Into the Wild Study Guide

Into the Wild by Jon Krakauer

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Into the Wild is the true story of the mysterious life and death of Christopher Johnson McCandless, a talented young man from a good family who inexplicably turned his back on everything he seemed to have going for him. He graduated from Emory University in 1990, lost no time in giving away to charity the sizeable balance in his bank account, and then abruptly abandoned his past life and the personal identity all knew him by to basically disappear from the lives of family and friends. He anticipated that his parents would want to stop him, so he arranged to have his mail held for at least a month before it was returned to them, thereby giving himself ample time to leave for unknown parts unhindered by parental intervention.

Although he had been outwardly obedient and cordial toward his parents, McCandless seemed to have been inexplicably angry with them for a long time. He immediately set out on a meandering adventure, a vagabond odyssey, as if he had been living a secret internal life all along, one that suddenly prompted him to throw over the affluent middle-class lifestyle he had conformed with previously to seek a purer place to think and feel in.

While his family searched for him in vain, he traveled across the United States, living off his wits and the charity of people he met along the way.

McCandless was inspired by the idealism of writers like Leo Tolstoy, Jack London, and Henry David Thoreau, all of whom disdained material wealth and espoused a Spartan existence of the spirit. His spiritual revolt against material possessions must have been partly fueled by estrangement from the values of his parents.

Chris had always possessed a generous altruistic streak since childhood, and he now, powerfully influenced by those writers he revered, gave away all his worldly goods and attempted to live a life unencumbered by material things.

As he drifted across the country, McCandless kept a sporadic record of his wanderings and adventures in a series of journal entries written in the third person about his adopted alter ego, "Alexander Supertramp." He also periodically corresponded with some of the many strangers who befriended and helped him in his travels, and who sometimes sheltered him in their houses. He spent two years living a free-spirited and rootless existence, undeterred by frequent, even thrilling, brushes with the law and with disaster, including a bout with heatstroke in the Mojave Desert and a near drowning in the Gulf of California.

Finally, in the spring of 1992, McCandless set out for his ultimate frontier, Alaska, where he seems to have wanted to survive in the wilderness in one final naturalistic experience before, perhaps, settling down.

He made it to Alaska, where the last person to see him alive was an electrician who gave him a ride in his truck and who tried to dissuade him from what sounded like a

foolhardy adventure. McCandless refused to be put off; after four months, which he documented in a series of journal entries and photographic self-portraits, he was found dead in the broken-down Fairbanks city bus that had become his home. After having survived for two years by his wits, he had been defeated by the dangerous torrents of an unforeseen spring run-off and had starved to death while hoping that someone would rescue him.

Krakauer tells the young man's story with great sympathy and insight in this book that was expanded from an article written shortly after his death for Outside magazine. Krakauer, unsatisfied that he had put to rest a difficult and haunting story, returned to interview family members about Chris's youth and to painstakingly research his later life and final weeks.

Into the Wild, though first and foremost a biography, reads almost like a detective story, as Krakauer has pieced together a fluent and readable narrative from a plethora of fragmentary sources. These include infrequent entries in the journals that McCandless left behind describing the exploits of "Alex," sporadic letters and postcards that he had sent to a few of the strangers who befriended him, and interviews with friends and family.

Krakauer even includes anecdotes about other ill-fated young adventurers and the story of a near catastrophic escapade from his own youth, all in a bid to provide valuable perspective to the reader's understanding of Chris McCandless. These united fragments of research provide an astonishingly vivid portrait of a bright, likeable, and almost unknowable young man.

About the Author

Jon Krakauer is a indefatigable outdoorsman with an insatiable love of nature and a prolific writer who balances journalistic instinct for a good story with humane sensitivity for his subjects. His writing career has circled a lifelong passion for adventure, the wilderness, and mountain climbing— his most abiding interest.

Krakauer was born in Massachusetts in 1954, moved to Oregon with his family shortly thereafter, and grew up in the Pacific Northwest. Krakauer has recorded in his books Into the Wild and Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster how his lifelong passion for climbing was born in the mountains of the Northwest. He was influenced early in his life by the first successful ascent of Mt. Everest's forbidding West Ridge by the American Into the Wild, 1996 Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster, 1997team of Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld, on May 22, 1963. While other boys his age idolized the American Astronauts who took humanity's first steps on the moon, young Jon was inspired by Willi Unsoeld, his personal hero and fellow Oregonian.

Unsoeld, a Krakauer family friend, was frequently around when Jon was growing up, and the boy occasionally played with the oldest Unsoeld children. His first real climb, up the side of a local volcano in the nearby Cascade Range, was accomplished in the company of his father and Unsoeld when Jon was eight.

After that initial ascent, Jon's love of climbing and the wildness of the remoter reaches of nature shaped his life and subsequent career. He devoted his early adulthood to climbing mountains, always taking particular pride Into the Wild 4689 in his accomplishments as a "technical climber," preferring difficult ascents that very few but the elite among mountain climbers would attempt.

Eschewing most of the trappings of success and stability that the vast majority of people aspire to in their lives—such as steady employment— Krakauer lived precariously, trying out jobs in various trades like carpentry and commercial fishing, in order to subsist and finance his climbing. In one interview, Krakauer tried to sum up his feelings by claiming that climbing "matters." He argued, "it's very physical, you use your mind and your body. It's like full-body chess, and it gets you to beautiful, beautiful places."

He began writing for magazines in 1974, when he was commissioned by the American Alpine Club to write an article about the first ascent of a peak in Alaska. After writing exclusively about nature and the outdoors for a time, Krakauer made the career move to major magazines, recognizing that he would be able to make a better living by diversifying his efforts.

These exertions were rewarded as he proved himself both fine writer and savvy businessman; he drew upon his former experiences as a carpenter and commercial salmon fisherman for background knowledge to articles he wrote for Architectural Digest and Smithsonian magazine. After that he began writing for a variety of magazines. As

Krakauer has observed to one interviewer, "It was useful, as a writer, to try out different voices and it was also smart, as a businessman."

However, as he has also pointed out, he considers the writing he has done for Outside magazine to be among his best work, simply because it is in those articles that his love for the outdoors finds its true voice. His love of mountains and wildernes s regions remains an enduring theme that continues to influence the important decisions in his life.

Having established his career as a magazine journalist, Krakauer made the move into books.

He published Eiger Dreams in 1990, a collection of twelve essays about mountaineering (most of which were originally published in either Outside or Smithsonian), and in the same year he and a fellow contributing editor for Outside, David Roberts, produced Iceland, a pictorial exploration of that country, filled with Krakauer's photography and Roberts's text. The first of Krakauer's books to cross generic borders and make an unforgettable impression on the general public was Into the Wild. This thoughtful chronicle of Chris McCandless's mysterious wanderings and premature death was originally the subject of an awardwinning Outside article, titled "Death of an Innocent," that Krakauer wrote in 1992.

Krakauer joined an ill-fated attempt in 1996 to scale Mt. Everest, the world's tallest mountain. Several climbers from Krakauer's and other parties died in a sudden storm that struck while they were still struggling near the summit. Krakauer wrote a 4690 Into the Wild striking magazine article and later expanded it into a painfully researched, full-length book.

What compels him to write about danger and adventure, to persistently tell stories of pain, risk, and reward in his initial articles and subsequent books? He describes Into the Wild as a "meandering inquiry"—perhaps an expression of his own renaissance approach to journalism and life—at one and the same time documentary, speculative study, and affecting human testament. Krakauer chronicles both the factual particularities and the hard inner realities of a strangely affecting story even as he delves, through careful contemplation, to uncover deep structures of human nature and the enigmas of young men's often fatal fascination with the wild.

Krakauer is a contributing editor for Outside magazine and has also published articles in several other prominent magazines, including Smithsonian, National Geographic, Playboy, Rolling Stone, and Architectural Digest, an impressive list that suggests the breadth and depth of his interests. He was nominated for a National Magazine Award in 1994 for his original Outside article about Chris McCandless, and Into the Wild won the Banff Mountain Book Festival award for Mountain Literature in 1996. Krakauer lives in Seattle with his wife, and divides his time between writing and climbing.

Plot Summary

Into the Wild is a true story about the life and death of Christopher McCandless. McCandless was a young man with seemingly every advantage. Raised by a successful and self-made family in an upscale suburb near Washington, D.C., McCandless graduates with honors from Emory University. By the time he enters the world as an independent young adult, Chris has a college degree, a loving family, a car that he loves, and some $25,000 in his savings account. So, why would this young man break all contact with his parents, give away all his money, abandon his vehicle, and spend the next two years living as a homeless drifter? That is the question author Jon Krakauer sets out to investigate.

McCandless touches many lives during his years on the road, but avoids any deep or meaningful contact with his fellow human beings. Much influenced by authors, such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, McCandless eschews human society and chooses to live on his own in the wild. McCandless comes to the public's attention in 1992, when a party of moose hunters finds his decomposed body in the Alaskan wilderness. In the wake of the tragedy, the people of Alaska are disgusted with this foolish greenhorn, whose hubris had convinced him he could conquer nature without the proper equipment, supplies or knowledge. His parents' heartbreak is difficult for many people to forgive, and public sentiment attempts to make a negative example of McCandless.

Jon Krakauer, however, believes he has a special insight into McCandless's point of view. Krakauer shares many qualities in common with the late McCandless, and by telling both of their stories, he hopes to provide better understanding of Christopher McCandless's brief life. Krakauer's book touches on some universal themes of parent-child conflict. His thoughtful perspective elevates McCandless's story beyond the level of individual tragedy. McCandless's story becomes iconic in Krakauer's retelling, and represents some common, deeply affecting parent-child issues. His life story is pertinent reading for anyone who has ever disappointed, or been disappointed by, a parent.

Author's Note

Author's Note Summary and Analysis

In April of 1992, a young man named Christopher Johnson McCandless hitchhiked to Alaska and entered the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. Four months later, a party of hunters found his body. *Outside* magazine subsequently asked Jon Krakauer, the author of *Into the Wild,* to write a story about the young man's life and death. In researching the story, Krakauer learned that McCandless hailed from an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C. and had graduated with honors from Emory University. Shortly after graduating, McCandless gave away his entire savings to charity, abandoned his possessions, and began living on the margins of society as a drifter and wilderness explorer.

Krakauer's article was published in *Outside* magazine in January of 1993, but his fascination with McCandless did not end there. Krakauer identifies with McCandless's attraction to nature and to high-risk activities, and also understands the young man's troubled relationship with his father. Krakauer informs the reader that he has chosen to include some of his personal history along with McCandless's in an attempt to shed light on McCandless's motives. McCandless, like the author, was an intense, stubborn, and idealistic young man. Krakauer admits that many people believe McCandless foolishly threw away his life, but the author admires his drive and accomplishments and believes that if McCandless had not made one or two critical mistakes, he would be alive today.

Krakauer promises to allow the reader to form his or her own opinion of McCandless, but Krakauer's personal convictions are already apparent. He acknowledges the public criticism of McCandless as "a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist" (pg. *xi*,) yet he believes McCandless was not very different from many idealistic if short-sighted young people. Krakauer's obvious identification with McCandless suggests elements of hero-worship, as if McCandless's actions somehow justify Krakauer's own young adulthood. On the one hand, this sets a compassionate tone for the book. Yet, Krakauer's personal bias for his subject, inextricably linked with Krakauer's romantic view of his own youth, makes it clear that the author's purpose is to defend Chris McCandless from his critics.

Chapter 1, The Alaska Interior

Chapter 1, The Alaska Interior Summary and Analysis

The chapter begins with a postcard written by McCandless, addressed to Wayne Westerberg in Carthage, South Dakota. McCandless, who signs the postcard "Alex," speaks of his regard for Westerberg and mentions the possibility that he may not return alive from his wilderness adventure in Alaska. Chapter 1 sets the precedent, which the author will follow in each subsequent chapter, of opening the chapters with quotations. These opening quotations are carefully selected to set the tone and mood for the contents of each new chapter. In some cases, the author's chapter conclusion is summed up by the beginning quotation.

Jim Gallien first encounters Alex four miles outside of Fairbanks, Alaska, hitchhiking by the side of the road. Despite the rifle the young hitchhiker carries, Gallien decides to give him a ride. The hitchhiker introduces himself as Alex, refusing to give a last name. Alex tells Gallien of his plans to walk into the wilderness near Denali National Park to live off the land for several months. Gallien knows that ill-prepared city folk often come to Alaska to take refuge from their lives in the wilderness. Such greenhorns usually underestimate the wilderness to their own peril. However, Alex appears intelligent, and he asks Gallien informed questions about the flora and fauna of Alaska.

Nonetheless, Alex seems frighteningly unprepared for his sojourn. He carries no food beyond a ten-pound bag of rice. Alex's cheap boots are not waterproof or well insulated, and his .22 caliber rifle is insufficient for killing large game. Alex does have a road map, which he found at a gas station, but he has no compass or other navigational aid. Alex intends to travel the Stampede Trail, a faint track in the wilderness well off the beaten path. Gallien tries repeatedly, in vain, to dissuade the young man from his plan. Gallien even offers to purchase some decent gear for him. This offer is refused. Alex admits that no one, including his parents, knows of his plans. Alex's excitement about the trip overwhelms Gallien's attempts to reason with him. In the end, Gallien presses a pair of rubber work boots and a brown bag lunch on the boy before dropping him off at the Stampede Trail. Gallien briefly considers notifying the authorities, but decides Alex will give up on his foolish plan soon enough.

Chapter 2, The Stampede Trail

Chapter 2, The Stampede Trail Summary and Analysis

Graffiti written by Alexander Supertramp near the scene of Chris McCandless' death reads "*Jack London is King*" (pg. 9.) Krakauer provides a quote from Jack London's *White Fang* about the mirthless and merciless frozen Northern wilderness. This quote sets the tone for the chilling struggle for survival which is about to unfold.

The Stampede Trail traverses some fifty miles of boggy bottomland separating Mt. Healy and the Outer Range of Mt. McKinley. Blazed in the 1930s by an Alaskan miner, named Earl Pilgrim, the trail originally led to Pilgrim's mining claims along Stampede Creek. In the early 1960s, the trail was upgraded by Yutan Construction to an actual roadway meant to allow trucks to haul ore year-round from the mines. To house the construction workers laying down the roadway, Yutan converted three buses for wilderness camping use and placed them along the Stampede Trail using a D-9 Caterpillar. The buses were outfitted with bunks and a barrel stove. The new roadway was laid, but no bridges were ever put in to cross the many rivers, which the road intersects. Seasonal flooding and thawing permafrost brought construction to a halt and have since obliterated the roadway. When the construction workers pulled out, Yucatan left behind one of the converted buses to be used by area hunters. It remains beside the Stampede Trail to this day.

Moose hunters frequent the parcel of land where the bus lies, because this land is surrounded on three sides by protected wilderness areas, ensuring a bountiful game supply. Each fall, the bus sees a handful of hunters. In September of 1992, by coincidence, three groups of people arrive at the normally deserted bus on the same day. Ken Thompson, Gordon Samel and Ferdie Swanson head down the Stampede Trail for the start of moose season. The first ten miles of trail is a maintained roadway, which subsequently tapers into a faint wilderness track. With their off-road trucks, the hunters drive another ten miles down the barely discernible track then plunge through the icy waters of the Teklanika River.

At this point in the season, the river is seventy-five feet across with swift currents. The daring hunters drive through one by one, prepared to tow each other out with a strong winch, if any of the vehicles are swamped. At the far bank, the hunters park their vehicles and continue on in the ATVs they carry in the back of the trucks. When they encounter chest-deep beaver ponds flooding the trail, the hunters merely dynamite the dams and wait for the ponds to drain before proceeding. The author's choice to describe the difficulties faced by these extremely well-prepared hunters sets the groundwork for McCandless's story. Crossing the river to return to civilization would be virtually impossible for the ill-equipped McCandless. Later, as Krakauer details McCandless's entry into the wild, this river crossing becomes a critical factor leading to his death.

The hunters arrive at the bus in late afternoon and find a couple from Anchorage standing nearby. The couple is upset and nervous about entering the bus. A terrible smell comes from inside and a note on the door indicates the occupant is injured and near death. The note is signed Chris McCandless. Gordon Samel peers inside the bus and discovers McCandless's decomposing body. Samel wants to evacuate the body, but there is no space on the ATVs. A hunter from Healy, Alaska, named Butch Killian, arrives on the scene shortly thereafter with a larger ATV, but Killian insists on contacting the State Troopers to evacuate the body. Killian, a volunteer firefighter, drives five miles down the trail, until his two-way radio gets a signal. He requests law enforcement assistance.

By highlighting the difficulty of making radio contact in this wilderness area, the author again shows how even a well-equipped individual could easily come to harm here. This ominous tone lays the groundwork for the author's conclusion that McCandless handled himself well, as opposed to being a foolish greenhorn, as his critics contend. Krakauer makes it clear that even a seasoned and well-equipped individual or group must contend with the dominant force of nature for survival. This grim tone underscores the harsh realities of this wilderness area, so that the reader will understand how incredible it is that McCandless survived sixteen weeks on sheer determination and ingenuity. In presenting the harsh facts of wilderness survival, the author pursues the thesis he will ultimately present, that McCandless understood the risks he faced and came fully prepared to surmount them.

At eight-thirty the next morning, a police helicopter lands beside the bus. The troopers examine the scene for foul play, then evacuate McCandless's body and some of his personal effects, including a camera, five rolls of used film, the note, and a diary written on blank pages in a field guide to edible plants. The diary contains 113 brief entries recording McCandless's experiences. In Anchorage, the coroner cannot determine a precise time of death due to the badly decayed state of the body. No broken bones or massive injuries are found. The body's stores of subcutaneous fat are virtually gone, and the muscles show significant atrophy. The official cause of death is starvation. Aside from McCandless's signature on the note, there is no identification on the body, leaving authorities with the task of tracking down the dead man's identity.

Chapter 3, Carthage

Chapter 3, Carthage Summary and Analysis

A quotation from Leo Tolstoy about the love of danger opens this chapter. The author notes that McCandless had underlined this particular passage in Tolstoy's *Family Happiness*, one of the books found with his remains. The title of the book, *Family Happiness*, also sets the stage for Krakauer to discuss McCandless's family. This book will be quoted in later chapters as well, when Krakauer delves into the McCandless family history in greater detail.

Carthage, South Dakota is a small town on the northern plains with 274 inhabitants. In its lone bar, the Cabaret, Wayne Westerberg meets with the author to reflect on the young man he knew as Alex. Westerberg drinks a White Russian, Alex' favorite drink, and speaks fondly of Alex. Westerberg first met "Alex McCandless," when he offered the young hitchhiker a lift. Something in Alex' demeanor caused Westerberg to take the boy under his wing. Alex' destination was Saco Hot Springs, but when Westerberg had taken him as far as his route permitted, it was dark and pouring down rain. He offered Alex a place to sleep and a job with his combine crew. Alex hadn't eaten in several days, but that night, Westerberg's friends fed him heartily. Alex fell asleep at the table. Alex stayed on for three days. Before he left, Westerberg told him he'd have a job waiting in Carthage anytime he wanted it. Several weeks later, Alex did return to Carthage to work for Westerberg. Alex was not the first hitchhiker Westerberg employed, but he was the hardest working. Westerberg comments on Alex' intelligence. He wonders if Alex became so muddled up in trying to understand the world that it got him in trouble.

After employing Alex, Westerberg learns his real name is Chris. Alex alludes to problems between him and his parents, but Westerberg never pries, figuring Alex has good reason to feel as he does. Alex finds a surrogate family with his new friends in Carthage. Alex lives in the Westerberg home, where a casual sense of community prevails. Alex likes Carthage, but when Westerberg is sentenced to four months in jail for making illegal satellite-television boxes, his grain elevator business shuts down for the duration. Alex presents Westerberg with a copy of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and leaves town. From that day forward, Alex considers Carthage his home residence. He even has his mail sent to Westerberg's address.

McCandless's actual hometown is Annandale, Virginia. His father, Walt McCandless, is a highly respected aerospace engineer, who worked for NASA before launching his own consulting firm in 1978. Billie McCandless, Chris's mother, is Walt's partner in the business. Together, they have two children, Chris and Carine, and Walt also has five children from his previous marriage. While attending Emory University in Atlanta, Chris writes and edits for the student newspaper. He is asked to join an honor society, but declines, because he feels such honors are meaningless. Chris's last two years of college are paid for by a forty-thousand-dollar inheritance from a family friend. He is

expected to use the remaining balance of twenty-four thousand dollars to pay for law school. Instead, Chris donates the money to OXFAM America, a charity to feed the hungry.

When Chris graduates from Emory, his parents have no idea their son is about to give away all his money and hit the road, indefinitely. Uncharacteristically, Chris presents his mother with flowers for Mother's Day. Normally, Chris eschews giving or receiving gifts. In fact, when Walt and Billie offer to buy Chris a new car for graduation and pay for his law school, Chris becomes upset. He tells them he is very happy with his beloved 1982 Datsun B210, and later writes a letter to Carine venting his fury over their offer. He believes his parents are trying to buy his respect. Chris bought the Datsun on his own in high school and has often taken it on the road for extended solo trips. Thus, after college, when he tells his parents that he intends to '"disappear for a while,'" they don't realize they have lost him permanently (pg. 21.) Chris indicates he may visit them before he leaves for his road trip and sends a nice thank-you note to his parents after the graduation ceremony. That thank-you note is the last contact he will ever have with his family.

Chris had been separating himself gradually from the family for a while. During his final year of college, he lived off-campus in a monkish apartment with no telephone. By August of 1990, Walt and Billie become concerned, because they've heard nothing from Chris since his graduation. They drive to Atlanta to visit his apartment, only to find that Chris moved out at the end of June. When they return home, they find that the post office has forwarded them all of Chris's mail, which had been held until August 1 at Chris's instruction. Billie realizes Chris held the mail so his parents would not know he had already left. By the time his parents arrive at his former apartment in Atlanta, Chris McCandless has already hit the road. He heads west from Atlanta in his Datsun and rechristens himself Alexander Supertramp.

The author presents Wayne Westerberg and the McCandless family together in this chapter to offer a comparison between Chris's feelings of alienation from his own family, and his subsequent desire to create a new family unit in Carthage. The flashbacks to Chris' time in Carthage and his college graduation are not chronologically linked, thus the choice to pair these flashbacks together highlights the importance of Westerberg in Chris's life. Having his mail forwarded to the Westerberg residence in Carthage symbolizes Chris's complete break with his family of origin. Unable or unwilling to confront his family directly, Chris uses the postal service to show how his family allegiance has shifted from the McCandlesses to the Westerbergs. The quote from *Family Happiness*, which opens the chapter, hints at the importance of family roles in Chris's life. Chris may have abandoned his family, but the organization of this chapter shows the author's belief that family is the driving motivation behind Chris's actions.

Chapter 4, Detrital Wash

Chapter 4, Detrital Wash Summary and Analysis

Paul Shepard's work, *Man in the Landscape*, is quoted at the beginning of Chapter 4. The quoted passage speaks of the spiritual pilgrimage, which the desert climate offers, and how one can find reality by retreating from it for a time.

In October of 1990, National Park Ranger, Bud Walsh, discovers an abandoned vehicle on the bed of the Detrital Wash, on the Arizona side of Lake Mead. The car is an old yellow Datsun with no license plates. A note on its windshield reads, "'This piece of shit has been abandoned. Whoever can get it out of here can have it.'" (pg. 26) Inside the car is a Gianini guitar, some old clothes, loose change, twenty-five pounds of rice and the keys to the ignition. The vehicle is jump-started without difficulty and, at the time of publication, is still in use by the Park Service for undercover drug sting operations. Ranger Walsh enthuses that the car is an extremely reliable vehicle.

Chris McCandless came to abandon his once-beloved Datsun in the Wash after getting caught in one of the flash floods common to the region during infrequent rains. Unfamiliar with the territory, McCandless had not realized he was camped in a potential flood zone. When the waters came, he only had time to evacuate his tent. After the waters receded, McCandless drained the battery with his impatient attempts to start the car, before it fully dries. Without insurance, registration or a current driver's license, McCandless cannot afford to call the authorities for help. Besides, he is camped in an area off-limits to the public. McCandless decides the incident is a blessing, for it has freed him from the burden of possessing a vehicle. To symbolize his new freedom, he sets fire to his remaining cash reserves, one hundred and twenty-three dollars.

McCandless buries his Winchester rifle for later recovery, then sets out on foot to hike around Lake Mead. He later writes in his journal that this is a mistake. The extreme July temperatures in the desert cause him to become delirious. McCandless manages to hitch a ride with some boaters on Lake Mead, who take him to a marina on the west side of the lake. Here, he resumes hitchhiking and prowls the West for two months, enthralled by the landscape. He meets other vagabonds during his travels and has a few problems with law enforcement personnel. While hitchhiking, he accepts a job offer in northern California. When his new employer refuses to pay him, he steals a bicycle and rides away. McCandless is befriended by a couple of fellow drifters. Jan Burres and her boyfriend, Bob, feed the hungry young man, who calls himself Alex. Burres has a son Alex's age from whom she is estranged. Alex is proud that he's been surviving on edible plants, which he identifies from a book. However, Burres is concerned, when she hears he burned his money. Alex leaves them but stays in touch by sending postcards from time to time.

Walt and Billie McCandless receive a ticket issued to their son for hitchhiking near Eureka, California, dated August 10. "In an uncharacteristic lapse, McCandless gave his

parents' Annandale address when the arresting officer demanded to know his permanent place of residence." (pg. 31) The author draws no conclusion regarding this "uncharacteristic lapse," but the importance McCandless gives to his address of record has been previously addressed. His choice to change his address was so deliberate and conscious, it seems unlikely he would have given out his parents' address by mistake. This suggests McCandless wants them to know where he is, and that he is all right. McCandless left home with the deliberate intention of hurting his parents and punishing them for something he could not discuss with them. Perhaps, his "lapse" is a reflection of his ambivalent feelings. His desire for freedom from his family may be conflicting with an unconscious desire to work out his family issues.

In any case, upon receiving the ticket, Walt and Billie hire a private investigator, named Peter Kalitka. McCandless is long gone from California before Kalitka begins his search, however. Kalitka is unable to turn up any information until December, when Chris's tax records reveal that he donated his college fund to OXFAM. Walt and Billie are beside themselves. Why would Chris be hitchhiking, when he loves his Datsun so much? Why would their son give away his entire savings? Kalitka is unable to answer those questions. By now, Chris is in Carthage meeting Wayne Westerberg.

After Westerberg is jailed in September, Chris again seeks the warmer climate of the West. He hitchhikes to Needles, California, then walks through the desert to Topock, Arizona. Here, he purchases a secondhand aluminum canoe and decides to paddle down the Colorado River to the Gulf of California, which is across the border in Mexico. By the end of November, he has reached Yuma, Arizona. He mails a lengthy postcard to Westerberg, thanking him again for his hospitality. Using the name Alex again, he tells Westerberg how much he loves the natural beauty of Arizona. Alex speaks of his deep respect for Westerberg and reminds him to read *War and Peace*, a book Alex feels most people are incapable of understanding, but which he knows Westerberg will love. Notably, in the letter, Alex also complains that tramping is too easy with the money he earned working for Westerberg. He prefers the challenge of foraging for his food.

On December 2, Alex crosses the Mexican border without any trouble. Once in Mexico, his canoe trip becomes difficult, because the river peters out into marshland containing many dead-end channels. McCandless's diary for this period, in which he refers to himself in the third person as Alex, tells of his persistence in believing there is a river route to the Gulf of California, although the evidence strongly suggests otherwise. Not to be deterred, Alex carries his canoe overland to the Wellteco Canal after two local canal officials suggest it may connect with the Gulf of California. Alex is helped along the way by other Mexican locals and decides they are a friendlier people than Americans. On December 9, Alex's journal indicates his despair upon finding that the Wellteco Canal dead-ends in a swamp. Unwilling to give up or turn back, Alex enters the swamps and becomes lost. He despairs and weeps in his canoe. Then, he has the good fortune to find some duck hunters in the marsh, who agree to drive him and his canoe to the ocean.

McCandless spends a month camped out by the sea on a great desert of shifting sand dunes. On January 11, 1991, he writes about the fateful events of the day in his journal.

A storm sweeps his canoe out to sea. He finds himself helpless against the storm. Screaming in frustration, Alex smashes his oar against the canoe. Realizing he will die if he loses the other oar, Alex forces himself to calm down. Somehow, he manages to steer his canoe safely to shore. This incident convinces him to abandon his canoe and head back north. He has survived on rice and food caught from the sea for some two months. Here, the author intrudes on the narrative to state that this survival experience becomes a critical factor in Alex's later belief that he can survive in the Alaskan wilderness on nothing but rice, and what he can forage or kill from the land.

On January 18, immigration authorities catch McCandless, as he reenters the United States. They confiscate his Colt Python .38-caliber handgun, but McCandless is able to talk his way out of custody and spends the next six weeks traveling the Southwest. In Los Angeles, he rejoins society to obtain an ID and a job, but his journal entry reports that he no longer feels comfortable in the society of others. He feels the need to escape again, and soon hitches his way to the Grand Canyon. In a diary entry for February, he muses that despite having lost twenty-five pounds to malnutrition, his spirit is uplifted, and he scarcely believes he's the same person who set out on the road in July.

McCandless returns to Detrital Wash but finds his vehicle gone. He retrieves the belongings he buried and hitches into Las Vegas, where he takes a job at a restaurant. Before entering the city, he buries everything he owns just outside the city limits. He lives on the streets with other homeless people until May 10, when he again desires to hit the road. In his journal, he exalts that he is living life to its fullest and has discovered real meaning. He thanks God for the gift of life.

Chapter 5, Bullhead City

Chapter 5, Bullhead City Summary and Analysis

Jack London's reference to the "dominant primordial beast" in *The Call of the Wild* is echoed by a graffiti quote found in the abandoned bus on the Stampede Trail. Alexander Supertramp's graffiti hails the dominant primordial beast and Captain Ahab. The Captain Ahab reference will later become important to the author's thesis. This quote, then, helps Krakauer lay the groundwork for his conclusions.

McCandless's camera is ruined, when he buries it outside Vegas. With its loss, he discontinues his journal entries, as well. Thus, little is known of his movements after leaving Las Vegas in May of 1991. A letter sent to Jan Burres indicates he spends July and August in Oregon, along the coast. The fog and rain drive him back to California and then into the desert, once again. He arrives in Bullhead City, Arizona in October, where McCandless chooses to remain for a time. Krakauer suggests McCandless likes Bullhead City because of the high population percentage of working class people and the stark desert scenery. McCandless stays in Bullhead City for more than two months, the longest stop on his travels since leaving Atlanta the previous July. In a letter to Westerberg, McCandless indicates he might settle down in Bullhead City, at least through the winter, until springtime makes him restless, once again.

McCandless obtains a job at McDonald's and opens a savings account at a local bank. He even uses his real name and Social Security number with his employer. McCandless tries to disguise the fact that he is homeless, but the other employees complain about his body odor. He is a hard worker, so the company keeps him on despite his poor hygiene. One former co-worker describes McCandless's abhorrence for socks. He would wear them during his shift per company policy. However, the moment his shift ended, McCandless would remove his socks as if making a statement that the company did not own him. An Assistant Manager, Lori Zarza believes McCandless ultimately quit, because he was embarrassed about the teasing he faced due to his body odor.

While in Bullhead City, McCandless is provided free housing in a vacant mobile home by a man, named Charlie. McCandless describes Charlie as "a lunatic," who is difficult to get along with (pg. 41.) Charlie describes McCandless as a decent young man, although moody and in apparent search of something. Charlie does not believe McCandless knew what he was searching for, exactly. In November, McCandless sends a postcard to Jan Burres. Thrilled that McCandless has a return address, Jan writes back right away, asking to come visit. McCandless enthusiastically agrees and provides her detailed directions to the mobile home in Bullhead City, but before Jan and her boyfriend Bob leave for the visit, Alex turns up unexpectedly at their door. He tells them that he got tired of the "'plastic people'" he was working with, quit his job and left town (pg. 43.)

Jan and Bob are at the Slabs, when Alex arrives. The Slabs is a city of drifters, which has sprung up over the empty concrete foundations of an abandoned naval base. It is a seasonal city, where drifters of all types come to live for the winter. An impromptu flea market is up and running when Alex arrives, and he volunteers to help Jan Burres sell her secondhand paperbacks. Burres reports that Alex was a great help to her and enjoyed working with the public while selling the books. Alex tells everyone he sees to read *The Call of the Wild*. His fascination with Jack London dates back to his childhood. Alex believes in London's condemnations of capitalism and his love for the unwashed masses. The author intrudes into the narrative to mention that McCandless seemingly overlooks the fact that Jack London's real life does not mirror his literary ideals. Krakauer's comment speaks to his thesis that McCandless was an idealistic but impressionable youth, who would likely have reached a more mature viewpoint had he survived.

A seventeen-year-old girl, named Tracy, becomes infatuated with McCandless during his stay at the Slabs. McCandless, however, appears intent on maintaining a celibate existence and does not take the teenager's crush seriously. McCandless is not anti-social, however, insists Jan Burres. During this time, he flirts with her constantly and makes many friends in the camp. McCandless devotes time each day to getting himself in shape for the trip to Alaska, which he has now decided to undertake. His enthusiasm for the trip is boundless, and he speaks of it frequently to Burres and Bob. Burres becomes concerned about Alex's plans and questions him thoroughly about his parents, encouraging him to call his mother. Burres divines that Alex hails from the Washington, D.C. area, because he roots for the Redskins on television one day, but she is able to glean no further information from him.

When Alex leaves the camp, he accepts a fifty-mile ride from Burres to Salton City, where Alex has McDonald's send his final paycheck. However, when Burres attempts to pay him for his work at the flea market, Alex is offended by her offer. She insists on giving him some knives as payment in kind that she hopes he might trade for necessities further down the road. She tries to give him some warmer clothing to take to Alaska, but he hides the clothes in her van and leaves them there. This section demonstrates the inconsistency of Alex's belief system. He is offended that Burres wishes to pay him wages for working at her flea-market booth, but he has no trouble asking her to drive a hundred miles roundtrip so that he can pick up his McDonald's paycheck. Nor does he hesitate to accept goods from her in lieu of money, although the knives likely cost Burres as much as a cash payment would have. This double standard indicates Alex's romantic mindset about money. He denies himself money often at others' expense and feels that his self-denial puts him on higher moral ground than everyone else.

Chapter 6, Anza-Borrego

Chapter 6, Anza-Borrego Summary and Analysis

A quotation from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* precedes Chapter 6. The author divulges the contents of a letter he received in January of 1993. The letter requests a copy of the article about Alex McCandless. Forwarded to Krakauer by *Outside* magazine, the letter's shaky penmanship leads Krakauer to conclude the author was elderly. Its author, Ronald Franz, desires to get in touch with Krakauer to discuss McCandless. Franz indicates he knew McCandless and wishes to know more about his death. Krakauer is once again moved by the effect McCandless had on the people he knew so briefly. Of everyone he met on the road, McCandless affected Ronald Franz most deeply.

After leaving Jan Burres at the Salton City Post Office, McCandless hikes into the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and sets up camp. Fifty miles from Palm Springs, the Salton Sea was created in 1905 by an engineering mishap causing water from the Colorado River to be diverted to a sunken desert flat in Salton. Some years ago, real estate speculators hoped to capitalize on this impromptu ocean by selling waterfront property. However, the development never got underway and today Salton City remains a small town. McCandless camps four miles from Salton City, and he occasionally goes into town for supplies. In mid-January, Ron Franz stops to give him a ride to his campsite. McCandless tells him he lives just beyond Oh-My-God Hot Springs. A six-year resident of Salton, Franz is nonetheless unfamiliar with the Hot Springs.

Oh-My-God Hot Springs turns out to be a hippie commune of sorts, which has sprung up around some natural hot springs. McCandless's camp is half a mile further into the desert. Franz gets to know Alex during the drive. Franz is an army veteran who lost his wife and only son in an automobile accident in 1957 while he was overseas in Okinawa. Afterwards, Franz began to unofficially adopt indigent Okinawan children, even paying for medical school for two of them as his own son had dreamed of attending medical school. After dropping Alex off, Franz returns to his apartment in town. After church the next Sunday, Franz decides to speak with Alex about his lifestyle. He sees intelligence and promise in Alex and hates to think of him wasting his life.

Back at Alex's camp, Franz is surprised to learn Alex already has an education. Alex claims he is not destitute and explains he is living, as he does by choice. Franz buys him dinner at a nice restaurant in Palm Springs and accompanies him to San Jacinto Peak where Alex buried some possessions the year before. Over the next several weeks, Alex spends time with Franz. He does his laundry at Franz's apartment and they barbecue steaks on Franz's grill. Alex turns the tables and lectures Franz on his lifestyle, telling eighty-year-old Franz he should sell his possessions and live on the road.

Alex speaks frequently of his plans to go to Alaska for the ultimate wilderness adventure. Franz enjoys Alex's company and teaches him the craft of leatherworking. Alex picks it up well and creates a tooled leather belt upon which he documents, through creative visual pictures and symbols, his entire journey to date. Ironically, McCandless's initials are inscribed in the belt surrounding a skull and crossbones. This is ostensibly a reference to the death of his former identity, not to his own physical death, but it lends to the author's tone and creates a somber forewarning of his impending death. Franz reminisces about Alex with the author. Franz's emotions cause him to halt his narrative periodically, indicating his abiding fondness for his late friend. Franz recalls Alex as being incredibly smart. However, McCandless was given to angry, passionate rants about politics, society, and his parents. Franz would keep quiet during these rants in order to avoid alienating Alex.

In February of 1992, Alex announces he is going to San Diego to earn money for his Alaskan odyssey. Franz offers to give him money, but Alex will not be thwarted from his plans. Finally, Alex agrees to allow Franz to drive him to San Diego. He leaves his belongings in Franz's apartment for safekeeping. Franz is extremely sorry to see Alex go, but drops him at the San Diego waterfront. Two weeks later McCandless calls Franz collect to wish him a happy eighty-first birthday. McCandless had just celebrated his own twenty-fourth birthday a week earlier. Alex admits to Franz that he is having a hard time finding work.

At the end of February, Alex mails a postcard to Jan Burres. He still can't find work and is living on the streets, eating in the homeless missions. He complains about being preached to at the missions and tells Burres he is heading north tomorrow. Alex states his decision to head to Alaska by May 1 but notes he needs to raise money first. He mentions the possibility of returning to Carthage, South Dakota to work for Westerberg. From Seattle, in March, McCandless sends cards to both Burres and Franz. He has discovered the art of train hopping and is thrilled at his quick progress cross-country. Alex reports a run in with an armed security officer. He is pleased with himself for getting the last laugh by successfully hopping the same train five minutes after being released by the officer, whom he refers to as a "lunatic!" (pg. 53)

A week later, Alex calls Franz collect and asks him to pick him up. Franz agrees even before he learns that Alex is not in Seattle, but in California only a few miles from Franz. Franz rushes to rescue Alex and buys him steak and lobster at Sizzler before bringing him back to Salton City. Alex tells Franz he intends to stay only one day, long enough to use Franz's washer and dryer. Alex has heard from Westerberg in Carthage and has a job waiting for him at the grain elevator. Franz drives him to Bullhead City so Alex can close out his savings account and pick up some belongings he left in Charlie's trailer. Then Franz drives him to Grand Junction, Colorado, which is the furthest Franz can go without missing a doctor's appointment scheduled for Monday. Franz gives Alex some arctic gear as a going away present.

Video footage from a camera Franz purchased specifically for the trip shows Alex at Bryce Canyon, impatient to be on his way. He looks healthy and fit. The trip is pleasant but rushed, according to Franz, who would have rather delayed the moment of parting.

Franz asks Alex if he will be his adopted grandson. Alex tells Ron they can talk about it after he returns from Alaska. On March 14, Franz drops Alex off at Grand Junction. "McCandless was thrilled to be on his way north, and he was relieved as well - relieved that he had again evaded the impending threat of human intimacy, of friendship, and all the messy emotional baggage that comes with it. He had fled the claustrophobic confines of his family. He'd successfully kept Jan Burres and Wayne Westerberg at arm's length, flitting out of their lives before anything was expected of him. And now he'd slipped painlessly out of Ron Franz's life as well." (pg. 55)

From Franz's point of view, the parting is hardly painless. Franz has developed a strong and genuine affection for Alex. Something of a loner himself, Franz had allowed Alex to penetrate his emotional defenses. Alex's sudden departure wounds Franz deeply.

A few weeks later, Franz receives a long letter from Alex. Alex reports that Westerberg has asked him to stay on for the summer, but Alex is adamant about leaving for Alaska by April 15. Alex asks if Franz attended the Rainbow gathering in March at the Oh-My-God Hot Springs, but suggests that Franz might not be capable of appreciating such a fun and wonderful gathering. Alex hints it will be a long time before he and Franz see each other again, and alludes to the possibility he might not survive his Alaskan adventure. However, he offers the hope of further contact between them, especially if Franz is willing to change his ways. Alex exhorts Franz to stop wasting his life, to sell his possessions and exchange boring security for "*a helter-skelter style of life*" (pg. 57.) He conveys his disappointment with Franz for Franz's unwillingness to stop and see the Grand Canyon on his solo return trip. Alex concludes by telling Franz that joy is found in nomadic existence, not in interdependent human relations. Alex states that Franz is stubbornly fighting his own happiness.

Shockingly, the eighty-one-year-old man takes Alex's advice. He sells his possessions, buys a camper, and begins living alone in nature on Alex's former camping spot near the hot springs. Krakauer reports that Ronald Franz is a pseudonym for the remarkable man who today appears healthy despite two previous heart attacks. Krakauer visits Franz at his camp in the desert a year after McCandless's death. Krakauer learns Franz had remained at Alex's old campsite until a flood washed the road away. Now, he camps twenty miles further out near the Borrego badlands. Oh-My-God Hot Springs was subsequently closed by the Health Commission. The official reason given was microbes in the hot springs, but the locals believe the springs were bulldozed because of the drifters they attracted. Franz had waited for eight months at the old campsite for Alex to return. The day after Christmas, Franz picked up a hitchhiker who had read of Alex's death in *Outdoor* magazine. Crushed, Franz bought a bottle of whiskey and drained it, hoping to die. Afterwards, he quit his church and became an atheist.

By devoting an entire chapter to Ronald Franz, Krakauer shows that despite his support of McCandless, the author sees the pain McCandless's abdication from human society caused to those who loved him. Krakauer demonstrates his own introspective abilities, even as he highlights McCandless's lack of self-awareness. McCandless projects his feelings onto Franz when he states that Franz is stubbornly fighting his own happiness. McCandless needs to convince Franz to live a nomadic life to justify his own choice to

leave society. This letter betrays McCandless's deeply buried misgivings, and by including it, the author reveals his deep understanding and kinship with McCandless. Although this chapter reveals McCandless in a very negative light, it ultimately lends weight to the author's point of view. Krakauer is able to exonerate McCandless despite, or perhaps because of, his stubborn youthful foolishness. Had Krakauer painted a one-dimensional, positive portrait of McCandless, the book would fall far short of supporting Krakauer's thesis.

Chapter 7, Carthage

Chapter 7, Carthage Summary and Analysis

Chapter 7 opens with two quotations, which provide support for McCandless's choice to avoid his family and the society of other people.

In South Dakota, Wayne Westerberg repairs a tractor against a deadline and with increasing bad temper. Afterwards, he apologizes to Krakauer, explaining that he and his crew are shorthanded since Alex did not return to work this fall as expected. It is two months since McCandless's death and seven months since Westerberg last saw him. Alex had worked hard for Westerberg, taking on the unskilled, hard jobs, which no one else wanted to do. Westerberg had tried to teach Alex a higher-skilled job, but Alex was not mechanically inclined. Westerberg also mentions that despite Alex's intelligence, he lacked common sense.

During Alex's final visit to Carthage, he becomes close to Westerberg's girlfriend, Gail Borah. Borah is a divorced mother of two teenagers. Like Westerberg, she takes Alex under her wing, cooking him dinner nearly every night. Sometimes, Alex cooks for her over at Westerberg's house. He is a good cook and extremely fond of rice. Alex confides many of his emotions to Borah. He does not divulge details about his family, but Alex tells Borah he is close to his sister, Carine. He never speaks of his parents and, at the time, Borah assumes he has legitimate reasons for leaving them behind. Since his death, she has reconsidered that viewpoint. Borah knows that many children have it rough at home, and no longer believes Alex's youth was any more difficult than anyone else's. She thinks he was obsessed with something that happened between him and his father and was somehow unable to get past it. Krakauer notes that Borah has guessed the situation fairly accurately, despite her lack of knowledge of the details.

Krakauer describes Chris and Walt McCandless as being very similar, both stubborn and temperamental individuals. Walt had a need to control, which clashed, with Chris's need for independence. Krakauer believes Chris raged and brooded inwardly throughout high school and college, chafing under his father's strict rule but never letting his anger show. Krakauer characterizes Chris's disappearance as an act of rebellion. Shortly before leaving, Chris had told his sister, Carine, that he planned to lull his parents into a false sense of security then cut them out of his life abruptly and decisively. In a letter to Carine he calls his parents idiots and vows never to speak to them again in his life. Presumably his beloved sister and confidante did not expect this excommunication to include her or society in general.

McCandless's coldness to his parents contrasts with the charm and warmth he exudes during his travels. Westerberg recalls Alex mentioning a desire to marry and produce a family some day. Alex didn't take relationships lightly, however, and had little experience with women. Borah agrees with this assessment. She tells of taking Alex out dancing with a group of friends. With little encouragement, Alex had come out of his shell and

danced all night. Carine later told Borah that she was one of the only females Alex had ever gone dancing with. Carine recalls her brother having close friendships with two or three girls in high school, but there is little evidence to suggest he was sexually active. McCandless's asceticism appears to have led him to a monkish existence. He valued chastity and moral purity as defined by Tolstoy and Thoreau. Like Thoreau, a lifelong virgin, McCandless's passion was reserved for nature.

Westerberg believes Alex's trip to Alaska was to be his final great adventure. Before leaving, Alex promises Westerberg he will return in time for the fall harvest. Alex spoke of writing books about his travels. Given his education, Westerberg thought that seemed likely. That final spring, Borah helps Alex shop for his supplies. In mid-April, Westerberg asks Alex to delay his departure for a couple of weeks, because he is shorthanded at work. Westerberg even offers to buy him a plane ticket afterwards so that Alex can still get to Alaska before May 1, as he intends. Alex won't hear of the delay and considers flying to Alaska to be cheating the journey. "'It would wreck the whole trip,"' he tells Westerberg (pg. 67.)

Westerberg, Borah, and several other people join Alex at the Cabaret bar for a going away party. They are surprised, when Alex demonstrates a heretofore-unknown talent for the piano. The next day, Alex cries when he hugs Borah goodbye. His tears frighten her. She realizes he is not sure he will survive his adventure. In Fairbanks, Alex sends final postcards to Westerberg and Jan Burres. He mentions the possibility of dying in the wild, says a final goodbye to his friends, and informs them they will not hear from him again.

Chapter 8, Alaska

Chapter 8, Alaska Summary and Analysis

The opening quotes in Chapter 8 speak of the pathological extremes of some creative people and of how the Alaskan wilderness is a harshly unsuitable setting for those individuals wishing to cure their souls in the wilderness.

Jon Krakauer reports receiving many angry letters for glorifying McCandless's story in *Outside* magazine. The letters Krakauer chooses to quote are thoughtful and insightful albeit highly critical of McCandless. One writer speaks of McCandless's hubris and ignorance. The author sums up the public response by saying, "The prevailing Alaska wisdom held that McCandless was simply one more dreamy half-cocked greenhorn who went into the country expecting to find answers to all his problems and instead found only mosquitoes and a lonely death." (pg. 72) These letters serve as a contextual bridge for the series of flashbacks, which the author now presents. Krakauer cites several examples of marginal individuals who have died in the Alaskan wilderness, presenting the details of their cases in hopes of supporting his thesis that McCandless was an uncommon individual, not the typical foolish greenhorn. The flashbacks provide an overview of more typical wilderness deaths. The author acknowledges some similarities in the cases, but in subsequent chapters seeks to prove that McCandless is different.

Krakauer personally met one of these men in 1981, Gene Rosellini, the Mayor of Hippie Cove. Rosellini came from a wealthy family and, as a young man, excelled athletically and academically, just like McCandless. Rosellini attended college for quite some time, accumulating many credits but no degree. He claimed he saw no need for the external validation of a degree. In 1977, he left school and devoted his life to living out an anthropological experiment. Rosellini wished to determine if it was possible to live independently of modern technology and society. He worried that humans had become so dependent on technology they could no longer survive on the land, as their ancient forebears had. Rosellini believed modern humans were inferior to their hardier ancestors.

Determined to uplift the human race by reacquiring the ability to live without technology, Rosellini divested himself of all tools and possessions, save those he made for himself. He lived in the woods above Hippie Cove outside Cordova, Alaska, hunting and foraging for his food. After ten years, Rosellini decided to end his experiment. In a letter to a friend, he wrote of his conclusion that human beings are no longer capable of living off the land. Forty-nine-years-old by this point, Rosellini announced his new intention to tramp around the world, living out of his backpack. Instead of taking this trip, however, Rosellini knifed himself through the heart in his shack in the woods. He left behind no suicide note.

Another such marginal character was John Mallon Waterman. Like McCandless, Waterman hailed from the suburbs surrounding Washington, D.C. The son of a musician

and talented political speechwriter, Waterman learned rock climbing from his father and developed an avid fascination for the sport. Waterman exercised obsessively, as Rosellini had, and first climbed Mt. McKinley at the age of sixteen. Waterman had a well-established reputation as a mountain climber by the time he entered the University of Alaska. Short in stature and socially awkward, Waterman's personality has been described by his acquaintances as manic-depressive. He liked to prance around campus with a black cape and a cheap guitar, playing the role of balladeer, as he sang about his wilderness adventures.

Waterman's parents divorced, when he was a teenager. His mother had a history of severe mental illness, and his older brother, Bill, lost a leg while hopping a freight train as a teenager. A few years later, Bill sent his family a letter indicating he was embarking on an extended trip and then vanished completely. The family never heard from Bill again. In addition to these difficulties, Waterman lost eight close climbing partners to accidents and suicide in his first years as a climber. In 1978, Waterman decided to climb Mt. Hunter's southeast spur on his own, a feat never achieved even by teams of climbers. Waterman achieved the snowy summit and descended safely, having spent 145 days in complete isolation. Upon his return, he borrowed twenty dollars from his friend, Cliff Hudson, the pilot who had flown him to the mountains. Then, he found a job as a dishwasher in Fairbanks. Despite these meager circumstances, Waterman was hailed as a hero by the local climbing fraternity. He gave memorable talks about his experiences.

Waterman became extremely compulsive in the wake of the Mt. Hunter climb. He began meticulously logging every event of his days. He followed an unsuccessful run for the local school board with a campaign for the presidency of the United States. His platform was to end world hunger, and he decided to make a solo ascent of the south face of Mt. Denali to publicize his campaign. He took very little food in an attempt to make a point about the wastefulness of the American diet. His pilot friend Hudson again flew him to the mountains, but after fourteen days, Waterman called it off, telling Hudson he didn't want to die. Yet, two months later, Waterman again prepared for the ascent. A cabin fire at the base of Denali incinerated his collection of journals, poetry and notes, causing severe distress to Waterman. He committed himself to a psychiatric institute, but checked out two weeks later. The next winter, he again decided to climb Denali.

Waterman insisted on beginning his solo ascent at sea level, 160 miles from the foot of the mountain. Waterman changed his mind thirty miles from the mountain peak and returned to town. The following March, he set out one more time to climb Denali alone. This time, he told his friend Hudson that he didn't expect to ever see him again. Alpinist Mugs Stump met up with Waterman on the upper Ruth Glacier and noted that Waterman was acting strangely. He wore a cheap snowsuit and carried no food except flour, sugar and Crisco. Kate Bull, a friend of Waterman's, also saw him on the Ruth Glacier, where Waterman stayed in a cabin, delaying his ascent for several weeks. According to author Glenn Randall in *Breaking Point*, Bull reported Waterman's demeanor as heedless, and his health as run down. Waterman borrowed her radio to call Hudson then returned it, insisting he had no further use for it. Waterman had no other means of calling for help. Waterman was last seen on April 1, 1981. Despite an

intensive search, his body was never found. It is presumed he fell to his death through a crevasse.

Jon Krakauer notes that parallels have been drawn between Waterman and McCandless. Parallels have also been drawn between McCandless and a Texan, named Carl McCunn. McCunn moved to Fairbanks in the 1970s to work on the Trans-Alaska Pipeline construction project. In 1981, shortly before Waterman's death, McCunn hired a bush pilot to fly him to a remote lake region near the Coleen River. McCunn was a photography buff, and his design was to shoot photos of the natural environment. He neglected to arrange to have the pilot return to pick him up, however. McCunn's friend, Mark Stoppel, claims that such practical oversights were typical of McCunn. McCunn depleted his food supply in his remote mountain cabin and began to fear death. Stoppel suspects that McCunn's magical thinking probably convinced him that someone would miraculously arrive to save him. McCunn made no attempt to walk out of the wild, and by the time his strength faded, it was too late. He ended his life with a bullet to the head.

Krakauer admits the similarities between Waterman, McCunn and McCandless, including McCandless's lack of common sense. However, Krakauer states that McCandless, unlike the other two, was not mentally ill. McCandless had no illusion that someone would come to save him. He truly intended to make a go of it alone. Krakauer's personal bias is evident in this statement. In fact, McCandless learned in the swampy canals of Mexico that strangers would come to his rescue. McCandless, a spiritual man, termed this earlier rescue by Mexican hunters a "miracle." The note McCandless left on the bus door just prior to his death indicates that he hoped for another such miracle.

McCandless may or may not have been mentally ill, but he stubbornly refused to see any evidence to contradict his point of view. McCandless believed he could survive without money and became resentful whenever anyone offered him money, yet he accepted food, lodging, and other assistance from kind strangers. How did the strangers obtain these material comforts except with money? McCandless didn't seem to realize that he was only able to survive without money, because he thoughtlessly spent other people's money. He was equally thoughtless in accepting rides from other people. The freedom he felt by abandoning his car was afforded by the others in his life who drove him where he needed to go. McCandless felt completely independent of human society, where in truth he relied on it utterly.

These points are not addressed in the narrative due to the author's personal bias. Nonetheless, by presenting the stories of Waterman and McCunn, the author does provide a balanced portrait, which allows the reader to draw an independent conclusion. Krakauer believes McCandless is better compared to a young man, named Everett Ruess, whom he introduces in the next chapter.

Chapter 9, Davis Gulch

Chapter 9, Davis Gulch Summary and Analysis

A letter from Everett Ruess to his brother, Waldo, precedes Chapter 9. In the letter, Reuss declares Waldo's life to be too boring for Reuss's taste. Reuss admits he occasionally misses the company of his fellows, but indicates that most of humanity is too unintelligent to converse with anyway. Reuss describes his love for the wilderness and his intention to stay away from city life. A subsequent quotation from *Mormon Country* magazine compares Reuss with the celebrated author, John Muir.

Davis Gulch in southern Utah houses a watery oasis in its midst. Wilderness travelers from the early Kayenta Anasazi Indians to turn-of-the-century American cattlemen have used this water source. Ancient rock art, pottery, and rusty tin cans mark their former presence here. A little known passage carved into the rock by Mormon cattlemen leads from the creek up into the dry gulch. A mile downstream of this passage is an inscription carved by twenty-year-old Everett Ruess. It reads, "NEMO 1934" (pg. 89.)

Ruess was born in Oakland, California. His father, Christopher Ruess, was a graduate of Harvard Divinity School who became a Unitarian minister, a poet, and worked in the California penal system. His mother, Stella, was a bohemian artist and self-published a literary journal. As a youth, Everett attends art school and Hollywood High before leaving for his first solo adventure, a summer-long trek through Yosemite and Big Sur. Later that summer, Ruess introduces himself to a well-known photographer in Carmel and becomes his apprentice of sorts. Everett returns home to get his high school diploma, then hits the road again, this time traveling alone through the canyons of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. Afterwards Ruess makes two extended visits to his parents, attends one semester at UCLA, and stays one winter in San Francisco in the company of well-known photographers and painters. These are his final visits to civilization.

Ruess spends the remainder of his days living out of a backpack and sleeping on the ground. Ruess's letters, collected in W. L. Rusho's biography, *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*, echo McCandless's transcendent joy of nature. Ruess states that even his friends do not understand him and never will, for he has "*gone too far alone*." (pg. 91) Like McCandless, Ruess adopts a series of new names. Eventually Ruess returns to his given name, but when his wanderings take him to Davis Gulch, he twice carves his name into sandstone as Nemo. Ruess's father suggests the name derives from Jules Verne's book, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. The book, a favorite of Ruess's, features a protagonist, named Captain Nemo.

Krakauer does not belabor the parallel between Ruess's reference to Captain Nemo and McCandless's graffiti reference to Captain Ahab, but it is remarkable that both young men leave similar references at the site of their deaths. Krakauer draws a parallel between Ruess and the well-respected John Muir by quoting their writings together at the beginning of this chapter. Krakauer considers Ruess's case history more

respectable than the case histories presented in the previous chapter, and believes McCandless is more like Ruess and John Muir than he is like Waterman, McCunn, or Rosellini.

Like McCandless, Reuss posts several letters shortly before his death indicating that he will be out of touch for an indefinite period. Three months later, his worried parents receive a bundle of mail forwarded by the post office at Marble Canyon Arizona, because Ruess never shows up to collect the mail. A search party is organized in 1935. The Nemo graffiti is found in Davis Gulch, along with Ruess's two pack burros, but neither Ruess nor his possessions are ever found. Many people believe Ruess fell to his death from the canyon wall, but no remains have been found, making this scenario unlikely. The presence of Ruess's burros in the gulch has led others to assume he was murdered by cattle rustlers and his belongings stolen. Others believe Ruess lived on, alone in the wild.

Ken Sleight, an author and Ruess researcher, believes Ruess died in 1934 or 1935 by drowning. Sleight believes Ruess corralled his burros and exited the gulch by the rugged trail blazed by Mormon pioneers. Sleight feels a kinship with Ruess and understands that the desire to be alone contends with the desire to seek occasional companionship. Thus, Sleight believes Ruess was headed to visit friends in a Navajo reservation across the San Juan River, when he died in the river. Sleight believes both McCandless and Ruess are notable, because they both attempted to follow their dreams.

To expand the context of the discussion, Krakauer introduces the *papar*, Irish monks from the fifth and sixth centuries. A.D. The *papar* settled in Iceland, but when a handful of Norwegian settlers also arrived, the *papar* felt crowded and rowed off for Greenland. Many *papar* lost their lives in pursuit of their spiritual ideal of seclusion from the world's temptations. Krakauer believes both Ruess and McCandless pursued the same ideals as these Irish monks. Thus through this carefully ordered discussion of other wilderness deaths, Krakauer gradually and artfully transforms the reader's view of McCandless from mentally ill isolationist to knowledgeable spiritual seeker.

Chapter 10, Fairbanks

Chapter 10, Fairbanks Summary and Analysis

An article from *The New York Times*, dated September 13, 1992, details the death of Chris McCandless. At the time of publication, McCandless's identity had not been fully ascertained and so is not disclosed in the excerpt.

Jim Gallien reads a similar article in the *Anchorage Daily News* on September 10. The article indicates the body was found twenty-five miles west of Healy on the Stampede Trail. With a sick feeling, Gallien realizes the dead youth is likely the same hitchhiker he picked up and delivered to the Stampede Trail. He calls the State Troopers to help identify the body, but so many calls have come in about the article that the troopers are skeptical. Gallien's persistence sways the trooper, as does a reference to "Galliean" [sic] in the dead hiker's journal. The officers have developed the film found in the dead man's camera and bring the photos to Gallien's job site for identification. Gallien provides a positive ID and relays Alex's statement that he came from South Dakota.

An all points bulletin in South Dakota coincidentally turns up a missing person also named McCandless. However, this is a false lead. Wayne Westerberg hears about the unknown man's death on local AM radio, however, and contacts the police. The Alaska State Troopers have by now been inundated with false reports of the dead man's identity and are even less receptive to Westerberg than they initially were to Gallien. Westerberg finds Alex's real name and Social Security number on his employment paperwork and calls the troopers back. Authorities in Alaska trace the Social Security number to northern Virginia and contact law enforcement there. Walt and Billie McCandless have since moved to the Maryland shore, but the Virginia police find a local telephone listing for Sam McCandless, Walt's eldest son from his first marriage.

Sam had seen an article about the hiker but had not connected it with Chris. Nonetheless, the police description of the hiker sounds terribly familiar to Sam. Sam identifies Chris from photographs at the Fairfax County Police Department. He and his wife drive to Maryland to give the bad news to Chris's parents.

Chapter 11, Chesapeake Beach

Chapter 11, Chesapeake Beach Summary and Analysis

Samuel Walter McCandless, Jr., Chris's father, receives Jon Krakauer in his home seven weeks after his son's death. "'How is it,' he wonders aloud, as he gazes blankly across Chesapeake Bay, 'that a kid with so much compassion could cause his parents so much pain?"' (pg. 104) The McCandless's well-appointed home features a photographic memorial to Chris, currently occupying the dining-room table. Billie shows Krakauer photos of Chris as a toddler, and as an eight-year-old on his first backpacking trip. Walt states that of all his children, he had spent the most time with Chris and really enjoyed his company.

Walt has Top Secret Defense Department clearance in connection with his work on advanced radar technology. He is a man accustomed to being in charge, and his electric intensity brings to mind Chris's intensity. In response to Chris's disappearance in 1990, Walt has mellowed his take-charge personality and has become more tolerant. Walt's strict discipline perhaps results from his early poverty. He is a self-made man who has worked long and hard to achieve his success. Like Chris, Walt has a gift for music and even played professionally to support himself in college. However, his work in the aerospace industry has brought him his greatest successes. At Hughes Aircraft, Walt had met Chris's mother, Billie. At the time, Walt was separated from his first wife, Marcia.

Walt and Billie moved in together and Billie soon gave birth to Chris. Walt bought her a Gianini guitar on which she played lullabies for Chris. This is the same guitar the National Park Service later found in Chris's abandoned Datsun. From an early age, Chris demonstrated high intelligence and an iron determination. However, he did not like to do the extra work required of him by the gifted classes at school. As a child, Chris enjoyed solitary pursuits, although he got along well with his peers. The family moved to Annandale when Chris was six and Walt took a position at NASA. By now, younger sister Carine had joined the family. She recalls that money was tight, and her parents worked long hours. Walt had to provide for two families, for he had five children with Marcia before meeting Billie.

Eventually, Walt and Billie's consulting company took off and their financial picture greatly improved. Nonetheless, life for the McCandless children was often stressful. Their parents' tension led to frequent verbal disputes, and the word divorce was thrown around as a frequent threat. Carine recalls many happy times, too. The family often took vacations to scenic destinations, camping out in the back of Walt's Chevy Suburban and later in an Airstream trailer. Walt acknowledges that wanderlust runs in the family. He believes that Chris was most like Billie's father, however. Loren Johnson was a truck driver who never held a job or stayed in one place for long. Billie's dad loved animals. Loren often kept food on the table by hunting, but he would cry every time he shot a

deer. Loren and Chris developed a close bond and Chris greatly admired Loren's savvy as an outdoorsman. Walt recalls young Chris's fearlessness in the woods.

Chris got straight A's at school with one notable exception, an F in high school physics. Walt spoke to the physics teacher and learned that the teacher, a retired air force colonel, had a strict format requirement for all lab reports. The teacher explained that, because he had two hundred students, it was important for him to receive his reports in a standard format. Chris intentionally flouted the format every time and received an F. Walt supported the teacher's decision. Chris and Carine were close throughout school despite their natural sibling rivalry. Walt notes that Chris only enjoyed things that came easily to him. He excelled in cross-country track but lacked the discipline to acquire the learned skills of a game like racquetball. Walt recalls Chris's natural aptitude for racquetball and his refusal to improve his game. Chris usually won handily, but when confronted with a more experienced opponent, Chris's lack of knowledge caused him to lose badly.

His cross-country teammates recall the grueling workouts Chris, as team captain, imposed on them. Chris would have the team run overland until they got lost, then have them continue running until they recognized a landmark and could race back home. Chris often used spirituality to motivate his teammates. As impressionable youngsters, his teammates got behind Chris's philosophy that they were trying to outrun the evil in the world. Chris was very attached to Carine's dog, Buck, and thrilled whenever he outraced the dog. Chris did not take defeat well. He frequently beat himself up in solitude after losing so much as a practice race.

McCandless carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, agonizing over racism and other social inequities. One night, he took a friend downtown and spent the night feeding and preaching to homeless people. Once, Chris even installed a homeless man in the family Airstream, unbeknownst to his parents. Chris did not want to attend college, believing that careers were demeaning inventions of the twentieth century. Billie and Walt, both from blue-collar families, prized education and hammered away at Chris until he agreed to attend. Chris often spoke poorly of his family, although his friends thought they were nice people. Despite Chris's social conscience, he enjoyed partying with his friends and was known to drink on occasion. However, he hated his parents' financial success and judged them harshly for it. Walt notes that this opinion was ironic given Chris's ability, from a young age, to turn a profit with his entrepreneurial bent.

Chapter 12, Annandale

Chapter 12, Annandale Summary and Analysis

Chapter 12 opens with a quote from Thoreau's *Walden* about the insincerity of riches. This passage was found highlighted in Chris's personal effects.

When Chris graduates high school, he presents his father with a birthday present of a very expensive telescope. On this occasion Chris makes a tearful and emotional speech about his gratitude and respect for his father despite their differences. After this, Chris leaves on his first solo adventure. Walt and Billie don't contest Chris's trip, but give him a Texaco credit card and ask him to call home every three days. Initially Chris honors this agreement, calling home from Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and the Pacific coast. The phone calls taper off and Chris is not heard from again until he arrives home two days before he is due to start college. Carine recalls how thin Chris looked. Apparently he had become lost in the Mojave Desert and nearly died of dehydration.

Chris and Walt are hesitant to broach the subject of safety with Chris, knowing if they say the wrong thing Chris will take more risks to spite them. Walt tries subtlety, asking Chris to be more careful and to let them know his whereabouts. Chris privately decides to tell them even less than before. Nonetheless, Chris excels at Emory, to his parents' delight. He writes for the school paper and speaks enthusiastically of Harvard Law School to his father. The summer after freshman year, Chris returns to Annandale and works for his parents, writing a software program that Walt describes as flawless.

Chris's high school friends find him much changed in college. He is absorbed in his studies and more cynical than ever. The next summer, Chris returns to Annandale and works as a pizza delivery driver. Carine recalls that Chris would sit at the kitchen table and figure out his precise profits and expenses. Chris teaches Carine how to make a business work by sharing his accounting procedures with her. Chris seems more interested in keeping score than in the money itself. Over the summer, Chris's relations with his parents deteriorate drastically. Although his parents do not understand this anger, it is fueled by something Chris learned two summers previously. On a visit to his childhood neighborhood, Chris had discovered that his father's first marriage had not been terminated until well after Chris was born. Walt had actually maintained a double life, living with both Marcia and Billie simultaneously. Marcia and Billie found out, when Chris was two. The secret caused terrible suffering for both of Walt's families.

When Chris was six, the McCandless's moved to Annandale, and Walt finalized his divorce from Marcia. Walt and Billie spend many years working to put his betrayal behind them. Two decades later, they think they have succeeded, but they don't count on Chris uncovering the past. Nor does Chris ever tell them what he learns. Instead, Chris broods on the situation for several years. His suppressed anger begins to bubble to the surface the summer before his junior year in college, but he chooses to keep his knowledge a secret "and express his rage obliquely, in silence and sullen withdrawal."

(pg. 123) Chris's resentment for his parents increases, as does his anger over the injustices of the world. Chris begins to resent the rich students at Emory and takes classes about world hunger, poverty, wealth distribution and racism. Chris's ideals are all over the map. He publishes rants in the student paper for and against many contradictory issues. His one consistent theme is his discontent with the world.

Chris leaves for another road trip without notice after his junior year. He sends two postcards home, one announcing his trip to Guatemala and the second announcing his revised destination, Alaska. This is Chris's first trip to Alaska, although Walt McCandless has spent considerable time in Fairbanks on business. Chris becomes enamored of Alaska before returning to complete his senior year. He is more withdrawn than ever, avoiding old friends and dividing his time between the library and his Spartan apartment off campus. In a letter to Chris, Billie pleads for him to reconsider his isolation from family and former friends. Chris writes to his sister, Carine, and tells her their parents are imbeciles.

In the spring of 1990, Walt, Billie and Carine think Chris looks happy, as he takes the stage to receive his diploma. After graduation, Chris cuts off all contact with his family, including Carine, donates his money to OXFAM and disappears without a word. Carine, like her parents, worries about Chris, but she is not hurt by his disappearance. She knows her brother is happy with his new independence, and she believes he keeps her ignorant of his whereabouts so his parents won't try to bring him home. Walt admits that is exactly what he would have done had he known where Chris went.

As the months and years pass, their anguish grows deeper. Billie can't leave the house without leaving a note on the door for Chris. Whenever she and Walt see a young man on the road, they circle back to see if it might be Chris. In July of 1992, Billie wakes from a vivid dream. Shaking Walt awake, she tells him she dreamt Chris was begging for her help. She is certain it is not a mere dream, but she can't help him, because she doesn't know where he is. The author's choice to include this maternal warning of danger lends emotional weight to Krakauer's belief that Chris McCandless did not want to die.

Chapter 13, Virginia Beach

Chapter 13, Virginia Beach Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13 begins with a quotation from John Haines about the link between physical exploration and the exploration of the mind. Carine McCandless's home in Virginia Beach displays two prominent photographs of her brother, Chris. One is taken when he is seven, the other when he is seventeen. He wears the same annoyed expression in both photographs. Carine's elderly dog, Buck, sleeps at her feet, as she recalls how Chris loved Buck. She and her parents regret not allowing Chris to take Buck with him on his travels. Perhaps, if he'd had the dog, Chris would not have taken so many risks. Carine, like Chris, is a high-achiever with a ready opinion, but unlike her brother, Carine has made peace with her parents. Much like Walt and Billie, Carine and her husband, Chris Fish, work many long hours together in their auto-repair business. Carine hopes to make her first million soon. She now laughs at her youthful disdain for her parents' hard work and financial aspirations.

In the ten months since Chris's death, Carine cannot get through a day without weeping. She pulls herself together after each crying bout, but marvels at the persistence of her tears. Carine learned the news from her husband. Her immediate reaction was hysteria. She would not allow her husband to touch her for hours. Finally, she calmed herself and drove the four hours with her husband to Walt and Billie's house in Chesapeake Beach. The next day, Carine and her husband flew to Fairbanks to retrieve Chris's cremated remains and his personal effects. Having learned that Chris starved to death, Carine's, Billie's, and Walt's eating habits were all impacted by their grief. A month later, notes the author, Billie's grief remains palpable and extreme.

"Such bereavement, witnessed at close range, makes even the most eloquent apologia for high-risk activities ring fatuous and hollow." (pg. 132) This statement expands on the author's belief that Chris McCandless was on the road to rejoining society. The kinship Krakauer feels for McCandless allows him to use McCandless's story as a warning for other young men like them. McCandless, believes Krakauer, did not wish to die, but was merely searching for a way to make life livable. McCandless's tactics, similar to Krakauer's as the reader will soon learn, were understandable but not justifiable according to the author, who has had the good fortune to survive his youthful adventures and reach a more mature viewpoint. Throughout the novel, Krakauer addresses McCandless's youthful errors with the compassion of one who has lived a similar tale.

Chapter 14, The Stikine Ice Cap

Chapter 14, The Stikine Ice Cap Summary and Analysis

The quotes preceding Chapter 14 discuss the intense euphoria of mountain climbing. Krakauer addresses the fatalistic, melodramatic tone of McCandless's final postcard to Wayne Westerberg. The postcard has caused many people to believe McCandless intended to die in Alaska, but Krakauer believes his death was an unplanned accident. His insight into McCandless's intentions stems from his own youthful experiences. Krakauer describes his younger self as reckless, moody, stubborn and self-centered. Krakauer had a difficult relationship with his father, and he often vacillated between a desire to please his father and a contrasting desire to rebel against him. Krakauer developed an obsession with mountain climbing that lasted a decade. His free hours were devoted to planning and dreaming of new climbing challenges. Krakauer believes that this obsession helped guide him through the confusion of his youth, keeping him on a constant path instead of being buffeted by the emotions coursing through him.

At the age of twenty-three, Krakauer decides to scale a mountain called the Devils Thumb, alone. Moreover, he intends to ski cross-country thirty miles to reach the mountain, then ascend the impassable northern wall of Devils Thumb. During this era, Krakauer feeds himself on a literary diet of Nietzsche, Kerouac, and John Menlove Edwards. Edwards was a suicidal psychiatrist-author with a love of climbing he described as neurotic. Krakauer also owns a book which contains a dark, sinister photo of the Devils Thumb. The photo has a pornographic appeal for Krakauer, who uses the photo to enhance the feeling of terror he imagines he will feel while clinging to the icy precipice. He wonders if he is capable of facing his fear and expects the climb to completely change his life.

Krakauer dumps his carpentry job without notice, clears out of the trailer in which he has been squatting, and within a few hours is on the road to Alaska. He describes the elation and sense of possibility he feels during the drive. Unable to afford plane fare to reach the fishing village of Petersberg, accessible only by boat or plane, Krakauer abandons his vehicle and hitches a ride on the *Ocean Queen* as a temporary member of the crew. As a symbolic precursor to his experience on the mountain, Krakauer recounts the ship's narrow brush with a fear-crazed mule swimming in the sound. Its red-rimmed eyes and exhausted appearance foreshadow the state in which the author will soon find himself.

When the ship docks in Petersburg, Krakauer jumps ship. He is offered dinner and a place to sleep by a kind-hearted woman named Kai Sandburn. That night, Krakauer realizes that he has been deceiving himself into believing he is happier without any human contact. The next day he hitches a ride across the twenty-five mile ocean stretch separating Petersburg from the deserted valley of ice surrounding the mountain. The trip overland to the mountain is dangerous as there are hidden crevasses lurking

underneath the snow. Krakauer has brought two sturdy aluminum curtain rods with him, lashed in a cross shape, to prevent him from falling into a crevasse. The rods are strapped to his backpack with the pole extended horizontally over the snow. If he falls through, the poles should protect him from falling to his death.

Krakauer's solitude amplifies his emotional experience. The beauty of the snowy terrain and clear sky is intensified for him, and the towering mountains seem more menacing than they would if he had company. These emotional highs and lows hold great appeal for him. The author's descriptions of the emotional peaks afforded by his solitary journey correlate to McCandless's descriptions of his emotions. One begins to get a sense of the kinship Krakauer claims with the young McCandless. In three days, Krakauer arrives at the Stikine Ice Cap, which he describes as resembling a train wreck of ghostly white boxcars. The sheer force of nature frightens him, as evidenced by his tumultuous description of the landscape's frozen power.

Krakauer twice slips through the fragile ice bridges. Only his aluminum poles keep him from falling to his death hundreds of feet below. Dry heaves grip his body, as he realizes how easily he could die alone in this barren wilderness. He pushes on and makes camp at the location where he'd arranged to have a bush pilot drop his food supplies. Waiting anxiously, he finally spots the plane approaching overhead. Krakauer realizes the pilot is taking a huge risk flying so low to the mountain and is grateful that the persistent aviator succeeds in dropping his cargo. His replenished stores cheer him up and, the next day, he begins his climb. Krakauer describes the feeling of hovering three thousand feet above the ground, his life dependent on the uncertain grip of two ice axes.

The void exerts a siren call over Krakauer, which he describes as typical during the early stages of a climb. Following this fearful beginning, a climber's confidence builds, as he or she continues to succeed in defying death. The Zen-like focus required to climb under such difficult circumstances provides clarity, immediate focus on survival, and clears the mind of all nagging thoughts of civilized life. This peace of mind provides a joy of sorts, but Krakauer warns it is a tentative joy, easily dispelled by the climber's realization of danger. Krakauer's joy dissipates when he comes to an impassable section of the northern wall. Dispirited, he climbs back to a safer vantage point, barely hanging onto his life. He realizes there is no open route to continue his climb. He must descend.

Chapter 15, The Stikine Ice Cap

Chapter 15, The Stikine Ice Cap Summary and Analysis

One of the quotations preceding Chapter 15 discusses a son's anger at his father. Thus, Krakauer implies that his struggle with the mountain is his way of working out his relationship with his father. The reader can further infer that McCandless's wilderness exploits were a similar means of working out his feelings about the elder McCandless.

For three days after descending, Krakauer is snowbound in his tent on the ice cap. He has lost his desire to climb the Thumb, but the prospect of returning in defeat spurs him onward. Frustrated and feeling trapped, he smokes the marijuana cigar he brought to celebrate his victory and gets the munchies. Making oatmeal is a drawn-out process involving gathering snow and lighting the stove. Somehow he burns a hole through his father's expensive tent, which his father had been reluctant to loan him. Disheartened, Krakauer muses over his ability to disappoint his father time and again.

Krakauer describes his father as volatile and brash with deep insecurities which prevented him from ever admitting fault. His father taught him to climb mountains, but had not anticipated the passion which his son would develop for the sport. Krakauer describes his father's gentler side as kind and generous. Lewis Krakauer loved his five children, but his overall life philosophy was autocratic and competitive. Lewis's ambitions extended to his children, and by the time Krakauer was five, he knew his father expected him to become a doctor or lawyer. From as early as elementary school, Lewis's children were expected to succeed at everything so they could one day gain admission to Harvard Medical School. This path to success had worked for the elder Krakauer, but as his son reached his teenage years he began to rebel against this carefully planned life.

Young Jon refused to enter an Ivy League college. After graduation, he became an itinerant carpenter and mountain climber, increasing the emotional and physical distance between him and his father. Jon learned from his father that anything short of an outright win was a failure, and like most children, Jon took his father literally. Later, when family secrets came to light revealing his father's weaknesses, Jon could not accept his father's hypocrisy. He became consumed by rage. For many years, he was unable to forgive his father his human weaknesses.

From the perspective of two decades later, Krakauer realizes his rage has long since dissipated. In its place is sympathy and affection for his father. Krakauer realizes his own behavior was selfish, stubborn, and as difficult for his father to deal with as his father's behavior had been for him. He credits his mature realizations to time and a distinct change in his father's formerly good luck. Illness first crippled his father, after which the elder Krakauer developed a dependency on prescription medications. His resulting irrational behavior drove off his friends and Krakauer's mother, after which

Lewis Krakauer attempted suicide in front of his son. Lewis' subsequent commitment to a psychiatric ward showed his son how far the perfect idol has fallen.

Jon Krakauer appreciates an irony he does not believe his father understood. To Jon, climbing the Devils Thumb displayed the same win or die ethic his father worked so hard to drive into him. Jon credits this instilled drive with his refusal to admit defeat on the Stikine Ice Cap. Three days after his first aborted attempt, he climbs the north face once again. However a squall and his own inner nervousness drive him quickly back down. He does not return to base camp, however, stubbornly camping mid-mountain with no equipment besides his bivvy sack. The continuing snowstorm buries him five times before he gives up and returns to camp. The blinding snow prevents him from locating his camp, and after risking his life needlessly for an hour searching, he realizes he should dig into the snow and outwait the storm. Here he remains, full of self-pity, throughout the remainder of the storm.

At sunset, the wind dies down, and he finds his base camp. He begins to acknowledge that even his iron will cannot tame the elements. He now considers climbing the south wall of Devils Thumb, a route he considered unworthy only a week ago. He begins the climb and spends the night sixteen hundred feet below the summit. He sees the lights of Petersburg that night and is deeply moved by this sign of human life. Overcome by loneliness, his dreams are troubled. When he awakes, the sky is scarlet and squalls can be seen on the horizon. With no equipment besides his two ice axes, he ascends quickly, racing to beat the storm. In short order, he finds himself on the final ice field approaching the summit. He takes the most direct and dangerous route to the top in order to get there before the storm hits.

For a few terrifying moments, he is unable to find purchase and clings to the peak by a single axe. Mortally afraid yet determined he somehow achieves the summit. He describes the summit as malevolent and surreal. He snaps a few quick photographs to prove his accomplishment then descends. He has beaten the storm. Krakauer's detailed weather and terrain descriptions throughout this chapter have a poetic ring. The weather, although real and not symbolic, nonetheless serves to symbolize his state of mind. Krakauer is so in tune with the natural environment around him that the weather blends seamlessly with his internal weather. His courageously explicit descriptions of his personal feelings, including those he now views as immature or foolish, support his point of view about McCandless. Had McCandless had the luck to survive as Krakauer did, it seems likely he too would have gained maturity and satisfaction from his deeds.

As he returns from the summit, a weekend boater gives him a lift across the water from the ice cap. The boater does not believe that Krakauer actually climbed the mountain. Krakauer's long, scraggly hair and body odor give the man a bad first impression, but during the ride, they become friendly. The man, still skeptical, nevertheless buys Krakauer a cheeseburger and lets him stay the night in a junked van in his backyard. Unable to sleep, Krakauer makes a late night visit to the local bar. His triumph and relief at surviving fade as the patrons in the bar believe his story but fail to be impressed. Within the month, Krakauer returns to his old carpentry job in Boulder, earns a raise, and moves out of the job-site trailer into a studio apartment in town.

Krakauer reflects on his mistaken belief that climbing the Devils Thumb would somehow change his life, providing him the answers he longed for desperately. Eighteen years later, Krakauer attributes his risk-taking to youthful hubris and naivety. He did not have a death wish and believes McCandless, like his younger self, simply failed to consider long-term consequences. Krakauer's early fascination with his mortality stemmed partly from ignorance. Like many young people, he simply did not believe he could die.

Chapter 16, The Alaska Interior

Chapter 16, The Alaska Interior Summary and Analysis

"*Wilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with man and his works. It not only offered escape from society but also was an ideal stage for the Romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his own soul.*" These words, from Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, precede Chapter 16.

Chris McCandless leaves Carthage on April 15, 1992 for his long dreamed of trip to Alaska. He takes photos of himself at mile markers along the way while hitchhiking to Fairbanks. A truck driver named Gaylord Stuckey takes Alex a thousand miles from Liard, Alaska to Fairbanks. Unaccustomed to picking up hitchhikers, Stuckey likes Alex's clean-shaven, shorthaired look and soon learns Alex is intelligent, as well. Alex speaks frequently of his sister. Of his parents he says little. He describes his father as a NASA rocket scientist and a bigamist. Alex tells Stuckey of his plans to spend the summer living off the land, describing the experience as a long-cherished dream. Alex tells Stuckey that he wants to prove he can survive on his own without anyone's help.

When they arrive at Fairbanks, Stuckey takes Alex to a grocery store where Alex buys rice. Alex asks to be dropped off at the University of Alaska so he can look up edible plants in the library. Stuckey warns him that it is too early in the season, the ground hasn't thawed, but Alex will not delay his plans. Stuckey describes him as eager to get out into the bush. In exchange for driving him a thousand miles and feeding him for three days, Stuckey asks Alex to send him a letter when he returns to let him know he's alright. This Alex agrees to, but when Stuckey asks him to call his parents before he enters the wilderness, Alex is noncommittal.

McCandless lingers in Fairbanks, near the university, for three nights. He sends his final missives to Westerberg and Burres from the university post office. McCandless buys a used semiautomatic .22-caliber Remington. The gun is favored by Alaskan trappers for its light weight and durability. He camps four miles west of town, near the George Parks Highway which leads to the Stampede Trail. Early the next morning, he gets a ride from the first car he sees, driven by Jim Gallien. Three hours later, Gallien drops Alex off on the Stampede Trail. Snow still covers the ground.

Filled with excitement, Alex sets off alone at last. Dog mushers, skiers and snowmobilers frequent the end of the Stampede Trail near Healy, but not in the springtime, when the thawing snow turns the terrain to mush. On his second day of hiking, Alex easily crosses the Teklanika River. In early Spring, the river is but a trickle, giving no indication of the roaring depths it will reach by the time Alex tries to re-cross the river to return home. After traveling twenty miles from his starting point, Alex stumbles across the abandoned bus, stocked with wilderness essentials by the hunters who use it during moose season. Alex's journal refers to this discovery as a "Magic Bus," again indicating his belief in miraculous intervention.

Thrilled by his new accommodations, Alex graffitis the bus with a triumphant declaration of his presence. He signs it Alexander Supertramp, May 1992. Within a few days, his journal reflects his difficulties, however. He reports feeling weak, being snowed in, and one day he describes simply as a disaster. Alex's journals are filled with references to disaster, however, which demonstrates his tendency to become easily frustrated. The emotional peaks afforded by testing himself in the wilderness can be likened to Krakauer's point of view regarding his own youthful adventures. Alex has trouble killing game initially, but eventually bags a couple of small animals. By mid-May, the snow melts, revealing a wealth of rose hips and lingonberries, which he gathers and eats. His hunting skills improve as well. For six weeks, he eats regularly of squirrel, grouse, duck, goose and porcupine. He loses a crown from his molars on May 22, but his spirits seem undaunted, for he joyfully reports climbing a mountain.

During this time, Alex does not remain at the bus. He leaves it on May 5 and wanders westward, devoting most of each day to stalking game. As the ground continues to thaw, hiking becomes more difficult. Alex realizes that his original plan to walk five hundred miles to the tidewater is impossible, so he turns around and returns to the bus, making it his base camp for the summer. Despite its apparent remoteness, the bus is actually less than thirty miles from the highway to the east and sixteen miles from a road to the north. Within six miles of the bus are four cabins. Nonetheless, in his four months in the bush, he does not see another human being. Alex occupies himself with a to-do list scrawled on a piece of birch bark, which includes short term items like laying in firewood, and long term, ambitious tasks, such as mapping the area and sewing clothing from animal hides.

Upon his return to the bus, his success at hunting increases greatly. On June 9, he bags a moose, which he records triumphantly. However like his grandfather, Alex soon regrets the kill. He believes wasting the animal is a moral crime, so he spends six long days trying to cure the meat. Unfamiliar with the local method of doing so, he attempts the feat in the manner of South Dakotan hunters, by smoking it under the bus. His attempt fails, and he labels the kill a disaster. Lamenting the moose's death, he calls it "'One of the greatest tragedies of my life.'" (pg. 167) In subsequent days, he highlights passages in *Walden* which discuss the moral purity of abstaining from food, especially animal food. McCandless vows to learn from his tragic mistake and writes of his rebirth in his diary. His new perspective includes deliberate living, in which each task is engaged with complete concentration. The preparation and eating of food is holy. Gradually, he is able to move on from the moose incident. His equanimity returns and remains with him until early July, when he experiences the first of two pivotal setbacks.

McCandless's diary reflects his decision to return to the society. He marks passages in his books indicating that true happiness must be shared with others in order to have value. On July 3, he sets out on the return hike. Two days later, halfway back, he runs into the beaver ponds which blocks the Stampede Trail. McCandless bypasses the ponds and returns to the trail at the mouth of the Teklanika River. Here, he discovers that the river, formerly a small trickle, is now a raging flood, a hundred feet wide. He correctly assesses the impossibility of swimming across. The current is too swift, and the water too cold. McCandless decides to return to the bus, presumably to wait for the

water level to drop. His journal states that he is lonely and afraid. Krakauer notes that had McCandless walked a mile north along the river, he might have been able to cross the individual channels which join downstream to create the raging torrent. It would have been risky, but potentially doable. McCandless's choice to return to the bus will prove fatal.

Chapter 17, The Stampede Trail

Chapter 17, The Stampede Trail Summary and Analysis

A quote from Henry David Thoreau's *Ktaadn* discusses the awesome power and mystery of nature. In Chapter 17, as in every other chapter, the initial quotations identify the chapter theme and help create the appropriate tone. In this case, Thoreau's mention of "*a force not bound to be kind to man*" foreshadows the cruel fate McCandless will soon suffer at the hands of the impassive forces of nature.

Krakauer stands on the bank of the Teklanika River a year after McCandless's aborted attempt to cross the waterway. At this time of year, Krakauer notes that the river is indeed a wide, churning flow of water. Yet, Krakauer has advantages McCandless lacked, including a detailed topographic map and three companions. The map reveals the presence of a U.S. Geological Survey gauging station a half mile downriver. At the now defunct station a steel cable stretches across the river. On the side where McCandless became trapped is an aluminum basket suspended from this cable by pulleys. Krakauer and his friends cross the river using the cable and basket. Had McCandless possessed a topographical map, he would have been able to find the basket and cross the river. Krakauer, again revealing his kinship with McCandless, mentions his initial irritation at the fact that his companions invited themselves along. Now, in the presence of these malevolent woods, he is grateful for companionship. His change of heart is a subtle indication that McCandless, too, may have regretted coming into the woods alone.

Krakauer's party arrives at the bus. Animal bones lie scattered around, evidence of McCandless's successful hunting forays. Krakauer finds the remains of the moose which McCandless had so regretted killing. The party of moose hunters who found the body the previous year had told Krakauer that the moose bones were actually caribou bones. This huge error by McCandless had been duly reported in Krakauer's magazine article and helped make the case that McCandless was a foolish greenhorn. However, now Krakauer and his friends determine that the bones did indeed belong to a moose, thus proving McCandless's judgment to be accurate. Krakauer finds this important, because most of the hate mail he's received regarding McCandless refers to the caribou-moose mistake.

Reverently, McCandless enters the bus, where McCandless died. Inside, he finds evidence of McCandless's presence everywhere he looks. His canteen, Chap Stick, paperback books, and even Jim Gallien's rubber work boots are still in the bus. Krakauer also finds a garbage bag full of bird feathers, which McCandless apparently intended to use for clothing or to feather a pillow. McCandless's pots and pans are in the front of the bus, along with a knife sheath bearing Ronald Franz's initials, a parting gift from Ron. The crown McCandless lost is in the bus, and Krakauer finds McCandless's eloquent graffiti alongside briefer inscriptions left by other travelers. McCandless's

patched jeans are laid out to dry. Krakauer notices the belt McCandless made from a strip of blanket and realizes McCandless must have made it when he grew too thin for his jeans.

These personal artifacts trouble Krakauer greatly, and he escapes to the fresh air outside. Over dinner and a campfire Krakauer and his friends discuss McCandless. They try to understand why so many people are so angry at McCandless. Many people have compared McCandless to Sir John Franklin, a nineteenth-century British officer whose lack of humility in the wild led to his death and the deaths of 140 of his men. Both men are perceived by the public as being arrogant in the face of nature. Krakauer asserts that McCandless's brand of arrogance is a far cry from Franklin's. Franklin expected nature to submit to the rules of civilized society. He carried material possessions with him and tried to insulate himself from the hardships of the wild. McCandless took just the opposite approach by immersing himself completely in nature and trying to insulate himself from human society.

Krakauer acknowledges that McCandless tried to live off the land without first mastering the requisite skills. However, he does not believe McCandless was a foolish greenhorn. McCandless had sufficient survival skills to last sixteen weeks in the bush, and was fully aware of the risks of his endeavor. Krakauer notes that McCandless's youthful risk-taking is no different than the typical teenage penchant to take risks by drinking too much and driving too fast. Krakauer adds that many full-grown adults also enjoy risk-taking, comparing John Muir and Henry Thoreau to McCandless. Krakauer does not believe McCandless to have been an existential man adrift in a meaningless existence. He firmly believes McCandless found great purpose and meaning in his wilderness adventures.

Krakauer's friend, Roman Dial, hails from the same Washington, D.C. suburbs as McCandless, and he too found them stifling. They produced in Roman a distrust of authority and a desire to conquer nature. Roman's wilderness adventures bring him respect in Alaska, where he teaches at the university. Roman sees little difference in his deeds and McCandless's. However, Roman admits he has never tried to live completely off the land as McCandless did. Roman admires McCandless's efforts, but would not undertake them himself. Roman suggests that the Alaskans who are so critical of McCandless merely recognize their own younger selves in the boy.

Chapter 18, The Stampede Trail

Chapter 18, The Stampede Trail Summary and Analysis

A quotation from Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* precedes Chapter 18. A passage regarding love for one's neighbor has been underscored by Chris McCandless.

Stymied by the Teklanika River, McCandless returns to the bus on July 8. His journals do not indicate his state of mind, but Krakauer thinks he has decided to wait for the river to subside. McCandless returns to his hunting and gathering routine and finds game plentiful. However the animals he kills are themselves quite lean and provide insufficient calories to make up for what McCandless expends in the hunting. With his survival at stake, McCandless reads *Doctor Zhivago* and has an epiphany. He highlights a section in the book which speaks to the desire to take refuge in nature, yet the book concludes that genuine happiness must be shared with one's fellow human beings. McCandless's handwritten note in the margin indicates his desire to re-enter society.

However, on July 30, two days after completing *Doctor Zhivago,* a journal entry indicates that he is in trouble. McCandless reports starvation and extreme weakness. He blames potato seeds for his condition. Another theory is that McCandless confused *Hedysarum alpinum*, a wild potato plant, with a similar-looking plant called *Hedysarum mackenzii*, a poisonous sweet pea. Most of McCandless's critics believe he made this mistake. In Krakauer's initial magazine article, he reported this as the likely cause of death, but due to his subsequent research, he no longer believes this to be the case. McCandless had been gathering and eating the wild potato plant for months without confusing it with its poisonous brother. Krakauer believes that, as he grew hungrier, McCandless began to eat the seeds as well as the edible roots of the potato plant. Krakauer finds no medical or botanical reference indicating that wild potato seeds are poisonous. Thus, McCandless may well have concluded that there was no harm in eating the seeds.

Krakauer collects samples of the wild potato seeds and sends them to the Chemistry Department of the University of Alaska for analysis. Preliminary testing indicates the presence of the swainsonine alkaloid, a poisonous substance. This poison prevents the body from converting food to useable energy. Thus, no matter how much McCandless ate, he was doomed to starve. A healthy body has a chance of recovering from the poison, because the glucose and amino acids already present in the body can bind with the poison for excretion. However, McCandless had very low stores of glucose and amino acids, and thus had no way to flush the toxin from his system. Still, if McCandless had discovered his error in time, as his journal entry indicates, he may not have ingested a fatal dose. A sufficient supply of non-toxic food might still have saved him if he had not grown too weak to hunt by this time.

McCandless celebrates his 100th day in the wilderness on August 5. He is proud to have survived so long, but his journal entry reports his increasingly dire condition. He is now too weak to walk out of the wilderness. He is trapped and knows death is likely. If only he'd had a topographical map, he would have known there was a Park Service cabin stocked with emergency rations only six miles south. Two miles closer to the bus are a pair of privately owned cabins, where he might also have found food. Strangely, these three cabins and their food stores had been vandalized sometime between mid-April and June. The two private cabin owners suspect that it was McCandless himself who caused the damage out of anger for the intrusion of civilization into his pristine woods.

Krakauer does not believe McCandless caused the devastation, as there is no evidence of it in McCandless's journals or photographs. Perhaps the author's bias prevents him from considering this fairly likely scenario. Two items previously reported support the possibility. The first is Krakauer's description of McCandless's writing. The journal entries are often formal and stilted as if created for some imagined audience. McCandless refers to himself in the third person in his journal entries, and several times mentions to his friends the possibility that he will write about his travels. Therefore, it is not at all unlikely that McCandless would edit his writing and leave out anything which portrays him in a poor light. McCandless has no trouble writing about his brushes with the law, when he feels he carries moral authority, but perhaps he was ashamed of the childish tantrum which led him to destroy the contents of the cabins.

The second item supporting this theory is McCandless's previously documented tantrum, on the occasion when he beats his canoe and breaks the oar. Realizing his survival is at stake, Alex forces himself to calm down before he breaks his last remaining oar. This angry, frustrated tantrum was produced by a storm at sea. Raging at the storm with heedlessness for his own survival sets a precedent for the kind of anger displayed by the cabin vandal. Alex's strong desire to live in the wild where there are no traces of civilization might well have produced an angry response if he found three fully provisioned cabins within easy walking distance of his wilderness camp.

Krakauer details McCandless's attempts to hunt game in his final days. McCandless misses opportunities to kill large game, but does manage to shoot five squirrels and a ptarmigan. Such small game would have been insufficient to sustain him, however, given the swainsonine poisoning. On August 12, McCandless leaves the bus to forage for berries. He leaves a desperate plea for assistance on the bus door. Krakauer begins the book with this poignant note in which Alexander Supertramp reverts to his given name, Chris McCandless. Symbolically, McCandless has come full circle, acknowledging the validity of his true identity and his interdependence on other human beings.

Some survivors of starvation report a euphoric feeling, as death grows near. Krakauer fervently hopes that McCandless felt this euphoria, and that it provided him some measure of comfort in his dying days. McCandless pens a goodbye note on August 12, saying that he has had a happy life. He takes a final photo of himself holding this goodbye note. His emaciated frame contrasts with the smile on his face. Krakauer

estimates his death occurred on August 18, three weeks before the moose hunters discover his body.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Ten months after McCandless's death, Krakauer, Billie and Walt take a helicopter to the bus site. Billie had wanted to follow the same overland path as her son took into the wilderness, but the Teklanika River is running too high, and the group is advised that not even an amphibious, all-terrain vehicle can cross it. The helicopter ride to the bus takes fifteen minutes. Billie notices that the wilderness looks much like the area where she grew up and realizes her son must have loved being here. Even Walt grudgingly admits the location's appeal. Billie and Walt enter the bus, where Chris died. Billie notices a spoon from the family's old silverware set. She inhales her son's jeans which still smell like him. Walt installs a memorial plaque inside the bus. Billie leaves a suitcase full of food for the next occupant of the bus. Inside the suitcase is a note asking whoever finds it to call their parents. Walt and Billie find a small measure of solace in visiting the bus.

Characters

Christopher Johnson McCandless

Wayne Westerberg

Samuel Walter McCandless, Jr.

Billie McCandless

Carine McCandless

Jan Burres

Ronald Franz

Everett Ruess

John Mallon Waterman

Jon Krakauer

Objects/Places

The Canoe

McCandless purchases a used aluminum canoe when, on a whim, he decides to paddle down the Colorado River all the way to the Gulf of California. McCandless refuses to be deterred by the fact that the river does not actually reach the gulf.

The Oars

Frightened by a storm at sea which threatens to take his life, McCandless becomes extremely angry and beats his canoe with an oar. When the oar breaks, he is tempted to continue beating the canoe with the last remaining oar, but McCandless forces himself to calm down for he realizes that if he breaks the second oar he will surely die. After this experience, McCandless abandons the canoe and surviving oar.

The Tooled Leather Belt

Taught leatherwork by Ron Franz in Salton City, McCandless creates an artistic belt inscribed with pictorial representations of McCandless's travels. The name ALEX is inscribed on the belt. The initials of his legal name are there too, surrounding a skull and crossbones motif. The other pictures inscribed on the belt include a car trapped in a flash flood, a hitchhiker's thumb, the Rocky Mountains, Montana wheat fields, and Wayne Westerberg's home in Carthage. This remarkable belt captures McCandless's tale from his personal point of view.

Ten Pound Bag of Rice

Aside from the bag lunch which Jim Gallien gives him at the last minute, this ten-pound bag of rice is all the food Chris McCandless takes with him into the wilderness.

Tanaina Plantlore

Tanaina Plantlore is the title of the guide to edible wild plants, which Chris McCandless relies on in the wilderness. Unfortunately, the *Tanaina* does not mention that the otherwise edible wild potato plant, *H. alpinum*, has poisonous seeds. Author Jon Krakauer believes consumption of the wild potato seeds led to McCandless's death.

The Stampede Trail

The Stampede Trail crosses approximately fifty miles of Alaskan wilderness. Originally blazed by a miner named Earl Pilgrim, the trail leads to productive mining territory. After

Alaska officially became a state, Yukon Construction was hired to turn the faint trail into a passable road for mining trucks to use. The wilderness resisted man's efforts to tame it, however, and the project was never completed. The developed roadway disintegrated back into a barely discernible trail. The trail crosses several rivers and creeks, and no bridges exist at these crossings. The first ten miles of the east trailhead, near Healy, Alaska, is still a maintained roadway. The final twenty miles to the west cross through Denali National Park ending at the Toklat River. Chris McCandless becomes trapped along the trail, unable to re-cross the Teklanika River after the spring thaw when the formerly small stream becomes a raging torrent.

The Bus

The abandoned bus was originally one of three buses placed along the Stampede Trail by Yukon Construction. The buses were modified with bunks and stoves to house the construction workers laying down a road along the trail path. When nature thwarted Yukon's attempt to build a passable road, the company pulled out, leaving one bus behind for use by anyone in need of shelter in the wild. Chris McCandless finds this bus by chance and makes it his base camp. A few months later, McCandless succumbs to starvation and dies inside the bus, where his body is later found by a party of hunters.

Gallien's Boots

When Jim Gallien gives McCandless a lift to the head of the Stampede Trail, he notices that the young man wears a pair of cheap hiking boots which are not waterproof. Concerned for McCandless, Gallien gives him a pair of rubber wading boots. These boots are later found in the bus where McCandless dies.

Annandale, Virginia

This Washington, D.C. area suburb seems idyllic on the surface. Its inhabitants represent those families who have achieved the American dream. Yet, three of the individuals discussed in *Into the Wild*, including the book's subject, Chris McCandless, all hail from tony suburbs in the D.C. area, and all three agree that these of Annandale are stifling to the soul. The emphasis on material importance within the local culture appears to have sparked a spiritual anger and rebellion on the part of McCandless, Roman Dial, and John Mallon Waterman.

Carthage, South Dakota

A rural, working-class small town, Carthage represents the opposite extreme of Annandale, Virginia. Yet, the two places are really the flip side of the same coin. Where Annandale represents the ideal American dream, Carthage represents the humbler ideals upon which America is founded. It is a down-home community which values

honest, hard work and the simple joys of everyday life. Here in Carthage, McCandless finds his second home with Wayne Westerberg and his crew of grain elevator workers.

Setting

This story overflows with vivid descriptions of the country McCandless traversed, and a reader can easily trace his peregrinations by pencil on an atlas of the continental United States, although some smaller or more obscure place names may prove elusive and tricky. This account also travels back and forth through time as Krakauer includes sharp descriptions of the forbidding Alaskan terrain that McCandless battled in his doomed bid to survive and the ice-locked mountainside that nearly claimed Krakauer himself as a young man. These Alaskan depictions are especially graphic, striking, and thrilling—probably because this land and the bus that became his home on the Stampede Trail constitute the cold and mysterious heart of Krakauer's haunting narrative.

Descriptions of Chris's middle-class upbringing are full of references to a bustling blended family and the kind of high school and university activities that many young people will find comfortably familiar. He was always a precocious little boy with a gift for making money, competing athletically, and excelling at just about anything he attempted. His parents had come from humble backgrounds and grew affluent as they raised their family in a comfortable Virginia suburb.

This picture of middle-class comfort contrasts sharply with one story about a teenaged Chris dragging a friend into a destitute Washington, D.C.

neighborhood, armed with good intentions and a bag of hamburgers for the homeless. More starkly different yet are the descriptions of his largely bohemian lifestyle on the road.

His ill-fated journey began in the Mojave desert where, startled by the flash flood from a sudden storm, McCandless just managed to escape, though his beloved Datsun automobile was abandoned to the mud. His travels began in earnest after this adventure, as he subsisted on charity from others, on what he could scavenge, and on rice, the unfailing standby. He traveled through the western states from Washington to California and points between, with stopovers in Lake Tahoe, the Sierra Nevada, the Pacific Crest Trail, a scruffy dirt ranch in Northern California, and the Idaho Panhandle, to name only a few.

Terse descriptions resplendent with telling detail make the countryside spring to life, and many locations are brought into powerful relief through the author's detailed portraits of the people who live there. McCandless bought an aluminum canoe in Arizona and paddled down the lower Colorado River, through an ascetic landscape filled with cacti, serene desert, and shimmering salt flats spread before mountains. That voyage took him all the way to Mexico, where he nearly drowned in rough water in the Gulf of California. He later celebrated New Year's Eve here by watching the moon rise over the Great Desert. Wending his way north again, he was caught sneaking back over the United States border and was forced to spend a night in jail.

McCandless now lived off the wiles of a hobo during peregrinations through Texas, along the Pacific Coast, and through cities like Los Angeles and Las Vegas, where he lived on the street and hated the feeling of confinement. Especially pertinent are honest and realistic descriptions of places like Carthage, South Dakota, and sprawling Bullhead, Arizona, where he tried to settle down for a while, first camping outside town and then squatting in a trailer. He seemed briefly happy here while holding down a job in a local fast food restaurant, but he still could not bring himself to conform—only wearing socks under duress and annoying management with his casual hygiene.

On another occasion, McCandless visited friends at an old abandoned Navy airbase called the "Slab," which Into the Wild 4693 had become the site of a mobile freetown of wildly assorted vagabonds whose only common denominator was that they were footloose and traveling on the same road. Here Chris gave an impromptu concert on a portable electric organ at a flea market and dazzled listeners with his musical talent. He even rode the rails, tangling with the dreaded railroad security bulls, and was jailed again, this time in California, for hopping a train.

Social Sensitivity

A number of very unconventional people are portrayed in Into the Wild, and author Krakauer presents them with great respect and sympathy. He describes an assortment of transients like the "rubber tramps" who live out of their cars while eking out a living hawking wares at flea markets and swap meets. McCandless was a "leather tramp" himself because he had given up his car and relied on his shoe leather to get him around. It turns out that there are few common denominators among people who elect to live a vagabond existence; they may be highly educated, disenchanted with the idea of putting down roots somewhere, and disgusted with the thought of trudging through a nine-to-five existence, or they may be down on their luck and homeless. McCandless met, and Krakauer interviewed, all types, from free spirits Jan Burres and her boyfriend, to Charlie, a mildly eccentric old man who took pity on Chris and allowed him to "squat" in a trailer. There are many people for whom a comfortable, stable lifestyle holds little interest or merit, and Krakauer's insightful descriptions humanize the strangers that pass us on the highway. In much the same way, Krakauer renders the lives of the most ordinary people—the ones we meet briefly in nondescript small towns or on the road, like Wayne Westerberg or Jim Gallien—visible in a manner that makes them extraordinary, familiar, and comforting. It becomes clear that people who live on the road or hold down unglamorous jobs are often possessed of great dignity, warmth, and an insight that enables them to recognize something special in a stranger like Chris.

The original Outside article that was published in January, 1993, was greeted with a barrage of mail that represented deeply polarized responses.

Many writers condemned Chris's foolhardiness and Krakauer's refusal to judge him in a harash light, while others expressed sympathy and admiration for the young man. It is therefore to Krakauer's credit that he avoids offering any easy judgement, striving not to force any conclusions on his reader. Although he clearly sympathizes with Chris in a special way, he attempts to back away from stating whether Chris was right or wrong in his decisions and actions, urging readers to judge for themselves.

An issue that is central to Into the Wild is Chris's estrangement from his family. Krakauer, while still withholding judgment, presents Chris's mysterious condemnation of the parents who tried to give him everything they had never had and simply and clearly shows the pain this rejection caused, even while he investigates the other side of the equation. He acknowledges that Walt loved his children fiercely and wanted them to have the things he had struggled without, but he notes the force of the father's character and expectations that would have threatened to suffocate his son. With as much respect as possible to Walt and Billie McCandless and their family, Krakauer presents honestly and without prejudice the discovery about their early relationship that was probably a catalyst in Chris's alienation.

Literary Qualities

Documentary biographical writing is not celebrated for its prime literariness. Into the Wild, however, features many of the narrative qualities that mark the best novels. Krakauer's deft interweaving of diverse personalities and locations lend his work a crisp credibility and resonance, while enabling the author to shape a sustained drama from the facts and figures that comprise the documentary materials at hand. His generous and candid descriptions of his varied interviewees eschew cliches and add color and texture to this book.

Krakauer has made Into the Wild a much more complicated book by including many intertexts in the form of thoughtfully placed epigraphs and excerpts from the books that influenced Chris, as well as some anecdotal stories about other young adventurers whose attraction to nature also proved fatal. Krakauer even relates a hairraising tale from his own youth that resonates with the same idealism and stubborn adventurousness that characterized McCandless. This multifaceted story is part biography, part documentary, part autobiography, and part contemplation of human nature.

Krakauer records the minutiae of local scenes by successfully combining his knowledge of the outdoors with the devoted attention of an experienced journalist and professional nonfiction writer. Descriptions of Alaska and other places are both informationally dense and excitingly written.

Krakauer's readers acquire a valuable familiarity with remoter parts of their world while being captivated by a riveting story.

Krakauer claims he loves writing books because he loves researching them. Although he makes his living writing shorter magazine articles, he considers the genre "reductionist by nature." Writing an entire book enables him to carefully consider the more complex issues or details of a story that just cannot properly fit into a shorter work. Moreover, Krakauer is a responsible researcher who acknowledges the important role of the McCandless family in the process of researching and preparing Into the Wild for publication. He notes with appreciation the complexities of the personal cost this may have meant for McCandless's parents and siblings.

Readers perusing the acknowledgements at the end of the book will come to appreciate the scope of a task like this biography. They may also want to compare Krakauer's willingness to accept and acknowledge assistance with Chris McCandless's seeming disregard for any substantial help 4696 Into the Wild whatsoever.

Themes

Man in Nature

Man's role in Nature is the predominant theme of *Into the Wild*. The subject of the book, Chris McCandless, believes that man's ultimate joy can only be found in communion with nature. McCandless is an avid reader, and his favorite authors are quoted frequently to support McCandless's romantic view of natural communion. Jack London and Henry David Thoreau are two of McCandless's favorite authors, and their immense respect for nature influences the impressionable young man. However, nature is a fickle beast, turning from friendly ally to cruel enemy in the blink of an eye. McCandless is not insensible to this fact. His personal experience and the literary accounts he enjoys reading both teach him that nature's laws do not change for any man. Natural cause and effect can work just as easily against a man, as it can in his favor.

McCandless's adventure in the Alaskan wilderness bears out this duality of nature. He treks into the bush in early Spring, when snow still covers the ground. The frozen environment is both blessing and obstacle to him. The ground is more passable when frozen, and the Teklanika River is easy to cross prior to the Spring thaw. Nonetheless, with the thaw emerges the abundance of nature's bounty in the form of wild, edible plants which McCandless collects and eats. This same thaw, however, traps him at his base camp. The muddy ground becomes impassable and the Teklanika River turns into a raging torrent which McCandless cannot traverse. Ultimately even the bountiful plant life becomes his enemy when he mistakenly eats the poisonous seeds of an otherwise friendly potato plant. He takes pride in his knowledge and ability to find edible plants amongst the poisonous varieties, but in the end, a minor error costs him his life. Nature's role in the story is to provide a challenging field against which a man like McCandless may test himself. Nature's power is inherently neutral, and it is up to the individual man to discover the limits of his strength and knowledge without exceeding those limits, as McCandless inadvertently does.

Father-Son Relationships

Father-son relationships play a central role in Jon Krakauer's non-fiction book, *Into the Wild*. Chris McCandless holds his father up as the ideal man for most of his young life. Walt McCandless inspires this idealism by holding Chris to a standard of perfection unattainable by any fallible human being. On the surface, Walt does appear to live up to his own credo, and Chris is alternately admiring of and intimidated by Walt's success. Yet, when Chris discovers that there are dark secrets lurking in Walt's past, he realizes that his ideal father is not perfect after all. Indeed, he is not even close. Understandably, Chris responds to this deception with intense anger. Perhaps if Walt had not pretended to be better than he was, or if he had not expected Chris to be as perfect as he pretended to be, maybe Chris would have been able to deal with the sudden realization of his father's imperfection in a healthier manner.

Chris's response is to seek revenge against his father. Rather than confront Walt and give him an opportunity to defend himself or at least to admit his error, Chris simply walks away from his family without a word. Through this action, Chris shows that he is still wholly dominated by his father's ideals. Even though Walt fails in his example, Chris does not recognize that the perfection Walt preached was unattainable. Chris's anger stems largely from his disappointment that Walt failed to attain perfection. Chris still expects perfection from himself. He does not release himself from his father's unrealistic expectations, he only redefines the arena in which he seeks perfection. Author Jon Krakauer believes that if Chris had not died so young, he would eventually have reached a more mature perspective on his relationship to Walt. To support this thesis, Krakauer discusses his relationship with his own father. Through this additional example, he shows that the father-son dynamic between Chris and Walt is indeed a common one, although the McCandless family represents an extreme example of this dynamic.

Self-Denial

Self-denial is one of the principal tenets of Chris McCandless's philosophy. Raised in an environment which glorifies material achievement above all else, young Chris identifies his parents fully with this environment. Thus, when Chris learns that the father he idolizes has some serious flaws, he turns against his parents and all the material successes they so admire. Chris embarks on an ascetic life, eschewing creature comforts, money, and even basic necessities like food and warm clothes. Chris donates his twenty-four-thousand-dollar savings account to feed the hungry, abandons his car in the desert, and makes a bonfire of the paper money left in his possession. Chris's youthful idealism leads him to believe that, because there are homeless and hungry people in the world, those with homes and food are somehow evil and the cause of the problem.

To a certain extent, Chris's philosophy is admirable. He demonstrates deep compassion by caring so deeply for the suffering of humanity. Nonetheless, in his quest to save the homeless and hungry, he becomes homeless and hungry himself. His actions only serve to enlarge the problem. Chris does not realize that his extreme self-denial is merely the opposite extreme of the greedy mindset which he so detests. Through his refusal to provide for himself, he thoughtlessly strains the resources of others. Chris is offended when Jan Burres offers to pay him for his work at her flea market booth, but he expects her to feed him and thinks nothing of asking her to drive a hundred miles roundtrip since he lacks the means to transport himself. Chris never realizes that his self-denial, which he believes has freed him from dependence on human civilization, actually makes him more dependent than he would have been otherwise. Self-denial is linked with self-sufficiency in his mind, but in truth, Chris's self-denial prevents him from achieving self-sufficiency.

Themes/Characters

Chris McCandless remains a somewhat ghostly presence even in this biography of his life. Although Krakauer uses frequent excerpts from Chris's personal journals, the reader always feels somewhat distanced, partly owing to his habit of writing about himself in the third person under an assumed name. Only Chris's final journal entries are written in the first person and signed with his real name, perhaps underscoring the shocking realization of first the possibility and then the certainty of his own imminent death. The tone of these final words is frightened at first, then rueful and courageous, and finally serene and reconciled. Other than these journal extracts, all of the information about McCandless is fragmentary and pieced together from the testimony of people who had met him on his journeys. Their accounts seem to paint him as an intensely bright and defiantly independent young man who clung to the stern and archaic ideals gleaned from his readings.

According to the reminiscences of his family and university friends, McCandless was a seemingly welladjusted twenty-two-year-old at the time of his disappearance. He was athletic, bright, and a natural-born entrepreneur, excelling at so many things that he tended to be overconfident. A double major with above average grades, he led a life of comparable comfort and good fortune. He worked on the student newspaper at Emory University and, like many other people his age, thought about injustice in the world around him. He seemed to take life more seriously than many peers, however, refusing to join a fraternity and declaring that, according to his principles, he would no longer give or accept gifts. He appeared, on balance, to be an affable and intense friend according to all who met him, but there are puzzling glimpses of the unhappiness directed at his parents. While appearing to be content with his home life, McCandless revealed to a few trusted people a fierce disdain and bitterness toward his parents, whom he saw as unfairly tyrannical.

Krakauer is careful to avoid weighting Into the Wild with an excess of authorial judgment; although he concedes at the outset that his own feelings about McCandless will become obvious, he painstakingly tries not to impose his deeply-held convictions on his readers. A notable subtext in this biography is the way the young man's story and any number of other themes seem to inter-illuminate each other for the author. In the introduction to Into the Wild, Krakauer says "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 high risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind, the complicated, highly charged bond that exists between fathers and sons."

A significant theme is the deep and secret alienation that McCandless felt toward his parents. He was intensely angry with them, although his complaints never seem to have been very clear. Bitterness and frustration often build walls between the competing natures of strong-willed sons and equally inflexible fathers, and Krakauer's portrait of the elder McCandless as a self-made man with a powerful personality makes this possibility a very reasonable one. However, a persevering positivism such as McCandless possessed might easily have overcome such an obstacle, and Walt

McCandless remembers that, regardless of everything, he loved spending time with his son. Krakauer suggests one possible reason that kept reanimating his powerful antipathy may have been his discovery that the end of his father's first marriage and the beginning of the second were messy and fraught with tension and dissembling on all sides. These long-ago marital troubles seem to have enraged the son's impeccable and unforgiving sense of morality, and eventually led him to judge and condemn his father forever, using moral standards so unrelentingly severe he would not even apply them to his friends.

He seems in the whole breadth of his nature to have been possessed of an insatiable hunger to discover some redeeming truth about mankind through himself. Nevertheless, his insistence on doing things his way caused him to neglect several basic precautions that would probably have kept an experienced woodsman alive: a good hunting gun with ample ammunition, reliable information about the area he would be venturing into, and a dependable U.S. Geological Survey topographic map. Krakauer has concluded that the actual cause of Chris's death by starvation was a form of poisoning to which he succumbed after eating some wild seeds that even the experts never knew were highly toxic. Ironically, this was a mistake anyone might have made, but McCandless would not have had to eat the seeds if he had not allowed himself to be trapped by runoff from the Teklanika river, if he had possessed a gun adequate for hunting game, or a map to show him that half a mile away from his camp was a way to cross the torrent. As one friend was to observe later, McCandless, given his passion and intensity, sometimes had a problem seeing the forest for the trees.

While he remains an elusive figure, others who are more distinctly represented in Into the Wild include the diverse, ordinary, and not-so-ordinary characters who briefly met and befriended him. These include "rubber tramps," Jan Burres and her boyfriend Bob, who ran into McCandless along the United States Highway 101. Jan felt a maternal impulse toward Chris, Into the Wild 4695 and he responded with an almost waiflike affection. At other times, he was given work and a place to stay by Wayne Westerberg in Carthage, a small, hard-working South Dakota town. Ronald Franz, another friend, had lost his own family to a tragic automobile accident long before McCandless was born. Franz was touched by Chris's earnest good nature and actually asked the young man if he would let Franz adopt him as his grandson. McCandless responded with characteristic evasiveness; having renounced his family, it seems as if he is instinctively drawn to parental figures even while he was trying to push them away.

Style

Perspective

Jon Krakauer, author of *Into the Wild*, makes his perspective on his subject matter clear from the initial Author's Note. Krakauer's carefully researched book presents plenty of evidence to indict its subject, Chris McCandless, as a foolish greenhorn who met his end due to willful negligence and a possible death wish. Yet, Krakauer does not believe McCandless was negligent or suicidal. Based on some shared common ground, Krakauer sees a kinship between himself and young McCandless. Krakauer does believe that McCandless was headstrong and napve, but he points out that many young people share these qualities. Had McCandless survived, concludes Krakauer, he would likely have matured in his perspective and come to realize that running away from civilization would not solve his problems.

Yet by presenting a balanced perspective, Krakauer indulges the reader's right to make up his or her own mind about McCandless. To that end, Krakauer includes case histories of several other wilderness buffs who, like McCandless, met untimely deaths in the wild. Krakauer nonetheless arranges these case histories in a manner which supports his thesis. He first presents the most outrageous individuals, hoping that these case histories will appear much more extreme to the reader than McCandless's. He follows these with a discussion of wilderness seekers largely admired by society, such as Henry Thoreau, John Muir, and a historical sect of Irish monks. Through this carefully ordered process, Krakauer intends to sway the reader's perspective on McCandless. He presents his own case history after these, admitting his youthful naivety and sharing the lessons he has subsequently learned. Whether the reader agrees with Krakauer's conclusions or not, the author's compassion for McCandless comes across clearly.

Tone

The overall tone of *Into the Wild* can best be described as ominous. The very first paragraph of the prefatory Author's Note informs the reader that young Chris McCandless, the subject of the book, died in the wilderness of Alaska, all alone. His decomposing corpse was later discovered by a party of moose hunters. Thus, the reader knows from the outset that this true-life story will not have a happy ending. From this point forward, author Jon Krakauer must walk a delicate line. Krakauer must allow his readers to hide from this awful truth so that the readers can allow themselves to become emotionally invested in McCandless's story. Simultaneously, Krakauer interjects forbidding reminders of McCandless's ultimate fate in order to keep the readers' attention riveted.

Krakauer accomplishes most of this through his descriptions of nature. Nature becomes a character in the book, a merciless, uncaring force which provides succor in one moment then viciously attacks the next. The geography of Alaska particularly lends itself

to creating the author's ominous tone. The history of the Stampede Trail, where McCandless meets his fate, is the story of Nature's triumph over man's puny attempts to tame it. The government-sponsored effort to turn the trail into a passable road fails miserably as Nature eats away at the construction efforts, eventually swallowing the road completely. For contrast, Krakauer quotes letters from angry Alaskans who mock McCandless's dream to live in nature, noting that the site of his death is only a few short miles from civilization. Even as these letters make light of McCandless's feat, Krakauer's forbidding tone asserts the power of nature and commends the young man's ability to survive even sixteen weeks in this forbidding environment.

Structure

Into the Wild is carefully structured to promote the author's thesis while constantly building the tension of the narrative. The author hits the reader with the cruel facts of Chris McCandless's death in the Author's Note which precedes the story. Here, too, author Jon Krakauer lays out his thesis that he intends to prove McCandless was not a foolish young man with a death wish, as his critics contend, but rather a thoughtful, intelligent young man who attempted to meet a great challenge with full knowledge of its attendant risks. McCandless failed to survive his dream of living off the land in Alaska, but Krakauer structures his argument to show that McCandless's effort was in many ways a great triumph.

Krakauer begins the story by detailing McCandless's flight from his hometown and family, and introducing the substitute family McCandless finds on the road. This sets the stage for Krakauer's discussion of father-son relations and how they impact McCandless's choices. From this foundation, the story begins to chronicle McCandless's two years on the road in a chronological fashion. Each chapter title reflects a stop on McCandless's trail. The chronology leaves off abruptly just before McCandless begins his final journey to Alaska. McCandless's surviving family is interviewed and the emotional impact of his loss is assessed. Following this, case histories of other men who have died in the wilderness are presented and contrasted with McCandless's story. Next, a detailed flashback to McCandless's childhood is explored, followed by the author's personal case history which supports his belief that he and McCandless share much in common. Finally, the chronological narrative resumes with the final chapters of McCandless's young life. A brief Epilogue seeks to impart closure for the reader.

Quotes

"*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 and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless. August ?*" Chapter 2, pg. 12

"'You could tell right away that Alex was intelligent,' Westerberg reflects, draining his third drink. 'He read a lot. Used a lot of big words. I think maybe part of what got him into trouble was that he did too much thinking. Sometimes he tried too hard to make sense of the world, to figure out why people were bad to each other so often.'" Chapter 3, pg. 18

"He buried his Winchester deer-hunting rifle and a few other possessions that he might one day want to recover. Then, in a gesture that would have done both Thoreau and Tolstoy proud, he arranged all his paper currency in a pile on the sand - a pathetic little stack of ones and fives and twenties - and put a match to it." Chapter 4, pg. 29

"He was so enthralled by these tales, however, that he seemed to forget they were works of fiction, constructions of the imagination that had more to do with London's romantic sensibilities than with the actualities of life in the sub arctic wilderness. McCandless conveniently overlooked the fact that London himself had spent just a single winter in the North and that he'd died by his own hand on his California estate at the age of forty, a fatuous drunk, obese and pathetic, maintaining a sedentary existence that bore scant resemblance to the ideals he espoused in print." Chapter 5, pg. 44

"Not infrequently during their visits, Franz recalls, McCandless's face would darken with anger and he'd fulminate about his parents or politicians or the endemic idiocy of mainstream American life. Worried about alienating the boy, Franz said little during such outbursts and let him rant." Chapter 6, pg. 52

"*Since they won't ever take me seriously, for a few months after graduation I'm going to let them think they are right, I'm going to let them think that I'm 'coming around to see their side of things' and that our relationship is stabilizing. And then, once the time is right, with one abrupt, swift action I'm going to completely knock them out of my life.*" Chapter 7, pg. 64

"Across the top of the first one, dating from McCandless's initial visit to Carthage, in 1990, he had scrawled 'exempt exempt exempt exempt' and had given his name as Iris Fucyu. Address: 'None of your damn business.' Social Security number: 'I forget.'" Chapter 10, pp. 100-101

"'How is it,' he wonders aloud as he gazes blankly across Chesapeake Bay, 'that a kid with so much compassion could cause his parents so much pain?'" Chapter 11, pg. 104

"'Chris had so much natural talent,' Walt continues, 'but if you tried to coach him, to polish his skill, to bring out that final ten percent, a wall went up. He resisted instruction of any kind.'" Chapter 11, pg. 111

"As she studies the pictures, she breaks down from time to time, weeping as only a mother who has outlived a child can weep, betraying a sense of loss so huge and irreparable that the mind balks at taking its measure. Such bereavement, witnessed close range, makes event he most eloquent apologia for high-risk activities ring fatuous and hollow." Chapter 13, pg. 132

"As a youth, I am told, I was willful, self-absorbed, intermittently reckless, moody. I disappointed my father in the usual ways. Like McCandless, figures of male authority aroused in me a confusing medley of corked fury and hunger to please. If something captured my undisciplined imagination, I pursued it with a zeal bordering on obsession, and from the age of seventeen until my late twenties that something was mountain climbing." Chapter 14, pg. 134

"As a young man, I was unlike McCandless in many important regards; most notably, I possessed neither his intellect nor his lofty ideals. But I believe we were similarly affected by the skewed relationships we had with our fathers. And I suspect we had a similar intensity, a similar heedlessness, a similar agitation of the soul." Chapter 15, pg. 155

"One of his last acts was to take a picture of himself, standing near the bus under the high Alaska sky, one hand holding his final note toward the camera lens, the other raised in a brave, beatific farewell. His face is horribly emaciated, almost skeletal. But if he pitied himself in those last difficult hours - because he was so young, because he was alone, because his body had betrayed him and his will had let him down - it's not apparent from the photograph." Chapter 18, pg. 199

Topics for Discussion

1. Why did McCandless reject his parents' lifestyle?

2. What do you think of McCandless's decision to discard his identity and past life without a backward look?

Would you do the same thing if you were in his place, or do you think it would be important to discuss your decision with your family first, even if you were certain that they would try to dissuade you?

3. Pretend that you could speak for McCandless. What would you have to say to Krakauer, his biographer. To his parents?

4. What do you think you would want to say to McCandless if you were his father? If you were his mother?

5. The author believes that McCandless was deeply embittered by his discoveries about his father's past.

How do you think he should have handled his discovery?

6. Do you think that Krakauer's empathy for McCandless may have influenced his critical judgement in examining Chris's actions and decisions? Do you think the sympathetic way that Krakauer tells the story may influence your own opinion of McCandless?

7. Krakauer insists that he "won't claim to be an impartial biographer."

What kind of book do you think an "impartial biographer" might write?

How do you think such a biography would be different than the book Krakauer has written? Would it be better, worse, or just too different to properly judge? What conditions would a biography have to meet in order for its author to be able to claim impartiality? Do you think this is a realistic or a reasonable expectation?

8. What do you think of the many people in this story who seem to be living as transients or squatters? Does the freedom of their lifestyle appeal to you? Do you think they should attempt to establish stable homes and livelihoods?

9. The public response to McCandless's story has been deeply divided. Is this story an example of tragic foolhardiness or heroic idealism?

Essay Topics

Give at least three examples from the story, which demonstrate Chris McCandless's wilderness knowledge and preparation.

Cite three or more examples from the text, which indicate McCandless's lack of preparation or naivety regarding the challenges of living in the wild.

On balance, do you believe McCandless was a reckless greenhorn or a well-prepared wilderness adventurer? Why?

Do you believe McCandless's decision to leave his family without a word was justified? Why or why not?

Author Krakauer describes the "pornographic" fascination which the photograph of a mountain held for him in his youth. What did he mean by this?

McCandless followed an intentionally celibate and solitary lifestyle, yet found passionate enjoyment in risking his life in the wilderness. Do you believe McCandless's self-denial was a contributory cause to his penchant for thrill-seeking? Or, do you think his passion for dangerous adventure was simply a natural inclination, which eclipsed all other forms of passion in his life?

Did you respond with anger to McCandless's actions? If so, why? If not, explain your own reaction and place it in context with the angry public response to his death.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. According to Jon Krakauer, Chris McCandless died as a result of "one or two seemingly insignificant blunders."

What were those blunders and how could Chris have avoided them? Discuss the kinds of preparations that someone planning to live in the bush should take before setting out.

2. Who are "Rubber Tramps" and "Leather Tramps"? Describe their way of life. Discuss the pros and cons of a vagabond lifestyle.

3. Consider the various accounts of experiments similar to McCandless's that Krakauer relates. Discuss the kinds of idealism or alienation that lead these young people to abandon past lives and lead potentially dangerous existence.

4. Choose someone who has attempted to live in the wild the way McCandless did and research that person's experiences. Write a short biography about their adventures and the lessons they may have learned.

5. Krakauer seems unwilling to judge either McCandless or any of the people who were involved in his life.

Many people have either praised or condemned McCandless for his foolhardiness or Krakauer for his sympathetic approach to telling this story without making judgements. How would you defend or criticize the author's refusal to claim a position?

6. There are instances in this book where Krakauer introduces autobiographical material and suggests that his own experiences influence his perspective. Discuss an episode from your own life where your feelings about past experiences may have influenced your judgment or understanding of someone else.

7. The often conflicted relationships between children and their parents is one of the themes of Into the Wild. Describe and discuss some obstacles to communication between generations that you can identify either in this book, or in your experience.

8. Krakauer claims that he tries to "minimize" his "authorial presence."

Describe what you think he means by this, and discuss whether you should consider authorial presence when you read other kinds of literature, such as a work of fiction.

9. Krakauer uses quotations from other books about the wilderness as well as anecdotes about other ill-fated young adventurers as intertexts in Into the Wild. Judging from your own response to this book, discuss how the use of intertexts contributes to your understanding of the story.

Further Study

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