



LOUISIANA
LITERATURE

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Reviews

JAMES LEE BURKE. *Cimarron Rose*. New York: Hyperion, 1997. Pp. 288. \$24.95 (cloth).

TONY DUNBAR. *Shelter from the Storm*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1997. Pp. 226. \$24.95 (cloth).

The term *mystery*, as in *murder mystery*, implies that a search needs conducting. In most early detective stories, the emphasis was on finding a murderer, or the perpetrator of some other crime, or at least the solution to a puzzle. The reader expected to learn "whodunit," and how, and why. In more recent detective fiction, the detective himself or herself has come to be the focus of the story. Often he or she is searching for answers to personal puzzles along with or even in place of answers to a client's puzzle. Two recent novels with Louisiana connections fit this profile.

James Lee Burke, of course, is best known for his Dave Robicheaux novels. Robicheaux is a New Iberia private detective who searches for ways to deal with his past, his alcoholism, his violent nature, and the presence of evil in his world while also solving his clients' problems. The lead character in Burke's latest novel, *Cimarron Rose*, shares these concerns with Robicheaux. However, readers will quickly recognize Billy Bob Holland as a very different, if equally memorable, character. Holland is a lawyer in the small town of Deaf Smith, Texas, near the Mexican border. He is faced with the difficult and delicate task of trying to acquit Lucas Smothers, who has been charged with the sexual assault and murder of a girl he had been dating. This task is especially important to Billy Bob because Lucas is his illegitimate son, a son he has watched over but never publicly acknowledged. Billy Bob realizes from the onset of the action that Lucas has been set up by the corrupt local law force, but to prove it he must delve into a complex tangle of drug runners, overlapping law enforcement agencies, unscrupulous businessmen, and depraved small-town youths.

To complicate matters, Holland is dealing with a ghost. Years before, he had accidentally killed L. Q. Navarro, his partner in the Texas Rangers. Now L. Q., a disturbing and vivid reminder of a violent past, shows up from time to time to chat with Billy Bob. Billy Bob is haunted also by the voice of his grandfather, a cattle drover with a violent streak who reformed his ways, became a preacher, and then left everything he had to live with Jennie, the Rose of Cimarron, among the very thieves he abhorred. In reading his grandfather's journal, Holland finds many parallels to his own circumstances. Like his grandfather, he feels himself to be on the side of justice in a corrupt community but struggling not to give in to violence as a corrective means. As an example of the evil that uncontrolled violence can generate, Burke offers Garland T. Moon. Moon, warped in about every way a man can be, represents danger to all who have the misfortune to cross his path.

Burke weaves the multitude of threads in this story into a controlled pattern, with Billy Bob's search for truth dominant. Billy Bob finally gains control over the fears and the ghosts that haunt him by publicly acknowledging his own deficiencies, but that is not the end of the novel. Burke did not begin his writing career with detective fiction; like many other writers, he found that he could use the form to explore other themes that interest him. However, he may now be in the habit of thinking from a detective's point of view, and detectives (in fiction at least) do not walk away when a mystery is still to be solved. Billy Bob pursues the truth until he knows who done it. The answer, while unexpected, should satisfy fans of detective fiction.

Shelter from the Storm, Tony Dunbar's latest mystery, also focuses on the detective's search for truth. Dunbar has been successful with his series of novels set in New Orleans and featuring Tubby Dubonnet, a so-so lawyer but a fairly effective detective. Dunbar usually puts a humorous slant on Tubby's misadventures, and this novel is no exception. Setting the action in the midst of a flooded Carnival season provides many opportunities for comic action and zany sights.

As in the previous Tubby Dubonnet books, the city of New Orleans itself almost overshadows the other elements of the novel. Native readers will be grateful to discover the real New Orleans in Dunbar's books. He can be trusted to work neighborhood bars, streetcar lines, and local cuisine into his fiction in a realistic way; his novels never read like tourist brochures. The device of the flood on Fat Tuesday allows him to create a people's Mardi Gras, in which Mardi Gras Indians tour their neighborhoods in pirogues, the Jefferson Buzzards march regardless of a canceled parade schedule, and Rex makes his way downtown by any means available.

In contrast to this optimistic view of the city, the crime at the center of the story has led Tubby to believe that the rising crime rate and corruption on the police force are the work of an "evil hand. . . . Some kind of force that can set up a heist at a bank, that does deals with big oil companies, that can reach into a major hospital and kill a man. Somebody's pulling the strings" (p. 207). This conspiracy theory, which Tubby formulates toward the end of the novel, is not explored or solved in this book. The theory comes across as far-fetched, but it does leave the reader anticipating the next Tubby Dubonnet novel, in which Tubby will presumably undertake to find the truth and attempt to save his beloved city.

C. DENELLE COWART

BRUCE CLAYTON. *W. J. Cash: A Life*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991/1997. Pp. xiv+236. 8 illustrations. \$13.95 (paper).

Students of the American South will surely welcome this paperback edition of Bruce Clayton's masterful 1991 study of Wilbur Joseph Cash and his classic work, *The Mind of the South*. A tour de force, Clayton's biography of man and book helped open a revival of interest in Cash's powerful, searching investigation into the *weltanschauung* of the American South. Shorter and less comprehensive than Joseph L. Morrison's biography of Cash (*W. J. Cash, Southern Prophet: A Biography and a Reader* [New York, 1967]), Clayton's study is more compelling and more attuned to the mood of the post-civil rights era.