

• **Isabel Allende** || *The Amazon Queen*

A powerful dream led me to the Amazon. For three years I had been blocked, unable to write, with the feeling that the torrent of stories waiting to be told, which once had seemed inexhaustible, had dried up. Then one night I dreamed of four naked Indians emerging from the heart of South America carrying a large box, a gift for a conquistador. And as they crossed jungles, rivers, mountains and villages, the box absorbed every sound, leaving the world in silence. Then song of the birds, the murmuring of the wind, human stories, all were swallowed up. I awakened with the conviction that I must go there to look from that voracious box, where perhaps I could find voices to nourish my inspiration. It took a year to realize that wondrous journey.

How shall I describe the Amazon? The Amazon occupies 60 percent of Brazil— an area larger than India— and extends into Venezuela, Colombia and Peru. From the airplane, it is a vast green world. Below, on the ground it is the kingdom of water, vapor, rain, rivers broad as ocean's sweat.

I approached the Amazon through Manaus. The city is far from the Atlantic coast, and appears on the map as a solid jungle. I imagined a village on stilts, ruled over by an anachronistic baroque theater. I had been told that during the height of the rubber

boom, the city was so prosperous that its ladies sent their clothing to Paris to be laundered, but probably such tales were only legend.

It was a surprise to land in an effervescent city of a million inhabitants, a free port, a center of a broad spectrum of businesses and trafficking, both legal and suspect. A wall of heat struck me in the face. The taxi took me along the highway bordered with luxuriant vegetation, then turned into twisting little streets where the homes of the poor and the middle class were democratically interspersed, both far from the neighborhoods of the wealthy who live in luxurious fortresses under heavy guard.

The famous opera theater, remodeled, is still the major tourist attraction. During the last century, Europe's most famous opera stars traveled to Manaus to delight the rubber barons. The surrounding streets are paved with a mixture of stone and rubber to mute the wheels and horses hooves during performances.

After seeing the theater, I had *piracucú*, the best fresh-water fish in the world—delicious, but horrifying in appearance—served on a terrace in the port facing the incredible river, which in times of flood stretched out like an ocean.

I stayed in Manaus only a couple of days, then set out on a boat with a powerful outboard motor. For an hour we traveled upstream at a suicidal pace, following the Rio Negro to Ariaú Hotel, an eco-hotel constructed in the treetops. The hotel consists of

several towers connected by passageways open to monkeys, parrots, coatis and every insect known to man. Chicken wire everywhere prevents animals from coming into the rooms, especially monkeys, which can wreak as much destruction as an elephant.

I took a walk through the thick undergrowth, led by a young *caboclo* guide. It seemed to me that we walked for an eternity, but afterward I realized that the walk had been ridiculously short. Finally I understood the meaning of the last line of a famous Latin American novel: “He was swallowed up by the jungle.” Compasses are useless there, and one can wander in circles forever.

The jungle is never silent, you hear birds, the screeching of animals, stealthy footfalls. It smells of moss, of moistness, and sometimes you catch the waft of a sweet odor like rotted fruit. The heat is exhausting, but beneath dark canopy of the trees you can at least breathe. Out on the river the sun beats down unmercifully, although as long as the boat is moving, there is a breeze.

To inexpert eyes everything is uniformly green, but for the native the jungle is a diverse and endlessly rich world. The guide pointed out vines that collect pure water to drink, bark that relieves fevers, leaves used to treat diabetes, resins that close wounds, the sap of a tree that cures a cough, rubber for affixing points on arrows. Hospitals and doctors are beyond the reach of the *caboclos*, but they have a pharmacy in the forest plants —

barely 10 percent of which have been identified. Some with poetic names are sold in hotel: *mulateiro*, for beautiful skin; *breuzimho*, to improve memory and facilitate concentration during meditation; *guaraná*, to combat fatigue and hardness of heart; *macaranduba*, for coughs, weakness and lugubrious chest.

Another day we went to a native village, which was in fact the habitat of a single extended family. These were Sateré Maué Indians, who had been evicted from their lands and forced to emigrate to the city, where they ended up in a *favela*, or slum, dying of hunger. The owner of the Ariaú Hotel had given them some land where they could return to living in harmony with their traditions. We arrived at their village late one afternoon by boat, at the hour of mosquitoes.

We climbed a muddy hill to the clearing of the forest where, beneath a single palm roof, a bonfire blazed and a few hammocks were strung. One of the Indians spoke a little Portuguese, and he explained that they had planted manioc and soon they would have the necessary tools to process it. From the root they make flour, tapioca, bread—even a liquor.

I walked over to the fire to see what was cooking, and found an alligator about a meter in length, quartered like chicken, with claws, teeth, eyes and hide intact, sadly roasting. Two piranhas were strung on a hook, along with something that resembled a

muskrat. Later, after a good look at the skin, I saw it was a porcupine. I tried everything: the alligator tasted like dried and reconstituted codfish, the piranhas like smoke and the porcupine like petrified pig. The Indians were selling the modest crafts they make from seeds, sticks and feathers — and a long, badly cured boa skin, brittle and pathetic.

The *caboclos* are Indians with European or African blood, a mixing of races that began during the sixteenth century. Some are so poor they don't use money; they live from fishing and a few crops, trading for fuel, coffee, sugar, flour, matches and indispensable supplies. There are a few villages on land, but as the water rises more than 45 feet during the annual floods, submerging thousands of acres, people prefer to build houses on stilts or live in floating huts.

The dwellings are not divided into rooms, as the *caboclos* do not share the white man's urge for privacy. They have few possessions, barely what is needed for survival. The incentive of acquisition is unknown; people fish or hunt for the day's needs, because anything more than that spoils. Sometimes, if they catch more than their daily quota, they keep the live fish in bamboo baskets in the water. They cannot understand the white man's greed or his drive to get everywhere quickly.

All communication and transportation is by river. News can

take weeks to travel by word of mouth to the nearest radio, where it awaits its turn to be transmitted in the form of a telegram. As a result, the death of a family member may be learned a year after the fact, and a birth when the child is already walking. For the *caboclos*, time is measured in days by boat; life, in rainy seasons. What sense is there in rushing? Life, like the river, goes nowhere. The whole point is to keep afloat, paddling through an unchanging landscape.

A few months ago on the Alto Yavar river, on the border between Peru and Brazil, explorers discovered a tribe that had never had any contact with white civilization. To record that first encounter airplanes and helicopters laden with television cameras filled the air, while on the ground the Indians, surprised in the midst of the Stone Age, readied their arrows.

I admit with a touch of embarrassment that I bought a blowgun, arrows and a pouch of powerful poison curare that came directly from that tribe. The blowgun is nearly 10 feet long and I was not allowed to take it on the plane, but I hope that someday it will arrive in the mail. The arrows and curare are on my desk as I write, but I need to find a safer place for them. It would be difficult to explain if someone pricked a finger on a curare-poisoned arrow.

In comic contrast, Avon Ladies have invaded the Amazon, women who go from door to door selling beauty products. I

learned that one had recently been eaten by piranhas—a direct contradiction to the soothing words of the guide when he invited us to swim in the Rio Negro.

The Negro is as smooth as a dark mirror when it is calm, frightening when storms erupt. In a glass, the water is a kind of amber color, like strong tea. It has a delicate, almost sweet flavor. One morning we left before dawn to see the sun rising on a red horizon and to watch the frolicking of rosy dolphins. Dolphins are among the few Amazonian creatures that are not eaten; the flesh tastes terrible and the skin is unusable. The Indians, nonetheless, still harpoon them to rip out their eyes and genitals to make amulets for virility and fertility. In that same river where the water is as warm as a soup and the dolphins frolic, where the previous afternoon we had watched some German tourists catch dozens of piranhas with a pole, a string and a bare hook, I had swum naked.

That night we went out in a canoe with a huge, battery-powered spotlight to look at the alligators. The light blinded the fish, and in their terror some leaped into the boat. Knowing they were piranhas we took them carefully by the tail and threw them into the water, not wanting to lose a chunk of flesh to those horrifying jaws. We saw bats and huge butterflies flying in the darkness. The boatman, an adolescent *caboclo* who spoke a little English and laughed openly at our discomfort, would beam his light into the

tree roots and when he spotted a pair of red eyes would jump into the water. We would hear a great thrashing and soon he would reemerge holding an alligator by the neck in his bare hand if it was small, with a cord around its muzzle if it was larger. We saw photographs of one they had caught the week before: It was longer than the boat. There are also more than 30 species of manta rays in those same waters, all very dangerous. And to think I had swum there!

After 10 days, we had — reluctantly — to leave. I did not find the four naked Indians with their magic box, but when I returned home, I carried some bit of that vast greenness within me, like a treasure. For the sake of discipline, and because of superstition, I begin all my books on Jan. 8. On Jan. 8, 1997, I finally ended the three-year block I had suffered and was able to write again. My dream of the jungle was not without its reward.

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Chilean writer Isabel Allende was born in 1942 in Lima, Peru, where her father held a diplomatic post. As a child, she lived in Chile, Bolivia, and Lebanon and then returned to Chile in 1958 to complete her education. She worked for the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization both in South America and in Europe until 1965, when she again returned to Chile and began a career as a print and television journalist. Two years after the 1973 overthrow of her uncle, Salvador Allende, as president of Chile, she moved to Venezuela, where she wrote her first novel, the internationally best-selling *The House of Spirits* (1982). Subsequent books include the novels *Eva Luna* (1989) and *Daughter of Fortune* (1999), the memoirs *Paula* (1994) and *My Invented Country* (2003), and several works for young adults. A naturalized U.S. citizen, Allende currently lives in California.