



## Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild*

Jon Krakauer is an American writer and mountaineer, well-known for outdoor and mountain-climbing writing.

*Into the Wild* is his main success. The novel tells the true story of Christopher McCandless, a young man from a wealthy American family who, after graduating from college, gave all his money to charity, renamed himself 'Alexander Supertramp' and started a journey in the American West. Two years later, his body was found dead in the Alaska wilderness. In the book, Krakauer draws parallels between his own experiences and motivations and those of McCandless. In 2007, *Into the Wild* was adapted into a film, whose soundtrack was composed by Eddie Vedder, the frontman of the American rock band Pearl Jam.

Following the experiences of Beat Generation poets and writers, who wished to live according to what their instinct suggested to them, *Into the Wild* is a modern journey into natural life to rediscover a man's real self far away from civilization.

In the book introduction, Krakauer explains the reasons why Christopher McCandless' unlucky adventure attracted him.



### Introduction

In April 1992, a young man from a well-to-do East Coast family hitchhiked<sup>1</sup> to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mount McKinley. Four months later his decomposed body was found by a party of moose<sup>2</sup> hunters.

Shortly after the discovery of the corpse, I was asked by the editor of *Outside* magazine to report on the puzzling<sup>3</sup> circumstances of the boy's death. His name turned out to be Christopher Johnson McCandless. He'd grown up, I learned, in an affluent suburb of Washington D.C., where he'd excelled academically and had been an elite athlete. Immediately after graduating, with honours, from Emory University in the summer of 1990, McCandless dropped out of sight.<sup>4</sup> He changed his name, gave the entire balance of a \$24,000 savings account to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, and burned all the cash in his wallet. And then he invented a new life for himself, taking up residence at the ragged<sup>5</sup> margin of our society, wandering across North America in search of raw, transcendent experience. His family had no idea where he was or what had become of him until his remains turned up in Alaska.

I was haunted<sup>6</sup> by the particulars of the boy's starvation and by vague, unsettling<sup>7</sup> parallels between events in his life and those in my own. Unwilling to let McCandless go, I spent more than a year retracing the convoluted<sup>8</sup> path that led to his death in the Alaskan taiga, chasing down<sup>9</sup> details of his peregrinations with an interest that bordered<sup>10</sup> on obsession. In trying to understand McCandless, I inevitably came to reflect on other, larger subjects as well: the grip wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure<sup>11</sup> high risk activities hold<sup>12</sup> for young men of a certain mind, the complicated, highly charged<sup>13</sup> bond<sup>14</sup> that exists between fathers and sons.

I won't claim to be an impartial biographer. McCandless' strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering<sup>15</sup> of the tragedy impossible. Through most of the book, I have tried – and largely succeeded, I think – to minimize my authorial presence. But let the reader be warned: I interrupt McCandless' story with fragments of a narrative drawn from my own youth. I do so in the hope that my experiences will throw some oblique<sup>16</sup> light on the enigma of Chris McCandless. He was an extremely intense young man and possessed a streak<sup>17</sup> of stubborn idealism that did not mesh<sup>18</sup> readily with modern existence. Long captivated by

### GLOSSARY

1 soliciting a car ride – 2 animals similar to deer – 3 confusing and mysterious – 4 disappeared – 5 poorest – 6 obsessed – 7 disturbing, upsetting – 8 tortuous, complicated – 9 following, looking for – 10 was on the limit of – 11 fascination – 12 took, exercised – 13 emotional – 14 relationship – 15 portrait, report – 16 indirect – 17 vein – 18 cope, interconnect



the writing of Leo Tolstoy, McCandless particularly admired how the great novelist had forsaken<sup>19</sup> a life of wealth and privilege to wander among the destitute.<sup>20</sup> In college McCandless began emulating Tolstoy's asceticism and moral rigor to a degree that first astonished, and then alarmed, those who were close to him. When the boy headed off<sup>21</sup> into the Alaskan bush he entertained<sup>22</sup> no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey. Peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking.<sup>23</sup> And that is what he found, in abundance. For most of the 16-week ordeal,<sup>24</sup> nevertheless, McCandless more than held his own. Indeed, were it not for one or two seemingly insignificant blunders,<sup>25</sup> he would have walked out of the woods in August 1992 as anonymously as he had walked into them in April. Instead, his innocent mistakes turned out to be pivotal<sup>26</sup> and irreversible, his name became the stuff of tabloid headlines,<sup>27</sup> and his bewildered<sup>28</sup> family was left clutching<sup>29</sup> the shards<sup>30</sup> of a fierce and painful love.

A surprising number of people have been affected by the story of Chris McCandless' life and death. In the weeks and months following the publication of the article in *Outside*, it generated more mail than any other article in the magazine's history. This correspondence, as one might expect, reflected sharply divergent points of view: some readers admired the boy immensely for his courage and noble ideals; others fulminated<sup>31</sup> that he was a reckless<sup>32</sup> idiot, a wacko,<sup>33</sup> a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity – and was undeserving<sup>34</sup> of the considerable media attention he received. My convictions should become apparent after reading a chapter or two of *Into the Wild*, but I leave it to the reader to form his or her own opinion of Chris McCandless.

#### GLOSSARY

19 abandoned – 20 poor – 21 went to, took the direction – 22 have, thought – 23 searching, looking for – 24 trial, suffering – 25 mistakes, changes – 26 crucial – 27 title pages – 28 confused – 29 taken – 30 ruins, ashes – 31 blamed, judged – 32 irresponsible, careless – 33 eccentric, strange, freaky – 34 did not merit

#### ACTIVITIES

1 Have you read the book or seen the movie? Did you like it? Talk about it.

C. Aira - I. Pignet  
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