



## The Convict and Other Stories

By James Lee Burke

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One of the country's most-acclaimed and popular novelists offers a selection of a dozen short stories set in James Lee Burke's most beloved milieu, the Deep South.

"America's best novelist" (*The Denver Post*), two-time Edgar Award winner James Lee Burke is renowned for his lush, suspense-charged portrayals of the Deep South—the people, the crime, the hope and despair infused in the bayou landscape. This stunning anthology takes us back to where Burke's heart and soul beat—the steamy, seamy Gulf Coast—in complex and fascinating tales that crackle with violence and menace, meshing his flair for gripping storytelling with his urbane writing style.

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## The Convict and Other Stories By James Lee Burke Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #481126 in Books
- Brand: Burke, James Lee
- Published on: 2009-03-17
- Released on: 2009-03-17
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x .60" w x 5.31" l, .45 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 240 pages

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Burke brings the reader inside the minds and emotions of his characters, in stories that strike to the heart. They each concern the search for a reason, a purpose behind the interminable battle between good and evil. "Uncle Sidney and the Mexicans" focuses on a maverick tomato picker, fired for petty reasons and deprived of a day's pay, who is hired by the narrator's uncle and enabled thereby both to revenge himself on his former boss and to teach a lesson about Mexicans to the local bigots. A younger narrator, in "Losses," is troubled in the confessional by his priest's reluctance to condemn. Only long afterward does he comprehend the arrogance youthful innocence that refuses to countenance human flaws. The closing sentence in "When It's Decoration Day," about a young Civil War soldier, elegantly epitomizes the subtle impact of Burke's storytelling: as a shell bursts, the boy "thought he felt a finger reach up and anoint him casually on the brow." November 24

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### About the Author

James Lee Burke, a rare winner of two Edgar Awards, and named Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America, is the author of more than thirty previous novels and two collections of short stories, including such *New York Times* bestsellers as *Light of the World*, *Creole Belle*, *Swan Peak*, *The Tin Roof Blowdown*, and *Feast Day of Fools*. He lives in Missoula, Montana.

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### Uncle Sidney and the Mexicans

Billy Haskel and I were picking tomatoes in the same row, dropping them by the handful in the baskets on the mule-drawn wood sled, when the crop duster came in low over the line of trees by the river and began spraying the field next to us.

"The wind's going to drift it right across us," Billy Haskel said. "Turn away from it and hold your breath."

Billy Haskel was white, but he made his living as a picker just like the Mexicans did. The only other white pickers in the field were a couple of high school kids like myself. People said Billy had been in the South Pacific during the war, and that was why he wasn't right in the head and drank all the time. He kept a pint of wine in the bib of his overalls, and when we completed a row he'd kneel down below the level of the tomato bushes as though he were going to take a leak and raise the bottle high enough for two deep swallows. By midafternoon, when the sun was white and scalding, the heat and wine would take him and he would talk in the lyrics from hillbilly songs.

My woman has gone

To the wild side of life

Where the wine and whiskey flow,

And now my little boy

Calls another man Daddy.

But this morning he was still sober and his mind was on the dust.

"The grower tells you it don't hurt you to breathe it. That ain't true. It works in your lungs like little sparks. They make holes in you so the air goes out in your chest and don't come back out your windpipe. You ain't listening to me, are you?"

"Sure I was."

"You got your mind on Juanita over there. I don't blame you. If I hadn't got old I'd be looking at her, too."

I *was* watching her, sometimes without even knowing it. She was picking ahead of us three rows over, and her brown legs and the fold of her midriff where she had tied back her denim shirt under her breasts were always in the corner of my eye. Her hands and arms were dusty, and when she tried to push the damp hair out of her eyes with the back of her wrist, she left a gray wet streak on her forehead. Sometimes when I was picking even in the row with her I saw her look at her shirtfront to see if it was buttoned all the way.

I wanted to talk with her, to say something natural and casual as I picked along beside her, but when I planned the words they seemed stupid and embarrassing. I knew she wanted me to talk with her, too, because sometimes she spoke to Billy Haskel when he was working between us, but it was as though she were aiming through him at me. If only I could be as relaxed and easy as Billy was, I thought, even though he did talk in disjointed song lyrics.

It was raining hard Saturday morning, and we had to wait two hours on the crew bus before we could go into the field. Billy was in a hungover stupor from Friday night, and he must have slept in his clothes because they smelled of stale beer and I saw talcum powder from the poolroom on his sleeves. He stared sleepily out the window at the raindrops and started to pull on a pint bottle of urine-yellow muscatel. By the time the sky cleared he had finished it and started on a short dog, a thirty-nine-cent bottle he bought for a dollar from a Mexican on the bus.

He was in great shape the rest of the morning. While we were bent over the tomatoes, he appointed himself driver of the sled and monitor of our work. He must have recited every lyric ever sung on the Grand Ole Opry. When we passed close to a clump of live oaks, he started to eye the tomatoes in the baskets and the trunks of the trees.

"Some of these 'maters has already got soft. Not even good for canning," he said. "Do you know I tried out for Waco before the war? I probably could have made it if I hadn't got drafted."

Then he let fly with a tomato and nailed an oak tree dead center in a shower of red pulp.

The preacher, Mr. Willis, saw him from across the field. I watched him walk slowly across the rows toward where we were picking, his back erect, his ironed dark blue overalls and cork sun helmet like a uniform. Mr. Willis had a church just outside of Yoakum and was also on the town council. My uncle Sidney said that Mr. Willis made sure no evangelist got a permit to hold a revival anywhere in the county so that all the Baptist soul saving would be done in one

church house only.

I bent into the tomatoes, but I could feel him standing behind me.

"Is Billy been drinking in the field again?" he said.

"Sir?"

"There's nothing wrong with your hearing, is there, Hack? Did you see Billy with a bottle this morning?"

"I wasn't paying him much mind."

"What about you, Juanita?"

"Why do you ask me?" She kept working along the row without looking up.

"Because sometimes your brother brings short dogs on the bus and sells them to people like Billy Haskel."

"Then you can talk with my brother and Billy Haskel. Then when my brother calls you a liar you can fire him, and the rest of us will leave, too."

Both Mr. Willis and I stared at her. At that time in Texas a Mexican, particularly a young girl who did piecework in a vegetable field, didn't talk back to a white person. Mr. Willis's gray eyes were so hot and intense that he didn't even blink at the drops of sweat that rolled from the liner of his sun helmet into his brows.

"Billy's been picking along with the rest of us, Mr. Willis," I said. "He just cuts up sometime when it's payday."

"You know that, huh?"

I hated his sarcasm and righteousness and wondered how anyone could be fool enough to sit in a church and listen to this man talk about the gospel.

He walked away from us, stepping carefully over each row, his starched overalls creasing neatly behind the knees. Billy was at the water can in the shade of the oaks with his back to Mr. Willis and was just buttoning his shirt over his stomach when he heard or felt Mr. Willis behind him.

"Lord God Almighty, you give me a start there, Preacher," he said.

"You know my rule, Billy."

"If you mean chunking the 'mater, I guess you got me."

Mr. Willis reached out and took the bottle from under the flap of Billy's shirt. He unscrewed the cap and poured the wine on the ground. Billy's face reddened and he opened and closed his hands in desperation.

"Oh, sweet Lord, you do punish a man," he said.

Mr. Willis started walking toward his house at the far end of the field, holding the bottle lightly with two fingers and swinging the last drops onto the ground. Then he stopped, his back still turned toward us, as though a thought were working itself toward completion in his head, and came back to the water can with his gray eyes fixed benignly on Billy Haskel's face.

"I can't pay a man for drinking in the field," he said. "You had better go on home today."

"I picked for you many a season, Preacher."

"That's right, and so you knew my rule. This stuff's going to kill you one day, and that's why I can't pay you while you do it."

Billy swallowed and shook his head. He needed the work, and he was on the edge of humiliating himself in front of the rest of us. Then he blinked his eyes and blew his breath up into his face.

"Well, like they say, I was looking for a job when I found this one," he said. "I'll get my brother to drive me out this afternoon for my check."

He walked to the blacktop, and I watched him grow smaller in the distant pools of heat that shimmered on the tar surfacing. Then he walked over a rise between two cornfields and was gone.

"That's my fault," Juanita said.

"He would have fired him anyway. I've seen him do it to people before."

"No, he stopped and came back because he was thinking of what I said. He couldn't have gone to his house without showing us something."

"You don't know Mr. Willis. He won't pay Billy for today, and that's one day's wage he's kept in his pocket."

She didn't answer, and I knew that she wasn't going to talk the rest of the afternoon. I wanted to do something awful to Mr. Willis.

At five o'clock we lined up by the bus to be paid. Clouds had moved across the sun, and the breeze was cool off the river. In the shadow of the bus the sweat dried on our faces and left lines in the dust film like brown worms. Billy's brother came out in a pickup truck to get Billy's check. I was right about Mr. Willis: he didn't pay Billy for that day. The brother started to argue, then gave it up and said, "I reckon the sun would come up green if you didn't try to sharp him, Preacher."

Juanita was standing in front of me. She had taken her bandanna down, and her Indian hair fell on her shoulders like flat star points. She began pushing it away from the nape of her neck until it lay evenly across her back. Someone bumped against me and made me brush right into her rump. I had to bite my teeth at the quiver that went through my loins.

"Do you want to go to the root-beer place on the highway?" I said.

"I never go there."

"So tonight's a good time to start."

"All right."

That easy, I thought. Why didn't I do it before? But maybe I knew, and if I didn't, Mr. Willis was just about to tell me.

After he gave me my check he asked me to walk to his car with him before I got on the bus.

"During the summer a boy can get away from his regular friends and make other friends that don't have anything to do with his life. Do you know what I mean?" he said.

"Maybe I don't want to know what you mean, Mr. Willis."

"Your father is a university teacher. I don't think he'd like what you're doing."

My face felt dead and flat, as though it had been stung with his open hand.

"I'm not going to talk with you anymore. I'm going to get on the bus now," I said.

"All right, but you remember this, Hack -- a redbird doesn't sit on a blackbird's nest."

I stepped onto the bus and pulled the folding doors closed behind me. Mr. Willis's face slipped by the windows as we headed down the dusty lane. Somebody was already sitting next to Juanita, and I was glad because I was so angry I couldn't have talked to anyone.

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## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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**Jeanie Clark:**

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