

THE LOST CITY OF Z by David Grann

2005; 339 pages

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Some readers are familiar with the author of “Killers of the Flower Moon” or “The Wager”. The Lost City of Z is one of his earlier books (2005). It is the story of the British explorer Percy Fawcett who entered the Amazon in 1925 with his son, his son's best friend, and several Brazilian guides looking for what Fawcett believed was the advanced civilization living in the area that Fawcett called Z. The three British explorers never returned.

Fawcett started exploring in the Amazon region in the early 1900s. He went in by foot whereas other explorers followed the major rivers. Fawcett wanted to see uncharted territory and meet undocumented locals. Despite the hazardous conditions, Fawcett stayed healthy and avoided most injuries. He was kind to all the locals (he called them Indians) and did not respond with violence even when attacked. On the other hand, he was a demanding leader who criticized his team and said any who couldn't keep up were cowards. Nothing stood in the way of his objectives.

He was familiar with the efforts of those who searched for El Dorado but viewed the stories as romantic fantasies. However, he did not dismiss the concept entirely because his earlier adventures led him to believe that an ancient, lost, highly cultured civilization lived in the Amazon. He thought these “white Indians” descended from western societies. He was fairly sure he knew the location (near what is now Xingu National Park in Brazil) and he called the city Z.

Perhaps the concept of a hidden civilization was not as far-fetched as some might believe. Think of Cortes arriving in Tenochtitlan or Pizarro conquering Cuzco. What they saw was magnificent, like a dream. Furthermore, Columbus reported “white Indians” seen on his travels and the Yanomami Tribe is light skinned.

Fawcett wanted to start the search in 1914 but WW1 began and he was sent to the western front in Belgium. He was a polarizing figure, admired or despised, cited for bravery but always thinking about Z. He was jealous of other explorers in the region, especially Dr Rice, an American physician with vast resources, and Col Rondon, a famous Brazilian known to us for his voyage with Teddy Roosevelt.

By the time Fawcett, his son and friend started the 1925 trip, newspapers all around the world were following the story. Initial communications sparked interest but by the spring of 1927, there was widespread concern because all messages had stopped. The first major rescue effort began in Feb 1928. That was followed by many more. In fact, so many searchers died during the rescue attempts, in 1934 the Brazilian government banned any further trips. The ban was generally ignored.

Various theories were put forth regarding Fawcett's disappearance. He and his son and friend might have been captured by Indians, killed by Indians, animals or disease, or they might just be lost and stranded (highly unlikely given Fawcett's experience). The author tried to retrace Fawcett's route and met with several people who told stories of three British men last seen headed East.

Today archeologists are working in the region and have come across many pottery deposits indicating settlements may have existed in the area.

The book is in our library under Biography. If you are interested in the story but don't think you have time for the book, the Kendal library has the DVD.

Reviewed by Beverly Halchak