therefore Robicheaux) to equally ecclesiastical imagery; for example: "But the damage in New Orleans was of a kind we associate with apocalyptic images from the Bible" (p.195). For more on such theodicy and mainstream and crackpot godbothering in general, as well as cogent analyses of political and media treatments of the crisis, see Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell Or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, Basic Civitas Books, 2006 – who also cites the only significant remaining records of life in the drowned zones as being music videos by Southern rappers (and for further reference to their responses to Katrina, see my 'Rebel Poets Reloaded', *VARIANT* 30, 2007).
7. Robicheaux sees firsthand, and duly notes, the sundry paltry and woefully belated grassroots fruits of Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA; run by Bush crony Michael Brown with no experience in this, or any relevant, field) activity; i.e. granting enormous contracts to notoriously vicious, corrupt corporations like Blackwater, resulting in minimal resources trickling down to relief recipients. Given Blackwater's record in Iraq, the Third World parallel is doubly ironic even while exposing the general logic of 'private finance initiatives'.
8. For example: *Blowdown*, pp.140-1; and 'A City of Saints and Sancho Panza', *L.A. Times* (see note 3).
9. Including very nearly electing ex-KKK Nazi David Duke as state Governor as recently as 1991. For the best review of *Blowdown* I've read anchored in New Orleans nuance, see Robert Maxwell, 'After the Storm: James Lee Burke Answers Katrina's Wrath with His Own', *Mobile Press-Register* (Alabama), August 5, 2007 ([www.press-register.com](http://www.press-register.com)).
10. *L.A. Times*, note 3.
11. In 'The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape: Reality and Fantasy in New Orleans', *In These Times*, 20 October, 2005; invoking a parallel with anti-semitism in Nazi Germany where, quite irrespective of any actual misdeeds, "the causes of all social antagonisms were projected onto the 'Jew' – an object of perverted love-hatred, a spectral figure of mixed fascination and disgust".
12. *The Guardian*, December 1, 2007.
13. Burke, in Trachtenberg, *Wall Street Journal*, note 4.
14. See, for example, John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, Chicago University Press, 1976; David Geherin, *The American Private Eye: The Image in Fiction*, New York, Vintage, 1985; Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*, Routledge, 1993.
15. See Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Routledge, 1991; and various contributions to Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir*, Verso, 1993.
16. In 'Soft Boiled Dicks', *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference*, Verso, 1995.
17. 'Soft Boiled Dicks', pp.116-7. Burke's foregrounding of Robicheaux's psychic conflicts also contrasts most sharply with the fashionable serial killer subgenre – for example, the Hannibal Lecter series, where class hatred is mystified and dispersed into outlandishly supernatural empathetic connections between detectives, murderers and amoral upper-class incarnations of the Devil.
18. In Trachtenberg, *Wall Street Journal*, note 4.