



Into the Wild

Jon Krakauer

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In April 1992 a young man from a well-to-do family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. His name was Christopher Johnson McCandless. He had given \$25,000 in savings to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet, and invented a new life for himself. Four months later, a party of moose hunters found his decomposed body. How McCandless came to die is the unforgettable story of *Into the Wild*.

Immediately after graduating from college in 1991, McCandless had roamed through the West and Southwest on a vision quest like those made by his heroes Jack London and John Muir. In the Mojave Desert he abandoned his car, stripped it of its license plates, and burned all of his cash. He would give himself a new name, Alexander Supertramp, and, unencumbered by money and belongings, he would be free to wallow in the raw, unfiltered experiences that nature presented. Craving a blank spot on the map, McCandless simply threw away the maps. Leaving behind his desperate parents and sister, he vanished into the wild.

Into the Wild Details

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From Reader Review Into the Wild for online ebook

Fabian says

The article written by J. Krakauer was totally enlarged to make this, an obsessive journalistic account of an obsession. I am sure that the core of it is included in this 200 pg book somewhere (the anecdote: young incompetent kid dies out in the wilderness); it should be short and sweet, however it is exhaustively stretched out (obviously to capitalize on the popular story) to include stories of the own writer himself as a kid (conceited!!!) plus brief accounts by people who met the young mentally ill man. Also, there's a long (but interesting) section which includes tales of other intrepid nonconformist isolationists. Why couldn't this kid just learn his lesson on moderation? Had this dude been into heroin instead, the results would have been strikingly similar (minus, of course, the book).

Jason Koivu says

On the outside looking in, this seems like another case of arrogant human vs unassuming nature. Nature usually wins that fight. It did here and in a most tragic way. And yet, in *Into the Wild* Jon Krakauer does an excellent job of muddying up the waters, so that they flow with the natural fluidity of life itself. Was this kid so very unprepared? Was this a foolhardy and unnecessary death easily avoided with a few, slight precautions? Life is seldom black and white, cut and dry. Krakauer reminds us of that, while telling a riveting story.

Philip says

3ish stars.

The movie adaptation is one of my all-time faves. Of course, while this book is an unnecessarily expanded version of what was originally an article written by Krakauer, the movie turns it into an epic, dramatized, stranger-than-fiction, based-on-a -true-story biopic of Christopher McCandless.

McCandless in the book is still an enigmatic, magnetic, fascinating man, but would I have felt the same if I hadn't already loved Emile Hirsch's portrayal of him? Would I have been affected as much by the touching, powerful relationships he shared with Jan Burres, and Ron Franz if I hadn't been picturing the incredible cinematic performances of Catherine Keener and Hal Holbrook in my mind?

McCandless's story is awe-inspiring regardless, but Krakauer stretches it far past the breaking point by including narratives of other, similarly ill-fated explorers (including his own experiences), among other frivolous details that I honestly could have done without.

One of the uncommon instances where the movie surpasses the book, but I'm not disappointed I read it. Makes me want to get out and go hiking or backpacking; my wife and I have a goal to visit each of the 59 U.S. National Parks (we've been to 10/59 so far, a long way to go). Or if nothing else, to watch the movie again. :)

Posted in Mr. Philip's Library

Traci says

I love Jon Krakauer. I didn't find one single thing about the Alex McCandless even remotely interesting. He came across as a spoiled brat with no concept of reality - basically because of his privileged upbringing. But somehow, he blamed his parents for that void of myopic self absorption.

I live in Alaska and I've lived in Idaho and Colorado and Oregon . . . basically AROUND people who love the great outdoors. I am more comfortable in a heated coffee shop READING about the great outdoors. Still, I know that heading into any forest - particularly one at that latitude and altitude in pursuit of adventure with (a) no food, (b) no gear, (c) no plan and (d) no backup plan is nothing short of delusional or maybe just stupid.

I absolutely adore Jon Krakauer's attempts to explain Alex's possible motives and angst. I get that Krakauer identifies with some of what gnawed at Alex . . . that discontent . . . that feeling that life can't possibly be this pointless . . . etc. I wonder about those things with fairly consistent frequency. I suppose I have my own means of stamping those feelings out (alternating burst of extreme carbohydrate consumption and running or spinning; work and volunteerism). Still, the fact that Alex died of exposure in an abandoned bus in Denali National Park is less poignant than poetic - justice, that is. Darwinism, if you want to be cruel.

(Cringe) That sounded really awful, didn't it? But Krakauer carefully paints a picture of a young man completely disillusioned with the life that his parents provided for him, the future they groomed him for. A life easier, better than theirs. He points to his parents' mistakes and flaws as lightning rods for Alex's rejection of them and his pursuit of deeper understanding.

What a luxury. One that we all pursue at some point in our lives and if we have any sense, grow out of. I was constantly irritated with Alex for hitching, homelessness, biting every hand that tried to feed him. His lonely, desperate death not at all surprising and not terribly sad, either . . . except for what it put his family through.

I had no interest in seeing the movie. I saw trailer images of a young man looking off into the wilderness with depth and intensity and that is NOT the Alex McCandless I got to know in the book. If Sean Penn managed to paint a more enlightened image of Alex, then he deviated from the book quite a bit.

Melinda says

This book is a wonderful cautionary tale. I will probably read it again with my daughter when she is old enough to discuss it. Unfortunately, I'm afraid the reason most people will read the book and see the new upcoming movie, is for a different reason. Chris McCandless (in the book, and from what I understand in the movie), is a hero and courageous for flying in the face of everything he grew up with to find a better way. A young man unhappy with the materialism, hunger, and waste in the world; angry with his father for not being a perfect father to him; intellectually superior, a fantastic athlete in top condition... and yet a young man who died because of his own decisions and his own actions. He cut off ties to his family, hitchhiked and worked his way to Alaska, headed "into the wild" in April 1992, and was found dead in August 1992 most probably from starvation. How wonderful to "fight against the odds" and "ask real questions". Unfortunately, Chris didn't really fight against any odds, he took the easy way out by cutting off real relationships. Chris may have asked real questions, but he denied real people the opportunity to answer them in any way, because he had already decided what was "the right way". This is not heroic. It is immaturity. It is tragic and sad, yes,

but not heroic or courageous.

After reading the book, I think Chris died because he was foolish. Intellectually bright, yes. Athletically gifted, yes. But he had no wisdom. Wisdom has been defined as "skill in living", and wisdom is not always bestowed on the young and the healthy and the intellectually smart. The opposite of wisdom is foolishness. His anger and questioning drove him not to wisdom, but to self-reliance and an overweening arrogance in his own ability to "get through it". Well, we see the result of those decisions and those attitudes.... to quote Darwin, Chris is an example of how "survival of the fittest" applies. Chris was not "fit", therefore he did not "survive". But why wasn't he fit? He was smart and young and gifted in many ways, but he chose to abandon relationships and abandon those who loved him and create himself anew with no relationships and no ties. He walked away from people who loved him, made friends with people who came to love him, and walked away from all of that to find his answers "in the wild" on his own. The way away from love and relationship leads not to life, but indeed to death. And death is what Chris got.

The book quotes Chris' mother as saying, "I haven't prayed since we lost him." (pg. 202) An older man who befriended Chris, Ronald Franz, also says, "When Alex left for Alaska, I prayed. I asked God to keep his finger on the shoulder of that one; I told him that boy was special. But he let Alex die. So on December 26, when I learned what had happened, I renounced the Lord. I withdrew my church membership and became an atheist. I decided I couldn't believe in a God who would let something that terrible happen to a boy like Alex." (pg. 60) But God didn't do anything to Chris, except let him do as he wanted? If Chris sought real answers to his hard questions, God is there, and God can help, but you have to know you need help and submit to someone wiser than you. Chris McCandless never submitted willingly to anyone, and he certainly never admitted anyone else had teaching or wisdom for him. He was smarter than everyone else, better able to see the truth than anyone else. So the heritage Chris McCandless left is one that drives his mother to stop praying, and converts an old man to atheism. Is this the heritage anyone would want?

So read this book, but read it with questions in mind. Why are we lauding a young man as a hero who was actually a foolish man? What kind of society are we in where real courage and real heroism are somehow playing 2nd fiddle to selfishness and arrogance? When are you so intellectually intelligent that you become stupid? Is there any time when foolish decisions could be called "courageous"? In a search for truth and what really matters in life, is it acceptable to think nothing of hurting those people who are most vulnerable to you? When you die, will the way you lived your life cause others to abandon their faith or grow in their faith? Is it ever courageous to be selfish and think only of yourself? Is it harder to walk away from a relationship, or to stay in a relationship and work on making it better? Would you ever teach anyone else that the way to have real relationships is to limit yourself only to those people who cannot ever hurt you?

Real courage, real heroism comes when you love others and you serve others. Real courage has nothing selfish in it. Fathers and husbands who remain with their families and provide for them, even though they would rather have a mid-life crisis and leave it all, they are courageous and heroic. They remain, they work, they don't father or husband perfectly, but they remain in difficult relationships. It courageous to stay in the hard parts of life, and try. Mothers and wives who sacrifice and serve again and again and again without books being written about them, without thanks, but who continue to love and give of themselves to others. That is courageous. It is hard to stay in messy relationships. It is easy to leave. It is courageous to stay and do hard things. It is easy to leave and do what you want.

So, let's read this book, but read it as a cautionary tale. This is what happens when you seemingly 'have it all', but have not love. When you die, will people be driven to become atheists? Will people stop praying when you are dead? Or will you live a life of wisdom and love? Will you leave behind you a heritage of godly love and service? Will people pray more because of the example you left them? Will they be more loving, better mothers or fathers or sisters or brothers? Or will they become angry and arrogant and foolishness? Yes, this is a good book to read. But let's read it for the right reasons and with the right questions.

[NOTE: In the book, and in the movie, the author proposes that Chris ate some poison berries which caused his death. But tests have been made around the area, and plants that would have been available to Chris were tested, and no toxic berries or plants have been found. The truth is probably that he starved. Too few calories coming in, high expenditure of calories for hunting and keeping warm resulted eventually in such a calorie deficit that he died.]

Some good articles I found on Chris McCandless include:

<http://www.newsminer.com/news/2008/ap...>

<http://nmge.gmu.edu/textandcommunity/...>

Alaskan Park Ranger Peter Christian wrote: "I am exposed continually to what I will call the 'McCandless Phenomenon.' People, nearly always young men, come to Alaska to challenge themselves against an unforgiving wilderness landscape where convenience of access and possibility of rescue are practically nonexistent [...] When you consider McCandless from my perspective, you quickly see that what he did wasn't even particularly daring, just stupid, tragic, and inconsiderate. First off, he spent very little time learning how to actually live in the wild. He arrived at the Stampede Trail without even a map of the area. If he [had:] had a good map he could have walked out of his predicament [...] Essentially, Chris McCandless committed suicide." [18:] Some may argue that this is what he wanted all along, given his troubled past

An update as of Sept 2013 as to how McCandless died. See <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs...> which documents the poison contained in wild potato seeds. Consuming these seeds introduces a neurotoxin into the body which results in lathyrism. This condition causes gradual paralysis which ultimately made McCandless very weak, unable to stand or walk, and thus unable to forage or hunt for food.

Paul E. Morph says

This book seems to divide people. One group seems to think McCandless was a visionary; a free-thinking, wild spirit who lived his dream and died an unfortunate, tragic death. The other group thinks he was a stupid kid; an ill-prepared daydreamer who brought his demise upon himself due to his own idiocy.

I think it's entirely possible he was both. In my experience, the two states are not mutually exclusive. The one thing that's clearly true is that his death was avoidable and tragic. Whichever camp you fall into, this is an upsetting tale.

What also upsets me is that, due to the media picking up on this case, with various newspaper and magazine articles being written about it, a movie being made and (the surefire win for anyone looking to be a teenage martyr) a soundtrack album being recorded by hipster messiah Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam, McCandless is being promoted as an inspirational figure for impressionable young people.

I can only hope that they will take this sad tale onboard as a cautionary tale, rather than one to emulate.

Darlene says

Jon Krakauer possesses a phenomenal skill in taking a non-fiction story and telling it in a way that does not

bog you down in unmemorable details; but instead keeps you engrossed in the unfolding details of what happens next. In this story, *Into the Wild*, Mr. Krakauer tells the emotional story of a young man... Christopher McCandless, who in April of 1992, hiked into the Alaskan wilderness and never walked out. I listened to the audiobook version of this story and the fine narration was performed by Philip Franklin.

Although it quickly became apparent to me that Christopher McCandless' story had been widely covered in the national media at that time, I had been personally unaware of the story so it was completely fresh for me. Mr. Krakauer tells the story in an entertaining and yet informative manner... he not only attempts to trace the steps of Chris McCandless through McCandless's own writings.. such as letters and excerpts from a personal journal found among his personal effects after his death; but he also details interviews he conducted with people Chris McCandless met along his journey and his family members. He even relates snippets from his own personal history, seemingly able to personally identify with Chris McCandless and his feelings of wanderlust and his troubled relationship with his father.

Much of Chris McCandless's story is simply conjecture. What IS known is that he came from a well-to-do family outside of Washington, D.C. After graduating from Emory University in 1990, he cut off all ties to family and friends. He changed his name to 'Alexander Supertramp', gave away everything he owned, including the \$24,000 in his savings account to OXFAM, his car (an old Datsun), and he burned all of the cash in his wallet. 'Alex'/Chris then set off across the country hitchhiking and doing odd and short term jobs along the way, making just enough cash to continue on. Finally, in April 1992, 'Alex'/Chris hitchhiked to Alaska and walked into the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley... carrying only a backpack containing a 10 pound bag of rice, a Remington rifle, some cooking utensils, a sleeping bag and an array of paperback books.

The portrait of Chris McCandless which takes place in this narrative seems to me to be one that is relatively common for someone his age. Chris McCandless was a contradiction.. as are many young people who are trying to figure out who they are and where they fit into society. He was intelligent, stubborn, had a very strong sense of social justice and seemed acutely aware of the inherent hypocrisy present in society... most especially among those he considered authority figures (his father, for example). At the same time, he could be short sighted, unforgiving at times.. especially of those who loved him most, and couldn't recognize his own hypocrisy concerning his unwillingness or inability to forgive those closest to him; but seemed to quite easily overlook those same failings in people he was said to admire but didn't really know. Chris seemed to be simply a young man struggling with his own identity and wrestling with accepting the reality of what it means to be a human being.... full of strengths, weaknesses and contradictions.

One question continued to arise for me as I listened to this story... was Chris McCandless understandable and perhaps even admirable... or was he simply just a foolish and short sighted young man who didn't seem to recognize his own ignorance of what it would take for him to survive in such harsh conditions? I struggled with my feelings about this young man and what he did; but in the end, I would have to say that he was both understandable AND incredibly foolish. As a parent of children who are similar in age to Chris McCandless, I was horrified by his seeming lack of caring about how his parents and siblings must have felt, having no idea where he was, what he was doing... or if he was even alive. I felt angry over his self-centeredness in not considering the feelings of anyone who cared about him. Oddly, at the same time, I COULD remember sharing some of his feelings when I was young and I also remember that it could be difficult at times to put those feelings in any kind of context.... and those feelings could often be overwhelming.

Ultimately, Chris McCandless's story left me full of sadness at the unnecessary tragedy that befell him.. and his family. After all, Chris McCandless's story WAS a tragedy. Just a few short months after walking into the Alaskan wilderness, some hikers discovered his body in an old abandoned Fairbanks City Transit System bus (#142). Taped to the door of the bus was a note...

"S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death and too weak to hike out of here. I am all alone, this is NO

JOKE. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you. Chris McCandless, August 7?"

I found this story compelling and at the same time so very unnecessary and tragic. And although Mr. Krakauer did his best to describe the geography of the locations in the story, I found some of the details confusing as I'm unfamiliar with Alaskan geography. Perhaps this geographic confusion was better addressed in the print copy of this book. Regardless, I definitely recommend this book.

Matt says

I live a life, I suspect, that is much like yours. Wake up, go to work, come home, eat dinner, go to bed. At the end of this weekly desert, there might be a drink or ten to celebrate the victory over another five days of soul-crushing drudgery.

I am a desk jockey. A paper pusher. I mean that literally; I sit in my office, and when people peer inside, they will see me moving a sheet of paper from one side to the other. It looks, to the untrained eye, like valuable labor.

When I get the chance, though, I head to the mountains, to the wild. I love the away-ness of these trips. At the risk of sounding absurdly curmudgeonly, I like getting away from the crush of humanity (and I'm sure the crush of humanity appreciates my temporary absence).

There was a time when my friends and I would head out west every summer. We picked a destination (isolated, challenging), packed the car, and plunged into the wilderness. We undertook silly risks, because we were younger and we laughed at consequences, or at the possibility that there were consequences. Once, a little later on, we gathered around a campfire, four of us, and swore - like characters from a young adult novel - that we'd always do this: that we'd always head out to the mountains together.

Then we got older. My friends married, they started having kids, and the mountains became a memory, a slideshow of pictures that showed up on the screen savers of our computers. Friends with whom I'd jumped off cliffs, slid down glaciers, and climbed rocks matured overnight into sober professionals, husbands, and fathers. It was remarkable how age engendered caution, and squelched the desire for adventure.

That was my mindset when I picked up *Into the Wild*.

Jon Krakauer's classic is, to put it mildly, a polarizing book. Based on the people I've surveyed, I've found that you either love it or you hate it, and whether you love it or hate it will be determined by what you think about Christopher McCandless, the young man at the center of *Into the Wild*. You will be taken in by Chris's literate, philosophical, iconoclastic, boundary-pushing vagabondism. Or you will be sickened by his selfishness, his self-pity, and the way he left a shattered family in his wake.

Either way, you will have a vivid response.

Upon graduating from Emory University, and instead of going on to law school (which was my choice), McCandless gave away \$25,000 to charity and began his life as a tramp (or hobo, as they sometimes like to be called). I was in sixth grade when McCandless walked into the Alaskan wilderness and never returned. He was 24.

The power of *Into the Wild* is directly attributable to Krakauer's empathy for his subject. Krakauer is a solid adventure writer, but he's not a prose stylist. Rather, he uses his own life experiences to connect with Chris on a very intimate, personal level. He does not attempt any faux objectivity that is often the hallmark of "serious" serious journalism. Instead, Krakauer admits, straight up, that he saw his younger self in Chris, with the exception that Krakauer survived his youth, while Chris did not. For instance, there is an autobiographical section in *Into the Wild* where Krakauer tells his story about climbing the Devil's Thumb. This could easily have been a self-serving digression, but Krakauer uses that experience, and the vividness of his memory, to explore the the compulsions that drove Chris McCandless to follow his unique path to his destiny.

I think Chris, in his own way, was a towering figure; he was the person I would like to be, if I had more guts and less excuses. He was a smart kid, a college grad, who came from money. His parents were messed up, but really, whose parents aren't? After college, instead of going to law school (don't go to law school, by the way), he gave away \$25,000, burned his credit cards, and set out to see the west.

Whatever else you call him, you can't call him a poser. Like everyone, he had his share of dreams and demons, and he set out to follow his dreams and fight his demons. There's something to be said for what he put his parent through. Still, the world forces us to be our own person. He went forward the best way he knew how, defining himself along the way. The tragedy, of course, is that the lessons he learned - about the value of friends and family - he learned too late.

I don't really need to defend Chris. Krakauer does that. He is unabashedly in his corner, defending his choices, his skills, his desire to go alone to the far places, like John Muir before him. Chris McCandless was himself, fully and completely, which is saying a lot, in this day and age. Or any day and age. He was part adventurer, part philosopher, and part monk (the monk part fascinates Krakauer, who spends a lot of time wondering whether Chris died a virgin).

I suppose a brief note on the movie, directed by Sean Penn, is in order. While I found it poetic and inspiring, the movie focuses too much on Chris's effect on the various people he meets on his journeys. In a way, Chris becomes some kind of wandering apostle, healing and helping those he meets along his path, before he dies a martyr's death in Alaska, a vision from a Don Maclean song ("the world was never meant for one as beautiful as you..."). The book, on the other hand, keeps Chris firmly grounded as a human being. Krakauer admires Chris, to be sure, but he does not neglect the warts. (However, Krakauer sharply dismisses those armchair psychiatrists who want to diagnose Chris with a mental disorder. I'm glad he does. I think it's saying something about the conformity of our society that anyone who bucks the trend (he gave up law school!?) is called mad).

In the end, Chris was one of those rare people who wanted to know the world intimately, and in the process of discovering those secrets, was killed by that same world. Maybe there was something quixotic or foolish in his quest; maybe he should have taken a job, taken a wife, found a safe desk behind which to grow old. Or maybe there is something foolish in us, to believe that we can outlive the world with our caution.

Elizabeth says

I think a lot of the people who have formed negative opinions of this story are really missing the point. Most people rage on and on about what a terribly selfish, careless idiot Chris McCandless was, to which I say, *duh*. John Krakauer points out many, many times that Chris was "heedless" and "overconfident." I never once felt that Krakauer idolized him or tried to make him into a hero. He was fascinated by McCandless, sure, and he certainly seems to have seen a lot of himself in the young man, but by no means does he gush about what a

fantastic person or brave adventurer McCandless was.

Chris McCandless is fascinating to me because, despite how frustratingly foolhardy and arrogant he may come across (who's to say really - none of us ever knew him), I am astounded by the number of people who fell head over heels for him in such a short period of time. Grown men and women! It seems impossible that his flaws outweighed his character. The people he met over the course of his travels genuinely seemed to love him, but Chris was just one of those strange individuals who don't really want to be loved.

I do hope his parents and sister were able to find peace with McCandless's death. It's very hard to keep giving away your love to someone who simply doesn't want it.

Dini says

This book got me riveted in the tragic story of Chris McCandless, a young man who left his family and friends, abandoned most of his material possessions, went to the Alaska wilderness and perished there. The author does a great job of portraying McCandless complex personality through meticulous research based on interviews, letters and journal entries. The writing is so engaging that although it is already clear from the beginning how McCandless' story would end, I was hooked till the last page. Krakauer only digresses when discussing his own high-risk undertaking and those of ill-fated adventurers similar to McCandless — these parts offer comparison to McCandless' character but I found myself getting impatient and wanting them to end quickly, to return to the main story itself which is much more compelling.

Readers have been divided with regard to this story. Some admire McCandless' daring and idealism; some others say he was stupid, reckless and arrogant enough to have gone to Alaska without sufficient preparation. I think he was a human being with faults and merits, but I have to admit I felt something stirring in me when I read this passage, taken from a letter he wrote to a friend:

"...make a radical change in your lifestyle and begin to boldly do things which you may previously never have thought of doing, or been too hesitant to attempt. So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism... The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure."

The passage resonates with me because my life has been filled with stagnation and inactivity. I am the queen of conventionalism. I don't consider myself unhappy, but I'm always afraid of moving outside the comfort zone, of expanding further than my own comfortable little shell. I often don't exert myself to my best capabilities because halfhearted efforts seemed good enough. When I read about McCandless, I noticed that one of his admirable traits is if he wanted something he went out and did it. He was not afraid of challenges, the greater they are the better. Jason Mraz says *"live high, live mighty, live righteously"*. I think that was what McCandless did: he lived up to his ideals.

One the other hand, the greatest tragedy of McCandless' life, in my opinion, was his conflicting feelings toward human intimacy and relationship. He clashed with his parents and others who didn't share his beliefs to the point that he spurned humanity and sought nature and the wilderness instead. But even during his solitary journeys he met a lot of people and connected with them, touching their lives as well as his own. His final odyssey in Alaska had probably made him realize, more than ever, the raw need for companionship, but he didn't survive that trip — causing endless grief to his family. So in the end, if there is something I can take from McCandless story, it is this message: Be bold. Get out there. Do something. But don't forget those who love you.

Maudeen Wachsmith says

I first read *Into the Wild* ten years ago when it first came out after finding out that parts of it are set in Carthage, Miner County, South Dakota pop. 187, a town where my mother has family and where her cousin was once mayor. My great-grandmother is buried in Howard, the Miner county seat. So that was the book and movie's initial appeal. I mean this town is the true "blink-and-you-miss-it" town. That is, if one would ever even happen to drive through it as it isn't on a main road. So I wondered, how young Chris McCandless, the subject of the book and movie ended up in Carthage in the first place.

Then I read that Sean Penn was finally making a movie adapted from the book and filming in Carthage. I thought it would be really interesting to see Carthage on the big screen. The first day it was showing in our little theater here in town I Shanghaied my husband (who really isn't a movie goer, in fact if you ask him, on a scale of 1-10, that he'd suggest going to a movie as a form of entertainment he'd probably tell you -2) into going with me for the matinee. Now John had seen the Oprah show where Sean Penn and Emile Hirsch (who portrays young McCandless in the film) were guests along with author Jon Krakauer and didn't think too much of McCandless so he was even less excited than usual about seeing this film. If he had known ahead of time that it was 140 minutes long he'd probably had left the theater after his first carton of Milk Duds. But the trooper he is, he persevered for my sake.

The movie adequately told the story of young Christopher McCandless who after graduating from Emory University, took off on a two year road trip, calling himself Alexander Supertramp. Very early on his car was destroyed and he abandoned it, burned what little money he had left and took off on foot. Some one say he was idealist others an adventurer, but others just reckless. Everyone seems to have his or her own opinion. What is clear is that he was found two year later dead in an abandoned bus just north of Denali National Park in Alaska. However his adventures along the way and the people he met tell a very interesting story. And the just how he died is still fodder for speculation although Krakauer does give his theory. Hirsch as McCandless is wonderful – his portrayal deserves an Oscar nomination as does that of Hal Holbrook as Ron Franz, the elderly recluse who befriends him. Told mostly in flashbacks, the movie suffers from uneven editing. I was also disappointed in the cinematography—the Alaskan scenes could have been brilliant but they were just average. That said, the South Dakota prairie was breathtaking. And it was fun to see Carthage. I think the entire town was filmed.

After watching the movie, I was compelled to read the book again. At only 207 pages it's a fairly quick read. It was even more meaningful after watching the movie. I read many passages out loud to my husband and told him I thought he might change his opinion of McCandless. He is now reading the book. I don't have the absolutely negative opinion of young Chris as many people have. He was a bit reckless, that's for sure. But no more than many young men. As Krakauer mentions late in the book, it's that attribute of daring that contributes to many young men signing up for the military—particularly in times of war. Yes, he did some things wrong. But don't we all. The only reason that we're reading about him was that he made some little mistakes that ended up killing him. He was actually a smart kid and I found a lot in him to be admired. It was sad he had to die. Any loss of life is sad. And that is what bothers me the most. That a parent lost a child, that a sister lost a brother, that a world lost a promising young man. There are lessons to be learned here, of course, but was the price too great?

Steven Godin says

In 1992, roughly around the same time Chris McCandless was living out his final days in the Alaskan wilderness, I would have been enjoying the summer holidays before embarking on my final year at school, contemplating the big wide world and what I was going to do with the rest of my life. It wasn't until watching Sean Penn's film in 2008 I would learn of Chris's story, a story that moved me, immensely.

I always presumed Jon Krakauer's book would be some huge epic, but was surprised on finding out it's a little over 200 pages. I simply had to read it, just don't know why it took me so long.

It's going to be difficult to review this without making my own thoughts on Chris known first. Although it isn't as straightforward as this, taking everything into consideration, if there is to be a camp criticism and a camp McCandless, then I firmly sit with McCandless. He was an awe-inspiring bright young man, who simply broke free from the establishment to follow his own path, a path, going by both book and film that was simply stunning. I know there are people that criticized his adventure as reckless, stupid, dangerous and well unequipped for the treacherous landscape of wild Alaska, and were even angry with him, that he deserved what was coming to him, disrespecting nature. Let's not forget something, he probably died a slow agonizing death that you wouldn't wish on anybody, why the anger from people who didn't even know him? it was nobody else's business what Chris chose to undertake. As the old saying goes, it's a free country. And he was just that, free.

I do feel for his family of course, I can't begin to imagine the pain and anguish they would have had to injure, and the fact he didn't try to contact his sister Karine, who he was dearly close to, was strange. I just hope his family came to eventually realize that the two years Chris spent on the road he would have been immensely happy. That's got to count for something. Had he gone on to work, no doubt well paid work, you get the impression he just wouldn't want to be there. Had Chris been some wacko or mentally incapacitated person I would have taken far more pity over his story, but he wasn't, he was highly intelligent and knew exactly what he was doing. That's why, although he came to a sad end, I am still on the whole, happy for the guy.

The strongest parts of the book for me are actually not the last months in Alaska (which had to be recreated based on Chris' diary and the evidence found at the site of his death), but the memories of people whom Chris had met on his travels, with whom he had caught rides, worked and stayed, struck up friendships. I was especially moved by the generosity of strangers and by Chris's run in with 81 year old Ron Franz, whom he managed to convince to give up the monotonous life and take up adventure. These two years of traveling had no boundaries, no obligations, no limitations, no expectations. Just exploring the land, exploring life, and himself.

Jon Krakauer also included memories from his own youth, trying to draw comparisons with Chris, along with some other historical journey's similar to what McCandless embarked on.

Chris was a keen reader, and used literature as a way to inspire him on the road, there were quotes from the likes of Leo Tolstoy, Jack London, Henry David Thoreau and Wallace Stegner that he noted down in his diary, these play an important role for any outsider trying to understand just who Chris was.

The book works wonders on different levels, it deals with non fiction in a dramatic storytelling way, like an adventure novel, but also stays as close as possible to the facts and truths recovered from Chris's diary. I didn't think his epic story could be condensed down to 200 pages, but it works, only concentrating on the things that truly matter. I was moved to the core. Not many books have had the opportunity to do this to me.

One shouldn't judge a life by its end or its duration, but by its content. Chris may have died young, but his life certainly was a fulfilling one.

Petra X says

We are all heroes to ourselves. McCandless was, Krakauer is. This doesn't vary. All that varies is how we define heroism and how much, or how little, we are prepared to do to for that stance.

In order to get people, usually young men, to sacrifice their lives we tell them of those that went before and tell them they were heroes who died for their countries, died for their principles, died even for their dreams. Impractical dreams that are the province of the young. And those who would be heroes never concern themselves with the practical, that is far too mundane, it is for others to take care of those details.

McCandless' dream of heroism was to survive entirely alone and entirely off the land at the ends of the earth. It didn't include the practicality of learning about the wild foods he might forage in that area, or how he might survive in extreme weather conditions, or even exactly where his place of solitude was situated so that when he sought succour at the end, he didn't even know how close it really was.

The final photograph he took of himself is of a wasted face, gaunt but beautiful with the shining eyes of one who has lived his dream and is satisfied. Then he died.

Dixie Diamond says

My grandfather--not an Alaskan but an experienced outdoorsman--would have tied this kid to a tree and let the bears play tetherball with him.

A small part of me appreciates the effort Krakauer put into researching this book. A much bigger part of me is completely disgusted both with McCandless himself and with Krakauer's mindless adoration of him. Krakauer pulls out all the stops to make McCandless look like a phenomenon, and seems to agree with McCandless that the world should have handed itself to him on a silver salver because he was just so darned special. We're told he was brilliant, independent, funny, kind, musical, athletic, visionary, talented. Can you see the halo? Unfortunately, the impression that comes across is of a snotty adolescent who has never seriously thought of anyone but himself and is used to getting by on charm and flippancy rather than making good use of his considerable gifts (and I do not doubt that he was gifted). The conflicting aspects of his personality don't sound quirky; they sound devious and self-serving.

Krakauer tries half-heartedly to disguise his fascination but his admissions that McCandless was a clueless young hothead sound insincere; he has to say it to sound credible to his readers, who are less smitten. Krakauer makes an apt comparison between himself as an idealistic and foolhardy young man, and McCandless, and then dismisses himself because "he didn't have [McCandless:] intellect". This sounds utterly bogus after all we have been told about McCandless' foolish mistakes, and the obvious fact that Krakauer is not stupid. Two chapters that could have provided some insight into his hero are wasted because Krakauer sounds like a religious fanatic, with McCandless as his unknowable God and Krakauer as the I'm-not-worthy follower.

McCandless' (and Everett Ruess') overconfidence speaks to a fascination with nature but not a respect for it. Courage is not the same as not knowing when we ought to have a healthy degree of fear. Instead, McCandless arrogantly drives his car into the habitat of an endangered species of poppy. He butchers a moose, wasting the life of a beautiful and well-adapted animal because he could not be bothered to learn

ahead of time how to preserve it.

This was not a tragedy; this was inevitable. I don't believe he was schizophrenic or suicidal. Bipolar or ADD, maybe. His own friends readily admitted that he had a lot of enthusiasm but little common sense and didn't know much outside of academia. There are so many glaring outdoorsmanship errors made in the first two chapters that even I was cringing.

I write this with full admission that I am not much of an outdoorsperson. However, I don't believe for a minute that he lasted longer than most of us would have, or that "at least he tried it", as so many of his fans insist. I wouldn't try it, not because I'm scared, but because I can tell from here that ten pounds of rice and no preparation is a recipe for failure. I don't need to try it, and if I did, I'd want to live to get something out of it. Lots of other people have gone into the wilderness and come out just fine because they knew the magnitude of their own insignificance and planned ahead.

I'm not jealous of his alleged brilliance, either. I was accepted to Emory. And the University of Chicago. And a couple of other amply respected schools. Lots of people are. Big deal.

1) His bourgeois status made his adventure possible in the first place. He had money to pay his college tuition; the rest of us graduated and went to work to pay off our loans. He also had the gall to complain about his parents' offers to help him out, which smacks of a kid given so much that he doesn't know how fortunate he is.

Furthermore, living with nothing by choice is very different from living with nothing because you have no alternative. Though I'm sure he would have denied it, McCandless had the option of going back to his affluent life if he had wanted to, or if he had had to in an emergency. Maybe it would have knocked his self-image for a loop, but he would have been sheltered, fed, and nursed back to health. A lot of people live in poverty without that safety net.

2) Now is not the time to be squeamish about killing animals. Hint: There are no vegetarian Aleuts. This guy was a history and anthropology major. I learned in anthro that you can eat plants and lean protein until you burst and still starve to death if you aren't getting enough calories. It's very difficult to feed yourself if you're alone and don't have a lot of practice at it.

3) If he got this idea from Thoreau and London, he wasn't reading very carefully. McCandless should have read less Thoreau and more Donner Party. London's Alaskan experience was during the Klondike Gold Rush when he had plenty of help from others. Thoreau lived in a cabin on the edge of town, a mile and a half from the family home. He was not in the wilderness. Furthermore, Thoreau's civil disobedience was a protest against the Mexican War and slavery, not a petty defiance of matters of public safety such as mandatory car insurance. McCandless was a rebel without a cause.

4) Book-smart can't save you now. Success-only learning does not work. Krakauer goes into raptures about McCandless' education and intelligence to demonstrate the supposed tragedy of his loss. Nice brain gymnastics, but apples to oranges when what you need is practical knowledge.

This guy was idolized by some of my college classmates, most of whom were sheltered, relatively wealthy urbanites. They had the same vague and pathetic need for "real" experiences and arrogant expectation of success that comes from never having failed at anything in their lives.

5) For most of his trip, McCandless was neither independent or self-reliant. He got lost in Mexico; it would have been more self-reliant to get a map and take charge of his own navigation. He didn't eat for days until somebody felt sorry for him and fed him. Once he was in a situation where there was nobody to step in for him, he died (in this respect, I disagree with Krakauer that McCandless was any different from Carl McCunn). Even at that point, he left a note on the door of the bus begging for rescue.

The best (and most independent) outdoorsmen spend years learning. Just because you were a superstar student and athlete doesn't mean you get to skip all the hard work. I've no doubt that McCandless was smart, but he was mind-bogglingly ignorant and inexperienced.

6) Why are these self-discovery escapades always so self-centered? How about joining the Peace Corps? Teaching in inner-city schools? Working in healthcare in a remote South Asian village? If you're so disgusted with society, why don't you do something to improve it rather than keeping all the enlightenment for yourself?

7) Nature is not your babysitter. Nature doesn't care if you live or die. It's survival of the fittest, and humans, compared to most animals, are slow, weak, poorly-armed, poorly-insulated, have no stamina; have poor senses of smell, eyesight, and hearing; and are ill-adapted to go without clean water and food for any length of time. We are clearly meant to live in groups and use tools. This guy didn't even bring an ax.

8) He was already controlled and tainted by society or else he would not have worked so hard to avoid it. His anti-society and anti-materialism were as controlling of him as is the materialism of those who think they can "find themselves" by buying the right clothes or drug habit or SUV.

9) Unprepared people who set out on ill-planned "adventures" and need to be rescued are jackasses. A lot of other people—better-prepared, better-trained, and more sensible people such as park service, volunteers, and EMT's—end up spending a lot of time and money, and risking their own necks, to save them. McCandless spared everyone that trouble, but I'm sure there's a whole line of wannabes lined up to try it. I hope they have to pay back every penny spent on their rescues.

And Truth? The bad news is that Truth is relative. It doesn't exist in a vacuum. What a waste.

Nadine says

Overall, I was pretty disappointed with this book. The genesis of the book was an in-depth magazine article, and I suspect that the article was superb. But I just don't think there's enough here to warrant an entire book. As evidence, I point to several lengthy chapters that have nothing to do with the underlying story--they discuss other people who have gone "into the wild" and, surprisingly, Krakauer includes a whole chapter about himself.

My other problem is that I found myself unable to identify or empathize with the central character here. I think that Chris McCandless was not much more than a privileged, entitled, selfish, and undeniably intelligent person who threw everything away and nearly destroyed his family for reasons that weren't any clearer by the end of the book than they were at the beginning. I worried far more about his parents and his sister, who he called his "best friend," than I did about him.

I ended up "finishing" the book by skimming the last 1/3, or maybe even the last 1/2. I almost gave this only 1 star but decided to go with 2 because I want to give Krakauer the benefit of the doubt--it's a well-written book, I just don't think it needed to be written at all.
