



Shaking the foundations of belief

Jim Powell has led a charmed life, but has looked beyond privilege, creating a complex character grappling with the fall of communism, writes **Matt Philp**.

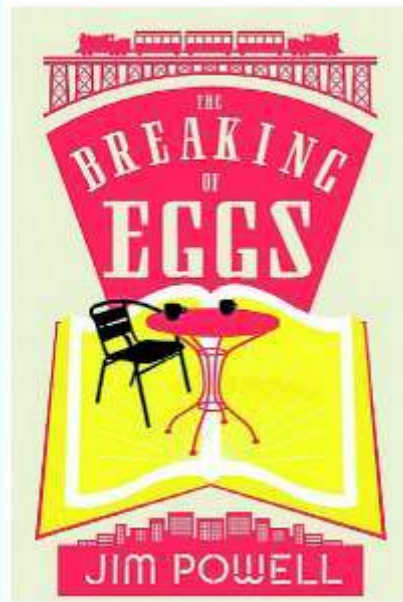
WE DO like to hang on to our certainties, says Jim Powell, author of *The Breaking of Eggs*. "We all come to believe things at certain ages for whatever reason and we become wedded to those beliefs, even when evidence emerges that should make us challenge them."

No-one clings more tenaciously than Feliks Zhukovski, the narrator of Powell's debut novel. A Polish emigre living in Paris, Feliks is a Communist sympathiser whose life's work is the publication of a travel guide to his beloved Eastern bloc. But at 61 he's living in a daze, the ground swept from under him by the sudden collapse of the Soviet edifice.

"Ironically, the immediate effect of this on the Guide was most beneficial," he remarks unhappily. When an American publisher makes an offer to buy him out, Feliks travels to the United States, where he eventually makes contact with a brother who he hasn't seen since the war. All manner of other certainties then take a pounding, including the story that Feliks had always told himself about what happened to his family back in Poland.

It's a novel that deals with the big sweep of history, epochal events, but told always in a voice that sounds authentically, intimately human. How did Powell, an Oxbridge ex-adman, and a Tory to boot, conjure up this lonely Polish dialogue?

"Actually I didn't set out with a character, or even with the idea of writing a political or historical novel," he says. "It started really with a very



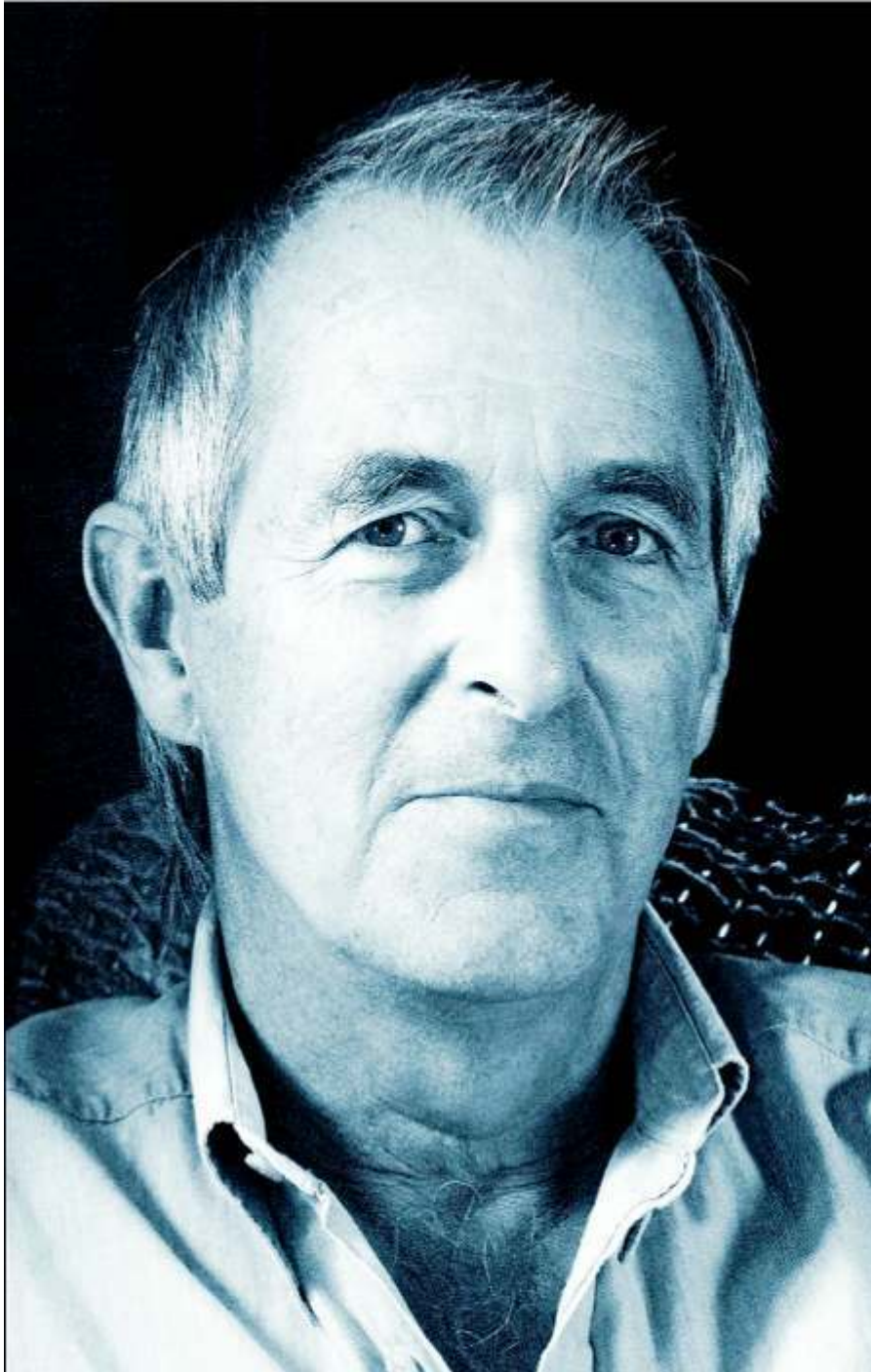
The Breaking of Eggs by Jim Powell
 (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, pb \$34.99)

abstract idea of wondering 'what is home, and what does home represent to people?' And what would it be like to be getting on in life and to not know where your home was?"

Feliks, who has lost home and family to the war, finds a surrogate in the party. "I also thought it would be interesting to show someone who had been a lifelong communist sympathiser having to deal with the collapse of that world."

Powell turned 61 in May, and that's about as close as he'll get to walking in Feliks's shoes. His own childhood couldn't have been more secure. He read history at Cambridge, where Simon Schama was his supervisor: "What a privilege, to spend two hours every fortnight one-on-one with someone like him; he was brilliant."

After graduation, he flew fast and high in London's ad-land, appointed as managing director of a large agency at a relatively young age. You get the sense of a charmed life. In late 1968, looking FOR a student holiday job, Powell walked into a central London employment agency. "I said 'have you got any work for the Christmas holidays?' They



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Back to the Wall: The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was a vivid anti-climax for Jim Powell.
 Photo: DAVID KILLICK

said 'how would you like to work for the Beatles?' Nobody believes that story, but it's true."

Working as an office boy at the band's company, Apple, Powell saw plenty of Ringo and John in particular. Ringo he admired. "He was the only one who was trying to make a go of running the business. John . . . I had very mixed feelings about. He treated some people in his life very, very badly."

During the advertising phase, he worked as a political speechwriter for Francis Pym, a Tory "Wet" who in the early 80s fought Margaret Thatcher in a kind of battle for the soul of the Conservative Party. Powell, who ran unsuccessfully in the 1987 general election, describes himself as a conservative, but of the centre.

"That is possibly reflected in the novel. It's not that I disliked that particular ideology [communism]. I very much dislike and mistrust ideologies of any kind."

His own experience of the fall of the Berlin Wall was of vivid anti-climax. "All the assumptions one had had for decades had been changed immediately. And it was 'oh, well, on we go'. More than anything I just had this feeling of the enormous tenacity of people living their own lives irrespective of these massive events going on around them."

As for himself, at the time, he wanted to visit Eastern Europe immediately and get a sniff of history unfolding. In the event, it wasn't until 1995 that he was able to travel extensively through

the former Soviet bloc. But he'd quit advertising and was working furiously to maintain his new business – in pottery, of all things, selling tableware to Bloomingdales and others. "I don't think I'd held a piece of clay in my life, but I'd met a ceramic designer who I thought was talented. It was incredibly successful, other than for the fact it neglected to make any money."

It failed and at 50, one of those landmark birthdays, he decided that it was now or never. "I'd always written, but I'd never thought of making a living out of it, and I was so bound up in one career after another. At 50 I thought 'what have you always wanted to do but haven't done?' Writing was at the top of that list."

His central character would have been horrified by such change. "My whole adult life I had subscribed to an ideology that advocated change, radical change," Feliks acknowledges in the book. "Yet I did not welcome change in my own life. I resisted it."

But Powell hopes that the book leaves an impression that Feliks has been shifted. "I strongly didn't want for him to see a blinding light on the road to Damascus, that would have been wrong and out of character. But what I tried to create was a sense of somebody whose principles remain intact but who is now more open to alternatives that might serve those principles."

It's the world as Powell sees it. "Cautious, measured improvement, on the whole, is the best we can hope for."