

River of Doubt (Review)

Written by Administrator

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There is a common theme in disaster yarns. Usually you have a hint of what's coming by the very book subject (or its back-blurb). But as you read, the windup is a litany of ill-advised, poorly-considered and stupid choices made that lead to the fiasco. And the Roosevelt journey into the Amazon rain forest (a subject I knew nothing about) fits right into this theme.

After losing a bid for a third term of the White House (at the head of the doomed Progressive Party), our man Teddy decided he needed a final hurrah, something to do that would fit into the adventurous, trailblazing motif of his personality. The idea of a surveying sweep of Western Brazil seemed just the thing. With the backing of the American Museum of Natural History, he sat back and let a team coalesce around him. This resulted in perfect choices, like a reverend with dusting of Amazon familiarity and a guy who'd marooned his Artic (yes, Artic - what's *that* got to do with rain forests?) team on the ice for two years. Then there was the equipment - crates of luxury items, huge tents, Rhine wine, even books. Yes, they were set to go.

But then again, what's better than to change your route at the last second, to decide that instead of a moderately difficult sweep, why not go to the tail end of a river suitably named River of Doubt, a river nobody had ever mapped (much less been on) and follow it for hundreds of miles to the Amazon River, through the dangerous forest?

The components of disaster are all in place.

Candice Millard covers what becomes an endless recount of rapids-portage, rapids-portage, rapids-portage, all set against a backdrop of slow starvation. We see the two leaders of the expedition, Roosevelt and the Brazilian hero Rondon, tangle their two versions of brilliant leadership. There are days lost looking for pet dogs, days lost when a member commits a murder, just a bumbling ill-equipped effort into the dangerous unknown, a effort which brings Teddy nearly to his death (and likely pushed him closer to it, even though he survived).

There is also a lot of information about the times and the jungle itself. While a lot of the latter seems to be a bit of a filler (endless descriptions of how animals and plants compete in this Darwinian paradise), it's still pretty interesting stuff. You'll never look at that movie *Fern Gully* the same way again.

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Anyway, good read - I got this one from my sister-in-law Kris from our Christmas book exchange and really enjoyed it.

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