

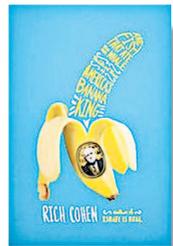
The ripe, luscious tale of the Banana King

BY ADAM LANGER

Samuel Zemurray, a poor Russian immigrant who arrived in America in 1891 at the age of 14, began his career as a fruit jobber and went on to become the multi-millionaire president of Cuyamel Fruit Co. and, later, the head of the infamous United Fruit Company. “Sam the Banana Man” seems as though he was born to become the subject of a Rich Cohen book. A sharpie with more than a bit of chutzpah, Zemurray will probably seem familiar to fans of Cohen’s previous work. This biography of the complex and often contradictory figure of Zemurray is Cohen’s most engaging and entertaining book to date.

“The Fish That Ate the Whale: The Life and Times of America’s Banana King” encompasses the classic rags-to-riches immigrant story and also provides a concise history of 20th century America. Zemurray was, Cohen writes, “an emblematic figure of what came to be known as the American Century.” True enough, for Cohen’s story of the Banana Man contains dozens of other uniquely American stories. There is the story of U.S. imperialism in Central America: As president of Cuyamel Fruit, Zemurray was influential in overthrowing the Honduran leadership and replacing it with a government whose tax policies were more sympathetic to his company. There’s the story of the rise of the multinational corporation: A Supreme Court decision involving United Fruit paved the way for global companies to evade American law. There’s the story of World War II: Zemurray’s son was an Air Force major who was killed when his plane crashed in Africa. Other stories include the Holocaust (in 1941, Zemurray helped to establish a community of Jewish refugees from Europe in the Dominican Republic) and the formation of Israel (Zemurray’s lobbying efforts with Central American nations helped Chaim Weiz-

mann garner the United Nations votes he needed to approve the 1947 plan to partition the state of Palestine). And so on. FDR appears in this story, as do Joseph McCarthy, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. And what of the assassination of Huey Long and the story of the Bay of Pigs? Well, maybe Zemurray had something to do with those too.



The Fish That Ate the Whale: The Life and Times of America’s Banana King

By Rich Cohen, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 320 pages, \$27

1898, *Scientific American* felt it needed to educate its readers about how to eat a banana: “The fruit is peeled by slitting the skin longitudinally and giving it a rotary motion with the hands.”

Cohen luxuriates in providing luminous excerpts from Pablo Neruda and Gabriel García Márquez, who were inspired to write about the exploits of United Fruit, as well as the lyrics from the first Chiquita Banana jingle. For his part, Cohen writes like a man high on the work of Saul Bellow,

Finally, and perhaps best of all, Zemurray’s story allows Cohen to relate the surprisingly fascinating history of the banana itself, that “shrink-wrapped-by-God product of the jungle,” which the book states may just have been the forbidden delicacy with which Eve tempted Adam in the Garden of Eden.

What makes Cohen’s book such a joy to read is not only all this history but the clear delight Cohen has in telling the reader about it. He relishes digressions, asides, small details. He writes of how in



Chicago Tribune historical file photo, 1951

Nelson Algren and Carl Sandburg, and he does so with such verve that you sort of wish Studs Terkel was alive so that he could read excerpts of Cohen’s book aloud on the air: “Back to the isthmus! Back to the sandy loam! Back to the land of United Fruit camps, even with its Quonset huts and its electric green fields and los Pericos blue from poison ... Back to the land where the banana is king and the Gringo gives the orders!”

Cohen takes his title from a New York Times article, which described Zemurray in his unlikely takeover of United Fruit as “the fish that swallowed the whale,” a

consistently underestimated immigrant who nevertheless found himself able to engulf a giant company. While this talk of fishes and whales may seem like a rather odd way to describe the life of a man who spent his career in the banana trade, it does provide a concise description of the pleasures of Rich Cohen’s book. In 320 pages, it offers a great many more histories than are normally found in books three times its size.

Adam Langer is the author of a memoir and four novels including “The Thieves of Manhattan” and “Crossing California.”