



49 Buddhas

Jim Ringel

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Practicing Buddhist Jim Ringel (*Wolf*, 2014) delivers an entertaining, head-spinning murder mystery that combines Buddhist insights with noir tropes on the mean streets of Denver.

We meet protagonist Lama Rinzen Naraka, a Buddhist monk, when he's reincarnated as a young private detective on seedy Colfax Avenue, a street cutting through the heart of the city. For him, this is the Hell Scape, one of the Six Realms of Existence he passes through, life after life. His mission is to recover the "dorje," a ritual object that will allow him to bring enlightenment to all. "I have not been a detective before, but I know its tricks," Naraka says. "To see things as they are without expectation."

Hired by the local police as a freelance investigator, Naraka is assigned to the murder of Sonny Heller, one of three brothers who rule the city's insurance market. Here, Ringel invents a spectral Tibetan underworld that escapes notice of the city's "gweilos" or white devils. A big clue is that Heller has been killed via Lingchi, an ancient Chinese form of torture and execution.

There's a dame named Abril involved; readers will question whether she's a damsel in distress or a femme fatale. Also in the mix are Naraka's ghostly teacher Daidyal; a grizzled police detective, and a Chinese customs officer who might be a spy.

Ringel offers an impressive display of literary alchemy, mixing ancient Tibetan philosophy into the trappings of a police procedural. He also makes skilled use of his backdrop, employing Asian emporiums, dive bars and poorly lit warehouses in a bitter, wintry locale. The story's shadowy underground recalls secret societies like those portrayed in the film *Big Trouble in Little China*, while Rinzen's meditative narration recalls the flawed Buddhist protagonist of John Burdett's novel *Bangkok 8*. A glossary helps readers decipher the book's Tibetan phrases and concepts.

Those expecting a conventional mystery should be surprised—and thrilled—by this original take on the noir genre.

Also available as an ebook.