

Jon Krakauer: *Into the Wild*

Author's introduction

Long after writing an article for *Outside*, Jon Krakauer remained haunted by the particulars of McCandless' starvation and by unsettling parallels between the boy's life and his own. His fascination bordered on obsession. His new book, *Into the Wild*, retraces a quest for self-knowledge that ultimately led to death.

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

Shortly after the discovery of the corpse, I was asked by the editor of *Outside* magazine to report on the puzzling circumstances of the boy's death. His name turned out to be Christopher Johnson McCandless. He'd grown up, I learned, in an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C., where he'd excelled academically and had been an elite athlete.

Immediately after graduating, with honors, from Emory University in the summer of 1990, McCandless dropped out of sight. He changed his name, gave the entire balance of a \$24,000 savings account to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, and burned all the cash in his wallet. And then he invented a new life for himself, taking up residence at the ragged margin of our society, wandering across North America in search of raw, transcendent experience. His family had no idea where he was or what had become of him until his remains turned up in Alaska.

Working on a tight deadline, I wrote a 9,000-word article (**Death of an Innocent**) which ran in the January 1993 issue of the magazine, but my fascination with McCandless remained long after that issue of *Outside* was replaced on the newsstands by more current journalistic fare. I was haunted by the particulars of the boy's starvation and by vague, unsettling parallels between events in his life and those in my own. Unwilling to let McCandless go, I spent more than a year retracing the convoluted path that led to his death in the Alaskan taiga, chasing down details of his peregrinations with an interest that bordered on obsession. In trying to understand McCandless, I inevitably came to reflect on other, larger subjects as well: the grip wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind, the complicated, highly charged bond that exists between fathers and sons. The result of this meandering inquiry was a 70,000-word book, titled *Into the Wild*, published in January 1996 by [Villard/Random House](#).

I won't claim to be an impartial biographer. McCandless' strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible. Through most of the book, I have tried--and largely succeeded, I think--to minimize my authorial presence. But let the reader be warned: I interrupt McCandless' story with fragments of a narrative drawn from my own youth. I do so in the hope that my experiences will throw some oblique light on the enigma of Chris McCandless.

He was an extremely intense young man and possessed a streak of stubborn idealism that did not mesh readily with modern existence. Long captivated by the writing of Leo Tolstoy, McCandless particularly admired how the great novelist had forsaken a life of wealth and privilege to wander among the destitute. In college McCandless began emulating Tolstoy's asceticism and moral rigor to a degree that first astonished, and then alarmed, those who were close to him.

When the boy headed off into the Alaskan bush he entertained no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey. Peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking. And that is what he found, in abundance.

For most of the 16-week ordeal, nevertheless, McCandless more than held his own. Indeed, were it not for one or two seemingly insignificant blunders, he would have walked out of the woods in August 1992 as anonymously as he had walked into them in April. Instead, his innocent mistakes turned out to be pivotal and irreversible, his name became the stuff of tabloid headlines, and his bewildered family was left clutching the shards of a fierce and painful love.

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

--Jon Krakauer
Seattle, January 1996