



## The Amazon Wins Again

A best-seller recounts an adventurer's fatal obsession with a long-lost city

BY NATALIE JACOBSON MCCrackEN

HOBOKEN, NEW JERSEY. February 1925. Boarding the luxurious S.S. *Vauban*, Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett, on his way once again to explore the Brazilian jungle, calls out responses to clamoring reporters. Experience has taught him the dangers ahead, among them electric eels that generate 650 volts, hostile and reputedly cannibalistic tribespeople, and possible starvation. Yet Fawcett has but one fear: that a rival will be first to find the advanced city he believes once existed in the Amazon, a city he has dubbed Z.

Such explorations made headlines. Newspapers worldwide would carry Fawcett's reports for five months. Then, silence, also widely reported. Fawcett and his companions had vanished.

Their mysterious fate and its hold on the public imagination are examined by *New Yorker* reporter David Grann (GRS'94) in *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon*, published this spring by Doubleday. Obsession with finding Z proved deadly for Fawcett and his companions; obsession killed perhaps 100 of the untold scores who searched for them.

In 2004, Grann happened on a reference to Fawcett and his

quest for Z. He began reading about the Amazon, in works by scholars who considered it so brutal a terrain that its inhabitants had energy and time only for survival and by revisionists who believed that a relatively sophisticated society was possible.

And he read about Fawcett, a towering figure whose apparent immunity to jungle dangers helped feed his obsession. Those with him

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on an expedition could be afflicted with cyanide-squirting millipedes or espundia, a flesh-destroying disease that makes its victims appear to be, in Grann's summary, "slowly dissolving." Some starved to death and some went mad. Seemingly impervious, Fawcett inspired his men to heroic feats of endurance and scorned those who could not keep up.

"While most of my articles seem unrelated, they typically have one common thread: obsession," Grann writes. "They are about ordinary people driven to do extraordinary things. . . . At times, I wonder whether I'm more similar to them than I care to believe."

Soon the writer was talking through static from a satellite phone to archaeologist Michael Heckenberger in a village deep in the Amazon jungle, where they agreed to meet.

Grann read Fawcett's papers at London's Royal Geographic Society ("You're not one of those Fawcett lunatics, are you?" a former society director asked when he called) and in Wales at the home of Fawcett's granddaughter. Then Grann — who describes himself as "pretty out of shape, pretty bookish," and with a poor sense of direction — bought camping gear at Eastern Mountain Sports, bade good-bye to his wife and baby son, and headed for Brazil. "Don't be stupid," she cautioned.

The government now protects indigenous Brazilian tribes, but Grann found a guide to negotiate access to their territories, and in talking with

tribe members, heard memories, legends, and rhythmic oral history. Having amassed enough information to write a book, he felt driven to know more. He called home — he'd been away nearly two months and his son had begun calling the telephone "Dada" — and pressed on, toward a village where explorers searching for information about Fawcett had been kidnapped only a decade before.

In that remote area Grann became separated from his guide and wandered alone in the jungle heat, wading through waist-high water, his forty-pound box of equipment and his laptop on his head. Falling in the slippery mud, scratched by thorns and bleeding, drenched, dirty, exhausted, and lost, he called his guide's name without avail.

The separation was brief. "Now you have some kind of real picture in your mind of what it was like for Fawcett," his guide said. "Now we go home, no?"

No. They arrived at Xingu, an isolated village Fawcett almost certainly had reached. Heckenberger met them there, as promised. Grann talked with him and with tribe members and left ready to tell Fawcett's story.

"Fawcett's obsession was complicated," Grann explains. "Certainly an element began out of scientific inquiry, his desire to explore and map the jungle, which came from a desire that propelled a lot of Victorian explorers, to flee the constraints of their own society. Then as he was in the jungle he began to uncover evidence of an ancient civilization."

#### SEARCHING FOR Z

While Britain's world maps no longer pictured fantastic creatures whose very breath could kill or such earthly delights as the Garden of Eden, much of the world remained mysterious — unexplored and unmapped. The Royal Geographical Society, founded in 1830 explicitly to gather and extend geographic knowledge, immediately attracted nearly 500 men "of high social standing," as a later society secretary recorded: established

scientists and philosophers (Charles Darwin joined in 1838) along with aristocrats and millionaires created by the industrial revolution, amateurs who could afford such expensive hobbies as exploration.

Son of an impoverished English aristocrat, Fawcett learned the intricate ways of Victorian gentlemen at the best schools his family could afford, served in Ceylon with the Royal Artillery, and then prepared for a more exciting life by studying, in classes offered to aspiring explorers by the Geographic Society, surveying, observation and recording, natural sciences, early anthropology, leadership, and survival in the wilds. In 1906, following a successful trip to Morocco pre-tending interest in cartography while spying for his government, he was invited by the society president to head a mapping exploration along the dangerous border between Bolivia and Brazil.

He accepted. "Destiny intended me to go," he later wrote.

Confident, brave, a quick master of languages, and a skilled observer, Fawcett became acquainted with tribes weakened and brutalized by their white captors and also with more sophisticated tribes with remarkable fishing, hunting, farming, and pharmacological skills. Although influenced by Victorian racism — he described Indians as "ape-like" and "jolly children" and was surprised when he first saw one cry — he denounced their mistreatment by white intruders and came to believe them capable of having created an advanced civilization, the City of Z. Bits of evidence — apparently ancient

carvings, paintings, and pottery shards, what might be the remains of roads, and records left by explorers of previous centuries — led him to think the Amazon held "the greatest secrets of the past yet preserved in our world of today."

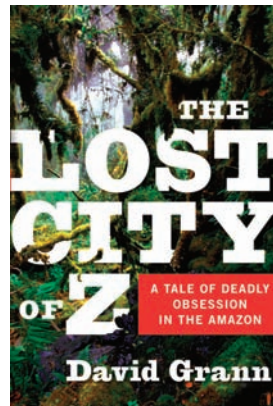
Scientists had come to doubt the possibility of an advanced Amazon city, and little institutional funding was available for exploration. With great difficulty, Fawcett assembled men and funds for another expedition.

But his companions proved variously physically or emotionally incapable of continuing, and age had stolen his apparent imperviousness to jungle hardships. In August 1921, soon after he was forced to abandon that quest, he went alone, wandered, Grann writes, "thirsty and hungry, delirious and deranged," and again returned defeated.

Desperate to be first to find Z, he then chose companions whose loyalty was beyond question: in 1925 he left with only his son, twenty-one-year-old Jack, and Jack's best friend. Unable to afford the two-way radios his greatest rival was using, Fawcett sent

dispatches with Indian runners, to be conveyed worldwide by cutting-edge technology: the telegraph. Then, dispatches stopped, and with time, Fawcett's obsession, once the basis of novels, comic books, films, and plays, faded from public consciousness.

Now it's back in the news. *The Lost City of Z* was number four on the *New York Times* nonfiction best-seller list within a week of publication, was among the top ten on Amazon.com's midyear Best Books of the Year . . . So Far list, and has been translated into twenty-two languages. And its return to best-seller lists is virtually assured: work on a movie, starring Brad Pitt as Fawcett, is well under way. Says Grann, "It's a lot of fun."



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