

White Doves at Morning

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For years, critics have acclaimed the power of James Lee Burke's writing, the luminosity of his prose, the psychological complexity of his characters, the richness of his landscapes. Over the course of twenty novels and one collection of short stories, he has developed a loyal and dedicated following among both critics and general readers. His thrillers, featuring either Louisiana cop Dave Robicheaux or Billy Bob Holland, a hardened Texas-based lawyer, have consistently appeared on national bestseller lists, making Burke one of America's most celebrated authors of crime fiction.

Now, in a startling and brilliantly successful departure, Burke has written a historical novel -- an epic story of love, hate, and survival set against the tumultuous background of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

At the center of the novel are James Lee Burke's own ancestors, Robert Perry, who comes from a slave-owning family of wealth and privilege, and Willie Burke, born of Irish immigrants, a poor boy who is as irreverent as he is brave and decent. Despite their personal and political conflicts with the issues of the time, both men join the Confederate Army, choosing to face ordeal by fire, yet determined not to back down in their commitment to their moral beliefs, to their friends, and to the abolitionist woman with whom both have become infatuated.

One of the most compelling characters in the story, and the catalyst for much of its drama, is Flower Jamison, a beautiful young black slave befriended, at great risk to himself, by Willie and owned by -- and fathered by, although he will not admit it -- Ira Jamison. Owner of Angola Plantation, Ira Jamison is a true son of the Old South and also a ruthless businessman, who, after the war, returns to the plantation and re-energizes it by transforming it into a penal colony, which houses prisoners he rents out as laborers to replace the slaves who have been emancipated.

Against all local law and customs, Flower learns from Willie to read and write, and receives the help and protection of Abigail Dowling, a Massachusetts abolitionist who had come south several years prior to help fight yellow fever and never left, and who has attracted the eye of both Willie and Robert Perry. These love affairs are not only fraught with danger, but compromised by the great and grim events of the Civil War and its aftermath.

As in all of Burke's writings, *White Doves at Morning* is full of wonderful, colorful, unforgettable villains. Some, like Clay Hatcher, are pure "white trash" (considered the lowest of the low, they were despised by the white ruling class and feared by former slaves). From their ranks came the most notorious of the vigilante groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, the White League and the Knights of the White Camellia. Most villainous of all, though, are the petty and mean-minded Todd McCain, owner of New Iberia's hardware store, and the diabolically evil Rufus Atkins, former overseer of Angola Plantation and the man Jamison has placed in charge of his convict labor crews.

Rounding out this unforgettable cast of characters are Carrie LaRose, madam of New

Iberia's house of ill repute, and her ship's-captain brother Jean-Jacques LaRose, Cajuns who assist Flower and Abigail in their struggle to help the blacks of the town.

With battle scenes at Shiloh and in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia that no reader will ever forget, and set in a time of upheaval that affected all men and all women at all levels of society, *White Doves at Morning* is an epic worthy of America's most tragic conflict, as well as a book of substance, importance, and genuine originality, one that will undoubtedly come to be regarded as a masterpiece of historical fiction.

James Lee Burke, the rare winner of two Edgar Awards for best crime fiction of the year, is the author of twenty previous novels including many New York Times bestsellers, among them *Purple Cane Road*, *Bitterroot*, and *Jolie Blon's Bounce*, and one collection of short stories. He lives with his wife in Missoula, Montana, and New Iberia, Louisiana.

Chapter One: 1837

The black woman's name was Sarie, and when she crashed out the door of the cabin at the end of the slave quarters into the fading winter light, her lower belly bursting with the child that had already broken her water, the aftermath of the ice storm and the sheer desolate sweep of leaf-bare timber and frozen cotton acreage and frost-limned cane stalks seemed to combine and strike her face like a braided whip.

She trudged into the grayness of the woods, the male shoes on her feet pocking the snow, her breath streaming out of the blanket she wore on her head like a monk's cowl. Ten minutes later, deep inside the gum and persimmon and oak trees, her clothes strung with air vines that were silver with frost, the frozen leaves cracking under her feet, she heard the barking of the dogs and the yelps of their handlers who had just released them.

She splashed into a slough, one that bled out of the woods into the dark swirl of the river where it made a bend through the plantation. The ice sawed at her ankles; the cold was like a hammer on her shins. But nonetheless she worked her way upstream, between cypress roots that made her think of a man's knuckles protruding from the shallows. Across the river the sun was a vaporous smudge above the bluffs, and she realized night would soon come upon her and that a level of coldness she had never thought possible would invade her bones and womb and teats and perhaps turn them to stone.

She clutched the bottom of her stomach with both hands, as though holding a watermelon under her dress, and slogged up the embankment and collapsed under a lean-to where, in the summer months, an overseer napped in the afternoon while his charges bladed down the cypress trees for the soft wood Marse Jamison used to make cabinets in the big house on a bluff overlooking the river.

Even if she had known the river was called the Mississippi, the name would have held no significance for her. But the water boundary called the Ohio was another matter. It was somewhere to the north, somehow associated in her mind with the Jordan, and a black person only needed to wade across it to be as free as the children of Israel.

Except no black person on the plantation could tell her exactly how far to the north this river was, and she had learned long ago never to ask a white person where the river called Ohio was located.

The light in the west died and through the breaks in the lean-to she saw the moon rising and the ground fog disappearing in the cold, exposing the hardness of the earth, the glazed and speckled symmetry of the tree trunks. Then a pain like an ax blade seemed to split her in half and she put a stick in her mouth to keep from crying out. As the time between the contractions shrank and she felt blood issue from her womb between her fingers, she was convinced the juju woman had been right, that this baby, her first, was a man-child, a warrior and a king.

She stared upward at the constellations bursting in the sky, and when she shut her eyes she saw her child inside the redness behind her eyelids, a powerful little brown boy with liquid eyes and a mouth that would seek both milk and power from his mother's breast.

She caught the baby in her palms and sawed the cord in half with a stone and tied it in a knot, then pressed the closed eyes and hungry mouth to her teat, just before passing out.

The dawn broke hard and cold, a yellow light that burst inside the woods and exposed her hiding place and brought no warmth or release from the misery in her bones. There was a dirty stench in the air, like smoke from a drowned campfire. She heard the dogs again, and when she rose to her feet the pain inside her told her she would never outrun them.

Learn from critters, her mother had always said. They know God's way. Don't never ax Master or his family or the mens he hire to tell you the troot. Whatever they teach us is wrong, girl. Never forget that lesson, her mother had said.

The doe always leads the hunter away from the fawn, Sarie thought. That's what God taught the doe, her mother had said.

She wrapped the baby in the blanket that had been her only protection from the cold, then rose to her feet and covered the opening to the lean-to with a broken pine bough and walked slowly through the woods to the slough. She stepped into the water, felt it rush inside her shoes and over her ankles, then worked her way downstream toward the river. In the distance she heard axes knocking into wood and smelled smoke from a stump fire, and the fact that the work of the plantation went on rhythmically, not missing a beat, in spite of her child's birth and possible death reminded her once again of her own insignificance and the words Master had used to her yesterday afternoon.

"You should have taken care of yourself, Sarie," he had said, his pantaloons tucked inside his riding boots, his youthful face undisturbed and serene and without blemish except for the tiny lump of tobacco in his jaw. "I'll see to it the baby doesn't lack for raiment or

provender, but I'll have to send you to the auction house. You're not an ordinary nigger, Sarie. You won't be anything but trouble. I'm sorry it worked out this way."

When she came out of the water and labored toward the edge of the woods, she glanced behind her and in the thin patina of snow frozen on the ground she saw her own blood spore and knew it was almost her time, the last day in a lifetime of days that had been marked by neither hope nor despair but only unanswered questions: Where was the green place they had all come from? What group of men had made them chattel to be treated as though they had no souls, whipped, worked from cain't-see to cain't-see, sometimes branded and hamstrung?

The barking of the dogs was louder now but she no longer cared about either the dogs or the men who rode behind them. Her spore ended at the slough; her story would end here, too. The child was another matter. She touched the juju bag tied around her neck and prayed she and the child would be together by nightfall, in the warm, green place where lions lay on the beaches by a great sea.

But now she was too tired to think about any of it. She stood on the edge of the trees, the sunlight breaking on her face, then sat down heavily in the grass, the tops of her shoes dark with her blood. Through a red haze she saw a man in a stovepipe hat and dirty white breeches ride over a hillock behind his dogs, two other mounted men behind him, their horses steaming in the sunshine.

The dogs surrounded her, circling, snuffing in the grass, their bodies bumping against one another, but they made no move against her person. The man in the stovepipe hat reined his horse and got down and looked with exasperation at his two companions. "Get these dogs out of here. If I hear that barking anymore, I'll need a new pair of ears," he said. Then he looked down at Sarie, almost respectfully. "You gave us quite a run."

She did not reply. His name was Rufus Atkins, a slight, hard-bodied man whose skin, even in winter, had the color and texture of a blacksmith's leather apron. His hair was a blackish-tan, long, combed straight back, and there were hollows in his cheeks that gave his face a certain fragility. But the cartilage around the jawbones was unnaturally dark, as though rubbed with blackened brick dust, knotted with a tension his manner hid from others.

Rufus Atkins' eyes were flat, hazel, and rarely did they contain or reveal any definable emotion, as though he lived behind glass and the external world never registered in a personal way on his senses.

A second man dismounted, this one blond, his nose wind-burned, wearing a leather cap and canvas coat and a red-and-white-checkered scarf tied around his throat. On his hip he carried a small flintlock pistol that had three hand-smoothed indentations notched in the wood grips. In his right hand he gripped a horse quirt that was weighted with a lead ball sewn inside the bottom of the deerhide handle.

"She done dropped it, huh?" he said.

"That's keenly observant of you, Clay, seeing as how the woman's belly is flat as a busted pig's bladder," Rufus Atkins replied.

"Marse Jamison says find both of them, he means find both of them, Rufus," the man named Clay said, looking back into the trees at the blood spots in the snow.

Rufus Atkins squatted down and ignored his companion's observation, his eyes wandering over Sarie's face.

"They say you filed your teeth into points 'cause there's an African king back there in your bloodline somewhere," he said to her. "Bet you gave birth to a man-child, didn't you, Sarie?"

"My child and me gonna be free. Ain't your bidness no more, Marse Rufus," she replied.

"Might as well face it, Sarie. That baby is not going to grow up around here, not with Marse Jamison's face on it. He'll ship it off somewhere he doesn't have to study on the trouble that big dick of his gets him into. Tell us where the baby is and maybe you and it will get sold off together."

When she didn't reply to his lie, he lifted her chin with his knuckle. "I've been good to you, Sarie. Never made you lift your dress, never whipped you, always let you go to the corn-breaks and the dances. Isn't it time for a little gratitude?" he said.

She looked into the distance at the bluffs on the far side of the river, the steam rising off the water in the shadows below, the live oaks blowing stiffly against the sky. Rufus Atkins fitted his hand under her arm and began to lift her to her feet.

She seized his wrist and sunk her teeth into his hand, biting down with her incisors into sinew and vein and bone, seeing his head pitch back, hearing the squeal rise from his throat. Then she flung his hand away from her and spat his blood out of her mouth.

He staggered to his feet, gripping the back of his wounded hand.

"You nigger bitch," he said.

He ripped the quirt from his friend's grasp and struck her across the face with it. Then, as though his anger were insatiable and fed upon itself, he inverted the quirt in his hand and whipped the leaded end down on her head and neck and shoulders, again and again.

He threw the quirt to the ground, squeezing his wounded hand again, and made a grinding sound with his teeth.

"Damn, I think she went to the bone," he said.

"Rufus?" the blond man named Clay said.

"What?" he answered irritably.

"I think you just beat her brains out."

"She deserved it."

"No, I mean you beat her brains out. Look. She's probably spreading her legs for the devil now," the blond man said.

Rufus Atkins stared down at Sarie's slumped posture, the hanging jaw, the sightless eyes.

"You just cost Marse Jamison six hundred dollars. You flat put us in it, Roof," Clay said.

Rufus cupped his mouth in hand and thought for a minute. He turned and looked at the third member of their party, a rodent-faced man in a buttoned green wool coat and slouch hat strung with a turkey feather. He had sores on his face that never healed, breath that stunk of decaying teeth, and no work history other than riding with the paddy rollers, a ubiquitous crew of drunkards and white trash who worked as police for plantation interests and terrorized Negroes on the roads at night.

"What you aim to do?" Clay asked.

"I'm studying on it," Rufus replied. He then turned toward the third man. "Come on up here, Jackson, and give us your opinion on something," he said.

The third man approached them, the wind twirling the turkey feather on his hat brim. He glanced down at Sarie, then back at Rufus, a growing knowledge in his face.

"You done it. You dig the hole," he said.

"You got it all wrong," Rufus said.

He slipped the flintlock pistol from Clay's side holster, cocked it, and fired a chunk of lead the size of a walnut into the side of Jackson's head. The report echoed across the water against the bluffs on the far side.

"Good God, you done lost your mind?" Clay said.

"Sarie killed Jackson, Clay. That's the story you take to the grave. Nigger who kills a white man isn't worth six hundred dollars. Nigger who kills a white man buys the scaffold. That's Lou'sana law," he said.

The blond man, whose full name was Clay Hatcher, stood stupefied, his nose red in the cold, his breath loud inside his checkered scarf.

"Whoever made the world sure didn't care much about the likes of us, did He?" Rufus said to no one in particular. "Bring up Jackson's horse and get him across the saddle, would you? Best be careful. I think he messed himself."

After she was told of her daughter's death and the baby who had been abandoned somewhere deep in the woods, Sarie's mother left her job in the washhouse without permission and went to the site where her daughter had died. She followed the blood trail back to the slough, then stood on the thawing mudflat and watched the water coursing southward toward the river and knew which direction Sarie had been going when she had finally been forced to stop and give birth to her child. It had been north, toward the river called the Ohio.

Sarie's mother and a wet nurse with breasts that hung inside her shirt like swollen eggplants walked along the banks of the slough until late afternoon. The sun was warm now, the trees filled with a smoky yellow light, as though the ice storm had never passed through Ira Jamison's plantation. Sarie's mother and the wet nurse rounded a bend in the woods, then saw footprints leading up to a leafy bower and a lean-to whose opening was covered with a bright green branch from a slash pine.

The child lay wrapped in a blanket like a caterpillar inside a cocoon, the eyes shut, the mouth puckered. The ground was soft now, scattered with pine needles, and among the pine needles were wildflowers that had been buried under snow. Sarie's mother unwrapped the child from the blanket and wiped it clean with a cloth, then handed it to the wet nurse, who held the baby's mouth to her breast and covered it with her coat.

"Sarie wanted a man-child. But this lil' girl beautiful," the wet nurse said.

"She gonna be my darlin' thing, too. Sarie gonna live inside her. Her name gonna be Spring. No, that ain't right. Her name gonna be Flower," Sarie's mother said.

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