

## Reader's Report

<b>Title:</b>	██████████	<b>Length:</b>	416 pages
<b>Author:</b>	██████████	<b>Draft:</b>	Prepublication Novel
<b>Submitted by:</b>	██	<b>Locale:</b>	New Orleans
<b>Submitted to:</b>	██████████ ██████████	<b>Genre:</b>	Murder Mystery
<b>Date Covered:</b>	02.06.00	<b>Period:</b>	1927
<b>Analyst:</b>	Julie Saint-Anne (818.842.9231)	<b>Script Eval:</b>	<b>CONSIDER</b>
		<b>Writer Eval:</b>	<b>PASS</b>

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Characterization	X			
Dialogue	X			
Story Line		X		
Structure				X
Adaptability		X		
Premise	X			

### LOGLINE

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Venerable criminal attorney Charles St. Claire is slashed to death one hot summer night in New Orleans. It looks like his beautiful, movie star wife Remy Lelourie did the deed, but detective Daman Rourke doesn't believe it. His investigation uncovers generations of dark secrets, crimes of the heart and crimes of corruption, and a web of deceit that has ruined the lives of everyone he holds dear.

### SUMMARY COMMENTS

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A sultry, surprising, seductive story peopled with twisted, compelling characters who are never what they appear to be. Misdirection and red herrings abound. The extremely complicated plot is confused by a structure that incorporates more backstory than is necessary or desirable (even in a novel), told in flashbacks that disrupt the flow, interrupt the action, and destroy pace.

### SYNOPSIS

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In an absinthe/cocaine haze, Charles St. Claire envisions his beautiful wife coming to him in the old slave shack behind his New Orleans mansion, Sans Souci. Suddenly, she slashes him across his belly with a cane knife. In disbelief he fights off the ghostly apparition. She slashes again and again; his groin, his hand, and a death blow across his throat. Finally, she leaves the knife caught in his chest and disappears into the night.

1927 New Orleans. Detective Daman Rourke questions the wife, movie star Remy Lelourie, known in Hollywood as the "Cinderella Girl." He's still in love with this long-ago summer sweetheart, and can't believe she killed her husband of five months, despite the blood drenching her nightgown. Rourke goes home to find his daughter Katie, awakened by nightmares of the "gowman" who haunts the bayou roaming through the house they share with his mother Maeve since his wife's death seven years before.

The next day, Vinny McGinty, a vig collector for the Maguire Mafia turns up dead in the bayou. Desk jockey Sergeant Roibin Doherty, an antagonistic son-of-a-bitch, gets into fisticuffs with Rourke, who slips Remy out the back alley to avoid the photographers, and spirits her away for a joy ride.

He questions Remy's mother Heloise and sister Belle. They've lived in seclusion ever since Remy's father Reynard Lelourie abandoned them to live in scandal with Rourke's mother. His mother had abandoned her family as well. He notes the wet umbrellas drying in the umbrella stand. They claim they went to church in the rain the night before. Jealous sister Belle confides that Remy loved only Julius, Charles's older brother — not Charles, and not Daman. He goes to see the light-skinned Lucille Durand, Charles's Negro mistress. She did his bidding only because he promised to get her incarcerated husband Leroy another trial. Now what hope has she of seeing her husband released from a 50-year sentence for a crime he didn't commit? Lucille's mama worked for Rourke's mother in the house on Conti Street and lived there with daughter Lucille after Reynard died suddenly of food poisoning.

Leroy's blind mother Adenise tells him Vinny was brought dead to the bayou two weeks before he was found. Dumped by two men hauling shrimp. Said they'd need to throw Rourke a bone to keep him from digging up the whole skeleton. Lost in renewed passion and emotional confusion, Rourke visits childhood friend Bridey O'Mara, widow of his other closest childhood friend detective Sean O'Mara. Together with Casey Maguire, the four had an unbreakable bond of friendship symbolized by a shared tattoo they'd gotten from a voodooiene. The man Leroy is confined for killing was Casey's baby brother Bobby Joe. Rourke finds comfort in Bridey's arms and in her bed, and departs reluctantly. Just as he crosses the street, a black Lincoln tosses a grenade under the house. The house explodes before he can get to her. He leaves the hospital, and goes directly to the diner where Casey Maguire lunches every day. He accuses the racketeer of killing Bridey. Casey denies it. Bridey's wake. Charles's funeral. Rourke's mother Maeve visits the grave of her love child Maureen, who died days after birth.

Rourke then goes to visit Charles's law partner, Jean Louis Armonde. The day he died, Charles had come into the office possessed, rifled through law books, looking for annulment statutes and precedents. The marriage was over. He needed out now! He was more frightened than angry.

The medical examiner discovers white enamel and a purple spangle wedged beneath Charles's nail. Meanwhile, without Rourke's knowledge, Charles's mistress Lucy has been arrested. Roibin Doherty beats her up. Rourke perjures an alibi, and gets her released.

The newspapers are screaming for an arrest, and pointing at celebrity Remy Lelourie. Rourke visits Miss Fleurie, a bootlegging, cocaine-, opium-, and marijuana-dealing drag queen who runs the most popular speakeasy in the French Quarter. Both Vinny and Charles bought cocaine from her. Vinny, scared, had come to her for the name of a good lawyer. She sent him to a dragon slayer. There was someone in addition to Lucy who visited Charles in the night. She'll reveal the name if Rourke agrees to a high-stakes game of bouree. Rourke catches sight of Leroy's little brother Lebeau. Chases him down. Lebeau was out gigging frogs on the bayou that night. He reluctantly confesses he heard screaming and saw something inhuman running across the yard. It was white with snakes for hair, and floated through the trees. Rourke visits the local voodooiene. The red beads in her bowl are identical to the red beads of Heloise's rosary. She tells him they're powerful poison. He asks if she's heard from Leroy. She says she won't tell him who she's spelling for. He tells her she just did. She'll tell him more. There's a white woman always sending her two daughters for spells against their daddy. Had them hating him fierce. He died.

Rourke attends his father-in-law's birthday party. 55-year-old Weldon Carrington is New Orleans Police Superintendent. He never approved of his daughter's marriage, had offered Rourke \$50,000 not to marry his daughter. On arrival, Rourke sees Roibin Doherty getting in a car and driving off. Rourke's father-in-law draws him aside and tells him they'll be arresting Remy on Monday. Rourke goes to Roibin's house. Discovers him dead, apparent suicide. The Julius St. Claire crime file on the coffee table. His bedroom walls are papered with news clippings about Rourke. One of the articles features a photo of Remy as Mardi Gras Queen, wearing a Medusa mask with snakes for hair. He sends Roibin's gun to the medical examiner for evaluation under his new ballistics equipment.

Returning home with daughter Katie, they're gunned down gangland-style. He stashes his daughter, jacks a Cadillac, and chases the black Lincoln. The chase through the city ends with Rourke flying through an outdoor cinema screen and landing in front of the Lincoln which sails over the lake and explodes. Rourke drives up to Casey's lake cabin. He points the pilfered submachine gun at Casey, who denies he had anything to do with it. A messenger instructs him to meet Casey at the Flying Horses carousel at noon tomorrow.

But first he has a date with Miss Fleurie for a game of bouree. He wins \$10,000 and the name. He goes to see Remy's sister Belle. She confesses to a mortifying one-night stand with her brother-in-law Charles. He accuses her of returning to him the night he was killed. The wet umbrellas. Priest said they weren't in church that day. Lying about Mass is a sin. She counters that a pregnant spinster is a worse sin. When she told Charles, he laughed. Then he turned mean. Told her to leave. She and Heloise went to Sans Souci to tell Remy. They would all go away together, and when they returned, Remy would claim it was her baby. First Remy took Julius from her, then Charles, and now she would take her baby. He meets Casey at the carousel. Casey explains that Vinny was working the boxing gate for Casey's brother Bobby Joe. Vinny was skimming receipts. Got caught. Killed Bobby Joe. When Casey found out it was Vinny, not Leroy, he had Vinny killed. Bridey was an accident. The boys in Chicago heard he was having trouble with a local cop, and decided to butt in. He promises to call them off.

Weldon Carrington pulls him off the case. Tells him they have bigger fish to fry. They're arresting Remy in a few hours, and they don't want it to turn into the trial of the century. Bridey and Leroy are expendable casualties. Rourke tosses his father-in-law a quarter. That's what the man's honor is worth.

The medical examiner determines that Roibin didn't shoot himself. He informs Rourke that the red beads are poisonous, when crushed and mixed with something sweet to hide the taste. Nasty death. Like the pralines that killed his father who died screaming.

Rourke confronts Remy. "I saw you kill Julius. Why did you do it?" Remy would rather die than live with his hate. She slashes her wrist with broken glass. She's arrested for Charles's murder. Rourke instructs the officers to search the cistern out back for the Mardi Gras mask and the gun that killed Julius years ago. Under interrogation, Remy swears she didn't kill Charles. He believes her. He'll get her out one way or another. She tells him Charles drove up to Angola. Said something about Cain having a lot to answer for. Rourke goes to Angola. Gets Leroy to confide that he and Vinny saw Casey strangle his brother Bobby when he discovered him stealing Capone's take and feared Chicago retribution. Had Leroy arrested for the murder. Sean O'Mara and Roibin Doherty beat the truth out of him. He never told Charles nothing. Now that Sean and Roibin are dead, he has no hope of ever getting out. He tries to escape and is shot dead.

Rourke goes after Casey at his slaughterhouse office. "You killed your brother." Yes. Sean got greedy. Vinny got scared. Doherty offered to off them both, too stupid to realize he'd have to go, too. But you couldn't have figured it out without Remy's help. He had an affair with her. Told

her what he'd done. She set them both up. Casey's henchmen begin blasting. War. Casey's dying words: I didn't kill Charles. She set us up. I take the fall, you bring me down. Rourke visits Lucille. Tells her about Leroy's death. She tells him Leroy hadn't seen his lawyer in a month.

Rourke faces off with Carrington at City Hall. What's this about? It's about a boss cop with the juice to get a black man a prison sentence instead of the electric chair for killing a white man, a beat cop named Doherty who was at your house before he turned up dead by a cop's gun. Maguire killed with orders. Who'd he use to kill Doherty? Talk like that will get you fired. "I want my quarter back; I overpaid."

Daughter Katie, still fearing the "gowman," wears a charm. Lebeau comes to tell them Lucy's mother (Maeve's maid) has died. At the funeral, Lucy asks Rourke to take her to Angola to see her husband's grave. He takes her. She'd been forced to have two abortions because of Charles. He laughed with the doctor that the world didn't need more Negroes. Then she found out Reynard Lelourie (Maeve's lover) was her father. When she told Charles, he laughed. It was her turn to laugh when she told him who her mama was — Miss Maeve, Rourke's mother. If Maeve is her mother, and Reynard was her father, what color does that make Remy?

Rourke surprises Remy in her bedroom at Sans Souci. You killed Charles and Julius because you didn't want anyone to know Lucille is your sister. Wrong. When Julius told his father he would marry Remy, his father told him why he couldn't. brought out papers that proved she was Negro. Julius decided they would both die by their own hands, but before he could force her to shoot herself, she shot him. When Charles found out her lineage, he swore he'd tell everyone everywhere that the screen goddess they'd worshipped for years was Negro and watch them squirm. He raped her and went out to the shack. "I couldn't stand it when you thought I'd done it, and looked at me as though I was the gowman." Rourke remembers Katie's gowman in the house. "Oh, god. Katie."

Maeve's and Reynard's love child Maureen didn't die. They buried an empty casket. When they realized the baby was black, he told her that his granddaddy had taken a Negro woman. That exposure would ruin him. They gave the baby to Augusta, and named her Lucy. It was when Augusta and Maeve washed the abortion blood from Lucy's legs that they first thought of killing Charles, who was destroying their daughter and killing her babies. Maeve drew the high card that determined who would do the deed. Rourke and Remy search the marshes for Katie and his mother, who'd taken her out to prove there's no gowman. A great wailing cry comes up, followed by a splash. They find Kate huddled in the pirogue. "Grandma fell into the water." They never find her.

Rourke asks Remy to be his wife. She protests that interracial marriages are illegal. He counters that laws in this city are broken all the time. A postcard arrives bearing a Brazilian stamp. A photo of a woman sitting on a rock looking out to sea. Nothing else. Nothing else is needed. A son always knows his mother.

## ANALYSIS

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### Premise:

This tangled web of lineage, deceit, and racial injustice is powerful. It provides an excellent backdrop for potent conflict and compelling themes concerning how well we know our loved ones and ourselves, and the choices we make to protect our illusions. The setup is reminiscent of *Devil In a Blue Dress*, *LA Confidential*, and *The Big Easy*. New Orleans is depicted as a separate universe, whose esoteric, unwritten rules define the people who live there in ways no outsider can ever really understand. Whose history defines its people's inevitable future. A place where *la famille* is worth killing and dying for. Where brute human instinct and base

desire permeate the air. As Rourke says, "Money, pride, greed, lust. And secrets. All the usual southern deadly sins."

**Storyline:**

The opening sequence is superb. Sensuous, mysterious, frightening, magnetic, and dark. Complicated as it appears in this synopsis, the storyline falls together into a logical web with few holes and without stretching credibility. The detective's progress in revealing the mystery is active and motivated step by step. There are only one or two steps in his detection that he couldn't have made without the backstory we know and he doesn't. The denouement is woefully drawn out (100 pages), and the ending (mother's postcard from Brazil) is laughable.

**Structure and Pace:**

The primary problem contributing to the overlong denouement, as well as pacing throughout, is the author's intrusive backstory flashbacks. Not only do these flashbacks interrupt action, they're repetitive, often unnecessary, and misplaced — sometimes provided too early to have meaning, or with too much detail to maintain interest. Most, if not all, of the necessary information they provide could be worked into action, props, and dialog, so that one or two well-placed flashbacks will have more impact and dramatic effect.

**Characterization:**

Characters (including New Orleans itself) are fascinating. Each sports compelling hidden agendas, contradictory motives, dark secrets, depth, intelligence, and a unique voice. The cast is well-rounded, including Rourke's partner Fio a non-native who provides both a contrasting viewpoint and a sounding board for the esoterica that is New Orleans. The complete character arcs for so many characters is testament to the author's skill. His complex backstory work pays off in full character portrayals that would read just as well without including the backstory.

**Dialog:**

Though dialog sometimes becomes melodramatic, it is most often real, mysterious, and moving. Characters never say what they mean, and always mean what they say. Lucille has a particularly powerful passage: "... made from stone the both of you. He was alla time tellin' me he loved me like a wife, but that di'n't stop him from makin' me into just another whore. Alla time braggin' on the good he doin' for my 'people,' like that goin' to change how I feel about him. 'I'm a champion of the Negro,' he used to say to me, usually right after he got done fuckin' me in the mouf, an' you could tell how he liked sayin' them words 'cause it made him feel like the good massa." Everything they say "has the potential to be a lie." The dialect is never heavy handed, though there is a surprising lack of cajun. Most of the characters are Irish!

**Adaptability:**

The story, set in the sultry atmosphere of New Orleans, among the bayous, cemeteries, the French Quarter, and plantations is very cinematic. Scenes are very visual, and rife with sensuality. Despite the flashbacks, it can become a very linear script with ample dramatic highpoints for each character. However, the author's heavy-handed dependence on flashback, slavish devotion to backstory, and redundancy may make him an inadvisable choice for penning the adaptation.