Malamud's latest novel, *God's Grace* has evoked mixed reactions from the literary critics. Saul Maloff considers it "a thoroughly serious novel, and a beautifully imagined one by our reigning fabulist." On the other hand, Joseph Epstein states, "Poor Malamud, the larger he strains to become, the smaller his talent begins to appear."

From the realistic setting of *Dubin's Lives* Malamud moves on to fantasy in *God's Grace*. As a modern folk artist Malamud is unsurpassed. *God's Grace* is not science fiction; it is a prophetic allegory predicting apocalypse as a dreaded possibility of the near future.

The story opens with the imagined end of all the inhabitants of the earth in a thermonuclear war between the Djanks and the Druzhkies. Calvin Cohn, a Jewish (who else could it be in Malamud's fiction) paleologist is the only homo sapien survivor of the nuclear holocaust. He was at the bed of the Pacific Ocean in his small deep-sea submersible studying fossils "at the instant the ocean flared, and shuddered and steamed, as nuclear havoc struck." When Cohn rises to the surface, he finds that the totally catastrophic, man-made war had wiped the earth clean of all living creatures.
and God had engulfed the earth in the Second Flood despite His promise to Noah that "He would not pour another deluge on the earth (p.16).

Cohn wryly broods over his fate as the lone survivor of all humanity. He tries to figure out God's inscrutable purpose in letting him live. Is it by design or sheer absentmindedness on God's part that he continues to live when all other living beings have perished. He wonders if he has been chosen by God to recreate life on earth. God speaks to him through a crack in the sky and dispels all wishful thinking. Cohn, He states, escaped destruction through a miniscule error — a minor slip-up in the cosmic plan, therefore, he must not have any false expectations. It is an oversight God will shortly rectify: "I must slay you, it is just. Yet because of my error, I will grant you time to compose yourself, make your peace. Therefore live quickly — a few deep breaths and go your way" (p.13). Cohn begs he be allowed to live. "He who saves one life, it is as if he saved the world," he quotes from the Sanhedrin (p.13). However, God is angry and will not revoke His orders; He will make "no exceptions, righteous or otherwise" (p.13).

Cohn rants, Job-like, against God for letting man destroy himself and for causing the Flood to engulf the earth again. God counters, man has failed Him; he has not proved himself worthy of His grace: "Man, failing to use to a sufficient purpose
his possibilities, and my good will, has destroyed himself" (p.12). Moreover, "they have destroyed my handiwork, the conditions of their survival," God states (p.12). Man's lack of self-control and his violent nature has brought upon him self-annihilation: "I made man to be free, but his freedom, badly used, destroyed him. In sum, the evil, overwhelmed the good. The Second Flood ... they brought on themselves. They had not lived according to the Covenant" (p.13).

Thus, humanity has done itself in; only God looked away and let the world burn in the scorching nuclear holocaust. Cohn mourns for "human beings, human existence, all the lives lost. ... He mourned civilization, goodness, daring, joy; and all that man has done well" (p.17). In rage and in grief, Cohn contends with the wrathful God for destroying His own dream. "Why hadn't He created man equal to whom He had imagined?" Cohn demands (p.126). God asserts that He made man imperfect so that he may strive to perfect himself. In sorrow and anger Cohn demands explanations from God: "You have destroyed mankind. Our children are all dead. Where we justice and mercy?" (p.127). God dislikes being asked impertinent questions about His ways and He thunders,

Who are you
to understand
the Lord's intention?
How can I explain
My mystery
to your mind? (p.126).

God withdraws his presence and snaps the crack shut in the cloud.
Cohn feels abandoned and desolate on the battered oceanographic vessel. Soon, however, he discovers another example of God's absentmindedness—a bright, young chimpanzee who, it turns out to be, is well versed in human speech and abstract thought. Cohn finds the realm of possibility expand with his discovery of Dr. Bunder's experimental chimpanzee who has not only been trained (with the help of an artificial larynx) to speak and think but has also been converted to Christianity. Cohn adopts the chimpanzee as a son and changes his name from the German sounding Gottlob ("God-praise") to the Jewish Buz after "one of the descendants of Nahor, the brother of Abraham the Patriarch, therefore a name of sterling worth" (p.27). Buz calls Cohn "Dod" affectionately.

Encouraged by his discovery of another living being, Malamud's protagonist, once again, sets about to create a new life for himself as his past life (as everybody else's) has come to nothing. "Survive is what we have to do. Thus we protest our fate to God and at the same time imitate Him" (p.82), Cohn thinks. He tells Buz "My father said survival was one way we shared God's purpose" (p.82). He reconciles to God's will—indeed, is grateful for small mercies. "He figured God had, at long length, permitted him to go on living.... Cohn would fast" (p.31). After the initial shock and anger at the total devastation of all life subsides, Cohn rationalizes:
God made man seriously imperfect. Maybe what was on His mind was that if He made man whole, pacific, good, he would feel no need to become better, and if he didn't, he would never truly be a man. He also planned it that man had to contend with evil, or it was no go. But the awful thing was that the evil was much a bigger bag of snakes than man could handle. We behaved toward each other like animals, and therefore the Second Flood followed hard on the Day of Devastations (p.73).

Thus Cohn analyses man's ambivalent nature (more prone to evil than good) and the cause of his fall from God's grace. Understanding of the deficient human nature makes Cohn conscious of the need for self-betterment. He ponders, "Man had innumerable chances but was — in the long run — insufficient to God's purpose. He was insufficient to himself... he never mastered his animal nature for the good of all ... nor could he invent a workable altruism. In short, he behaved too often irrationally, unreasonably, savagely bestially" (p.124).

Shortly afterwards Cohn and Buz are cast by their battered schooner Rebekah Q on a lush, tropical island bountiful in fruit bearing vegetation but totally devoid of life otherwise. Buz becomes chimp Friday to Crusoe-Cohn as they go about setting up home on this icylic island in the first third of the novel Cohn reflects, "Maybe this island was Paradise, although where was everybody who had been rumored to be rentless in eternity?" (p.45). Gradually a few chimpanzees, a lonely gorilla and finally a family of baboons and a shadowy albino ape appear on the island, somehow having survived the nuclear fires and the flood that followed. Cohn wonders if God has granted a new lease to life
to flourish by allowing the handful of animals to live on, or, did they also attest to God's cosmic absent mindedness.

With pleasure Cohn discovers that the family of chimpanzees easily acquire human language and are receptive to human thought--"a stupendous miracle" (p.100). "If explanation was needed the world was different from once it was ... there was now a breath of settled purpose in the universe ... He had permitted the visiting chimps to learn one of the languages unique to homo sapiens — had allowed them to go on living through Devastation and Flood in order to learn..." (p.101). Cohn organizes a seder to celebrate the emergence of speech among the apes and to express sincere gratitude to God for sustaining them through adverse circumstances and for the bountiful life on the island.

Gogol and Chekhov, whose influence Malamud acknowledges, often had talking animals in their tales and we saw talking animals in Malamud's earlier stories "The Jewbird" and "The Talking Horse." However, in God's Grace the primates not only talk, each has a telling name and distinctive traits. Thus Malamud gives them an individuality which does credit to the author's creative ability.

Now that a common language exists between the chimps and himself Cohn hopes to establish a functioning social community based on "a higher order of behavior — to a former lower order of creatures" (p.119). He takes upon himself the role of adv'
and teacher. He starts a school to educate the perceptive chimpanzees. Cohn lectures the primates on ethics, religion, philosophy and the history of the civilization destroyed. He addresses them on a variety of topics and inspiring thoughts culled from the Bible, Freud, Kierkegaard and Ortega y Gasset so as to instil the values of selflessness, discipline, mutuality and responsibility towards others among the chimpanzees. He constantly talks to them of the sins man committed so that they may avoid repeating man's worst errors in the future society: "men had failed each other in obligations and responsibilities —failed to achieve brotherhood, lost their lovely world, not to mention living lives" (p.119).

Thus, Cohn makes all efforts to establish a society based on humane ethics. The most noteworthy aspect of Cohn's teaching is that he draws his inspiration from the Jewish scriptures and traditions. Calvin (nee Seymour) Cohn is the son and grandson of rabbis and has himself studied for a rabbinical career. Though he eventually chooses to be an oceanographer, Cohn's rabbinic learnings have a strong sway over him. Cohn alludes profusely to the ethical teachings of the Pentateuch and the Hebrew scriptures in teaching his "fellow" primates. He sets up the Seven Admonitons "which reflect a cautiously hopeful, pragmatic view of the necessity for altruism and of man's small but real potential for good." Overtly God's Grace is the most Jewish of all the novels by
Malamud. "Cohn is vulnerable, comic, earthy, ironic.... His Jewishness is playful and serious, secular and spiritual, a repository of family memory and a measure of morality."5

Cohn rejoices as his teachings have a tentative hold on his pupils. They show polite interest as he orates though how much they absorb even Cohn is not too sure. However, as his teachings register the chimpanzees become orderly and gainfully employed. They learn to live by the rules and regulations of the island for the mutual benefit of all. The idealistic teacher preaches: "freedom depends on mutual obligation" (p.95) and the island community flourishes beyond his best hopes. Cohn wishfully hopes that as they evolve into concerned, altruistic living beings, God may once again show grace towards the survivors and that He may bestow a more magnanimous fate on them than what the humans suffered. Cohn has suffered the loss of all his kind and has learnt the value of responsibility and selflessness if more suffering is to be avoided.

However, Cohn's hopes are not shared by Bernard Malamud. The author, himself so optimistic and hopeful in the earlier novels, now seems to fear that, perhaps the evil within oneself cannot be rooted out totally. At best, it can be smothered for a short while only. Ultimately evil will prevail as it did in Lord of The Flies and doom life on earth for ever.
In God's Grace the island community shows much promise but things go haywire as past prejudices surface once again in the new world. Intolerance towards others, the bane of the lost civilization, sets in. Buz cannot bring himself to even tolerate the lonesome gorilla George. "He's a fot stupid pig, and besides that he stinks," Buz states (p.73). Likewise, all the chimps are hostile towards the baboons — they "don't belong to our tribe" (p.168).

More than intolerance, it is sexual jealousy which speeds the degeneration. Mary Madelyn, the only fecund female chimp becomes the cause of strife on the island. All the male chimps desperately seek to mate with her but she (most affected by Cohn's teachings) has learnt self respect and human "morality." Quite contrary to her true chimp nature, Mary, when in estrus (she does not want any one to say "in heat"), flees from the pursuing males. She is preserving her virginity for Cohn whom she loves; her "purity" is a sign of her moral growth. Cohn is possessed by a "disturbing desire" (p.144) but he quotes from the Leviticus and Deuteronomy in which to copulate with an animal is decried as an abomination. Anna Shapiro quite aptly points out that Cohn's "resistence to poor Mary Madelyn is less to bestiality than to miscegenation — he's like the Jewish hero of The Fixer worrying about shtupping the shiksa, during her period."6 One does get the feeling that Cohn seems to regard Mary Madelyn as a non-Jew — a Shiksa rather than as an animal.
Gradually, he begins to feel loving affection towards Mary and when he mates with her it is his weak self that he indulges, however much he justifies himself by his talk of evolutional development through a new race fathered by him. Cohn wants the primates to exercise moral restraints over their baser desires. He asks the frustrated males to sublimate their excessive energies in "thought, art or some satisfying labor" (p.169). However, he himself does not practise what he preaches. Cohn monopolizes the only female chimp on the island and enjoys sexual gratification. In a way he steals Mary from the male chimps who have, by all means, more right to her.

The situation created brings to mind Malamud's The Tenants where Lesser, the protagonist, steals Willie Spearmint's girl friend Irene thus arousing jealousy and hatred in the latter. Cohn, no doubt, justifies his act to others and himself as best for the progeny. He sees "the union and its fruit... as a possible evolutionary leap into a future of unprecedented splendor, a peacable kingdom worthy of God's grace."? The half-human half-chimp baby born of their union, he hopes, will mother a new race "more idealistic and altruistic" (p.190) than the past civilization. Cohn deceives no one but himself with his hypocrisy. The apes resent his selfishness, turn aggressive and murderous and the society Cohn has nurtured so lovingly, degenerates into barbarism. For his selfishness Cohn will suffer much. Suffering that teaches man the virtues of responsibility and selflessness has value in Malamud's moral world.
The major cause of strife on the paradisic island is, however, the ideological differences that arise among the inhabitants. Buz may call Cohn "Dod" but by no means is he ready to accept his authority or his Jewish ideology. He can only relate fully and whole-heartedly to "Jesus of Nozoroth." Cohn, though large-hearted and liberal minded does realise that as long as "one of them was a Christian and the other a Jew, Cohn's Island would never be Paradise" (p.54). Buz associates the values Cohn preaches with his Jewish ethnicity. Such values Buz refuses to adopt because he is a staunch Christian. When Cohn tells him that "to be human was to be responsible to and protective of life and civilization" (p.58), Buz replies he would rather be a chimp. As the degeneration sets in, their ethical differences cause problems. Buz upholds Christian tenets against Cohn's rabbinic teachings. One of the admonitions Cohn puts up, reads "God is not love, God is Goa. Remember Him" (p.157)—a Jewish theological view which runs contrary to Buz's Christian thought. Once Cohn's brave new world begins to disorganize, Buz makes bold to change the admonition to read "God is love"—and yet, what follows this incident is hate and violence and ghastly barbarism.

Like Buz, though all the apes adopt human speech, imitate Cohn's ways and obey the rules laid down by him, they, nonetheless, assert their individuality and also their "otherness" in comparison to the homo sapien—Cohn. Moreover, like Buz, all
the apes uphold Christian ethics and harbour anti-Semitic feelings. Only the big gorilla, George, whom the others call "Pariah" shows Jewish inclinations.

Thus greed, selfishness and jealousy undermine the possibilities Cohn had imagined. His optimism about a new, responsible society, proves to be delusive. As the restraints that Cohn had imposed upon them by way of admonitions and his authority as their leader crumble, the apes assert their freedom by indulging in cannibalism and infanticide. The apes kill and devour (with relish) the baboon children Sara and Pat and finally even Cohn's little daughter Rebekah is killed. "The chimpanzees' savagery is sickeningly believable — sickening from the human point of view, liberating from theirs." Their indulgence in "sadistic gourmandising is made shocking beyond the deed because the cadavers had names, so were as good as people. Such is Malamud's talent for the particular...."

Esau, the sour-faced, ferocious beast who is a self-appointed Alpha Ape, plays the Satan in the Paradise island. It is only for a short while that this evil being makes a half-hearted attempt to follow the rules and regulations Cohn has laid for the betterment of their society. Once the apes take up cudgels against Cohn, Esau reverts to his old evil self. The anti-Semitic feelings which have smouldered in him right from the beginning, surface and we hear him declare: "I will break every Jew-bone in your head" (p.182). As in The Tenants, Cohn
draws fire upon himself because he has slyly gained favour with the "woman" who by right belongs to another (chimps in this case). On losing Irene to Lesser, Willie had screamed "Bloodsucking Jew" and Lesser had called him "Anti-Semitic Ape." Esau is literally an anti-Semitic ape. Just as Spearmint had destroyed Lesser's precious manuscript, the apes destroy Cohn's treasured records, papers and all the other articles in the cave.

Worse still is Buz's betrayal of Cohn. It is sexual jealousy which turns Buz into a traitor. When he sees Cohn's growing fondness for Mary Madelyn, he is enraged: "By what right his own dod interfered with his courtship of her. She was his kind not Cohn's" (p.145). Their ideological differences further deteriorate matters. Like Judas, Buz proves to be selfserving and plays a doubtful role in the confrontation between Esau and Cohn. Cohn who looks upon Buz as a son, is deeply hurt and heartbroken he mutters: "Et-Tu, Buz?" (p.189). Buz last words to Cohn before the latter deprives him of speech are "I am not Buz, my name is Gottlob" (p.194).

In the denouement the primates indulge in an orgy of inhuman brutality. As evil prevails, God withdraws His grace and the chimps lose their power of speech. The end reminds us very closely of the gruesome ending of The Tenants where Willie Spearmint slashes off Lesser's testicles with a sharp knife's and at that very moment Lesser drives an axe into Willie's head. Cohn, in God's Grace is also incarcerated by the chimps and finally immolated. "here again Malamud is back on familiar turf, dramatising physical and spiritual torment, a fertile vein in his imagination and a value of his philosophy." Thus, the
only human to have survived is, in spite of his best intentions, sacrificed in a mock enactment of the sacrifice of Isaac and the crucifixion of Christ. In Malamud's world good intentions are not good enough. Cohn is expected to practise selflessness which he fails to do when he takes up with Mary Madelyn.

God has, in spite of His anger with man for misuse of the powers bestowed by Him and in spite of His initial warning that Cohn will be destroyed shortly, let Cohn live out his life. At the altar, Cohn, for the first time, realizes that he has a long white beard and he states: "Merciful God... I am an old man. The Lord has let me live my life out" (p.201). And yet, God allows him to be sacrificed by the other beasts.

By allowing the barbarous chimpanzees to eventually hold sway over the island, Malamud symbolically, puts forward the grim warning that if man does not reassert self-control it will be the evil in the world that will triumph. "In the end the ruckus caused by everybody's appetites -- for meat, sex, spirituality, survival, power -- creates a story more akin to Lord of the Flies than to Crusoe." Malamud fears as W. Golding had in Lord of the Flies that living creatures are essentially vicious -- they corrupt themselves even if there are no outside influences exerting evil pressure on them. Indeed, it is the laws of society that restrain man to some extent. In Lord of the Flies Ralph "wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart," at the
end of the novel. Likewise, Malamud despairs at man's lack of effort to overcome his evil nature. His allegory ends on a bleak note and though weighed down by artifice it is quite effective. Malamud's pessimism regarding the fate of man if he does not mend his destructive ways, provokes us to reconsider our values before it is too late. *God's Grace* gives a prophetic warning (such as Malamud has so often done in his later fiction) of man's grim future if he persists in his irresponsible indulgences. Moreover, once again the novel intones a prayer to the impassive God to have mercy on all living creatures and save insufficient mankind from self-destruction.

The novel is a perfect example of Malamud's "essentially folkloric and didactic" imagination, as Philip Roth puts it. "Like all good allegories *God's Grace* hints at essential questions: How like man is his cousin the ape? What role does language play in civilization? If other primates are genetically nearly indistinguishable from us must they sin as we do?"
NOTES AND REFERENCES


11 Anna Shapiro, p. 375.

