

---

READING  
GROUP  
NOTES

---



---

## in brief

As with so many parts of the Deep South it was all too easy to feel yourself drifting back in time. Dave Robicheaux had rented a room in the old part of Natchez and all the elements added up to give him a sense of displacement. The spring sunrise through the slatted blinds, the slowly rotating wooden fan blades above his head, the ship's horn blowing out on the river – it could have been 1862. Would that have been such a terrible place to wake up and find himself?

The convict he had travelled to see was named Elmore Latiolais. Once he had found the work party, and negotiated his way round the man in charge, one Jimmy Darl Thigpin, Robicheaux sat down with Latiolais on a log in the shade.

Latiolais' sister Bernadette was one of seven young women who had been killed in Jeff Davis Parish. A message had been passed over to say that the convict had something to say on the matter,

---

so Robicheaux had driven over. The newspapers had implied that all the girls had been prostitutes. Although that wasn't true, Latiolais took exception to the implication.

Apart from insisting that his sister had been no prostitute, Latiolais named Herman Stanga as the man behind her death. Despite the fact that Stanga was a pimp, Latiolais still said that his sister was not a prostitute. Robicheaux hated Herman Stanga with a vengeance.

Latiolais could give nothing more than his insistence that Stanga was to blame, so Robicheaux gave up and drove away. Stanga was everything Robicheaux hated – his misdeeds were countless, but it was the way he spread the depravity that so enraged Robicheaux. He harmed all those around him and enjoyed doing it.

Robicheaux travelled over to Stanga's faux antebellum house on Bayou Teche. He kept it in such a poor condition that it seemed almost deliberate. The depressing thing that Robicheaux learned was that it was deliberate. He would drive the neighbours out, then buy their properties for cheap. He denied any knowledge of the dead girls – indeed, why would a pimp kill his own girls?

---

He said the same thing that Latiolais had said – the girls were from the wrong side of the tracks, so no one cared what had happened to them. The same statement voiced by two men in very different situations. The trouble was, Robicheaux found it hard to deny. *He* cared, though – he would find out who had robbed these girls of their future.

When he got home, Robicheaux found his home life no simpler. His adopted daughter, Alafair, was seeing someone that Robicheaux didn't trust at all. Kermit Abelard was the first man whom she seemed at all serious about. Apart from being older than Alafair, Abelard chose to spend his time with the celebrated convict author Robert Weingart, who Robicheaux knew to be big trouble. The fact that the Abelard family money had allowed them to trample all over anyone they came into conflict with over the years didn't help Robicheaux's peace of mind.

Just to add an extra level of worry, Robicheaux's friend Clete Purcel seemed to be heading for self destruction in a very determined way. His overindulgence in everything was growing daily and Robicheaux could see it ending very badly. What he couldn't foresee, was that the Abelard

---

money, combined with a level of depravity that even Robicheaux had not witnessed before, would bring mortal danger down on everyone Robicheaux cared about – and still the mournful sound of the steamboat whistle seemed to call him back in time. Perhaps he'd go this time . . . it would be so much easier . . .

---

## the story's background in the author's words

*The Glass Rainbow* is based on real events, namely the murders of several young women within a two-year period not far from New Iberia, where the narrator of the novel, Dave Robicheaux, works as a sheriff's detective. What struck me most about the murders was the apparent lack of interest in them, both on the part of media and law enforcement. Needless to say, the victims were black or poor or both. Unfortunately this pattern is not without precedent in most communities, both in the North and the South.

The theme of the book, however, centres around the trade-off of an Edenic paradise for the profits to be made in oil exploration. The book was written before the BP blowout that has, in my opinion, done long-lasting environmental systemic damage to the Gulf of Mexico, even though that fact is denied by the petroleum company and the

---

White House. The patriarchal family we meet, the Abelards, gave up their stewardship of the land and lived long enough to see the consequence of the choices they made.

In the novel we meet a family that in effect represents the agents of neo-colonial expansionism that have more or less defined our collective history since 1914. I suspect T. E. Lawrence or Robert Graves might enjoy the book. Or at least I'd like to think that. Regardless, I think it's one of my best books and I hope readers in the UK will like it.

James Lee Burke

---

## about the author

James Lee Burke was born in Houston, Texas in 1936 and grew up on the Texas–Louisiana gulf coast. He attended the University of Missouri attaining both a B.A. and an M.A. Over the years he has had a number of jobs, including oil pipeliner, surveyor, newspaper reporter, English professor and social worker, and has been married for fifty-one years. He and his wife Pearl have four children.

He has written many novels and has won numerous awards, including a Breadloaf and Guggenheim Fellowship, two Edgars for Best Crime Novel of the Year and the CWA Gold Dagger, establishing himself as one of America's most revered writers.

His novel *The Lost Get-Back Boogie* was rejected 111 times by publishers over a nine-year period. When it was eventually published, it was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize!

---

## for discussion

- How does the author create the tone and feeling of the Deep South at the beginning of *The Glass Rainbow*?
- ‘Bloodsuckers of every stripe come here and wipe their feet on us. We’ve turned victimhood into an art form.’ Why is this do you think?
- To what extent is *The Glass Rainbow* an examination of the juxtaposition of rich and poor?
- ‘That’s because you’re unteachable.’ Do you agree with this opinion about Robicheaux?
- Why did the author title the book *The Glass Rainbow*?
- ‘But I had to remind myself that neither our own passing nor the passing of an era is a tragedy, no matter how much we would like to think it is.’ Do you agree?

- 
- How does the author use themes of decay in *The Glass Rainbow*?
  - Why does Robicheaux want to ‘disappear inside the nineteenth century’?
  - ‘Our greatest virtue, our trust of our fellow man, is our greatest weakness.’ True do you think?
  - To what extent is the novel about the true value of things?
  - ‘If you’re lucky, at a certain age you finally learn not to contend with the world or try to explain that the application of reason has little or nothing to do with the realities that exist just on the other side of one’s fingertips.’ Has Robicheaux been lucky?
  - ‘There’s nothing reasonable about human behaviour.’ Is this your experience too?
  - ‘The pagan ambience that always lurked on the edges of our French–Catholic culture.’ How has the author included this ambience in *The Glass Rainbow*?

- 
- ‘It has been my experience that most human stories are circular rather than linear. Regardless of the path we choose, we somehow end up where we commenced.’ Is time always linear in *The Glass Rainbow*?
  - How far away is the world of illusion and dreams from the world of *The Glass Rainbow*?
  - ‘The pagan ambience that always lurked on the edges of our French-Catholic culture.’ How has the author included this ambience in *The Glass Rainbow*?
  - ‘An admission of powerlessness is not a choice. That’s just the way things are.’ Do you agree?

---

suggested further reading

*Light in August* by William Faulkner

*Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain

*Suddenly Last Summer* by Tennessee Williams

*Killer in the Rain* by Raymond Chandler

*On the Yard* by Malcolm Braly

