



To The Bright And Shining Sun

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'A twisted spar whistled through the air like a cannon ball, cutting through the tops of two maple trees. The air became black with coal dust. As the last echo of the explosion began to thin in the distance, the boy could hear the leaves from the trees settling to the ground around him...'In TO THE BRIGHT AND SHINING SUN James Lee Burke brings his brilliant feel for time and place to a stunning story of Appalachia in the early 1960s. Here Perry Woodson Hatfield James, torn between family honour and the lure of seedy "watering holes" must somehow survive the tempestuous journey from boyhood to manhood and escape the dark heritage of the Cumberland Mountains in this 'surging, bitter novel as authentic as moonshine' (New York Times)

To The Bright And Shining Sun Details

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From Reader Review To The Bright And Shining Sun for online ebook

Sara says

Perry James is a boy in danger of becoming a man in the tradition of all the men before him. Kin to both Frank James and the Hatfields (as in Hatfields and McCoys), he has the pressures of life and the expectations of heritage bearing down on him. In the mining country of Kentucky, you must be tough to survive at all, and the evidence of what happens if you are not tough enough is all around you in every home and in every hollow.

I was in physical pain through most of this novel. I felt suffocated in the mining shaft, frightened by the men, even those who were supposed to be on your side, and wrenched by the poverty that confronted this boy when he looked at his parents, his siblings and his neighbors. I wanted to scream at him, "Get out of Here", and yet I knew how hard it would be to turn your back and put everything you ever knew or loved behind you.

I do not know if James Lee Burke grew up around mining towns or ever knew the hard-working poverty of such places, but he has a clear and realistic picture of exactly what such a life is. It is a life in which most are born rabbits and the wolves and hawks and snakes and bobcats are all around, hungry and devouring, and the poor rabbits are defenseless. The only hope they have is not to be noticed, or that the predator will miss and they will scuttle away, or that just when it might be their turn to die some other rabbit will enter the predator's sights and make the meal instead.

To say I enjoyed this book would seem wrong. It is Southern Gothic at its best, and it is not meant to be "enjoyed", it is meant to be heeded. It is meant to shine a bright light upon the inequities and inequalities and ask the hardest questions of all, the ones about who we are as a people when this kind of dog-eat-dog world can be accepted at all. And, it left me in awe of the human spirit, the thing within a man that makes him survive this kind of life, and enables him to continue to even try in the face of so much adversity.

This is my first encounter with Mr. Burke. I will gladly read more of his works. My library had a shelf of them, and I can imagine tackling them over time...but not too close together, because I need to do a lot of deep-breathing after this.

My thanks to the Southern Literary Trail that continues to expose me to high-caliber Southern writers.

Bert says

My first Burke, and the dude can write. This is one of those wrenching hard luck, hard times stories where you can feel yourself having an anxiety attack on the guys behalf. But there is also a lot of beauty here, and a lot of depth. Burke doesn't sermonise, pass judgement or whitewash history, and this is a bleak, authentic depiction of an Appalachian mining community, the moonshiners, boozers, and a life with no choice and a whole lot of rage. Great last paragraph.

Lindsay Luke says

I enjoyed this book. I have read several of Burke's Dave Robicheaux novels and was not sure what to expect. This is not a detective story, it's a coming of age story of a young man in a mining town in Kentucky in the mid 20th century. Burke pulls no punches as he describes the mining life - the descriptions are frank and brutal. At the same time, there is beauty in it as well. Although it was probably 30 years after the Grapes of Wrath, not much had changed for these people.

Dennis says

There are two things that really struck me about this novel. The first is the writing, which feels so authentic and real that I couldn't help but appreciate it. The second is the almost overwhelming despair that pervades this story.

The writing is wonderful. Burke brings the characters to life with rich, realistic dialogue that always rings true. It's rare to find dialogue this good. It's full of regionalisms and has that southern twang, but not so much that it overwhelms the meaning, or makes it hard to read.

The characters are complex and interesting, especially our protagonist. Perry James is driven by the desire to help his family and get them out of the helpless cycle that they are in, but he's held back by his stubborn pride, and by the expectations that have been heaped on him by other people in his life.

Perry is a compelling character, and I found him very sympathetic. The world he inhabits is violent and poor, full of traps that keep people from improving their lot in life. Whether it's the manipulations of the mining companies and their agents, the enforced solidarity of the union, or the lures of alcohol, there is always something to contend with.

To the Bright and Shining Sun is a gritty, realistic novel, a great study of a strong character in a very difficult situation. It's good, but it's also bleak and sometimes depressing.

Aditya says

Perry James is the oldest living kid in a large dirt poor mining family in Kentucky, and unlike most other generational miners he is astute enough to notice that the highest ambition a miner can possess is being a good bargaining chip between the miners union and the mine owners. He has seen violence escalate in close quarters and figured that he has no need for it or the guilt it brings. He goes away to seize a better life but when fresh turmoil erupts with more personal consequences, he has to choose between the violence he had been conditioned to reciprocate and holding on to his big ticket for his little slice of the American Dream.

In a tragedy the protagonist always has a certain amount of culpability, the trick is to write in such a way that the reader does not lose sympathy for a man who goes on making mistakes. Burke failed at that hurdle in his

debut novel but succeeds with Perry. Perry has enough good sense and instinct to do the right thing but not the maturity to follow through. His indignation, obstinance and refusal to listen to well wishers might make him petulant if he was older but at seventeen his behavior (under the circumstances) feels like just an inability to see the bigger picture.

Burke describes Kentucky with his trademark vivid prose but it still has not reached the fluency that makes Louisiana lyrical in his later books. The book feels well researched, the degradation and pollution of the earth by mining companies mirror the slow erosion of a way of life that generations of miners have known. The plight of the miners feels hopeless being reduced to pawns between warring parties that call a stalemate as soon as the pawns are sacrificed. There is a chapter from Perry's father's perspective that is as good as any short piece Burke has ever written. The ending is surprising but backed with enough character beats for it to feel organic and not tacked on for shock value. Basically Burke fans will find everything that they had come to expect from his crime reads except the sharp dialogue that injected the much needed wit to his narratives mainly because it does not fit here.

While reading the Robicheaux series I often wondered why Burke with his ability to create lived in worlds populated with three dimensional characters has never written more traditional literary novels. His back catalogue reveals that it was the first thing he did but for some reason it did not sell enough to pay his bills which is a pity because this crime fiction icon is even more multifaceted than I expected. Rating - 4/5.

Laura says

Burke does a fabulous job with the details of the landscape. He seemed to capture the place and area perfectly. I enjoyed the storyline but it was quite depressing the situations the characters were privy to. Lots of violence and revenge in play for my first read by Burke. I found it somewhat disappointing that most of the characters could not rise above their situation.

Lysergius says

Well written but exceedingly depressing. Reads like John Steinbeck on downers.

FrankH says

As much as I enjoy reading the Dave Robicheaux crime canon for its atmospheric rendering of the Louisiana bayou, I'm occasionally pulled up short by its tough-guy police-beat dialog -- "queer bait", "brain pan", etc. -- too purple for its purpose and ill-suited to Robicheaux's quiet dignity. But we don't see purple here. In this early Burke fiction set in and around Harlan county in eastern Kentucky, the descriptive writing is by turns spare and lyrical, the earthy exchanges articulate and scaled to brevity by the urgency and desperation of the characters.

'To the Bright and Shining Sun' is the story of Coal Country, USA, where miners work dangerous jobs for low wages, drink bad local hootch and, like Tennessee Ernie Ford, owe their souls to the 'Company Store'. Through the eyes of young Perry James, we see a community struggling, at every turn, with difficult choices

or no choices at all. For those like James, caught in the cycle of poverty, a personal code of conduct is often the only peg upon which to build self-esteem but, as James soon discovers, that code first must be squared with tribal loyalties and the kind of raw anger that can take him no place good.

In this rendering of life in the hollows of the Cumberland plateau, each man -- and woman -- seems locked-down in their own private crucible. Perry wants to leave Kentucky for the better life getting union scale wages as an earthmover in Ohio, but knows he's honor-bound, despite the risk, to avenge the attack on his father by scabs and company men; Perry's Mom feels loathe to part with her two malnourished kids but as the money runs out, she comes quickly to the idea keeping them will shorten their lives; the pawnshop owner sells guns for a living but, fearing for Perry's life, endeavors to halt him from making a purchase. And then there's the sheriff: he may extend every common courtesy to a suspected felon but the lawman knows where to draw the lawful line because he's calculated it so many times before. These are folks just as tough as the criminal element found in Robicheaux's New Iberia or the Big Easy. They know exactly the lay of the land because they have thought long and hard on its daily moral challenges.

TTBASS is set in the sixties. It would only be a few years before miners not unlike James would begin to fully grasp how automation and especially destructive mountain-top-removal (MTR) mining accelerate job loss. They already understood all too well the impact of union busting, unsafe working conditions, river pollution and black lung disease on their lives. On Nov. 21, 2016, TCM airs 'Harlan County, USA', the 1976 Oscar winning film documentary on the plight of striking miners in eastern Kentucky. Haven't seen it but it's probably worth a look. How much progress has been made since those days? Per 2013 U.S. census data, of 3,143 counties in the United States, Harlan County ranked 3,139 in the longevity of both male and female residents. According to a recent report in the New York Times (June 6, 2016), the coal industry, hit hard by a recent string of major bankruptcies, is currently on the hook for a billion-dollar coal-related clean-up operation -- mostly in Appalachia -- that, due to market forces and financial hardship, may well be beyond its reach. It would be nice to think the new pro-coal anti-regulatory administration will have the decency to continue to hold the coal industry accountable for this terrible scarring of the land, the water and the people of the Appalachian mining community. I just wouldn't bet on it. Perry had the right idea from the start

Rob says

If you're a fan of James Lee Burke, you might enjoy this early (1989) long short story of life in the mining communities in eastern Kentucky in the 60's, where mining companies controlled all aspects of life and labor strikes left families penniless, relying on government handouts and slim profits from the sale of moonshine made back in the hollows. "Deep Down Dark," a current bestseller of 33 men buried in a Chilean mine, is a dry description of working life in the mines compared to Burke's rich, descriptive paragraphs.

Franky says

Burke's novel encapsulates the struggle of the coal miners in Kentucky, who hope for better job conditions and better wages. We are thrust into this struggle and fight within the first pages of the novel.

After finishing this novel, I've been thinking quite often about the title. What is the significance, I ask

myself? I looked up song titles and there are several named “To the Bright and Shining Sun”, one bluegrass and one from an Irish band, The Walls, a top ten hit in Ireland in 2006. Somehow, I’m thinking the reference is not to the Irish band (good tune though, nonetheless).

However, in many ways, I think the title is a symbol of optimism amid very bleak and quite fleeting conditions for the miners, with Perry, a flawed, but compelling main character as the light for that hope.

Maybe I’m overselling Perry. In fact, I probably am. He’s very flawed—and stubborn, pig-headed, and sometimes just down right stupid, especially in his decision making. But, I think he carries a certain pride and humanness, and if a character doesn’t turn the corner at all in a book, or change from point A to point B, then are they really that compelling? Perry does. Yes, this is coming of age tale, and he does see the bigger picture at points. It just takes him quite a bit of failure and life lessons to get there. There is a constant internal conflict running within him, his pride often ruins many chances to break the cycle of poverty and bleak living conditions. At times, Perry reminds me a bit of Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, a sort of rebel who has a vision for better times. At one point, Perry ponders about the cycle that never seems to break:

“There ain’t nothing that goes along this good for so long without something happening. Things just don’t stay straight like that. At least not for us. There’s always something that’s going to shove a stick between your feet when you feel your almost there.”

I thought Burke’s writing so powerful and human. He really can paint a picture of a realistic struggle and conflict, and does so with spot-on prose that illustrates the bleak, difficult lives of his characters.

Michael says

This is one of James Lee Burke's early works and the reading of a character who lives in the poverty stricken area of Kentucky coal mines was reminiscent of Steinbeck's "*The Grapes of Wrath*."

Like Steinbeck's novel, we follow an impoverished family in an area controlled by coal mine owners. Miners who want to be represented by the union are blackballed and unable to find work.

The story begins as Perry Woodsen Hatfield James is helping three other men to set off an explosion that will close a mine that is currently hiring scabs. These non union workers are usually from out of state and take the jobs of union workers so those workers have no work and didn't have food for their families.

As the minors strike and there is no work, Perry is persuaded to join the job corps. He makes mistakes and his prideful about his background. However, he admits his mistakes and ends up with letters of commendation for his work and leadership.

A letter from home about his father being injured in a blast sends Perry home. The explosion was set in a school house where there was a union meeting taking place. Perry's father sees him on his death bed and begs Perry to go back to the job corps where he will have a future.

Perry's family refuses to accept welfare payments and social workers arrive to remove the three youngest because the family can't feed them.

With the death of Perry's father, being of the Hatfield family, Perry swears revenge. The remainder of the

story shows his pursuit of the men responsible. We see his desperate struggle for revenge but still wanting to make something of his life.

The conclusion was well done and the characters and setting were memorable.

Tom Mathews says

Before this was chosen as a group reading choice I had no idea that James Lee Burke had written any books that weren't part of his Dave Robicheaux or Hackberry Holland series. It's one of Burke's first books, based in the coal towns of Kentucky. Perry James is called home from Job Corps training to the deathbed of his father after mining company thugs set off a bomb at a union meeting. A descendant of both Frank James and Devil Anse Hatfield, Perry is not one to take his father's killing lying down. What follows is a high-tension tale of revenge and redemption. That this is Burke's sophomore effort is apparent but it is still worth reading.

I wish to thank Laura from the Goodreads On the Southern Literary Trail group for introducing me to this very entertaining book.

Dawn says

My first James Lee Burke ! I wish I had read these in a series ! I love to watch an author develop his main character over time in his series as with Reaubexeau. Great book ! Any one who loves a good mystery will like this and it is different . I would not mind tackling some Ace Atkins and Greg Ilies now too !

Zoeytron says

It is the early 1960's, and work is scarce in the Kentucky coal mines. Having gone on strike for something more than the pittance they are currently drawing, these miners are desperate men struggling to feed their families and they don't cotton to those who cross the picket lines. With the black coal dust etched into the lines of their faces, in the back of their throats, and slowly clogging their lungs, they are not about to let strike breakers take their jobs.

Perry James is 17, already a two-year veteran in the mines, and all he wants is to get out. Nefarious dealings with the J.W.s may preclude his realization of that dream. Perry has run afoul of the J.W. brothers, known as Big and Little. Big is tall with long yellow teeth and a quick temper; Little is short, pot-bellied, and pure D mean stupid. You can't play fair and expect to win with these two.

Read of taking up snakes to prove devotion, moonshine, bootlegging, and explosives. Paw-Paw trees, raggedy overalls, dresses made of feed sacks, jenny-barns, a "barmaid with a face that looked as hard as plaster of Paris." Mothers who are used up and bone weary, resigned to their hard lives with no light at the end of the tunnel.

Depressing and excellent.

Camie says

Perry Woodson Hatfield James' family has worked in the coal mines of Kentucky for generations but the 1960's in the Cumberland Mountains are especially hard times. Once poor families are now destitute as Union strikes and eventually mine modernization force men out of work. It's easy to see the Grapes of Wrath comparison here, and to know the Hatfield (as in Hatfield and McCoy) in Perry's name wasn't inadvertently added. At 17 he is young and tough, and offered enough assistance that it seems he may escape his fate, though sadly along with abject poverty he also seems to be battling his own demons. The New York Times called this early masterwork, as authentic as " moonshine" and the books closing paragraphs have been praised by many. 3.5 stars Nov -On The Southern Literary Trail Moderators Choice (Laura)

Alex Harrison says

I'll begin by saying that James Lee Burke is in my opinion perhaps the finest thriller writer in the world and his main creations - Dave Robicheaux and Billy Bob Holland - will surely become as famous in literary history as Philip Marlowe or Lew Harper, or Sam Spade.

This is not a thriller however.

To The Bright and Shining Sun was the second JLB novel I read. I was expecting something similar to a Robicheaux novel but this is instead set in the coal mines of Appalachia and the work camps of the 20s and 30s. Other reviewers say it's wonderfully written with great characters but too grim. I disagree. It has the single most beautifully written end to a book that I can think of. JLB's prose is just beautiful in it's descriptive power and eloquence. The only comparison I can make would be Thomas Hardy's description of the happy pastoral scenes in Tess of the D'Urbervilles. The end is also wonderfully positive - so how can the novel be too grim?

Can't recommend it enough.

Kirk Smith says

This is a very linear plot and once aware of what the characters are like it follows a predictable course, except for the ending. Though it is classified as a mystery, if I view it instead as a historical fiction it gains an extra star in my rating. The writing and the author's skill are first caliber. It does feel like a story that the author felt he must document. Set in the coal mines of Kentucky in the 1960's its focus is the conflict between union miners and the mine owners determined to break the unions. Miners of that period were faced with mechanization, lower wages, and were witnessing the end of the pick-axe and shovel era. Miner's strikes can be some of the worst due to their familiarity with explosives. The violence and conflict makes for interesting reading.

Sandi says

Another well written though dark and depressing early work from the author. This one is set in Kentucky coal country and revolves around a young man who is caught up in the union/company conflicts. Listened to the audio version which was very well read by **Tom Stechschulte**.

James Sorensen says

This book takes a close-up look at the violence and poverty of the coal economy of the mid 1960's. it also shows just how ineffectual unions can truly be. The coal mines are closed and it worker against owner, but in the midst of poverty Perry James tries to make a life for himself and his family. Even involving himself in illegal activity. When his father is killed, an innocent victim of the coal war, Perry seeks revenge. In the end Perry will find the answer he really desires. A good but not great book. Burke's early works lay the foundation for the treasure to come.

Lukas Evan says

Burke's second novel from 1970.

Before he found fame with his long-running Dave Robicheaux series, Burke wrote this book about coal mining families in Appalachia. The son tries to get out, but is dragged about into a world of poverty, poorly paid, dangerous work, violence, and blood feuds. The setting is somewhat similar to both "Justified" and "Winter's Bone" and Burke's writing is suitably gritty and lean. Probably not for the reader new to Burke, this is a good, rare example of Burke working outside of the crime genre. And this may be heresy, but I prefer him to Cormac McCarthy.
