

49 Buddhas

Jim Ringel

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Blending elements of philosophy, religion, and the mystery genre to interesting effect, 49 Buddhas is the start of a series to watch.

Jim Ringel's refreshing and complex murder mystery *49 Buddhas* borrows from Eastern philosophy and film noir.

Bodhisattva Lama Rinzen willingly puts off his own enlightenment until all of humanity can achieve the same. He is trapped in a cycle of rebirth, and awakens in this story as a detective assigned to the case of Sonny Heller, a despised insurance magnate who was horrifically murdered. Rinzen isn't only after Sonny's killer, though; he must also find a powerful artifact that, when touched, will provide enlightenment to everyone. Rinzen relentlessly pursues his goals while avoiding being killed.

Despite being a monk, Rinzen adopts a Sam Spade-esque persona and grapples with noir tropes like femmes fatales, shady businessmen, and a mysterious MacGuffin. Complicated moral and ethical dilemmas inject tension and drama. The end result is a straightforward mystery with some unique, if obvious, twists.

Rinzen narrates most of the story; the perspective switches into third person during an unusual climax. Thanks to multiple reincarnations over a long stretch of time, Rinzen's memory suffers, and many of the plot twists, while they are obvious to the reader, trip him up. This lends the story a dramatic irony while allowing events to unfold realistically for Rinzen.

Much of the book takes place on a single street in Denver with a small cast of characters. This leads to frequent stagnation. Rinzen does encounter violence and some gratuitous action, but the pacing is uneven. The book's combination of contemplative thinking and occasional violence seems at odds with Rinzen's general character, even if it is believable for his current incarnation.

Polished writing results in vivid scenes and eccentric characters. Characters speak realistically in their native tongues, but contextual clues make comprehension easy; the dialogue flows smoothly. A glossary provides further detail and context for the more esoteric Buddhist terms and specific references.

Some plot holes go unresolved—perhaps left for resolution in later books; perhaps in a nod to the philosophy of the book. Leaps of faith are required. The core murder mystery, unusual detective hero, complex world-building, and flowing dialogue make for an enjoyable read.

The first entry in the Lama Rinzen series lays heavy groundwork, introducing a unique detective and hero. Blending elements of philosophy, religion, and the mystery genre to interesting effect, *49 Buddhas* is the start of a series to watch.

JOHN M. MURRAY (March 27, 2018)

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