

Plagues and Miracles

Chapter 1: Role of Bananas in Jumping Evaluation

Maciej Stefan Kumosa

March 2026

Without bananas, Joseph Conrad and the author would not have succeeded; however, bananas can be, or should be, eaten just with our fingers; otherwise, Charles Darwin will become irrelevant, we will lose a banana, and the jumping evolution will cease.

I have given considerable thought to how to open this book — how to pull a reader past the first page and keep them there. Our civilization has produced countless volumes, some exceptionally crafted, on every conceivable subject. One could argue that crafting another book lacks purpose, as so much has already been articulated. This contention might hold if the progression of our civilization were less bewildering, less destructive, and marked by fewer instances of violence. Sadly, when we survey the world around us, we observe countless individuals, groups, and nations grappling with untangling the meaning of a fulfilling, constructive, harmonious life — their fabric of life unraveling due to circumstances largely beyond their control.

In a world where so many search for the elusive “perfect” system promising happiness — where bewildered and increasingly divided populations strive for the ideal way of life, yet grow ever more disappointed and angrier with one another — my book might, in some small way, help readers realize that the answers they seek are often within arm’s reach. Drawing on my immensely varied life experiences, encompassing an array of political, cultural, and religious systems that have shaped my journey, I aspire to offer a perspective on life yet to be articulated. This parallels the tale of the cherished Polish children’s book, “Matołek the Billy-Goat” — more on that in my subsequent chapter — wherein the central character journeys the world in pursuit of happiness, only to discover it waiting at his doorstep.

Thinking about structure brought me back to how I read books myself. I recall that my first book was naturally read from cover to cover when I was around seven. However, quite swiftly — likely by my second book — I noticed a peculiar aspect of the conventional system of reading books that seemed to mimic the Bible’s chronological order. But why couldn’t I read a book not from the

beginning but from the end, and then hop back and forth through the pages as I pleased? And this is how I've read all books, irrespective of language. Out of fairness to readers of this tale of leaps, however, I've made substantial efforts to present all the facts and viewpoints about my jumping life as systematically as I can. Some hopping may be inevitable but not intentional.

Given that I'm endeavoring to write the "greatest story" about jumping across several political systems, it's worth exploring if any other jumper preceded me — someone who truly made an impact and left an indelible mark on generations of readers worldwide through their "tales of jumping". In high school, the supposed perfection of the communist system in Eastern Europe compelled me to learn about Joseph Conrad. Now, I can almost hear the reaction of my peers, and I suspect, most readers as well, as they promptly assess my seemingly audacious comparison between Joseph Conrad and me with a sentiment that might sound like this:

"What an arrogant individual! He hasn't even written a single book. Yet, he is already on the opening pages of his debut book, drawing parallels between himself and one of English literature's most eminent writers and pillars."

In response, my humble reply would be:

"Why not?"

According to Wikipedia, Joseph Conrad (born Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, December 3, 1857 – August 3, 1924) was a Polish-British novelist and short story writer. He is hailed as one of the leading writers in the English language. Despite not becoming fluent in English until his middle or even later years, he earned acclaim as a master of prose who infused a non-English sensibility into English literature. Conrad authored novels and stories, often set in maritime settings, that portray the struggles of individual identity within what he perceived as an indifferent and amoral world.

Joseph Conrad passed away at the relatively young age of sixty-seven. He had an English wife and was buried in England. It's important to underscore that during the period when Conrad was crafting the stories that propelled him to international renown, he was grappling with intense mental turmoil. His overall health was precarious. Writing in a foreign language can be an

excruciating and nerve-wracking endeavor, which most likely greatly contributed to Conrad's health problems.

For Conrad, writing was not merely a creative outlet but a crucial source of income. He needed to captivate his English readers to generate the desperately needed funds to support his Polish-English family. After my seven-year period in England between 1984 and 1990, I can deeply empathize with his ordeal with writing, fully understanding the cruel, arrogant, and indifferent demeanor the British can exhibit toward foreigners, especially those striving to thrive in their country. However, I've also learned that if they embrace you, they will hold you dear forever and become your steadfast allies.

Conrad overcame the challenges posed by his initially fragmented written and spoken English. He befriended some of his generation's most eminent English writers and, most crucially, authored numerous novels that catapulted him to fame, establishing his legacy as one of the finest English writers. I read two of his works, "Typhoon" and "Lord Jim", during my high school years and was utterly captivated by them. Although the specific plot details have faded, what remains etched in my memory is the sense of enchantment these books instilled in me.

On multiple occasions, I've inquired about Josef Korzeniowski, Conrad's birth name, in different countries. The response has been consistently: "I'm not familiar with someone by that name."

However, when I mention Joseph Conrad, nearly everyone responds: "Oh, yes, the 'Lord Jim' and the 'Typhoon' guy."

What's particularly remarkable is that Conrad began writing in English in his mid-twenties, despite his proficiency in multiple foreign languages and his very limited English.

Most individuals write and converse in their native languages with relative ease and without significant deliberation. For someone educated in English, speaking and writing proficiently is second nature, without psychological struggle. However, for a foreigner striving to secure acceptance and understanding, communication becomes an intricate mental exercise fraught with psychological and personal turmoil. Conrad underwent tremendous emotional hardship while writing his exceptional narratives, a plight I can genuinely comprehend. One of my academic

acquaintances aptly described Conrad as a genius. Allow me, please, to disillusion everyone; I am not a literary prodigy, nor do I intend to affect such pretense within the pages of my book.

The comparison between Conrad and me arises solely from our shared experience of enduring profound suffering while navigating numerous systems and cultures, all in an effort to survive alongside my family. However, I possess a significant advantage over Conrad: I departed Poland as an educated engineer and scientist. I also held a Ph.D. from a highly esteemed Polish university with deeply entrenched German academic traditions before the war. I did not have to write stories in my fractured English to earn a living — what the English might call “making a quid”.

Upon crossing the English border, the British acknowledged my Polish training in engineering and science. While they didn’t exactly embrace me with open arms, their historical tradition of skepticism towards foreigners, influenced by a history replete with invasions, was evident. Nevertheless, they appreciated my engineering and scientific ability as I served as a foreign subject to their revered Queen. Conrad, in contrast, didn’t enjoy such luxuries. He was forced to compose entertaining, captivating stories for his English readers — a task I can understand.

Having spent six years in Cambridge, at the heart of their cultural and scientific center, surrounded by Nobel Prize winners and celebrities like Stephen Hawking (whom I encountered a few times), I am well acquainted with the British disposition. I had even heard of instances where my wife had the opportunity to clean Hawking’s ears at Addenbrooke’s Hospital. Thankfully, I never encountered Newton, who lived next door to me three hundred years ago. Hawking remarked in one of his books that “Newton was not a nice man”.

Like Conrad, I left Poland with several languages but barely rudimentary English. As someone once ironically noted, my English accent is “still in Warsaw” — much like Conrad’s was, since we both began learning English in our mid-twenties.

Conrad’s writing style was stained with romanticism, crafting relatively brief stories often inspired by his maritime escapades. While I’m nowhere near the level of a writing genius like Conrad, I have a distinct identity as a professor of Engineering, as recently acknowledged on my extensive Wikipedia page. My trajectory involves instructing engineering and assorted courses since around 1978. I’ve conducted research across four nations and pursued studies and employment at

Cambridge between 1984 and 1990. I hold the highest academic distinction conferred by the University of Denver, which I was given for life in 2006.

I am far removed from Conrad, although intriguing parallels surface between us. Conrad's departure from Poland was propelled by the political atmosphere in Eastern Europe, dominated by a Russian Czar in the nineteenth century. My departure from Poland in the twentieth century, and about a hundred years after Conrad, was prompted by my exasperation with Eastern-style Polish communist politics, which also emanated from the East. The key difference lies in Conrad's association with Russian Czars versus my interactions with my communist Polish leaders — those "Polish Czars" who frequently journeyed to Moscow to report to the Soviet Czars ensconced within the Kremlin.

In conversations with English or American friends about my past, I've frequently encountered requests to chronicle my tumultuous life on paper. My journey began in post-World War II Poland, a nation deeply scarred by German fascists and subsequently subjected to the ravages of Russian-style communism following our so-called liberation. Like Conrad, I left my homeland due to the Eastern invaders' devastation, which has yielded my achievements thus far, primarily through my eventful transitions.

I'm still alive, an aspect that separates me from Conrad, who had already passed away. My brush with mortality occurred at age sixty-two, involving a surgical procedure that virtually split me in two, entailing extensive cardiovascular reconstruction over several hours. Subsequent years were dedicated to recovery, predominantly on the psychological front, although physical rehabilitation played a part, too. I'm the proud father of two highly educated children. Joanna, my daughter, possesses an MBA from an American University, while my son "Dr. Lucas", specializing in bioengineering and neuroscience, is rapidly gaining international recognition in Parkinson's and Alzheimer's research. I also have three grandchildren, the greatest delight of my life!

Success, as anyone who has lived honestly knows, requires preparing for failure first. One must cultivate persistence, resilience in the face of mental and physical battering, self-healing of fractured bones — be they physical or mental — and an ability to weather shattered nerves. These qualities need to be nurtured before embarking on substantial jumps, unlike the minor ones we frequently encounter. Joseph Conrad and the author have experienced many leaps, defeats, and

successes, followed by new disasters and subsequent recoveries in the relentless pursuit of excellence. In both cases, they began in the same country, about a hundred years apart, because of the same, or very similar, devastating “political winds” blowing from the East, just as we can now observe in Ukraine.

It’s worth noting that our evolutionary success hinges on the fact that humans, just like our primate predecessors, wouldn’t have achieved much if we hadn’t progressed from one metaphorical tree to another. And no, the reason wasn’t that the grass was greener on the other trees. Instead, the bananas’ alluring taste and nutritional value drew us. Those bananas were abundant on different trees, and by making these jumps, we could evade predators lurking on the ground beneath our tree. Allow me to emphasize that these predators persist — they are aplenty and have evolved to be even more cunning, lethal, and intelligent than those of millennia past.

Bananas played a significant role in my personal development, so let me share my experiences with bananas from my past. I had my first banana in high school; they were not readily available in communist grocery stores in the 1950s and 1960s. During a family vacation to the Baltic Sea, my father, a highly accomplished physician, found a banana while swimming. Most likely, one of the merchant ships carrying bananas from Africa to the elite of the Soviet Union lost a banana. Sitting on a blanket by the shore, my family debated how to share the banana, adhering to communist principles of social justice while acknowledging my father’s incredible gift. After some negotiations, my sister and I received most of it; a small portion went to my mother, and the great banana fisherman got the skin with a tidbit of meat. This was my first encounter with bananas. No wonder those funny-looking primate humans were attracted to the bananas on the other trees. I would swim across the Baltic Sea to get my second banana since I enjoyed a piece of the first one so much. The “ugly Swedish bloodsucking capitalist” had bananas, and I had my first one, which we shared among the four of us, not so much justly, but what I would have done for my own family anyway.

My second experience with bananas as part of my banana-driven evolution happened at a dinner at Darwin College in Cambridge in the eighties. As we all remember from biology classes, Charles Darwin discovered the law that bananas are always better on other trees, and we should get them fast to avoid starvation. This perfectly agrees with his actual “survival of the fittest” law. Sitting

at the high table was a big deal at Cambridge, and I was sitting at the high table in the college named after Darwin. I was finishing my dinner, which, as usual, was great. I looked around and noticed something unusual.

The entire table was watching me, all those masters, dons, and other funny-looking guys wearing their Cambridge gowns, all except me. They were watching to see if I knew how to eat with a fork and knife in both hands, the European way. So very clearly tuned out, I passed the first test since my dictatorial mother would rather starve me to death than let me eat with my fingers or the way most of us eat in the States. There is a slight difference between how we hold the fork in our left hand in Europe and how the British do it. I can do it now both ways; I have “developed” so much after Cambridge.

Anyway, after successfully passing the first and second-course tests, I was suddenly served a banana on a small plate with a funny-looking fork and a knife on either side. As a non-civilized, semi-intelligent communist from Eastern Europe, aiming to be faster than the predators around me at the table, I grabbed the banana, peeled it as most of us would, and enjoyed the meaty interior. You should have seen the faces around me. Finally, they got me; OK, perhaps I slightly exaggerated.

I was supposed to pick up the funny-looking fork and the small, semi-blunt knife, peel the banana off the skin, cut the meat with the knife, and eat the banana with the fork, and never, I repeat, never touch the banana with my fingers. Some of us at the table were most likely amused as I failed my first banana test. At the same time, they forgave me, as I assumed, since I was just a semi-primitive communist, and what can you expect from a communist? It did not matter that I spoke several languages then and could play Chopin on the piano, but I could not speak their stiff-upper-lip Royal English fluently. My subsequent chapters will say more about my Cambridge experience and my enormous gratitude to the British people for their help and their hospitality.

Bananas, as the next chapter will show, also played a massive role in my cultural development and my English-language education. A banana was used in my first spoken sentence, barely pronounced in English, when I was almost twenty. Therefore, bananas should be respected, admired, and, most importantly, eaten without hesitation — peeled with your fingers, and enjoyed immediately, before a predator gets there first.