

Flags on the Bayou

Jim Alexander

James Lee Burke is the acclaimed author of over 40 books, the best known being the Dave Robicheaux series, featuring a deputy sheriff in Iberia County, outside of New Orleans. Having grown up in the area, Burke knows it well. His stories show an understanding of the local people, either at the low end of wealth and education or having gained some wealth or power by questionable means. Mostly in the stories, the good people, even though hampered by their low status in New Orleans life, eke out survival in the face of economic and social oppression.

Robicheaux is typically helped by his buddy and former fellow New Orleans police officer Clete Purcel, who is best known for taking direct, if not lawful, action to punish the bad guys. Another series follows the Holland family, in different locations but with somewhat parallel patterns of life.

Flags on the Bayou, published in 2023, is markedly different. Its story does take place in the New Orleans area, but at a different time and circumstance. The Civil War is winding down, much of the Mississippi is in the hands of Union troops, and the Confederacy is retreating to Texas, leaving behind crazed irregulars and unmanaged Union officers. Law and order has broken down, local officials are uneasy as to their authority, and old mores confront an uncertain future. Patterns of Southern civility continue on top of abuses of humanity.

As the story progresses, it is told with the unusual pattern of each of six main characters telling a successive chapter in their own voice and as they see it. The main character is Hannah

Laveau, a slave now confronting freedom, but harassed by a breakdown of civil order and an unfair charge of murder, with passions of love and degradation. Possessed of amazing inner strength and certainty, she confronts the pain of searching for her lost son, abuses beyond imagination, and a surrounding cast of characters ranging from the deranged to those who love and help her.

Burke's books typically benefit from his majestic command of the English language to describe scenes, typically portraying the feel of the Old South. In *Flags*, he does not disappoint. Instead of his usual descriptions of scenes across the water, of distant offshore oil

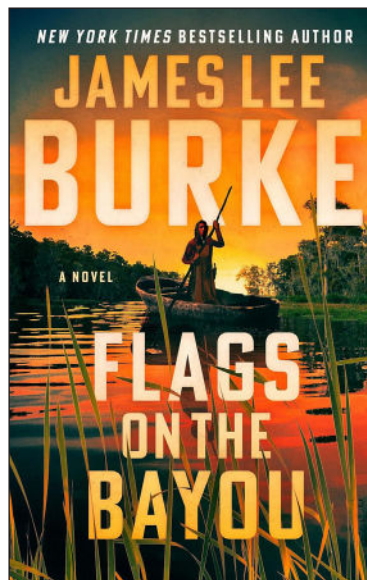
towers in the Gulf, he opens the story this way:

"Morning on the Lady of the Lake Plantation can be a grand experience, particularly in the late fall when the sky is a clear blue and the wind is blowing in the swamp, Spanish moss lifting in the trees, and thousands of ducks quacking as they end their long journey to the South."

Midway through the story his artistic words paint: "A storm is coming. There are no black clouds in the sky yet, but you watch. The wind will die and the sun will glow the color of tarnished brass and the air will smell like salt and wet sand and seagull nests toppling in the waves, then you'll see a glassy funnel wobbling far to the south and flickers on the horizon that turn out to be lightning that makes no sound."

But the true beauty of the story is the character of Hannah, who possesses amazing insights and inner strength as her saga unfolds. Much of

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it is not happy, save for the last chapter, this one expressed in Burke's voice.

I won't tell you the ending, but can provide this happy description in that chapter: "The woman named Hannah was the one who seemed to have the greatest faith.... She did not believe. She simply knew. God was simply there, wherever there was." And he closes with the words: "A cynic could conclude that evil had its way.... For us, vespers is the entryway into sunrise, the crossing of the Jordan no more consequential than sliding your bare foot into the foam rolling up a beach. It's that easy."

Burke, now 88 years old, says he regards this as his best work. Read and hang on. He's a master,

and the tale tells us not only of Hannah's journey, but much about the South at a critical time, and in a way, much about ourselves.

Jim's review of *Deep South; Four Seasons on Back Roads*, by Paul Theroux, appeared in the November 2021 edition of *The Lumberton Chronicle*. Older issues of *The Chronicle* may be found online at mlra.org and in the Lumberton and Medford Leas libraries. ■