God's Grace Short Guide

God's Grace by Bernard Malamud

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Characters

Throughout his career Malamud has defined himself as an experimental writer. "I [always] wanted to see what I could do," he summarized his attitude to taking literary risks. "I felt that the nature of talent is difficult to define and that one way of trying to define it is to see what it can do." In the past he has jumped from writing about a baseball prodigy, a black militant, a czarist Jew, an Italian hoodlum, a talking bird, an angel, a libidinous college professor, and other equally colorful characters. He has experimented stylistically with everything from impressionist imagism, stream-ofconsciousness, to almost scientific prose.

Indeed, such consistent striving to move beyond what he has already accomplished in style and subject matter must be considered one of Malamud's hallmarks.

If it is true that the author has been taking chances all his creative life, in God's Grace he is gambling for the jackpot. Among many memorable characters that populate the book, only the protagonist is a conventional agent. The others, in a triumphant narrative tour deforce are sapient and articulate chimpanzees, a 500-pound gorilla, a bunch of mangy baboons, and an irascible God who is not above pelting Cohn with lemons as a means of reminding him who is the boss.

But even Calvin Cohn, this thirtysomething Jewish Everyman whom God calls his great mistake simply because he survives the holocaust, is more than he first appears to be. He is a professional paleontologist and an ex-rabbinate student who escapes the Bomb and the Almighty by virtue of working at the sea bottom. His resourcefulness and industry would have made Robinson Crusoe proud, but in the course of the novel, while displaying all his human traits, Cohn becomes more and more like the chimpanzees whom he leads.

The transformation occurs on many levels, one of which is the vote during which Buz and his friends honor Cohn with the status of an honorary chimp.

Even in appearance the hero becomes curiously apelike. He has always been short and, after the radiation sickness, his bowed legs become even more crooked and chimp-like. Like his proteges, he is slim, trim and muscular, and prolonged exposure to sun leaves him with a deep brown tan. Losing his hair, he grows a short beard and, to complete the picture, becomes a devout fructivore.

Needless to say, such striking transformation serves to externalize the apelike nature of Cohn and, through him, humanity. The symbol becomes even more apparent when the island becomes haunted by an albino chimp, a fearsome creature who spells trouble for the community. Ultimately this is what Cohn is: a white ape chained, together with all of us, to our simian heritage.

This gradual metamorphosis is also symbolic of Cohn's role in the island community, evident in his special relationship with his adopted son and pupil, Buz. The protagonist

discovers the young chimp (whose previous name has been Gottlob) on the oceanic vessel before they get shipwrecked on the quasiEdenic island that becomes their home and purgatory. Thanks to a surgery performed by his former owner, the ultraintelligent Buz has an artificial larynx which enables him to master human speech. In moments of affection he calls Cohn his "Dod," and as Cohn comes to resemble a chimpanzee even to the point of mating with one, Buz acquires a more human and scholarly mien. Clearly both characters are two faces of the same person: the human ape. Moreover both develop into Malamud's favorite character type: the apprentice. In their own ways, Buz and Cohn vie with what seems their predestined fate, struggling with the unexpected twists their lives take. In this they echo so many of Malamud's hapless protagonists, defined by their search for the essence of their morality and mortality.

In Malamud's own words, his apprentice character is a "man who, as much as he can in the modern world, is in the process of changing his fate, his life."

One should not take the term "man" too literally at this point, especially in the light of the author's cheerful remark from 1983 that "Talking animals can, in a sense, be exciting people." In God's Grace we find Cohn's island peopled with talking chimpanzees who come into Cohn and Buz's settlement in two waves. The first group includes the future murderer Esau, the romantically lisping Mary Madelyn, the old patriarch Melchior, and simple-minded twins: Saul of Tarsus and Luke. The second coming delivers Hattie, an old female who becomes Melchior's consort, and a couple of males in their hunting and sexual prime, Esterhazy and Bromberg.

The most enigmatic of the books's characters are the two who are neither human nor chimp: George and God.

The source for the former's name was, again symbolically, a prehistoric hominid skeleton found by Richard Leakey. The lumbering gorilla is presented in contrast to the chimpanzees, for, where they are Christian in their beliefs, fluent in speech and, at least in some cases, vicious and vindictive, the black giant is a gentle mute with an intense affection for Jewish songs. George embodies the hope for regenerative goodness and moral sense in his deep spirituality. "[E]xperienced, saddened—after the Flood?"—

lacking Cohn's proselytizing tendencies, and fully embracing the Jewish fate, George is a better Jew than Cohn himself. If, as Buz suggests, to speak in human tongue depends simply on "hoving faith," George demonstrates his faith by reciting a Kaddish on Cohn's death. This is one of the strangest moments in this strange novel, full as it is with prophetic warnings, harrowing deaths, and symbolic miracles. For, improbable as it may sound, the vision of a gargantuan gorilla wearing a yarmulke and intoning a thanksgiving for the last man on earth is meant to affirm the noblest impulses in man, among which is his occasional ability for compassion for other sufferers.

The God that presides over the flooded Earth is one of Malamud's more fascinating creations. In the image of the Lord from the Hebrew Bible he is inscrutable, autocratic

and short-tempered—altogether a fearsome and choleric deity. As becomes the biggest player on the cosmic scene, he usually appears amid thunder and pillars of fire, and seems to enjoy cowing Cohn with bluster and divine muscle. And yet, despite his evident anger at Cohn's survival, he does not stop George when he saves Cohn from sure death. Furthermore he creates a lush island on which the chimps may try their hairy hand at civilization. Rather than another omission, this is clearly a part of his design for plants and fruit trees get pollinated even though no insect species are around. As Malamud insisted in an interview, God is thus more a symbol of fate rather than a specific product of any of the world's religions. He is a fiery ruler who seems ready to brand a Cainlike stigma on Cohn's head, but also a dispenser of grace, however stingy it may appear to the condemned.

Social Concerns

1982, the same year that Bernard InMalamud published his exuberant fantasy, another book stirred the public consciousness. Although outwardly it did not much resemble God's Grace, on a deeper level both could have been written by the same person. In the nonfictional The Fate of the Earth, Jonathan Schell (also a Jewish writer) inventories the genocidal aftereffects of a total nuclear exchange. "It may be one of the most important works of recent years," Walter Cronkite praised it, adding: "there still may be hope to save our civilization." With austere and unflinching detail Schell confronts the wintry devastation of a global doomsday. So does Malamud in the last novel published in his lifetime—the dark, experimental, and allegorical God's Grace.

There is no mistaking the urgency of Malamud's concern for the fate of the Earth. God's Grace, quirky and mythical where The Fate of the Earth is solemn and factual, begins "after the thermonuclear war between the Djanks and Druzhkies, in consequence of which they had destroyed themselves, and, madly, all other inhabitants of the earth." A conscientious humanist and moralist, Malamud articulates his growing alarm about the beast lurking in our civilization. While ratifying disarmament and nonproliferation treaties, the beast stockpiles megaFatmen and Little Boys (two fission bombs that vaporized the hearts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki), playing a political game of chicken with one finger on the button.

There are further differences, of course. Malamud's work is an allegory, a beast fable, a fantasy, and a morality play all rolled up into one. But the author does not spare the reader the accurate, if subtle and muted, front-seat view of the disaster: global explosion, gigantic tsunami floods, implosion of the biosphere (even cockroaches perish), radiation sickness, and the slow life-in-death of the last man on the planet: Calvin Cohn.

However separate in approach, Schell and Malamud are one in intent, somberly speaking to every reader and citizen who has any hope for the survival of his children. Both take literally Camus's admonition that "The purpose of the writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself." Both are hard-nosed realists about mankind's chances to avoid self-extermination. Both are afraid, even horrified, that the sun that also rises might be a sun made out of runaway neutrons.

Another source of concern in God's Grace are the internal tensions that boil underneath the surface of contemporary society. Racial, social, and religious intolerance rips the outwardly smooth fabric of Cohn's commune apart, reflecting in the behavior of the primates the simmering tensions from our own world.

George, the black gorilla, is the object of relentless prejudice and contempt outpoured on him by the educated and sophisticated chimp prodigy, Buz. A small group of emaciated baboons who lack the gift of human speech mastered by Cohn's chimpanzees become outcasts in the primate society, persecuted by Esau and his

cohort. The mere proximity of the black 'uncivilized' monkeys drives the chimps into a frenzy of predation and, as Cohn is mortified to discover, cannibalism.

Just like the racists and bigots in our own midst, Cohn's apes fail to develop the moral imperative which could elevate them above their primeval instincts.

Their hostility is the lens which reflects the same intolerance that so often turns our own society into a claw-and-fang collection of tribes, clans, and castes.

Peaceful coexistence and integration, two cornerstones of social and moral progress (almost emasculated by the current political jargon), are unwelcome guests on Cohn's island. The reader is left with no other conclusion after the supremacist chimps stalk, murder and devour a baboon child. As one chimp soldier who was 'only following orders' from the Alpha male, artlessly defends himself: "Esau told us that baboons don't belong to our tribe." To Cohn's exasperated reproof that God expects all to welcome strangers and live with them in peace, Luke answers with a bland: "What for?"

The same type of concern returns in a more abstract form among the author's considerations of moral freedom and biological nature of Man. The question of freedom has defined his fiction since his first novel The Natural (1952; see separate entry), and it has dominated almost all of the infrequent interviews the author granted in his lifetime. His characters, Malamud proposed, are engaged in the enterprise to "extend one's realm of freedom," and he has never wavered from writing about Man's "efforts to produce greater freedom than he was born with." The suppressed premise in the author's reflections is the almost truistic acceptance that moral choice and moral responsibility exist only to the extent that people (or sapient chimpanzees) have free will.

Despite libraries full of theological and theodicean treatises, no one has yet resolved the logical and moral dilemmas posed by an omnipotent and omniscient God and human freedom of choice. In God's Grace, asking a number of unresolved and perhaps insoluble questions, Malamud wonders about our reluctance to accept responsibility for our social and moral errors. Who was really responsible for the Devastation and the Second Flood: the Almighty or mankind? Who sowed the seeds of failure on Cohn's island: the unregenerate human or a pitiless deity? What is a human being: a morally free and thus culpable agent, or a dangling puppet on God's invisible strings? Is Man a moral—because so often immoral—creature who, as God thunders to the grief-stricken protagonist, was created "to perfect Himself"?

Or is he doomed to the mercy of his natural appetites—the four primitive F's of evolutionary survival: fleeing, fighting, feeding, and mating?

The author's concern about these issues rings from every page of the novel, in which Cohn contends with the fact of dying as the last surviving member of our species. Why do societies inevitably take the path of least resistance? Why is social change so infuriatingly slow? Why do tribal interests win over broader humanitarian concerns? Why do nations go to war? Sums up the writer: "The book asks, in a sense, a simple

question. Why does man treat himself so badly? What is the key to sane existence?" Given that we are free to determine our fate, and given that wars, injustice and intolerance are wrong, they should all have disappeared aeons ago. God's Grace is, in effect, Malamud's way of defining the degree of freedom from the primeval (and primate) beast lurking within us. The tribal primitive, fearful, mistrustful, selfish and sly, may be the true face of Man for whom civilization is merely a napkin with which he can dry out his fangs.

And yet, gripped by intense pessimism to which he repeatedly confessed in the years before his death in 1986, Malamud hangs on to the other side of our human nature: hope. "My premise," he revealed to Joseph Wershba in an early 1958 interview, "is that we will not destroy each other. My premise is that we will live on.

We will seek a better life. We may not become better, but we will seek betterment." It may appear wishful to look for balance to the grim picture of God's Grace in his words from another era. But a careful look at the novel supports this view. If Cohn, humanity's Everyman, was destined to die without a flicker of hope he would not have been granted a full life by God who sends out a samaritan gorilla to nurture him through the radiation sickness. That same gorilla, the most humane and gentle creature in the island's postlapsarian colony, restores a measure of God's grace by reciting a long Kaddish after the hero's sacrificial death. This Jewish form of thanksgiving and prayer, often overlooked by critics who succumb to the apparent bleakness of the novel, signals Malamud's persistent if muted hope that tomorrow may yet not turn into "the day after."

Techniques

We can separate aspects of Malamud's technique into three groups: genre, style, and symbolism. Inasmuch as it is a work of fantasy, God's Grace is unique among Malamud's novels (although not the short stories). Dispensing in a dramatic fashion with the conventions of verisimility, the author creates a rich and quasi-mythical story full of miracles and populated with talking animals and a supernatural being. "I write fantasy," he told Leslie and Joyce Field, "because when I do I am imaginative and funny and having a lot of fun."

Perhaps out of literary snobbery, some critics questioned this choice of genre, likely expecting from the author another melancholy tale of wrenching contemporary realism such as TheAssistant (1957). They wondered aloud why an established, National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning author would stoop to a lowbrow genre to write one of his most profound works. The fact is that fantasy, especially with strong allegorical overtones like in God's Grace, has a distinguished literary pedigree which goes all the way back to Spencer's Faerie Queene (1590-1596) and beyond.

Ever since Aesop, contends Malamud, it has been "the ultimate imaginative act to create a ... living being who is not human and yet can talk, giving you the opportunity to present a miracle in every sentence he speaks." It seems likely that his complex interplay of genres—fantasy cum beast fable, with a consistent sprinkling of post-holocaust allegory—was dictated by the requirements of his theme.

A moral parable and a theological fantasy, God's Grace is equally daring in the kaleidoscopic mixture of styles and canons of narration. In one sense Malamud's style has not changed from his earlier works; it is still, in Harold Hughes's words, "crisp, lean and hungry—it eats into your guts." But, consonant with the quasi-Biblical theme, in God's Grace the author resorts to the cadence and phrasing of the simple but dignified style of the Old Testament.

The effect is heightened in several passages in which Malamud breaks with standard prose lineation. Separating God's statements with blank spaces, or casting sentences in the form reminiscent of free verse adds to their power and solemnity. The frequent foreshadowing also increases the mythic quality of the drama which unfolds on the island, giving it an even greater resonance.

Upon landing on the island Cohn discovers bones of animals that perished during the Second Flood. Just like the paleolithic fossils which he painstakingly God 's Grace excavates near his cave, they foreshadow his own death at the end of the book and the fateful extinction of the human race.

All these devices are embedded in the rolling, witty vernacular in which Cohn and Buz communicate. This incongruity gives the book a distinct comic flavor, especially when moments of drama and levity follow one another in rapid succession. In a scene in which Cohn contends with God, only to be knocked out in front of the petrified apes,

after the pillars of light and thunder recede Buz declares the spectacle a knockout and asks, "When is the next episode?" But it is clear that even the lighter side of the novel has a serious intent at the bottom.

"Even a reader of holocaust drama has to be enticed into the act of reading, or he would rather forgo the anguish," argued the author in a post-publication interview. "So, I wanted a little laughter in this serious book."

The most pervasive aspect of Malamud's literary style is his use of symbolism. God's Grace is threaded with tacit and overt allusions to the perennial myths and parables from our cultural and literary history, especially those canonized in the Bible. At various points in the novel Cohn assumes the persona of God, Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, Job, and Jesus, to name a few.

But at the same time he is also a symbolic Everyman, a protean storyteller Homer; a shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe; a comical-satirical Gulliver; and a usurping Prospero. Moreover, his very name seems be fraught with symbolism.

As we learn at the beginning of the story, before he changed his name Cal vin Cohn was called Seymore. The conversion from See-More, suggesting openness and vision, to Calvin, one of the sternest religious dogmatists in history, foreshadows the occasional blindness which Cohn will demonstrate in his island protectorate.

Themes

There is probably no better way to convey the themes of God's Grace than to yield the floor to the author himself. Towards the end of the novel, before the evil strikes and reduces the community to a group of snarling and murdering beasts, Cohn sets up seven Admonitions in giant letters on the face of a mountain. These quasi-Mosaic edicts enshrine all that the last surviving human sees as the guiding principles for a just and civilized chimpanzee society. Like the Christian admonitions against the seven deadly sins, they are a distillate of Malamud's diemes and a symbol of the dual nature of Cohn's effort. Clearly the very fact of posting the laws indicates both the noble design for the new civilization and the necessity of re-directing its subjects onto the path of virtue.

The seven commandments that Malamud writes for his protagonist are: 1. We have survived the end of the world; therefore cherish life. Thou shalt not kill.

2. Note: God is not love, God is God.

Remember Him.

3. Love thy neighbor. If you can't love, serve—others, the community. Remember the willing obligation.

4. Lives as lives are equal in value but not in ideas. Attend the Schooltree.

5. Blessed are those who divide the fruit equally.

6. Altruism is possible, if not probable.

Keep trying. See 3 above.

7. Aspiration may improve natural selection. Chimpanzees may someday be better living beings than men were.

There's no hurry but keep it in mind.

These prescriptions encapsulate the aspirations for a good life in a secular but spiritual society. Over the years Malamud has declared the formative influences on his artistry to be World War II and the Holocaust, the racial strife of the last few decades, and the nuclear threat of the Cold War. All of these themes are reflected in Cohn's hopes and fears for the primate community.

The specter of war and nuclear winter lit up by the dying embers of a thermonuclear devastation are echoed in the first admonition. The pious Christian "God is love" is replaced by the much more somber reminder of his presence, so stark, in fact, that it sounds almost like a warning. The need for a willing form of social participation and an equitable distribution of wealth are themes which ring with especial force in America,

where the top one percent owns or controls over twenty times its share. A lifelong teacher of writing and literature, Malamud puts an equal amount of emphasis on education, symbolically grafting the apes' Schooltree onto the Biblical Tree of Knowledge.

The most pervasive theme of the novel, which sets it apart from the self-centeredness of postmodern fiction, is the complex relation between Man and Morality. Forming the backbone of all admonitions, this theme creates an unexpected climax when the protagonist attempts to alter evolution itself. In what must be the most daring scene in the book, Cohn copulates with a young female, Mary Madelene, who bears him a humanlike chimp baby. Malamud's choice of such an unusual denouement of the "last couple on Earth" motif corresponds to the weight of matters he brings to the reader's attention.

Although Nature has favored the sapient primate Homo to develop intelligence and civilization, reading God's Grace we cannot but wonder whether we were the ideal choice. Given that Buz and the feuding primates symbolize the human race all the way down to their fall from grace, the book hints that a different kind of animal may have been better suited to inherit the Earth than the chimpanzee. Only circumstances beyond Cohn's control, such as the initial education of Buz or the arrival of chimps instead of female gorillas, determine the direction of his experiment. By the last page it is clear that the peaceful, sensitive and spiritual George would have been a more deserving survivor to reach the promised land.

But what about the human race? Governing the planet in Nature's as yet unfinished experiment, humanity gives little indication that it is equipped for the job.

Global stewardship, implies Malamud, demands global consciousness and global perspective. The evolutionary point of view gives Malamud a vantage point from which to judge our apparent lack of moral vision. This anthropological, almost socio-biological perspective on typically moral themes is no accident and no mere poetic license. In preparation for God's Grace the author steeped himself in the study of evolution and anthropology (reading, among other works, Jane Goodall's In the Shadow of Man (1971), and spent a year at Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. The result is a tale of woe and pain, relieved only dimly by a hint of God's grace for the imperfect human and his simian inheritors.

Key Questions

In a number of ways God's Grace is an extraordinary, perhaps even a stunning, book. Breaking with all expectations, Malamud deliberately embarks on a narrative path which leads him away from what many readers would automatically associate with contemporary fiction. In your discussion of this experimental, allegorical, and profound novel, you may wish to consider the following questions.

1. Can you explain the significance of at least some of the symbolic roles played by Cohn in the novel?

2. What are the positive and/or negative personality traits of the four principal players in the novel: Cohn, God, Buz and George?

3. What were Cohn's errors in running the chimp community? Were they avoidable, or, given the primate nature and the ambitiousness of the experiment, destined to end in failure?

4. How would you handle the fact of being stranded on a desert island? The fact of being the last person on Earth?

5. What is the full meaning of the albino chimpanzee who haunts the forest, only to die at Cohn's hand?

6. The story of Abraham and Isaac occupies the central place in the novel.

Can you recount it in detail and explain how it applies to God's Grace?

7. Considering the thorough research that Malamud did for the book, which aspects demonstrate its scientific accuracy?

8. In comparison to other contemporary writers with which you are familiar, would you agree that Malamud is an experimental or even daring writer?

9. What are the sources of humor, comedy and satire in the novel?

10. Did you find God's Grace an unrelentingly bleak and nihilistic doomsday drama? What is the degree of hope and salvation suggested by its ending?

Literary Precedents/Related Titles

It is common for allegorical narratives to delve into other literary works for references and symbols, and God's Grace is no different. What sets it apart, however, is its richness and the encyclopedic range of allusions. The most obvious ones are Defoe's story of Robinson Crusoe (1719) and through it the proto-Robinson, Alexander Selkirk, who actually spent several years on a barren little island off the coast of Chile, and the Hebrew Bible, especially the book of Genesis. God's Grace is divided into six parts: "The Flood," "Cohn's Island," "The Schooltree," "The Virgin in the Trees," "The Voice of the Prophet," and "God's Mercy," which may represent the first six days of Creation. One of the book's leitmotifs is the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac at God's request who, at the prompting of Satan, wishes to test the extent of the man's faith in the Lord (thus foreshadowing the story of Job).

But the allusions and parallels extend far beyond that, delving into some of the most powerful fictions of the modern era. William Golding's Lord of the Flies (1954; see separate entry), which traces the degeneration of a peaceful commune into acts of violence and ritualistic murder, or George Orwell's Animal Farm (1945; see separate entry), with its allegorical talking animals, are prominent among them. As a matter of fact, even the Hollywood B-classic, The Planet of the Apes (1968; based on the novel by Pierre Boulle, 1963), in which the last humans survive among sapient primates, is a source of some profound if not exact parallels. Behind Malamud's version of a post-holocaust tragedy lie also the numerous works of modern fiction which spin various scenarios of global apocalypse (e.g. Kurt Vonnegut's Cat's Cradle, 1963; see separate entry, or Gore Vidal's Kalki, 1978).

Another literary precedent is signalled by the many references to Shakespeare, whose Works are one of the few books that Cohn salvages from the sinking vessel. In God's Grace Cohn plays, the mighty Prospero to Buz's Caliban, teaching the chimp how to be human with insufficient regard for the quasi-dictatorial manner in which his noble intentions are sometimes expressed. Moreover, the star-crossed tragedy of the romance between Romeo and Juliet is reincarnated in the hesitant union of Cohn and Mary Madelyn.

Although unparalleled -within Malamud's novelistic career, the beast fable or, broader still, fantasy has appeared regularly in several of his short stories.

"Angel Levine" (1958) and "Idiots First" (1963), for example, contain unmistakable fantastic elements, and the personified animals in "The Jewbird" (1963) and "Talking Horse" (1973) are clear precedents of the talking, thinking, and suffering menagerie of God's Grace. Even The Tenants (1971), the violent and racially explosive novel in which the Jewish Lesser and black Spearmint play out their hatred in the "accursed island" of their tenement, prefigures some of the themes which animate Malamud's allegorical fantasy. In short, the didactic strain of Aesop's Fables combined with the Swiftian animal satire may have been the natural path for this imaginative writer. In one of his reminiscences he revealed: "As a child I had enjoyed fantasies about talking animals

and later read some medieval beast epics. Along with my previously written animal stories, it eventually lead to God's Grace."

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