



The Lost City of Z: A tale of deadly obsession in the Amazon

by David Grann

New York : Doubleday, c2009.

339 p., [16] p. of plates

Maps on lining papers

Includes bibliographical references and index

Shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize, the book was chosen as one of the best books of 2009 by the New York Times, the Washington Post, Entertainment Weekly, Bloomberg, Publishers Weekly, and the Christian Science Monitor.

Translated into twenty-five languages

Summary

A grand mystery reaching back centuries. A sensational disappearance that made headlines around the world. A quest for truth that leads to death, madness or disappearance for those who seek to solve it. *The Lost City of Z* is a blockbuster adventure narrative about what lies beneath the impenetrable jungle canopy of the Amazon. After stumbling upon a hidden trove of diaries, acclaimed New Yorker writer David Grann set out to solve "the greatest exploration mystery of the twentieth century": What happened to the British explorer Percy Fawcett and his quest for the Lost City of Z?

In 1925 Fawcett ventured into the Amazon to find an ancient civilization, hoping to make one of the most important discoveries in history. For centuries Europeans believed the world's largest jungle concealed the glittering kingdom of El Dorado. Thousands had died looking for it, leaving many scientists convinced that the Amazon was truly inimical to humankind. But Fawcett, whose daring expeditions helped inspire Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, had spent years building his scientific case. Captivating the imagination of millions around the globe, Fawcett embarked with his twenty-one-year-old son, determined to prove that this ancient civilization which he dubbed Z existed. Then he and his expedition vanished.

Fawcett's fate and the tantalizing clues he left behind about Z became an obsession for hundreds who followed him into the uncharted wilderness. For decades scientists and adventurers have searched for evidence of Fawcett's party and the lost City of Z. Countless have perished, been captured by tribes, or gone mad. As David Grann delved ever deeper into the mystery surrounding Fawcett's quest, and the greater mystery of what lies within the Amazon, he found himself, like the generations who preceded him, being irresistibly drawn into the jungle's green hell. His quest for the truth and his stunning discoveries about Fawcett's fate and Z form the heart of this complex, enthralling narrative.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly Review

In 1925, renowned British explorer Col. Percy Harrison Fawcett embarked on a much publicized search to find the city of Z, site of an ancient Amazonian civilization that may or may not have existed. Fawcett, along with his grown son Jack, never returned, but that didn't stop countless others, including actors, college professors and well-funded explorers from venturing into the jungle to find Fawcett or the city. Among the wannabe explorers is Grann, a staff writer for the New Yorker, who has bad eyes and a worse sense of direction. He became interested in Fawcett while researching another story, eventually venturing into the Amazon to satisfy his all-consuming curiosity about the explorer and his fatal mission. Largely about Fawcett, the book examines the stranglehold of passion as Grann's vigorous research mirrors Fawcett's obsession with uncovering the mysteries of the jungle. By interweaving the great story of Fawcett with his own investigative escapades in South America and Britain, Grann provides an in-depth, captivating character study that has the relentless energy of a classic adventure tale.

Library Journal Review

Grann, a staff writer at The New Yorker, gives a gripping, detailed account of the fate of English explorer Percy Fawcett. Fawcett disappeared into the jungles of Brazil in 1925 with his son and his son's best friend. It was not the first time that Fawcett had plunged into Amazonia or confronted pestilence and natives not keen on receiving trespassers. Colonel Fawcett was a soldier, sometime spy, and expert surveyor and explorer who helped define the border between Bolivia and Brazil. But he was primarily obsessed with finding a rumored great city in the jungles of South America, which he simply called Z partly because it did not have a name and partly to throw off others who were looking for it. Grann's experience following this mystery to England and Brazil was an adventure in its own right. He alternates chapters on Fawcett's adventures, based on his diaries and contemporary accounts, with his own and others' efforts to find Fawcett or at least the truth about his demise. Like the books of Simon Winchester (e.g., *The Man Who Loved China*), this is a compelling and entertaining read.

Booklist Review

Percy Fawcett, a celebrated member of the Royal Geographical Society, explored the Amazon the hard way: on foot, hacking his way through the jungle. Single-minded and exceptionally tough, he captured the imagination of a public hungry for tales of far-off adventure. His exploits were widely reported, especially when he told of his belief in a lost city enigmatically, he called it Z that would offer proof an advanced civilization had once thrived despite the region's hostile environment. In 1925, having vowed to find Z, he disappeared into the jungle and was never seen again. Grann, of the New Yorker, was no outdoorsman. But captivated by the story, he joined the ranks of the Fawcett Freaks, determined to discover the explorer's fate. (It is estimated that more than 100 people have lost their lives trying to find out how Fawcett lost his.) He interweaves Fawcett's story with rich period detail and an account of his own trip to the receding jungle. The historical passages, peerlessly researched, are the best; the first-person parts could have been a useful way of illustrating the tale's irresistible lure but compared to Fawcett's relentless monomania and astonishing travels, Grann's own journey pales. The device pays off in the final scene, however, when, through Grann's own eyes, we experience the thrill of discovery and learn that Percy Fawcett just may have been right all along.



Biography (from www.davidgrann.com)

About the Author

- Birth—March 10, 1967
- Where—New York, New York, USA
- Education—B.A., Connecticut College; M.A., Tufts University (Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy); M.A., Boston University
- Currently—lives in New York, New York

David Grann is a staff writer at The New Yorker magazine. Grann's first book, *The Lost City of Z*, was a New York Times bestseller and has been translated into more than twenty-five languages. Shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize, England's most prestigious nonfiction award, *The Lost City of Z* was chosen as one of the best books of 2009 by countless newspapers and magazines, including the New York Times, Washington Post, Entertainment Weekly, Bloomberg, Publisher's Weekly, and Christian Science Monitor. The book is in the process of being developed into a movie by Brad Pitt's Plan B production company and Paramount Pictures.

At The New Yorker, Grann has written about everything from the mysterious death of the world's greatest Sherlock Holmes expert to the hunt for the giant squid, from the perilous maze of water tunnels under New York to a Polish writer who may have left clues to a real murder in his postmodern novel. Grann is also author of a 2010 collection of stories, *The Devil and Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Murder, Madness, and Obsession*.

Grann's stories have also appeared in *The Best American Crime Writing* (2004, 2005, and 2009), *The Best American Sports Writing* (2003 and 2006) and *The Best American Non required Reading* (2009). As a finalist for the Michael Kelly award for the "fearless pursuit and expression of truth," Grann has also written for the New York Times Magazine, The Atlantic, the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, the Wall Street Journal, The Weekly Standard, and The New Republic.

Before joining The New Yorker in 2003, Grann was a senior editor at The New Republic, and, from 1995 until 1996, the executive editor of the newspaper The Hill. He holds master's degrees in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy as well as in creative writing from Boston University. After graduating from Connecticut College in 1989, he received a Thomas Watson Fellowship and did research in Mexico, where he began his career in journalism. He currently lives in New York with his wife and two children
Do you think it was romance that led Fawcett into the Amazon, or was it something more than that?

Bibliography

Grann's stories have appeared in several anthologies, including *What We Saw: The Events of September 11, 2001*, *The Best American Crime Writing of 2004 and 2005*, and *The Best American Sports Writing of 2003 and 2006*.^[3] He has also written for the *New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Weekly Standard*.^[3]

The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon (2009)

The Devil and Sherlock Holmes: Tales of Murder, Madness, and Obsession (March, 2010)

Interview with Powells.com

<http://www.powells.com/authors/davidgrann.html>

Interview with the Author World Hum.com

<http://www.worldhum.com/features/travel-interviews/interview-with-david-grann-the-lost-city-of-z-20090216/>

Do you think it was romance that led Fawcett into the Amazon, or was it something more than that?

For Fawcett, I think it was many things. Part of him, like many of the great Victorian explorers, was fleeing the constraints of British society. Part of him was driven by scientific curiosity and his own demons. But I do think, at heart, he was a romantic who saw himself as an almost mythic figure embarking on an epic quest.

Fawcett is said to be the last of his breed of rugged, individualist explorers. Do you think the age of exploration is truly over?

I think it depends how you define the age of exploration. Certainly there are still relatively unexplored places. Even today, the Brazilian government estimates that there are more than 60 Amazonian tribes that have never been contacted by outsiders. Sydney Possuelo, who was in charge of the Brazilian department set up to protect Indian tribes, has said of these groups, "No one knows for sure who they are, where they are, how many they are, and what languages they speak." Like space, the oceans also remain hugely unexplored.

But I do think Fawcett marked the end of the age of terrestrial exploration, when maps were filled with blank spaces and explorers would wander into these unknown realms with little more than a machete, a compass, and an almost divine sense of purpose.

A lot of travel, and travel writing, has taken on a kind of artificial quest quality, which sometimes rings hollow. Since you write, as you say, about obsession, do you have any thoughts on what separates a true quest from a faux quest?

That's a great question. And I think it comes down to being honest and transparent with the reader. In travel writing there's a tendency to want to glorify one's own experiences, to pretend as if one stands apart. The best travel writing—or indeed any nonfiction writing—is when the narrator is a vivid but faithful recorder of the world.

You also write about some fascinating things in the Amazon, including the massive earthworks in the forest that have been discovered and the “Stonehenge of the Amazon.” Can you foresee a day when travelers could go and see these things, or is that still too far off?

Many of these ancient ruins are not only in the jungle but also in areas controlled by indigenous populations. Because of the long and bloody history of the contact between whites and Amazonian tribes—a contact that to this day often remains bloody—there is an understandable wariness on the part of the Indians to let anyone wander onto their territory. Yet I do think that travelers who go about it the right way and negotiate with the tribal leaders on their terms can see a lot of these incredible sites.

If Fawcett were alive today, what would he be doing? Where would he be traveling?

No doubt he’d still be wandering through the Amazon

January 2010 Times Online article “Hail Britain’s Indiana Jones of the Amazon”

Recounts Fawcett’s expeditions to prove the existence of a lost Columbian civilization

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/ben_macintyre/article6978417.ece

This page includes links to 1932 Times articles on Fawcett’s disappearance

March 2009 Interview with the author

<http://fyreflybooks.wordpress.com/2009/03/04/interview-with-david-grann-author-of-the-lost-city-of-z/>

If you’d been alive during the Age of Exploration, where would you have wanted to be responsible for exploring?

Definitely the Amazon. Though most early explorers in the region were decimated by disease and starvation—on the first expedition down the Amazon River in 1542 some 4000 men perished—the area still held, as Percy Fawcett put it, some of “the greatest secrets of the past yet preserved in our world of today.”

A lot of first-time authors come from a profession where they do a lot of writing anyways – was it difficult to make the transition between writing articles for The New Yorker and writing a book?

For The New Yorker, I write fairly long and intensively researched stories. Still, I had never spent so much time on one subject (more than three years), combing through archives around the world and even searching for clues in the jungle. The hardest part was simply the endurance. I read about biographers who were driven slightly batty by their subjects, and sometimes that’s how I felt about Fawcett.

Fill in the blank: “There is no amount of money in the world that could get me to..._____.”

...knowingly swim in the Amazon River near a candiru, a toothpick-like fish that strikes rather critical male orifices (for more excruciating details please see page 68 of my book).

What surprised you most about traveling through Amazonia?

That even today parts of this wilderness area, which is virtually the size of the continental United States, remain unknown. The Brazilian government estimates that there are more than sixty Indian tribes that have never been contacted by outsiders. "These forests are ... almost the only place on earth where indigenous people can survive in isolation from the rest of mankind," John Hemming, the distinguished historian of Brazilian Indians, wrote. Sydney Possuelo, who was in charge of the Brazilian department set up to protect Indian tribes, has said of these groups, "No one knows for sure who they are, where they are, how many they are, and what languages they speak." In 2006, members of a nomadic tribe called Nukak-Makú emerged from the Amazon in Colombia, to announce that they were ready to join the modern world, though they were unaware that Colombia was a country and asked if the planes overhead were on an invisible road.

What were your best and worst moments of your research/travels?

Among the best moments were finding Fawcett's secret diaries and logbooks; meeting up with the same Amazonian tribes that Fawcett had stayed with during his expedition and that held critical clues about the fate of his party; and discovering that the ancient city Fawcett was looking for was more than a fable.

As for the worst moment, that's easy—getting lost in the jungle without my guide or food and water.

Google Earth helps find El Dorado (Times Online January 2010)

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/science/earth-environment/article6982391.ece>

Discussion Questions by Lit Lovers

http://www.litlovers.com/guide_lost_city_of_z.html

1. What inspired Col. Percy Harrison Fawcett's obsessive search for Z...what evidence led him to believe the city was more than legend?
2. How does Grann portray Fawcett? What kind of a man was he? Would you describe him as a victim of his own obsession...as a romantic...a fool bent on his own destruction...a rational man of science...?
3. What are some of the legends that have surrounded Fawcett himself? To what do you attribute his place in popular culture over the years—and what does it say, both about Fawcett and ourselves, that he has maintained a hold on our collective imagination?
4. How did Fawcett differ from his rival, Alexander Hamilton Rice—especially in the approach to exploration? Were the two men evenly matched in skill and technology...or not? In what way did Rice, perhaps, represent the future of modern exploration?
5. What draws David Grann into the search for Fawcett—what initially sparks the author's fascination? Consider Grann's own difficulty in the Amazon, especially for a man who delights in air conditioning and fast food. Finally, what new information does Grann contribute to solving the mystery surrounding Fawcett's disappearance?

6. Where does Grann stand with regard to the existence of Z? What conclusions does he reach? Where do you stand?
7. What are some of the more surprising, even shocking, accounts of jungle exploration you found in this work?
8. Does this book remind you of other stories of those obsessed with adventure or other cultures: The Man Who Loved China...or Bill Bryson's misguided adventure on the Appalachian Trail? Any resemblance to fictional works ... say, Conrad's Heart of Darkness...or Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude?
9. Brad Pitt has brought production rights to the book. So, will he play Grann...or Fawcett?

Reader's Guide (from Random House)

1. Books about explorers, adventurers, and extreme risk-takers like Jon Krakauer's *Eiger Dreams* and *Into the Wild*, Caroline Alexander's *The Endurance*, Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void*, Nathaniel Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea*, Sebastian Junger's *A Perfect Storm*, and many others, have become extremely popular in recent years. What are the appeals of such books? What qualities does **The Lost City of Z** share with books of this kind? In what ways does it differ from them?
2. After time away from the jungle, Fawcett wrote: "Inexplicably—amazingly—I knew I loved that hell. Its fiendish grasp had captured me, and I wanted to see it again" [p. 116]. What drove Fawcett to plunge himself again and again into the dangers of the Amazon? What is the main force that drives him—obsession with finding the lost city, desire to prove himself against his competitors, a need to escape the confines of civilization, a spiritual quest?
3. In what ways is Fawcett a symbolic figure? What values does he embody? In what ways does he represent many of both the best and worst qualities of the British Empire?
4. Grann notes that some anthropologists and historians consider Fawcett's view of the Indians enlightened for his era while others saw him as unable to transcend the prevailing racism of his own culture. How does he regard the Indians he encounters? How does he treat them?
5. How do Fawcett's expeditions affect his wife Nina? How does she see her role in relation to him? In what ways does she succumb to his obsessions?
6. In what ways does **The Lost City of Z** challenge conventional views of the Amazon? What does it suggest about the current state of archeological research in the region?
7. What are some of the most fascinating and/or dreadful features of the Amazon jungle revealed in **The Lost City of Z**? How has the jungle been changed since Europeans first made contact with it?
8. What does **The Lost City of Z** reveal about the power of obsession? In what ways does Fawcett's obsession draw others into its deadly gravitational pull?

9. By what means does Grann maintain such a high level of suspense throughout the book? What does the interweaving of his own story—the story of his search for the truth about what happened to Fawcett and the story of his writing of the book itself—add to the total effect of **The Lost City of Z**?

10. After witnessing the mass carnage of World War I, Fawcett exclaims: “Civilization! Ye gods! To see what one has seen the word is an absurdity. It has been an insane explosion of the lowest human emotions” [p. 189]. In what ways does **The Lost City of Z** call into question conventional notions of civilization? What does it suggest about the supposed differences between advanced and primitive cultures?

11. What are Percy Harrison’s Fawcett’s most admirable qualities? What aspects of his character prove most troubling? Was James Murray right in accusing Fawcett of all but murdering him? [p. 139].

12. Near the end of the book, Grann writes about how biographers are often driven mad by the inability to fully comprehend their subjects. Of his own quest he says: “The finished story of Fawcett seemed to reside eternally beyond the horizon: a hidden metropolis of words and paragraphs, my own Z” [p. 303]. How well does Grann succeed in discovering and revealing the truth of Percy Fawcett?

13. Does Grann’s meeting with the anthropologist Michael Heckenberger in Kurikulo village confirm Fawcett’s belief in a lost ancient civilization? Is Fawcett’s search vindicated at last?

SUGGESTED READING

River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt’s Darkest Journey by Candice Millard

A Walk in the Woods by Bill Bryson

•Amazonia by James Rollins.

•The Piano Tuner by Daniel Mason.

•Ines of My Soul by Isabel Allende

National Geographic’s list of the top 100 adventure books (many before 1930s)

http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/0404/adventure_books_1-19.html

To Conquer the Air, by James Tobin (2003)

The Darkest Jungle, by Todd Balf (2003)

Sea of Glory, by Nathaniel Philbrick (2003)

Where the Mountain Casts Its Shadow, by Maria Coffey (2003)

At the Tomb of the Inflatable Pig, by John Gilmette (2004)

Caroline Alexander, *The Endurance*;
Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*;
Bruce Henderson, *True North*;
Sebastian Junger, *A Perfect Storm*;
Jon Krakauer, *Eiger Dreams*;
Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea*;
Joe Simpson, *Touching the Void*.