

Boot Tracks

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by Matthew F. Jones

This reading group guide has been prepared

by Chris Robson for Europa Editions

1. *The Buddha*

Rankin says the Buddha, his cellmate and mentor, made him “see that he was born to be something, that he could as well be a special thing as to keep being the nothing that he was.” What role does the Buddha play in Rankin’s life? Why does the Buddha loom so large in the novel?

2. *Samson and Delilah*

The biblical hero Samson uses his strength to rebel against the oppressive Philistines. He is seduced by beautiful Delilah, who cuts off his hair—the source of his power—and betrays him to the Philistines.

Regaining his strength in a final act of self-sacrifice, Samson pulls down the Philistine temple, crushing himself and his enemies. In *Boot Tracks*, Charlie introduces himself to Florence as Samson, and she in turn is referred to as Delilah. What are the similarities between their relationship and that of their biblical counterparts? Does Florence ultimately betray him or rob him of his strength? Is Rankin’s final sacrificial act one of rebellion, of vengeance?

3. *Making Love is Hard to Do*

Rankin’s sexuality is confused and damaged. “It just never does for me the way it ought to,” he tells Florence. Why does he, a lonely man just released from prison, initially reject her advances? Why is he finally only able to make love to her violently?

4. *Masks Within Masks*

Many characters in *Boot Tracks* have multiple identities: Charlie Rankin is sometimes Little Charlie or Samson; Florence is LuAnn or Delilah; William Pettigrew is the Buddha. What purposes do these alter egos serve? How does the author use them to develop each character?

More than just a very good crime thriller, this dark but illuminating novel shows us the psychopathology of the criminal mind.

Good-looking in a Marlboro Man way, street-savvy and sharp-eyed, Charlie Rankin is still a mess. Jones (*The Elements of Hitting*, 1994, etc.) turns him loose on a savage mission, and we watch him implode. Fresh from a four-year prison term for "taking forty-two bucks and some candy bars from a hospital vending machine I jacked open," Rankin is a hired gun, charged by his jailhouse mentor/lover William Pettigrew to murder a man for vengeance. The money's nice; the target, Pettigrew insists, deserves death. And so, methodically, Rankin sets out, constantly replaying mental movies of Charlie Bronson's *The Mechanic*, Hollywood's version of himself. In reality, he's hardly the cold monster he aims to be, but the shell of a lost boy abused by his father. On the way to the hit, he shacks up with a wasted cutie in cowboy boots. She, too, contends with a double identity: Is she Florence, lonely and desperate for love? Or LuAnn, the stage name she's picked as a minor porn star? Pettigrew himself, Rankin's puppetmaster, is both a hardcore criminal but also a kind of sage, whom Rankin refers to as "The Buddha." When Rankin explodes into murder, the scene is appallingly graphic, but perhaps even more wrenching are its metaphysical implications. For, even as he butchers, Rankin can't help wondering: am I so crazily confused that I've killed the wrong man? Brilliantly chilling in its step-by-step examination of the mechanics of committing a criminal act—how the gun fits the hand, how to stash the cash—the novel's true terror is an interior one: an extreme-close-up vision of the drive toward homicide.

A nightmare thriller with the power to haunt.

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5. *A Hard Knock Life*

Rankin periodically fantasizes about what he could have been: an artist, an athlete, a “golf club guy.” Instead he grew up poor, unloved and largely alone, suffering years in prison for a petty theft. Are the hard circumstances of Rankin’s life to blame for his crimes? When the Buddha tells him that “every living thing has a preordained niche and it wasn’t always the one they’d hoped for,” might he be right?

6. *The Worldly and the Spiritual*

Florence and the Buddha represent two very different worldviews that pull Rankin in opposite directions. The Buddha maintains that “we’re just another upright animal so we invent laws for ourselves we think will distinguish us.” Florence, on the other hand, espouses a transcendent spirituality of repentance and reincarnation. What are the moral consequences of

each of these worldviews? Does the author have a preference? Where do you stand?

7. *Salvation or Suicide?*

At the end of the novel Rankin has neither forgiven himself nor received forgiveness from his victim, who says, “I care less about him and his reasons than a single bug being stepped on.” What then is the purpose of his final act?

8. *Man vs. Beast*

Rankin’s surviving victim understandably views him as a monster, worse than an animal, while Florence sees in him a wounded, misguided soul capable of rehabilitation. Is he a monster? Does our natural sympathy for Little Charlie blind us to Rankin’s essential inhumanity? Do we share any of his characteristics?

9. *Cinema Verité?*

While “planning” his crime, Rankin contrasts himself with “the Mechanic,” an implausibly slick assassin from the eponymous movie starring Charles Bronson. How does Rankin compare with our normal conception of the criminal? How have our ideas about criminals been shaped by books, TV and film?