


[Join Salon.com today | Help](#)
[Benefits of membership](#)

**salon.com**

# Site Pass

SITE PRESENTED BY ▶

**SALON  
PREMIUM**


 Salon  The Web

 powered by  
**YAHOO! SEARCH**
[A&E](#) [Books](#) [Comics](#) [Community](#) [Life](#) [Movies](#) [News & Politics](#) [Opinion](#) [Sports](#) [Tech & Business](#)

## CURRENT BOOKS

### When bananas ruled the world

Intrigue. Power. Corruption. Death. Sex. The history of oil has nothing on that of the yellow fruit.  
 By Katharine Mieszkowski

**The witty detective** Karen Joy Fowler's follow-up to bestseller "The Jane Austen Book Club" is a detective novel about a mystery writer whose tales come back to haunt her.  
 By Louis Bayard

**Media hypocrites love personality politics** Why is the GOP smear machine so good at re-creating the social dynamics of high school, pitting the Republican jocks against the Democratic nerds?  
 By Glenn Greenwald

**Criminals of the world, unite and take over** In "McMafia," author Misha Glenny takes us on a startling tour of the new international underworld, documenting the hidden costs of an unregulated global free market.  
 By Laura Miller

## TABLE TALK

[What is your kid reading?](#)

[How do you know you're a book nerd?](#)

**SALON DAILY  
NEWSLETTER**

## When bananas ruled the world

Pages 1 2

[Share](#)
[Print](#)
[RSS](#)

 Font: [S](#) / [S+](#) / [S++](#)

It may seem hard to believe that the banana business could be as nefarious as the oil business. But to our banana chroniclers, it may have been worse. The banana men managed to be at once ferociously exploitative, while cultivating a beloved image with their customers, pioneering public relations and marketing practices still in use today.

"Nobody has ever loved the oil companies," says Koepfel. "Everyone has needed them, and they have a bloody history, but no one has ever said, 'Gee whiz! Those guys at Shell have such a cute little jingle.'" But when it comes to bananas, the 1944 Chiquita song is arguably the best-known jingle ever: "I'm Chiquita banana and I've come to say..."

But the banana men's mastery of spin didn't stop at catchy jingles. In the 1950s, President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala tried to force United Fruit to sell its fallow land back to the government. The president planned to redistribute it to landless peasants. To incensed banana leaders, this was an act of sovereign defiance.

One United Fruit P.R. man wrote a "report," which he sent to 800 influential conservative Americans, sounding the alarm about communism gaining a foothold in Latin America via Guatemala. The company employed no lesser force than the father of public relations himself, [Edward Bernays](#). Promptly, Bernays flew journalists to Guatemala on luxury "fact-finding" missions, which resulted in dozens of articles published in Time, Newsweek, the San Francisco Chronicle and the New York Times, portraying the Guatemalan leader as a dangerous threat.

Bernays called the stories "masterpieces of objective reporting," and went so far as to suggest that somewhere behind the Iron Curtain, Russia was training revolutionaries to take over Latin America. In case anyone missed the point, United Fruit's P.R. team put out a movie titled, "Why the Kremlin Hates Bananas." It wasn't long before the Guatemalan president, who had dared to defy United Fruit, was ousted with the

**This is FiOS. This is Big.**


Premier Package  
**\$47.99** per month

Special online offer  
**1st Month FREE**

**verizon** [Get FiOS TV](#)

Get Salon in your mailbox!  
email address

SIGN ME UP

**Banana Trees**   
All Types and Sizes of  
Banana Trees High  
Quality and Fast  
Delivery.  
[www.WillisOrchards.com](http://www.WillisOrchards.com)

Ads by Google

Sponsored Links:

Health insurance you need  without  
the 9 to 5.



help of the CIA. He ended up  
stripped down to his underwear, paraded before the press in the airport, and sent into  
exile, never to return again.



[Banana](#)  
Dan Koeppel  
Best Price \$13.39  
or Buy New \$16.29  
  
Privacy Information

Today's banana companies don't have anywhere near the power in Central America that they once did. That's in part because they don't have to. They've discovered the joy of outsourcing. After all, why deal with those pesky labor problems when you can have local producers assume all the inherent risks of growing an agricultural commodity?

What the banana men figured out, Chapman explains, is that "we don't have to own the land, we can give it to the local guy who wants to run his own plantation. We still have our railway, shipping line and sophisticated access to marketing. We don't have to be involved at the ground level with all the expense and aggravation, and all the headaches that go with it." Chiquita is now mostly a distribution and marketing concern.

But the legacy of their bad old days lives on. You can't blame United Fruit for everything that's wrong in Central American politics, says Chapman. Yet in many cases, by propping up weak governments, it helped create a power vacuum that's been filled by right-wing death squads and left-wing guerrillas. In Guatemala's decades-long civil war, more than 200,000 people have died. When some moderate leaders have advocated for a civilian government, they've been summarily executed. "I was with one such leader myself," says Chapman.

Even today, the taint of international scandal dogs the bananas in our supermarkets. In 2002, [Human Rights Watch documented](#) banana workers in Ecuador suffering "widespread human rights abuses," including use of child laborers as young as 8 years old, and workers being fired for trying to organize. In 2007, Chiquita was fined \$25 million by the U.S. Department of Justice for making payments to "terrorist organizations" in Colombia.



[Bananas!](#)  
Peter Chapman  
Best Price \$13.94  
or Buy New \$16.32  
  
Privacy Information

Both books  
also peel  
back the

environmental fallout of bananas.

The authors suggest that the commonplace banana we eat today, a cultivar called the Cavendish, will likely become the next victim of the same Panama disease that drove its predecessor, the once ubiquitous Gros Michel cultivar, to commercial extinction.

The race is on to build a better banana that can stand up to Panama disease and



**AARP** Essential Premier Health Insurance  
Presented by **Aetna**

Get new Premier health insurance benefits — custom designed for you and your family.

**GO NOW**

2008-08d [Legal](#)

When you  
retire, step  
into a new  
Premier  
health  
insurance  
plan.



shipping, ripen at the right rate once picked for the grocery store customer, and still be cheaper than that locally grown apple or pear. In a few decades, we could be eating cornflakes topped with an entirely different variety of banana, a notion that's certainly more comforting than the idea that we might have to give up this cheap, potassium-rich comfort food altogether.

In the meantime, the mass production of bananas for the world marketplace threatens the local varieties that millions of people around the globe depend on to keep starvation at bay. "It's a lot like AIDS, which is believed to have spread through Africa along newly built highways," says Koepfel. "As more and more commercial plantations are being built in Africa, the chances of cross-contamination increase. We are creating the possible disease vector."

Scientists are trying to create a more disease-resistant banana through cultivation and genetic engineering. But it's not easy. The banana, which is a giant berry plucked from the world's largest herb, is seedless, sexless and sterile. Because banana offspring are genetically identical to their parents, it makes them all the more vulnerable to disease.

Ultimately, banana fan Koepfel says he hopes learning more about bananas won't cause readers to turn away from them. "What I don't want people to think is, 'Oh my gosh, I should never eat a banana.' I just want people to think about this universal fruit in a real way."

Pages 1 2

[Share](#) | [Print](#) | [RSS](#) | [Font: S / S+ / S++](#)

[POST A LETTER ABOUT THIS ARTICLE](#)

[Read all letters on this article \(24\)](#)

**Further reading**

Powered by [Sphere](#)

Ads by

**[The Top Stock To Own Today](#)**

Free Report: The Top Pick For 2008. Minimur - Unlimited Return.  
[www.cabot.net](http://www.cabot.net)

**[Stocks Ready To Soar](#)**

Hot News Alerts, Huge Profits 1000%+, Stoc Explosive Breakout.  
[www.otcstockexchange.com](http://www.otcstockexchange.com)

**[Learn To Be Rich Training: Apr 28-30](#)**

Free Training: Washington Area. Free CDs w, attending.  
[www.MyEducationNetwork.com](http://www.MyEducationNetwork.com)

About the writer

**Katharine Mieszkowski** is a senior writer for Salon.

Story finder (3 ways to search Salon)

powered by **YAHOO!** SEARCH

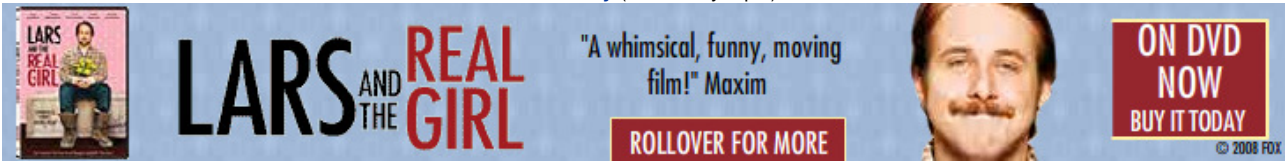
Salon  the Web

A list of all published articles organized by month and year:

April 2008

Go!

[Salon Directory](#) (browse by topic)



[Salon](#) | [About Salon](#) | [Contact & Help](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Advertise in Salon](#) | [Salon Personals](#) | [Salon Jobs](#) | [Salon Mobile](#) | [Salon Newsletter](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)

Salon Premium: [Premium log in](#) | [What is Salon Premium?](#)

[A & E](#) | [Books](#) | [Comics](#) | [Community: Table Talk](#) & [The WELL](#) | [Life](#) | [News & Politics](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Sports](#) | [Tech & Business](#) | [Letters](#)

[Investor Relations](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

Copyright ©2008 Salon Media Group, Inc. Reproduction of material from any Salon pages without written permission is strictly prohibited. SALON® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office as a trademark of Salon Media Group Inc.