Not What Krishna Had in Mind

MONKEY ON A STICK
Murder, Madness, and the Hare Krishnas.
By John Hubner and Lindsey Gruson.
Illustrated. 414 pp. San Diego:
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $19.95.

By Anne Fadiman

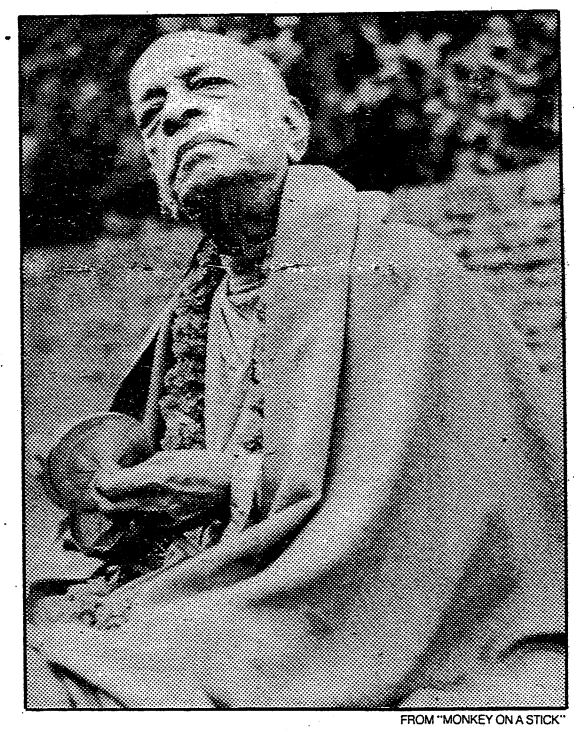
IN June 1966, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, an elderly Hindu swami who had recently arrived in New York from Calcutta, rented a dingy Second Avenue storefront and started giving classes on the Bhagavad-Gita and its divine hero, Krishna. He told his small audience of students and street people that they could serve Krishna by renouncing meat, drugs, alcohol, coffee, tea, cigarettes and illicit sex; by wearing Hindu clothes and anointing their foreheads with clay; by shaving their heads, if they were male; and by chanting the sacred Hare Krishna mantra precisely 1,728 times a day. Those who did so would rise above *maya*, the illusions of the sensual and material world, and thereby become instruments of God.

Prabhupada's message struck a chord among his young listeners, who craved spiritual discipline but dismissed Jesus and Moses as stodgy totems of the parental establishment. Krishna, on the other hand, had played the flute, gone barefoot, worn flowers and danced with milkmaids. He was a counterculture natural. After a second temple opened, in San Francisco, thousands of people chanted Hare Krishna at a "Mantra Rock Dance" that featured the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin and Allen Ginsberg. A recording of the mantra by George Harrison and a chorus of Krishna devotees sold 70,000 copies the day it was released. "This new brand of holy man," the underground journal The East Village Other wrote of Prabhupada, "with all due deference to Dr. [Timothy] Leary, has come forth with a brand of 'Consciousness Expansion' that's sweeter than acid, cheaper than pot, and non-bustible by fuzz."

It did not take long, however, for some of the holy man's followers to descend back into *maya*, and in so doing, to involve the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, which had in the meantime grown to enormous size, in a variety of activities that were eminently bustible by fuzz. These included drug dealing, wife beating, child abuse, weapons violations, arson, fraud, extortion, embezzlement, robbery and murder. "Monkey on a Stick," by John Hubner and Lindsey Gruson, is an account of how, as the authors put it, "a religious movement became diverted into a criminal enterprise."

Mr. Hubner, a reporter for The San Jose Mercury News, and Mr. Gruson, a reporter for The New York Times, initially collaborated on a Rolling Stone story called "Dial Om for Murder," and then continued to amass a mountain of investigative evidence that is by turns comic, pathetic and appalling. If their writing were half as good as their reporting, this would be an extraordinary book. Unfortunately, "Monkey on a Stick" reads like a potboiler, fast-paced and lively but vulgarized by cops-and-robbers slang (thefts are "heists," a blow to the head is a "braining") and bombastic clichés (of a new devotee seeking enlightenment, the authors write, "Little did he know that the search would take him down the road to a private hell"). Their commendably thorough source notes reveal an abundance of composite characters, "reconstructed" dialogues and "dramatized" scenes, though the material itself is so sensational that further dramatization hardly seems necessary.

Mr. Hubner and Mr. Gruson are nevertheless competent raconteurs, especially when they refrain from reflection and analysis (in which they tend to be reductive) and concentrate on what really interests them: the scandalous facts they have so industriously dug. They are at their best when they describe the corruption and violence that began to permeate the International Society for Krishna Consciousness when the underlying psychological instability of its members began, inevitably, to assert itself. *Sankirtan*, the ritual begging for alms, evolved into a complex repertory of scams as devotees scrambled to please Prabhupada by enriching the group's coffers. Female devotees who exchanged their saris for low-cut blouses and pretended to solicit on behalf of Biafran orphans or Vietnam veterans collected several hundred dollars a day. The quest for *lakshmi* — holy funds — soon escalated into even more lucrative lines of work, such as robbing jewelry stores and smuggling millions of dollars of hashish oil from Pakistan to California. Two hundred temples were built in sixty countries with the proceeds from largely illegal endeavors. "We're doing good deeds with the money," rationalized one drug dealer. "The glory of Krishna makes everything clean."



FROM "MONKEY ON A STICK"

A. C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, chanting with finger cymbals, late 1960's.

When Prabhupada, who seems to have been unaware of these crimes, died in 1977 at the age of 81, internecine war broke out among the 11 disciples he had chosen to carry on his work. Like players in a game of Risk, they squabbled over control of the movement's international branches. While their followers lived in poverty (the better to reject *maya*), they tried to one-up one another by acquiring ever more extravagant cars and houses. One guru spent $35,000 recording a rock-and-roll album, "Nice but Dead," a collection of guitar-accompanied potshots at the other gurus.

THE most egregious offender was Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada — né Keith Ham of Peekskill, N.Y., the son of a Baptist minister — who established a West Virginia commune called New Vrindaban, after the Indian village where Krishna spent his youth. Kirtanananda's devotees carried him on a jeweled palanquin, knelt when he passed and, while he barked orders, worked 14-hour days without pay to build him a temple of marble, onyx and 24-karat gold leaf. They also built an arsenal of illegal weapons to defend the community from attack by *karmis* (meat-eating barbarians — i.e., anyone who was not a member of the movement). In the meantime, among the rank and file, ugly quarrels, beatings, child- and wife-abuse began to erupt regularly, with the Hare Krishnas apparently so callous as to greet such events with indifference. It was at New Vrindaban, reputedly at Kirtanananda's urging, that a disloyal devotee was shot, stabbed, buried in a dammed-up riverbed and partially dissolved with acid intended for polishing the temple. (One of his murderers thoughtfully reminded him to chant the Hare Krishna mantra before he died, so he would lead a more spiritual life in his next incarnation.) Three years later, another devotee was shot by the same man after writing an unpublished account of Kirtanananda's offenses. This victim's friends recalled that one of Kirtanananda's favorite tales was the Indian parable of the monkey on a stick, impaled after its raids in a banana grove in order to provide a cautionary example to its comrades.

The society, in a sanitized and diminished form, still maintains temples around the world. Although many of the characters in this book are now in prison, the West Virginia police have not yet succeeded in indicting Kirtanananda. Expelled from the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, he continues to live at New Vrindaban, leading a splinter cult. I hope Mr. Hubner and Mr. Gruson, who by writing this energetic exposé have done far more to harm Kirtanananda than any of his previous monkeys on a stick, will be careful. □

Anne Fadiman is a writer who lives in New York. She was a recipient of the National Magazine Award for Reporting in 1987.

Thank Heaven for Wealthy Girls

THE LAP OF LUXURY
By William Hamilton.
293 pp. New York:
The Atlantic Monthly Press. $17.95.

By Susan Cheever

WILLIAM HAMILTON is a New Yorker cartoonist who also writes. His third novel, a witty moral tale set in the New York art world, goes much further than the affectionate prodding at WASP society that makes his cartoons so popular. In "The Lap of Luxury," money smothers creativity and destroys intelligence. Even the good-hearted rich are incarcerated by their own advantages, and the rest are frivolous, scheming and corrupt.

"Cajoling funds from the rich was best done by the rich," muses the novel's confused hero, Vincent Booth, a newly minted curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "For the poor to seek funds for the trophies of wealth would be unseemly and out of place. The egocentric old oil gnome; homely, thin-lipped heirs of a spectacularly greedy Civil War draft dodger; the former whore who probably killed the old auto manufacturer. . . . All of them required wealthy beseechers."

The book begins with Vincent, a young artist with an old dream, sketching in a French cafe. Fortune throws him a fortune in Mary Brigham, an American tourist at another table, who, unbeknown to Vincent, is the heiress of a vast conglomerate. Her parents live in a River House apartment that makes the East River look like "a moat." "It was a fortune so big and abstract that instead of belonging to anyone, people belonged to it." "All they knew of its existence was the dew of checks regularly condensing in their mailboxes."

Mary, who is traveling to recover from the depredations of a fake Hungarian count, quickly falls for handsome, innocent Vincent. Before he really knows what's happening, he's on his knees in a romantic Italian garden proposing marriage. As she accepts, Mary laughs and puts her head on his chest. "It landed

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Susan Cheever's fifth novel will be published next year.