

*The Amazon River in South America has attracted many explorers, none more famous than Percy Fawcett, an Englishman who disappeared in 1925 while searching for a lost civilization he called “Z.” In 1996, James Lynch became intrigued by Fawcett’s story. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.*

*from* **The Lost City of Z**  
by David Grann

1 **H**ow easily the Amazon can deceive.

2 It begins as barely a rivulet, this, the mightiest river in the world, mightier than the Nile and the Ganges, mightier than the Mississippi and all the rivers in China. Over eighteen thousand feet high in the Andes, amid snow and clouds, it emerges through a rocky seam—a trickle of crystal water. Here it is indistinguishable from so many other streams coursing through the Andes, some cascading down the western face toward the Pacific, sixty miles away, others, like this one, rolling down the eastern facade on a seemingly impossible journey toward the Atlantic Ocean—a distance farther than New York City to Paris. At this altitude, the air is too cold for jungle or many predators. And yet it is in this place that the Amazon is born, nourished by melting snows and rain, and pulled by gravity over cliffs.

3 From its source, the river descends sharply. As it gathers speed, it is joined by hundreds of other rivulets, most of them so small they remain nameless. Seven thousand feet down, the water enters a valley with the first glimmers of green. Soon larger streams converge upon it. Churning toward the plains below, the river has three thousand more miles to go to reach the ocean. It is unstoppable. So, too, is the jungle, which, owing to equatorial heat and heavy rainfalls, gradually engulfs the riverbanks. Spreading toward the horizon, this wilderness contains the greatest variety of species in the world. And, for the first time, the river becomes recognizable—it *is* the Amazon.

4 Still, the river is not what it seems. Curling eastward, it enters an enormous region shaped like a shallow bowl, and because the Amazon rests at the bottom of this basin, nearly 40 percent of the waters from South America—from rivers as far as Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador—drain into it. And so the Amazon becomes even mightier. Three hundred feet deep in places, it no longer needs to rush, conquering at its own pace. It meanders past the Rio Negro and the Rio Madeira; past the Tapajós and the Xingu, two of the biggest southern tributaries; past Marajó, an island larger than Switzerland, until finally, after traversing four thousand miles and collecting water from a thousand tributaries, the Amazon reaches its two-hundred-mile-wide mouth and

gushes into the Atlantic Ocean. What began as a trickle now expels fifty-seven million gallons of water every second—a discharge sixty times that of the Nile. The Amazon’s fresh waters push so far out to sea that, in 1500, Vicente Pinzón, a Spanish commander who had earlier accompanied Columbus, discovered the river while sailing miles off the coast of Brazil. He called it Mar Dulce, or Sweet Sea.

5 It is difficult to explore this region under any circumstances, but in November the onset of the rainy season renders it virtually impassable. Waves—including the fifteen-mile-an-hour monthly tidal bore known as *pororoca*, or “big roar”—crash against the shore. At Belém, the Amazon frequently rises twelve feet; at Iquitos, twenty feet; at Óbidos, thirty-five feet. The Madeira, the Amazon’s longest tributary, can swell even more, rising over sixty-five feet. After months of inundation, many of these and other rivers explode over their banks, cascading through the forest, uprooting plants and rocks, and transforming the southern basin almost into an inland sea, which it was millions of years ago. Then the sun comes out and scorches the region. The ground cracks as if from an earthquake. Swamps evaporate, leaving piranhas stranded in desiccated pools, eating one another’s flesh. Bogs turn into meadows; islands become hills.

6 This is how the dry season has arrived in the southern basin of the Amazon for as long as almost anyone can remember. And so it was in June of 1996, when an expedition of Brazilian scientists and adventurers headed into the jungle. They were searching for signs of Colonel Percy Fawcett, who had vanished, along with his son Jack and Raleigh Rimell, more than seventy years earlier.

7 The expedition was led by a forty-two-year-old Brazilian banker named James Lynch. After a reporter mentioned to him the story of Fawcett, he had read everything he could on the subject. He learned that the colonel’s disappearance in 1925 had shocked the world—“among the most celebrated vanishing acts of modern times,” as one observer called it. For five months, Fawcett had sent dispatches, which were carried through the jungle, crumpled and stained, by Indian runners and, in what seemed like a feat of magic, tapped out on telegraph machines and printed on virtually every continent; in an early example of the all-consuming modern news story, Africans, Asians, Europeans, Australians, and Americans were riveted by the same distant event. The expedition, one newspaper wrote, “captured the imagination of every child who ever dreamed of undiscovered lands.”

8 Then the dispatches ceased. Lynch read how Fawcett had warned that he might be out of contact for months, but a year passed, then two, and the public fascination grew. Were Fawcett and the two young men being held hostage by Indians? Had they starved to death? Were they too entranced by Z to return? Debates raged in salons and speakeasies; cables were exchanged at the highest levels of governments. Radio plays, novels (Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust* is believed to have been influenced by Fawcett’s saga), poems, documentaries, movies, stamps, children’s stories, comic books, ballads, stage plays, graphic novels, and museum exhibits were devoted to the affair. In 1933 a travel writer exclaimed, “Enough legend has grown up round the subject to form a new and separate branch of folk-lore.” Fawcett had earned his place in the annals of exploration not for what he revealed about the world but for what he concealed. He had vowed to

make “the great discovery of the century”—instead, he had given birth to “the greatest exploration mystery of the twentieth century.”

- 9 Lynch also learned, to his amazement, that scores of scientists, explorers, and adventurers had plunged into the wilderness, determined to recover the Fawcett party, alive or dead, and to return with proof of Z. In February 1955, the *New York Times* claimed that Fawcett’s disappearance had set off more searches “than those launched through the centuries to find the fabulous El Dorado.”\* Some parties were wiped out by starvation and disease, or retreated in despair . . . Then there were those adventurers who had gone to find Fawcett and, instead, disappeared along with him in the forests that travelers had long ago christened the “green hell.” Because so many seekers went without fanfare, there are no reliable statistics on the numbers who died. One recent estimate, however, put the total as high as a hundred.

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- 10 The challenge seemed insurmountable. But, as Lynch pored over financial spreadsheets at work, he wondered: What if there really is a Z? What if the jungle had concealed such a place? Even today, 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 and a former director of the Royal Geographical Society, 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 and announced 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.
- 11 One night Lynch, unable to sleep, went into his study, which was cluttered with maps and relics from his previous expeditions. Amid his papers on Fawcett, he came across the colonel’s warning to his son: “If with all my experience we can’t make it, there’s not much hope for others.” Rather than deter Lynch, the words only compelled him. “I have to go,” he told his wife.

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\* *El Dorado* — an imaginary place of great wealth said to be in South America