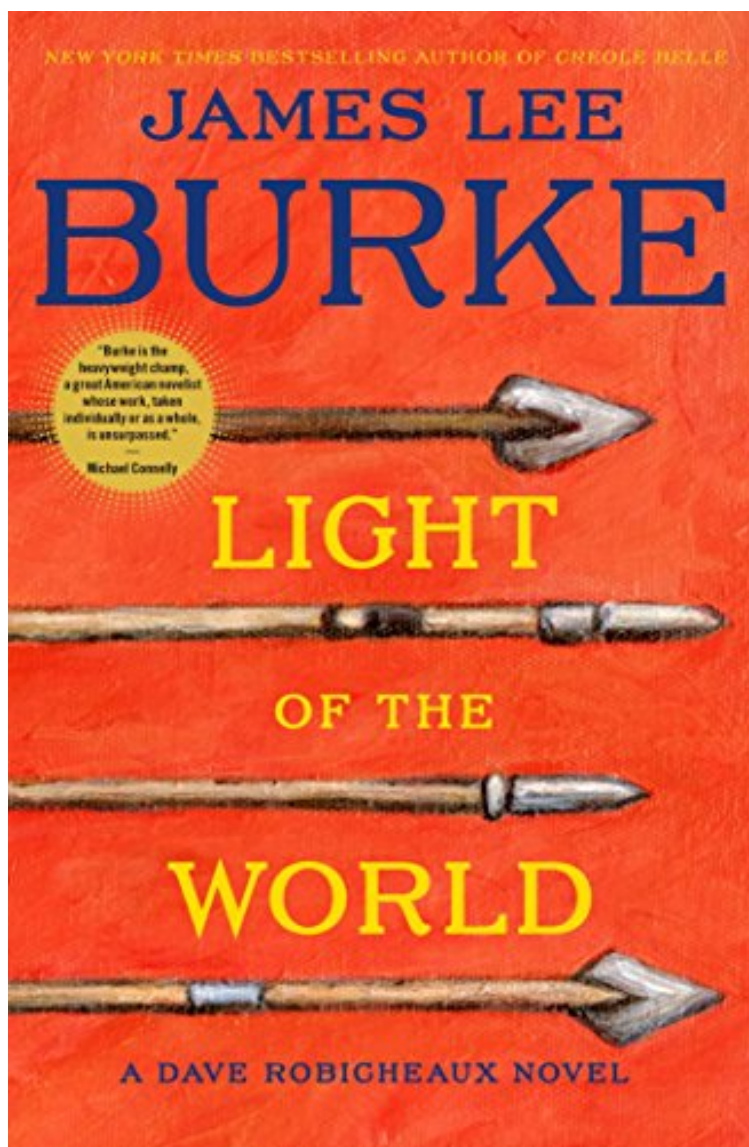


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Light of the World: A Dave Robicheaux Novel



Par James Lee Burke
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNew York Times bestselling author and Americas best novelist (The Denver Post) James Lee Burke is back with the twentieth mystery in the masterful Dave Robicheaux series.Sadist and serial killer Asa Surette narrowly escaped the death penalty for the string of heinous murders he committed while capital punishment was outlawed in Kansas. But following a series of damning articles written by Dave Robicheauxs daughter Alafair, Surette escapes from a prison transport van and heads to Montana, where an unsuspecting Davealong with Alafair; Daves wife, Molly; Daves faithful partner Clete; and Cletes newfound daughter, Gretchen Horowitzhave come to take in the sweet summer air. Surette may be even worse than Daves old enemy Legion Guidry, a man Dave suspected might very well be the devil incarnate.

But before Dave can stop Surette from harming those he loves most, he'll have to do battle with Love Younger, an enigmatic petrochemical magnate seeking to build an oil pipeline from Alberta to Texas, and Wyatt Dixon, a rodeo clown with a dark past whom Burke fans will recall from his Billy Bob Holland novels. Says *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), Already designated a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America, Burke should get another title, say, for sustained literary brilliance in his Dave Robicheaux series. Drawing on real events that took place in Wichita, Kansas, over a twenty-year span, *Light of the World* is a harrowing novel that examines the nature of evil and pits Dave Robicheaux against the most diabolical villain he has ever faced.

Extrait *Light of the World* I WAS NEVER GOOD at solving mysteries. I don't mean the kind cops solve or the ones you read about in novels or watch on television or on a movie screen. I'm not talking about the mystery of Creation, either, or the unseen presences that reside perhaps just the other side of the physical world. I'm talking about evil, without capitalization but evil all the same, the kind whose origins sociologists and psychiatrists have trouble explaining. Police officers keep secrets, not unlike soldiers who return from foreign battlefields with a syndrome that survivors of the Great War called the thousand-yard stare. I believe that the account of the apple taken from the forbidden tree is a metaphorical warning about looking too deeply into the darker potential of the human soul. The photographs of the inmates at Bergen-Belsen or Andersonville Prison or the bodies in the ditch at My Lai disturb us in a singular fashion because those instances of egregious human cruelty were committed for the most part by baptized Christians. At some point we close the book containing photographs of this kind and put it away and convince ourselves that the events were an aberration, the consequence of leaving soldiers too long in the field or letting a handful of misanthropes take control of a bureaucracy. It is not in our interest to extrapolate a larger meaning. Hitler, Nero, Ted Bundy, the Bitch of Buchenwald? Their deeds are not ours. But if these individuals are not like us, if they do not descend from the same gene pool and have the same DNA, then who were they and what turned them into monsters? Every homicide cop lives with images he cannot rinse from his dreams; every cop who has handled investigations into child abuse has seen a side of his fellow man he never discusses with anyone, not his wife, not his colleagues, not his confessor or his bartender. There are certain burdens you do not visit on people of goodwill. When I was in plainclothes at the NOPD, I used to deal with problems such as these in a saloon on Magazine Street, not far from the old Irish Channel. With its brass-railed bar and felt-covered bouree tables and wood-bladed fans, it became my secular church where the Louisiana of my youth, the green-gold, mossy, oak-shaded world of Bayou Teche, was only one drink away. I would start with four fingers of Jack in a thick mug, with a sweating Budweiser back, and by midnight I would be alone at the end of the bar, armed, drunk, and hunched over my glass, morally and psychologically insane. I had come to feel loathing and disgust with the mythology that characterized the era in which I lived. I didn't serve in Southeast Asia; I survived and watched innocent people and better men than I die in large numbers while I was spared by a hand outside myself. I didn't serve and protect as a police officer; I witnessed the justice system's dysfunction and the government's empowerment of corporations and the exploitation of those who had no political voice. And while I brooded on all that was wrong in the world, I continued to stoke the furnace inside me with Black Jack and Smirnoffs and five-star Hennessy and, finally, two jiggers of Scotch inside a glass of milk at sunrise, constantly suppressing my desire to lock down on my enemies with the .45 automatic I had purchased in Saigon's brothel district and with which I slept as I would a woman. My real problem wasn't the militarization of my country or any of the other problems I've mentioned. The real problem went back to a mystery that had beset me since the destruction of my natal home and family. My father, Big Aldous, was on the monkey board of an offshore drilling well when the drill bit punched into an early pay sand and a spark jumped off the wellhead and a mushroom of flaming oil and natural gas rose through the rigging like an inferno ballooning from the bottom of an elevator shaft. My mother, Alafair Mae Guillory, was seduced and blackmailed by a gambler and pimp named Mack, whom I hated more than any human being I ever knew, not because he turned her into a barroom whore but because of the Asian men I killed in his stead. Rage and bloodlust and alcoholic blackouts became the only form of serenity I knew. From Saigon to the Philippines, from Chinatown in Los Angeles to the drunk tanks of New Orleans, the same questions haunted me and gave me no rest. Were some people made different in the womb, born without a conscience, intent on destroying everything that was good in the world? Or could a black wind blow the weather vane in the wrong direction for any of us and reshape our lives and turn us into people we no longer recognized? I knew there was an answer out there someplace, if I could only drink myself into the right frame of mind and find it. I stayed ninety-proof for many years and got a bachelors degree in self-immolation and a doctorate in chemically

induced psychosis. When I finally entered sobriety, I thought the veil might be lifted and I would find answers to all the Byzantine riddles that had confounded me. That was not to be the case. Instead, a man who was one of the most wicked creatures on earth made his way into our lives. This is a tale that maybe I shouldn't share. But it's not one I want to keep inside me, either. MY ADOPTED DAUGHTER, Alafair Robicheaux, jogged up a logging road that wound through ponderosa pine and Douglas fir and cedar trees atop a ridge overlooking a two-lane highway and a swollen creek far below. The highway had been built on the exact trail that Meriwether Lewis and William Clark had followed over Lolo Pass into present-day Idaho and, eventually, to the Pacific Ocean in the year 1805. They had not been able to accomplish this feat on their own. After they and their men had sliced their moccasins to ribbons trying to make portage with their canoes through several canyons on a fork of the Columbia River, a Shoshone woman by the name of Sacagawea showed them a route that took them up a gentle slope, past the base of Lolo Peak, into the country of the Nez Perce and the spotted horses called the Appaloosa. As Alafair jogged along the dirt road that had been graded through timber by a bulldozer, the wind blowing cool out of the trees, the western sun blazing on the fresh snow that had fallen the previous night on Lolo Peak, she wondered at the amount of history that had been changed by one brave woman, because Sacagawea not only showed the Lewis and Clark party the way to Oregon, she saved them from starvation and being slaughtered by a rogue band of Nez Perce. Alafair was listening to a song on her iPod when she felt a stinging sensation on her left ear. She also felt a puff of air against her cheek and the touch of a feather on her skin. Without stopping, she swatted at her hair and pressed her hand against her ear and then looked at it. There was a bright smear of blood on her palm. Above, she saw two ravens glide into the boughs of a ponderosa and begin cawing at the sky. She continued up the logging road, her breath coming hard in her throat, until she reached the top of the ridge. Then she turned and began the descent, her knees jarring on the grade, the sun moving behind Lolo Peak, the reflected light disappearing from the surface of the creek. She touched her ear again, but the cut she believed a raven had inflicted was no longer bleeding and felt like little more than a scratch. That was when she saw the aluminum shaft of a feathered arrow embedded three inches deep in a cedar snag that had been scorched and hardened in a fire. She slowed to a stop, her heart beating hard, and looked over her shoulder. The logging road was in shadow, the border of trees so thick she could no longer feel the wind or see where the sun was. The air smelled like snow, like the coming of winter rather than summer. She took off her earbuds and listened. She heard the crackling of limbs and rocks sliding down a slope. A big doe, a mule deer, no more than twenty yards away, jumped a pile of dirt and landed squarely in the middle of the road, its gray winter coat unchanged by spring. Is there a bow hunter out there? Alafair shouted. There was no answer. There's no bow season in western Montana in the spring. At least not for deer, she called out. There was no response except the sweep of the wind in the trees, a sound like the rushing of floodwater in a dry riverbed. She ran her finger along the arrow and touched the feathers at the base. The aluminum shaft bore no trace of dirt or bird droppings or even dust. The feathers were clean and stiff when she ran the ball of her thumb along their edges. If you made a mistake and you're sorry, just come out and apologize, she yelled. Who shot this arrow? The doe bounced away from her, almost like a kangaroo. The shadows had grown so dark inside the border of the trees that the deer was indistinguishable except for the patch of white hair under its tail. Unconsciously, Alafair pulled on her cut earlobe and studied the trees and the orange glow in the west that indicated the sun would set in the next ten minutes. She fitted both hands on the shaft of the arrow and jerked it from the cedar trunk. The arrowhead was made of steel and was bright and slick with a thin sheen of oil, and flanged and wavy on the edges, which had been honed as sharp as a razor. She made her way back down the ridge, almost to the bottom, then walked out on a rocky point that formed a V and jutted into space and was devoid of trees and second growth. Below she saw a broad-shouldered man with a narrow waist, wearing Wranglers and a white straw hat and a bandanna tied around his neck. He had on a navy blue long-sleeved shirt buttoned at the wrists, with white stars embroidered on the shoulders and purple garters on his upper arms, the kind an exotic dancer might wear on her thighs. He was latching the door on the camper shell inserted in the bed of his pickup truck. Hey, buddy! Alafair said. I want a word with you. He turned slowly, lifting his head, a solitary ray of sunlight pooling under his hat brim. Even though the glare must have been intense, he didn't blink. He was a white man with the profile of an Indian and eyes that seemed made of glass and contained no color other than the sun's refracted brilliance. His complexion made her think of the rind on a cured ham. Why, howdy-doody, he said, an idiot's grin painted on his mouth. Where'd a cute little heifer like you come from? Does this arrow belong to you? she asked. I'll take it if you don't want it. Did you shoot this fucking arrow at me or not? I can't hear very good in the wind. What was that word you used?

He cupped one hand to his ear. Want to come down here and talk? Somebody almost killed me with this arrow. He removed the thin stub of a cigar from his shirt pocket and lit it with a paper match, cupping the flame in his hands, then making a big show of shaking out the match. There's a truck stop next to the casino. I'll buy you a Coca-Cola. They got showers there if you want one. Was that a bow you were putting in your camper? You owe me an answer. My name is Mr. Wyatt Dixon of Fort Davis, Texas. I'm a bullfighter and a handler of rough stock and a born-again Christian. What do you think of them apples? Come on down, girl. I ain't gonna bite. I think you need to get out of here. This is the home of the brave and the land of the free, and God bless you for your exercise of your First Amendment rights. But I only pretended I didn't hear what you said. Profanity does not behoove your gender. Know who said that? Thomas Jefferson did, yessiree-bobtail.

His teeth looked like they were cut out of whalebone. His whole body seemed wired with levels of energy and testicular power he could barely control. Even though his posture was relaxed, his knuckles were as hard-

looking as ball bearings. Are you deciding about my invite, or has the cat got your tongue? he said. She wanted to answer him, but the words wouldn't come. He removed his hat and drew a pocket comb through his silky red hair, tilting up his chin. I'm a student of accents. You're from somewhere down south. See you down the track, sweet thing. If I was you, I'd stay out of them woods. You can't ever tell what's roaming around in there. He let a semi carrying a huge piece of oil machinery pass, then got in his truck and drove away. She felt a rivulet of moisture leak from her sweatband and run down her cheek. A sour odor rose from under her arms. IN THE EARLY spring Alafair and my wife, Molly, and my old partner from NOPD, Cleve Purcel, had returned to western Montana with plans to spend the summer on a ranch owned by a novelist and retired English professor whose name was Albert Hollister. Albert had built a three-story house of logs and quarried rock on a knoll overlooking a railed pasture to the north and another to the south. It was a fine home, rustic but splendid in concept, a bucolic citadel where Albert could continue to wage war against the intrusions of the Industrial Age. When his beloved Asian wife died, I suspected the house she had helped design rang with an emptiness that drove him almost mad. Albert installed Cleve in a guest cabin located at the far end of the property, and the rest of us on the third floor of the house. From the balcony, we had a wonderful view of the wooded foothills that seemed to topple for miles and miles before they reached the Bitterroot Mountains, white and shining as bright as glaciers on the peaks and strung with mist at sunrise.

Across from our balcony was a hillside dotted with larch and fir and pine trees and outcroppings of gray rock and traced with arroyos swollen with snowmelt and brown water and pine needles during the runoff in early

April. On a shady slope behind the house, Albert had improvised a gun range where we popped big, fat coffee cans that he propped on sticks at the foot of a trail that had been used by Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce when they tried to outrun the United States Army. Before we would begin shooting, Albert would shout out Fire in the well! to warn any animals grazing or sleeping among the trees. He not only posted his own property, he infuriated hunters all over the county by chain-dragging logs across public roads in order to block vehicle access to U.S. Forest Service land during big-game season. I don't know if I would call him a rabble-rouser, but I was convinced that his historical antecedent was Samuel Adams and that ten like him could have a city in flames within twenty-four hours. The sun had set by the time Alafair returned to the house. She told me of her encounter with Wyatt Dixon. Did you get his tag? I asked. There was mud on it. He said he was going to the casino. You didn't see the bow? I already told you, Dave. I'm sorry, I wanted to get it straight. Let's take a ride. We drove in my pickup down the dirt road to the two-lane and turned east and followed the creek into Lolo, a small service town at the gateway to the Bitterroot Mountains. The sky was purple and flecked with snow, the neon lights glowing in front of the truck stop and adjacent casino.

The orange pickup. That's his, she said. I started to wave down a Missoula County sheriff's cruiser at the intersection, but I decided against it. So far we had nothing on Dixon. I rubbed the film off the rear window of the camper inset in his truck bed and peered inside. I could make out a lumpy duffel bag, a western saddle, a long-barrel lever-action rifle with an elevator sight, and a mud-caked truck tire and a jack. I didn't see a bow. I looked through the passenger window with the same result. The inside of the casino was dark and refrigerated and smelled of carpet cleaner and bathroom disinfectant. A man in a white straw cowboy hat was at the bar, drinking from a soda can and eating a sandwich. A piece of paper towel was tucked like a bib into his shirt collar. He watched us in the bar mirror as we approached him. My name is Dave Robicheaux, I said. This is my daughter Alafair. I'd like to have a word with you. He bit into his sandwich and chewed, one cheek tightening into a ball, leaning forward so no crumbs fell on the bar or on his shirt or jeans. His gaze shifted sideways. You have the look of a law dog, sir, he said. Have you been inside, Mr. Dixon? Inside what? A place where smart-asses have a way of ending up. I understand you're a rodeo man.

What some call a rodeo clown. What we call bullfighters. At one time I shot mustangs for a dog-food company down on the border. I dont do that no more. Were you hunting about five miles up Highway 12?

No, sir, I was changing the tire on my truck. You have any idea who might have shot an arrow at my daughter? No, but Im getting mighty tired of hearing about it. Did you see anyone on that ridge besides my daughter? No, I didnt. He put down his sandwich and removed his paper bib and wiped his mouth and fingers clean. He turned on the stool. All the color seemed to be leeches out of his eyes except for the pupils, which looked like the burnt tips of wood matches. Watch this, he said. Watch what? This. He sprinkled salt on the bar and balanced the shaker on its edge amid the granules so it leaned at an angle like the Tower of Pisa. Bet neither one of yall can do that. Call 911, I said to Alafair. Can I ask you a question? he said. Go ahead. Did somebody shoot you in the face? Yeah, someone did. I was lucky. He was a bad guy, a degenerate and a sadist and a stone killer. I bet you sent him straight to the injection table, didnt you? he said, his eyes bulging, his mouth dropping open in mock exaltation. No, it didnt make the jail. His mouth opened even wider, as though he were unable to control his level of shock. I am completely blown away. I have traveled this great nation from coast to coast and have stood in the arena among the great heroes of our time. I am awed and humbled to be in the presence of a lawman such as yourself. Even though I am only a simple rodeo cowboy, I stand and salute you, sir. He rose from the stool, puffing out his chest, his body rigid as though at attention, his stiffened right hand at the corner of his eyebrow. God bless you, sir. Your kind makes me proud of the red, white, and blue, even though I am not worthy to stand in your shadow, in this lowly barroom on the backstreets of America, where men with broken hearts go and the scarlet waters flow. The likes of Colin Kelly and Audie Murphy didnt have nothing on you, kind sir. People were staring at us, although he took no notice of them. I said, You called my daughter girl and sweet thing. You also made a veiled threat about seeing her down the track. Dont ever come near us again, Mr. Dixon. His eyes wandered over my face. His mouth was down-hooked at the corners, his skin taut as pig hide, the dimple in his chin clean-shaven and shiny, perhaps with aftershave. He glanced through the front window at a sheriffs cruiser pulling into the parking lot. The moral vacuity of his profile reminded me of a sharks when it passes close to the glass in an aquarium. Did you hear me? I said. That 911 deputy aint gonna find nothing in my truck, cause there aint nothing to find, he said. You asked if I was inside. I got my head lit up with amounts of electricity that make you glad for the rubber gag they put in your mouth. Before you get your nose too high in the air, Mr. Robicheaux, your daughter asked me if that fucking arrow was mine. She talked to me like I was white trash. He sat back down and began eating his sandwich again, swallowing it in large pieces without chewing or drinking from his soda, his expression reconfiguring, like that of a man who could not decide who he was. I should have walked away. Maybe he wasnt totally to blame. Maybe Alafair had indeed spoken down to him. Regardless, he had tried to frighten her, and there are some things a father cant let slide. I touched him on the shoulder, on the pattern of white stars sewn onto the fabric. Youre not a victim, partner, I said. Im going to pull your jacket and see what youve been up to. I hope youve been on the square with us, Mr. Dixon. He didnt turn around, but I could see the rigidity in his back and the blood rising in his neck like the red fluid in a thermometer. *Revue de presse* James Lee Burke is the heavyweight champ, a great American novelist whose work, taken individually or as a whole, is unsurpassed. (Michael Connelly) A gorgeous prose stylist. (Stephen King) Richly deserves to be described now as one of the finest crime writers America has ever produced. (Daily Mail) The gentle giant of US crime writers, Burke always ensures that his Louisiana detective Dave Robicheaux grapples with hot topics as much as with his own inner demons. (i newspaper) There are not many crime writers about whom one might invoke the name of Zola for comparison, but Burke is very much in that territory. His stamping ground is the Gulf coast, and one of the great strengths of his work has always been the atmospheric background of New Orleans and the bayous. His big, baggy novels are always about much more than the mechanics of the detective plot; his real subject, like the French master, is the human condition, seen in every situation of society. (Independent) The king of Southern noir. (Daily Mirror) His lyrical prose, his deep understanding of what makes people behave as they do, and his control of plot and pace are masterly. (Sunday Telegraph) One of the finest American writers. (Guardian) When it comes to literate, pungently characterised American crime writing, James Lee Burke has few peers. (Daily Express)