



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

By Rich Cohen

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**A legendary tale, both true and astonishing, from the author of *Israel is Real* and *Sweet and Low***

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Rich Cohen's brilliant historical profile *The Fish That Ate the Whale* unveils Zemurray as a hidden kingmaker and capitalist revolutionary, driven by an indomitable will to succeed. Known as El Amigo, the Gringo, or simply Z, the Banana Man lived one of the great untold stories of the last hundred years. Starting with nothing but a cart of freckled bananas, he built a sprawling empire of banana cowboys, mercenary soldiers, Honduran peasants, CIA agents, and American statesmen. From hustling on the docks of New Orleans to overthrowing Central American governments, from feuding with Huey Long to working with the Dulles brothers, Zemurray emerges as an unforgettable figure, connected to the birth of modern American diplomacy, public relations, business, and war?a monumental life that reads like a parable of the American dream.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“This is a rollicking but brilliantly researched book about one of the most fascinating characters of the twentieth century. I grew up in New Orleans enthralled by tales of Sam Zemurray, the banana peddler who built United Fruit. This book recounts, with delightful verve, his military and diplomatic maneuvers in Central America and his colorful life and business practices.” ?*Walter Isaacson, president and CEO of the Aspen Institute and author of Steve Jobs*

“Sam ‘the Banana Man’ Zemurray was a larger-than-life character. Rich Cohen is a superb storyteller. Put them together and you have a startling and often hilarious account of one of the forgotten heroes (and villains) of the American empire.” ?*Zev Chafets*

“In Rich Cohen's masterful and enthralling narrative, one man's character is not simply his fate but also that of a nation. With verve, wit, and page-turning excitement, *The Fish That Ate the Whale* unfolds as compelling story of bold success coupled with reckless ambition. I *loved* this book.” ?*Howard Blum, author of The Floor of Heaven and American Lightning*

“If this book were simply the tale of a charismatic and eccentric banana mogul, that would have been enough for me--especially with the masterful Rich Cohen as narrator. But it's not. It is also the story of capitalism, psychology, immigration, public relations, colonialism, food, O. Henry's shady past, and the meaning of excellence.” ?*A. J. Jacobs, author of The Year of Living Biblically*

“What a story, and what a storyteller! You'll never see a banana--and, for that matter, America--the same way again.” ?*Aleksandar Hemon, author of The Lazarus Project*

“There's a lot to learn about the seedier side of the ‘smile of nature’ in this witty tale of the fruit peddler-turned-mogul.” ?*Chloë Schama, Smithsonian*

“Cohen ... gives us the fascinating tale of ‘Sam the Banana Man,’ a poor Russian Jew who emigrated to Alabama as a teenager and ended up controlling much of Central America . . . Rich Cohen books constitute a genre unto themselves: pungent, breezy, vividly written psychodramas about rough-edged, tough-minded Jewish *machers* who vanquish their rivals, and sometimes change the world in the process. Within this specialized context, Cohen's Zemurray biography admirably fills the bill.” ?*Mark Lewis, The New York Times Book Review*

“Cohen's narrative has considerable charm, whether pondering Zemurray's Jewish identity or claiming him as a man ‘best understood as a last player in the drama of Manifest Destiny.’” ?*The New Yorker*

“Americans puzzling over the role of today's powerful corporations -- Bain Capital, Goldman Sachs, Google -- may profit from considering the example of the United Fruit Company . . . A new account of United Fruit and one of its leading figures, Samuel Zemurray . . . *The Fish That Ate The Whale* . . . usefully reminds us of some of the wonderful things about capitalism, and some of the dangers, too . . . The book recounts all the Washington insiders hired by Zemurray as lobbyists, including Tommy “the Cork” Corcoran. A business that lives by Washington is finally at its mercy, as United Fruit learned when the antitrust cops came after it. It's all something to remember the next time you peel a banana.” ?*Ira Stoll, Time*

“Cohen's masterful and elegantly written account of Zemurray and the corporation he built is a cautionary tale for the ages: how hubris can destroy even the greatest and most powerful company.” ?*Chris Hartman, The Christian Science Monitor*

“[An] engrossing tale of the life of Sam Zemurray . . . With his nimble narrative journalism, Cohen makes a convincing case that the somewhat obscure Sam Zemurray was in fact a major figure in American history. Cohen does so with a prose briskly accented with sights, sounds and smells, and invigorated with offhand wisdom about the human journey through life. What's rarer about Cohen's style is his skill with metaphor. His are apt and concise, but they're also complex . . . There are men of action and there are men of words: The contrast between them is a sort of shadow narrative in *The Fish That Ate the Whale* . . . At the end of Cohen's story, impetuous doers such as Zemurray not only cede the moral high ground, but also live to witness the terrifying power of the talkers . . . If some level of this book proposes a contest of Cohen vs. Zemurray, then the win goes rather unambiguously to Cohen; to paraphrase Edward Bulwer-Lytton, the pen is mightier than the banana.” ?*Austin Ratner, The Forward*

“[A] grippingly readable biography . . . Cohen fleshes out the legend [of Samuel Zemurray] in a 270-page account full of novelistic scene setting and speculative flights--the kind of writing that . . . puts Cohen firmly in the tradition of non-fiction reportage pioneered by Tom Wolfe and Norman Mailer. Based on scores of interviews, four years of archival research and on-the-spot reporting from Central America and New Orleans, the book carries its details easily, sweeping readers on a narrative flood tide that matches the protean energy of Zemurray himself . . . As sketched by Cohen, the big man emerges as a complicated, all-too-human hero, one whose bullish nature sometimes blinded him, but never let him accept defeat.” ?*Chris Waddington, New Orleans Times-Picayune*

“Portions of Zemurray's story, after all, are as good an example of the American promise as one could imagine . . . On the other hand, as Cohen acknowledges, Zemurray, especially with regard to his Latin American interests, was 'a pirate, a conquistador who took without asking.' This duality--and Cohen's immensely readable portrait of it--makes for a captivating character.” ?*James McAuley, The Washington Post*

“If you are a fan of pulp fiction, of seamy thrillers, of dank and tawdry noirs, of ashcan gutter naturalism, of absurdist caper novels, of whatever-it-takes-to-succeed, rags-to-riches sagas, then put away your books by David Goodis, Jim Thompson, Ross Thomas, George Gissing, Chester Himes, James M. Cain, Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and James Hadley Chase, and instead pick up Rich Cohen's vigorous and gripping *The Fish That Ate the Whale: The Life and Times of America's Banana King*. This history-embedded, anecdote-rich biography of Sam Zemurray, the bigger-than-life figure behind United Fruit Company at its height of power, is a balls-to-the-wall, panoramic, rocket ride through an acid bath, featuring unbelievable-but-true tales of power-grabbing, ambition, folly, passion, commerce, politics, artistry, and savagery: daydream and nightmare together . . . Cohen gives us this awesome story with a novelist's canny eye for details and pacing--he injects learned disquisitions that are easy to digest whenever necessary--and a fair share of reflection and commentary and psychologizing without undue editorializing or finger-pointing.” ?*Paul Di Filippo, Barnes and Noble Review*

“Cohen's biography of 'Banana King' magnate Samuel Zemurray in *The Fish That Ate the Whale* is really a history of the yellow fruit itself . . . Zemurray exemplified both the best and worst of American capitalism. His saga provides plenty of food for thought next time you grab one off the bunch.” ?*Keith Staskiewicz, Entertainment Weekly*

“In *The Fish That Ate the Whale* Rich Cohen sketches a lively and entertaining portrait of Samuel Zemurray, a banana importer and entrepreneur who rose from immigrant roots to take the helm of the storied United Fruit Co., among other accomplishments . . . Cohen unfurls a rich, colorful history of a man who

championed the establishment of the State of Israel by providing arms and ships to the Irgun, the nascent underground army. He gave muscle and capital to Eisenhower's decision to stage Operation PBSUCCESS, a CIA coup against Jacobo Arbenz's teetering democracy in Guatemala in 1954 . . . Was he a conquistador, pirate, explorer, tycoon, or a man of the people? Cohen's textured history shows that Zemurray played all of these roles, making him the ultimate Zelig-like character of the 20th century.” ?*Judy Bolton-Fasman, The Boston Globe*

“Absorbing, nimble and unapologetically affectionate . . . Mr. Cohen is a wonderfully visceral storyteller . . . it's a magnificent, crazy story, engagingly told.” ?*Aaron Gell, New York Observer*

“Eminently readable . . . The banana is lovely in its simplicity, but it turns out the man who ruled the banana kingdom for generations was quite the opposite--part conquistador, part pioneering businessman. Zemurray walked the line, and his interlaced legacies make for a fascinating and entertaining tale.” ?*Kevin G. Keane, San Francisco Chronicle*

“Lyrical . . . This remarkable book . . . is a beautifully written homage to a man whose pioneering life mirrors so much of America's beauty and beastliness. The life of Sam the Banana Man, in Cohen's eloquent hands, is as nourishing and odd as the bendy yellow berry that made him great.” ?*Melissa Katsoulis, The Times (London)*

“Documentary veracity counts for less than the dashing energy of Cohen's characterisation, and the moody atmosphere of the landscapes in which he sets this buccaneering life--New Orleans with its malarial damp, the jungle in Panama where an incomplete, unbuildable highway is 'defeated by nature and walks away muttering'. Best of all is his horrified contemplation of the monstrous banana in its native habitat, with its leaves shaped like elephant ears and 'coiled like a roll of dollar bills'. After a tropical downpour you can hear the plants stealthily growing at the rate of an inch an hour as the foliage drips: it is the sound of money being made.” ?*Peter Conrad, The Guardian*

“Here's what I'm sure about: You've never thought about reading a book about the banana business and/or Sam Zemurray, the guy perhaps most responsible building it. Here's what I'm also sure about: You absolutely should read *The Fish That Ate the Whale: The Life and Times of America's Banana King*, by Rich Cohen.” ?*Mark Bazer, WBEZ*

“Cohen's piercing portrait is not glossy; it is a gritty, behind-the-scenes look at how Zemurray was able to do what he did. Some of the most moving passages in this fine book are Cohen's own meditations about Zemurray; it feels as if he is always trying to understand what drove him . . . Cohen is a beautifully talented and vibrant writer who seems to effortlessly brings his pages to life. His narrative includes wonderful riffs on the history of bananas and how and where they are grown, the development of the banana trade in Latin America under its various corrupt governments, as well as the state of American politics and business during the early 1900s. Cohen is not an ideologue, and this serves him well as a writer and thinker. He is unafraid to share his gut response with the reader, as well as his uncertainties . . . Cohen's terrifically intuitive biographical portrait of Sam Zemurray allows us to take a very close look.” ?*Elaine Margolin, The Jerusalem Post*

“This is a great yarn, the events and personalities leaping off the page.” ?*Alan Moores, The Seattle Times*

## About the Author

**Rich Cohen** is a *New York Times* bestselling author as well as a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* and *Rolling Stone*. He has written seven books, including *Tough Jews*, *Israel Is Real*, and the widely acclaimed

memoir *Sweet and Low*. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *Best American Essays*. He lives in Connecticut with his wife, three sons, and dog.

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## **Selma**

Sam Zemurray saw his first banana in 1893. In the lore, this is presented as a moment of clarity, wherein the future was revealed. In some versions, the original banana is presented as a platonic ideal, an archetype circling the young man's head. It is seen from a great distance, then very close, each freckle magnified. As it was his first banana, I imagine it situated on a velvet pillow, in a display alongside Adam's rib and Robert Johnson's guitar. There is much variation in the telling of this story, meaning each expert has written his or her own history; meaning the story has gone from reportage to mythology; meaning Sam the Banana Man is Paul Bunyan and the first banana is Babe the Blue Ox. In some versions, Sam sees the banana in the gutter in Selma, Alabama, where it's fallen from a pushcart; in some, he sees it in the window of a grocery and is smitten. He rushes inside, grabs the owner by the lapel, and makes him tell everything he knows. In some, he sees it amid a pile of bananas on the deck of a ship plying the Alabama River on a lazy summer afternoon.

The most likely version has Sam seeing that first banana in the wares of a peddler in the alley behind his uncle's store in Selma. The American banana trade had begun twenty years before, but it was still embryonic. Few people had ever seen a banana. If they were spoken of at all, it was as an oddity, the way a person might speak of an African cucumber today. In this version, Sam peppers the salesman with questions: What is it? Where did you get it? How much does it cost? How fast do they sell? What do you do with the peel? What kind of money can you make? But none of the stories mentions a crucial detail: did Zemurray taste that first banana? I like to imagine him peeling it, eating the fruit in three bites, then tossing the skin into the street the way people did back then. Tossing it and saying, "Wonderful." In future years, Zemurray always spoke of his product the way people speak of things they truly love, as something fantastical, in part because it's not entirely necessary. When he mentioned the nutritional value of bananas in interviews, he added, "And of course it's delicious." Putting us at a further remove from Zemurray is the fact that the kind of banana he saw in Selma in 1893, the banana that made his fortune, the variety known as the Big Mike, went extinct in the 1960s.

Sam Zemurray was born in 1877, in the region of western Russia once known as Bessarabia. It's Moldavia today. He grew up on a wheat farm, in a flat country ringed by hills. His father died young, leaving the family bereft, without prospects. Sam traveled to America with his aunt in 1892. He was to establish himself and send for the others—mother, siblings. He landed in New York, then continued to Selma, Alabama, where his uncle owned a store.

He was fourteen or fifteen, but you would guess him much older. The immigrants of that era could not afford to be children. They had to struggle every minute of every day. By sixteen, he was as hardened as the men in Walker Evans's photos, a tough operator, a dead-end kid, coolly figuring angles: Where's the play? What's in it for me? His humor was black, his explanations few. He was driven by the same raw energy that has always attracted the most ambitious to America, then pushed them to the head of the crowd. Grasper, climber—nasty ways of describing this kid, who wants what you take for granted. From his first months in America, he was scheming, looking for a way to get ahead. You did not need to be a Rockefeller to know the basics of the dream: Start at the bottom, fight your way to the top.

Over time, Sam would develop a philosophy best expressed in a handful of phrases: *You're there, we're here; Go see for yourself; Don't trust the report.*

Though immensely complicated, he was, in a fundamental way, simple, earthy. He believed in staying close to the action—in the fields with the workers, in the dives with the banana cowboys. You drink with a man, you learn what he knows. (“There is no problem you can’t solve if you understand your business from A to Z,” he said later.) In a famous exchange, when challenged by a rival who claimed he could not understand Zemurray’s accent, Zemurray said, “You’re fired. Can you understand that?”

Selma, Alabama, was the perfect spot for a kid like Sam: an incubator, a starter town, picturesque yet faded, grand but still small enough to memorize. A manufacturing center in the time of the Confederacy, it had since been allowed to dilapidate. There was a main street, a fruit market, a butcher shop, a candy store, a theater with plush seats, a city hall, churches. There were brick houses with curtains in the windows and swings on the porches—the white side of town. There were shotgun shacks, blue and yellow and red, fronted by weedy yards—the Negro side of town. There were taverns and houses of worship where Christian gospel was mixed with African voodoo. There were banks, savings and loans, fraternal orders. There was a commercial district, where every store was filled with unduly optimistic businessmen.

Though the biography of Zemurray’s uncle has been forgotten, we can take him as a stand-in for the generation of poor grandfathers who came first, who worked and worked and got nothing but a place of honor in the family photo in return. Sometimes described as a grocery, sometimes as a general store, his shop was precisely the sort that Jewish immigrants had been establishing across the South for fifty years. Such concerns were usually operated by men who came to America because they were the youngest of many brothers, without property or plans. These people went south because, in the early days of the American republic, it was not inhospitable to Hebrews. Many began as peddlers, crossing the country with a mountain of merchandise strapped to their backs. You see them in ancient silver prints and daguerreotypes, weathered men humping half the world on their shoulders, pushing the other half in a cart—bags of grain, dinnerware, tinware, lamps, clothes, canvas for tents, chocolate, anything an isolated farmer might want but could not find in the sticks.

When they had saved some money, many of these men opened stores, which meant moving all that merchandise under a roof in a town along their route. Even now, as you drive across the South, you will see their remnants baked into the soil like fossils: an ancient veranda, a ghost sign blistered from years of rain—LAZARUS & SONS, HOME OF THE 2 PENNY BELT. These men were careful to open no more than one store per town, partly because who needs the competition, partly because they worried about attracting the wrong kind of attention. They stocked everything. What they did not stock, they could order. The most successful grew into great department stores: S. A. Shore in Winchester, Alabama, founded by Russian-born Solomon Shore, father of Dinah; E. Lewis & Son Dry Goods in Hendersonville, North Carolina, founded by Polish-born Edward Lewis; Capitol Department Store in Fayetteville, North Carolina, founded by the Russian Stein brothers. Others, having started by extending credit to customers, evolved into America’s first investment banks. Lehman Brothers, founded by Henry Lehman, a Jewish immigrant from Bavaria, began as a dry goods store in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1844. Lazard Frères, founded by three Jewish brothers from France, began as a wholesale business in New Orleans in 1848. The store owned by Zemurray’s uncle was probably of this variety: having begun as a young man carrying merchandise, it grew into a neat grocery on Broad Street.

Selma closed early. By ten p.m., the bustling of the marketplace had given way to the swamp stink and cicadas, but there was always action for those who knew where to look: in the private clubs where merchants played faro and stud, in the juke joints that stayed open from can till can’t. According to those who knew

him, Sam did not care for crowds and parties. He had a restless mind and a persistent need to get outdoors. He liked to be alone. You might see him wandering beneath the lamps of town, a tough, lean young man in an overcoat, hands buried deep in his pockets.

He stacked shelves and checked inventory in his uncle's store. Now and then, he dealt with the salesmen who turned up with sample cases. He stood in the alley, amid the garbage cans and cats, asking about suppliers and costs. There was money to be made, but not here. He interrogated customers. He was looking for different work and would try anything, if only for experience. His early life was a series of adventures, with odd job leading to odd job. Much of the color that would later entertain magazine writers—Sam's life had the dimensions of a fairy tale—were accumulated in his first few years in Selma.

He worked as a tin merchant. Well, that's how it would be described in the press. "Young Sam Z. bartered iron for livestock, chickens and pigs." According to newspaper and magazine accounts, he was in fact employed by a struggling old-timer who was less tin merchant than peddler, the last of a vanishing breed, the country cheapjack in a tattered coat, sharing a piece of chocolate with the boy. Now and then, he might offer some wisdom. *Banks fail, women leave, but land lasts forever.* He combed trash piles on the edge of Selma, searching for discarded scraps of sheet metal, the cast-off junk of the industrial age, which he piled on his cart and pushed from farm to farm, looking for trades—wire for a chicken coop in return for one of the razorbacks in the pen. After the particulars were agreed on, Sam was told to get moving, *Catch and tie that animal, boy.* It was Zem...

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