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WD INTERVIEW

James Lee Burke

THE BESTSELLER ON
BATTLING THROUGH
REJECTION



The WD Interview

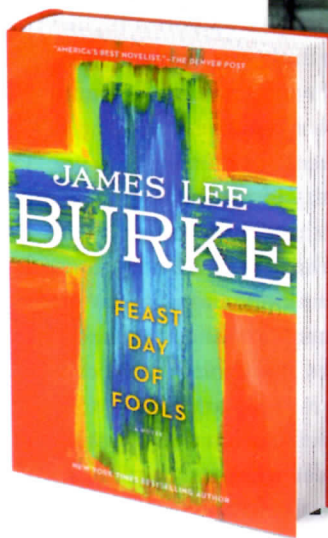
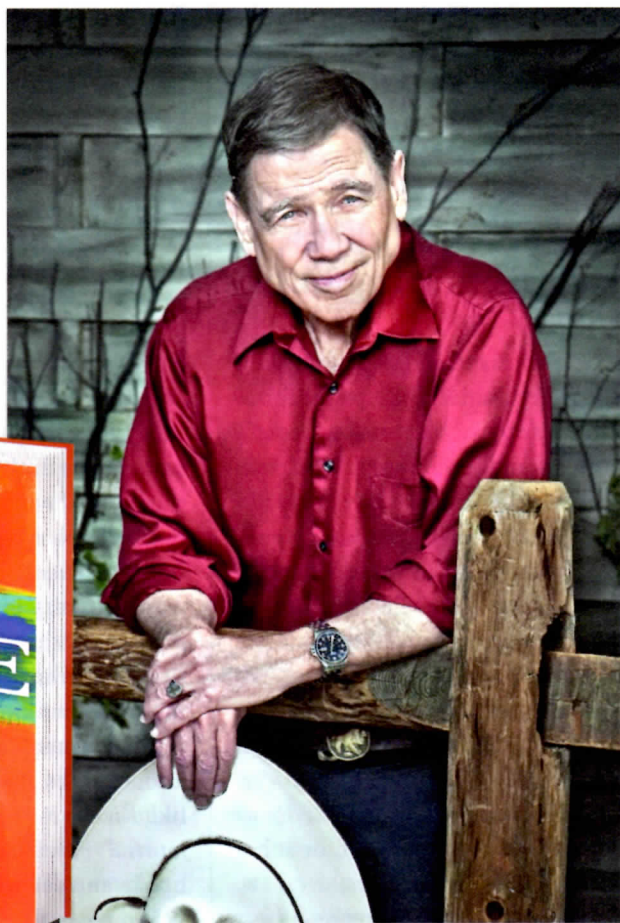


James Lee Burke

THE ART & CRAFT OF PERSEVERANCE

Genre-bending bestseller James Lee Burke never cared about rejections—he collected hundreds. Burke knew deep down that he had talent, and he let nothing stand in his way.

BY LINDSEY O'CONNOR



How much rejection is too much? After publishing several books, how many years could you take without any new publishing deals before doubting your career path, and perhaps even your talent?

Crime novelist James Lee Burke knows. He's a writer who's been unphased by rejection, and is as immune to self-doubt as he is bestseller hubris.

These days, he's famous for his Dave Robicheaux series about a tough, flawed detective in New Iberia, La. (Burke's hometown)—mysteries layered with Robicheaux's psychology, and the Acadiana culture, folklore and landscape. But Burke doesn't just serve up your typical mystery—throughout his career, he has attained the uncommon: both a massive commercial fan base and considerable literary respect. He's been called the Faulkner of crime fiction because of his lyrical, poetic language, his allusions to classical literature, his compelling villains, his evocative descriptions.

Before he became a bestseller, before he became a rare two-time Edgar winner and recipient of an NEA grant (not to mention a Guggenheim Fellowship), before three of his books were made into films, Burke's writing path began when he published his first short story at 19. He earned his MA in English and took a job in the oil fields and, later, fell upon hard times.

"From California to the East Coast, we did everything. Every dirty job that's there," he says. "I drove a truck. My wife waited tables. We taught school, worked for the state [of Louisiana], worked on Skid Row." That Skid Row job, as a social worker on Los Angeles gang turf, gave Burke the experience with inequities and criminals that would inform his work years down the road.

He published his first novel in the mid-1960s, and by age 34 he had released three mainstream novels with three different publishers and moderate sales. Then came the dry spell. In one of his most famous stories, an oft-told tale of publishing rejection, he wrote his fourth book, *The Lost Get-Back Boogie*, and submitted it, then resubmitted it, nearly ad infinitum. According to Burke, nine years later it had been rejected 111 times. He began applying for a Guggenheim, and was told no 14 times. Thirteen years passed, and he

couldn't sell another hardcover (or, as he says, "I couldn't sell ice water in hell"). Finally, LSU Press picked it up, and subsequently it was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

The long season of rejection inspired him to try something different—a literary novel in the mystery genre—so he created the Dave Robicheaux character with *The Neon Rain*. His 15th Guggenheim application got him in. Then he hit the literary jackpot in 1989 with his sixth book, *Black Cherry Blues*, which was auctioned for \$205,000. He's been doing what he loves, writing full time, ever since. At 75, he has now been working on his craft for five decades.

His latest release, *Feast Day of Fools*, is part of his Hackberry Holland series—and it's Burke's 30th novel. The sequel to *Rain Gods*, it features Sheriff Holland and his nemesis, Preacher Jack Collins, in a complex story set on the Tex-Mex border, revealing the timely issues of drug war violence, oil and gas, immigration, and religious freedom. All told, Burke feels *Feast Day of Fools* is his best book. Simon & Schuster has also nominated it for the National Book Award.

From his ranch in Montana, in a conversation peppered with laughter and stories, Burke shares with us his wisdom on continuing to write no matter what, avoiding negativity, and how attitude and believing in your art are key to overcoming rejection.

You've said it's important that an artist makes his statement based on his principles. Is that what your books are?

Well, others would have to judge that. It'd be grandiose for me to say that. Orwell once wrote an essay called "Why I Write," and he said every writer writes out of a compulsion that is based on a vanity. Every writer believes that he has a perfect vision of the truth about some element in the world or in his life, and he feels this compulsion to write it down for others to see it with the same clarity that he sees it.

I used to teach creative writing, and sometimes a student would say, "Hey, Jim, do you think I have talent? Do you think I should stay with it?" I would avoid answering the question because it was the wrong question.

What's the right question?

There would be no question. The real writer couldn't care less if other people think he has talent or not. Every writer knows—a real writer, real artist, knows he has it. He never doubts it.

I don't think that talent is earned. I think it's like standing in a wet pasture and getting hit by lightning. You don't sign up for the job. Every artist knows in his heart that the gift comes to him from some power outside of himself. And he doesn't care whether other people believe he has talent or not.

I've also always felt that if a person becomes grandiose and vain about his talent, he'll lose it. It will be taken from him and given to someone else.

How do we get to that point of such self-assurance and perseverance in our work? Is it something we can work toward?

It's a great question because your question answers the question. How do you get there? Well, a person knows at some point he wants to be an artist, whether a writer, novelist, poet, actor, singer. The particular medium is irrelevant.

This is the way I did it. I started writing and attempting to publish when I was 19. And by age 20 I worked briefly offshore, 10 days on the water, back on land for five days, and during those five days I would write, write, write. I rented a mailbox, and I would send my stories, and I guess some poems, to magazines all over Canada and the United States. Then I would go back on the quarter boat, and come back 10 days later, and my rejections would be waiting for me in the mailbox. But I learned a system and I've followed it ever since: Never let a manuscript stay at home longer than 36 hours. It's that simple. You keep it in the mail, and if you do not you are ensured to fail.

Why?

Because you're not a player. The manuscript's sitting in the desk drawer. It's never going to be published. And that's how you do it. And you're always a player. In other words, you write it as well as you can, you let God be the judge of it, don't worry about critics and rejection. There's literary criticism and then there's dismemberment of artists. They're quite separate. The [latter is] not even worth talking about.

If you don't compromise [your gift], if you write each day as well as you can, and then submit your work and not worry about it and go on to the next piece, you sud-

denly find oddly enough that you're no more interested in the applause than the silence. You don't hear either one of them. You can never listen to the naysayers. If you do you won't survive. You never doubt yourself. If God gives a gift to someone, it's for a reason. It's to make the world a better place. And you never forget that lesson.

How did you get through the long period of rejection in the middle of your career?

Rejection's not easy. I mean, it's like somebody, every day of your life, saying, "You know, you're a real loser." And you wonder if he has a point. But the truth is that you don't care. And I never did. I was never bothered by letters of rejection. I never believed one of them. And I received them by the hundreds, over many years.

You do it a day at a time. You just put your rejection slips in a shoebox and tell yourself one day you're going to autograph them and sell them at auction.

If you had stopped with all those rejections over the years, how would that have changed your life?

Well, I would have resented myself, I suspect, the rest of my life. But my point is an artist will not quit. He doesn't have a choice. An artist is not going to do other things. It isn't a matter of being brave. That's like saying, "Well, I was brave because I got up this morning." It's something in your spiritual tissue. You never stop. Why stop? Another thing a person has to remember: If he's successful, it's temporary. It's going to go away.

What's the most challenging aspect of the writing and publishing life to you?

Every writer has a nemesis. For me it's fatigue. You can do lots of things well if you're tired, but writing is not one of them. Maybe there are people who can write well when they're tired, but I think almost any artist would say that it's very hard to work at a full-time job somewhere else, and then write before you go to work, and write when you come home. That's when it really takes courage.

Write for the love of your art. Someplace down the road, the money, the fame, they'll come, but by that time you won't be thinking in terms of money or fame.

Has that been true for you?

Oh, absolutely. I wouldn't do anything as hard as writing is for money. There are too many other ways to make money far more easily. It's hard to write and rewrite every day and then rewrite what you wrote the day before.

Tell me about your writing process.

Well, I start early in the morning or whenever I get up. My enemy is insomnia. Sometimes I write in the middle of the night, but I write into the afternoon and then I work out at a club or I work on our place here. I work on it all the time and I keep a notebook by my bed with a pen, and I write sometimes things at night in longhand at 11 or 11:30 p.m. that I'll use in the morning.

Every day I rise with two scenes in mind, that's all. I never see farther ahead than two scenes. I never outline because I never know where the book is going, not until the last paragraph. The last paragraph of *Feast Day of Fools* is probably the best ending on a novel I ever wrote, but I didn't know how it was going to end even at 11 at night when I wrote that paragraph out in longhand and I said, "That's it." And the next morning I typed it on the computer.

Hemingway said if he outlined, he would know the end of the story, and if he knew the end of the story, so would the reader. I do it just like Papa did it. I never know where a story is going. I start the first line in the book and I do not know what the book is about. I just write those two scenes. That's the way it has always been.

Do you go back in the afternoons or the evenings to rewrite and to edit?

Yes, always. Every day, seven days a week, no days off. Always, always, always. I take it a little easy on Sunday. I go to church on Saturday afternoon.

That kind of work schedule could exhaust someone decades younger than you. Why do you work so hard?

It's a great life and I don't look upon it as work. This is the way I figure it: You have two choices in life. You either die or do something with your time. You're going to be doing something—why not write?

Your persistent themes seem to be about powerlessness versus the powerful, redemption, and social justice. Do you always return to those?

Always. You really went to the heart of it. That's what they're about—redemption and those who wish to acquire power and control and authority over their fellow man. That's always been at the center of my work. Those are the guys to watch out for. [Laughs.]

How do you view the relationship between publishing and creating?

When I was young, I was determined to have my way and

JUMPING GENRES

Did James Lee Burke "sell out" when he started writing crime fiction? For his take, visit writersdigest.com/novdec-11.

I would argue about changes in a manuscript; I wouldn't listen to people. Sometimes I may have been right, but most of the time I was just headstrong. This is what I've learned with a little bit of time, maybe a little bit of wisdom—to listen to what an editor or publisher has to say. They've done it lots of times and usually even if you disagree, if you will listen, you show respect for the person who is trying to help you and you learn that there is at least an element of viability in what you're being told.

When a person is younger, at least in my case, I often did not appreciate what publishers do for a writer. The word *publisher* simply means the people you work with: the copy editor, the publicist, the first reader, the printer, the people who invest their money in your work, the artists who create the cover. They never get credit for what they do, but all of them make an enormous contribution to a writer's career, and it's so easy to say thank you.

What are your favorite writing processes or methods that you would want to pass on?

I try to get at least 750 words a day. If you start adding it up, 750 a day—then you think 10 months down the road what you have.

What's your advice for writers inspired by your example of literary longevity and success?

Don't ever quit. Never quit. Never show anybody you're hurt. Grin and walk through the cannon smoke. It will drive them up the wall. You always stay true to your own principles. You always believe in your gift. God doesn't make mistakes when he presents someone with a gift like that. It's there for a reason. Tell the naysayers, those who reject you, to drop dead! Who cares?

What do you hope is your most lasting literary achievement?

Well, maybe I've made the world a little bit better. Maybe that what degree of talent I may have might be validated. That I did something right with it. There's nothing worse than remorse about not using what you have. **WD**

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