

# Into the Wild



## BACKGROUND INFO

### AUTHOR BIO

**Full Name:** Jon Krakauer

**Date of Birth:** April 12, 1954

**Place of Birth:** Brookline, Massachusetts

**Brief Life Story:** Jon Krakauer is an American writer, award-winning journalist, humanitarian, and mountaineer, known for his writings about the outdoors and his mastery of reportorial narrative. His father introduced him to mountaineering at age eight and after graduating from Hampshire College in 1976, Krakauer spent the next two decades climbing mountains all over the world. In 1996, he climbed Mt. Everest, becoming the only climber on his team of five to survive their descent from the summit, after a fatal storm struck. The incident inspired his 1997 book *Into Thin Air*, which became a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Meanwhile, his 1996 book, *Into the Wild*, remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than two years. In 1999, the Academy of Arts and Letters awarded Krakauer an Academy Award in Literature to honor his exceptional writing and investigative journalism. *Under the Banner of Heaven*, a study of religious fundamentalism in the American West, and *Where Men Win Glory*, a profile of professional football player, turned army-combatant, Pat Tillman, followed in 2003 and 2009, respectively. Krakauer's most recent book *Three Cups of Deceit*, published in 2011, investigates alleged fabrications and fraud surrounding Nobel Prize nominee Greg Mortensen. A fearless and adventurous reporter, Krakauer has continued to push boundaries through his writings in publications such as *Outside*, *GQ*, *National Geographic*, *Rolling Stone*, *Architectural Digest*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Smithsonian*, and *Byliner.com*, where he currently contributes.

### KEY FACTS

**Full Title:** *Into the Wild*

**Genre:** Nonfiction; outdoor literature; travel writing; nature writing

**Setting:** Alaska, South Dakota, the American Southwest, and Mexico.

**Climax:** When Chris McCandless decides to return to civilization, but turns back into the wild because he cannot cross the Teklanika River.

**Protagonist:** Chris McCandless

**Antagonist:** Walt McCandless; nature

**Point of View:** Journalist Jon Krakauer reports from a third person perspective and occasionally the first person.

### HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

**When Written:** 1995

**Where Written:** Seattle, Washington

**When Published:** 1996

**Literary Period:** Contemporary nonfiction

**Related Literary Works:** Krakauer's book and McCandless's odyssey is situated within a literary legacy that stretches from the transcendentalism of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* to the naturalism of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*. Like Thoreau, who spent two years pursuing a "simple" life in the woods of Concord, Massachusetts, McCandless sets out alone into the Alaskan bush to live off the land and create a new identity. McCandless's solo quest for a "raw, transcendent experience" also reflects the transcendentalist values Thoreau espoused in his works, among them, individualism, self-reliance, anti-institutionalism, and finally an exhortation for man to simplify his life, live it to the fullest, and find a personal connection to God and nature. An heir to Thoreau's transcendental tradition, *Into the Wild* is also a successor to

Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*. McCandless was not only a fan of Jack London, but Krakauer's *Into the Wild* also exposes striking similarities between McCandless and his icon's life and work. Like the young Jack London, McCandless was a fearless adventurer, traveler, and wanderer. Like *The Call of the Wild*'s protagonist Buck, a domesticated dog who follows his instincts to become a wild wolf, McCandless also answered the "Call," giving up his worldly comforts for a free life in nature. In addition, McCandless's death mirrors the death of a man who succumbs to his follies and the might of nature in London's short story, "To Build a Fire." Similarly, London's early death as a Socialist who never came to terms with his financial success parallels McCandless's untimely death as a young man who fell victim to his fiercely idealistic beliefs before ever having the opportunity to fully shape them. Other related texts include Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and writings by Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, and American naturalist John Muir.

**Related Historical Events:** *Into the Wild* is based on the life and death of Chris McCandless, a young man from a well-to-do family, who gave up all his worldly possessions, and hitchhiked throughout the U.S., to Alaska, between 1990 and 1992. He trekked into Denali National Park and lived off the land for 113 days before apparently dying of starvation. McCandless's journey is shaped by American economic, cultural, social, political, and technological trends of the 1990s, primarily represented by his parents, whose affluent lifestyle, careerism, and success in the aerospace industry mirrors the economic prosperity of the period, the elevation of the meritocracy to prominence, and the rise of the information age. McCandless's rejection of his parents' values as well as his concern for world hunger and South African apartheid also parallel the development of "alternative" subcultures in the early '90s and the decade's growing awareness of global issues. Lastly, McCandless's story figures prominently in the rise of New Media, or mass and instantaneous communications. McCandless disappeared at the cusp of the digital age, only a few years before the invention of email, (1993), and the popularization of the cell phone, (1995), two devices that could have hampered his mission to live off the grid. Ironically, the discovery of McCandless's body in September 1992 set off a media firestorm that circulated McCandless's story in almost every medium from print to film. While propagating McCandless's image, these communications also debated the merits of McCandless's elevation to celebrity status. Because McCandless became infamous posthumously for his bizarre death, McCandless's rise to fame reflects the popularization of reality TV, which came into vogue in 1992 with the MTV series *The Real World*. Interestingly, if it were not for this great deal of media attention, McCandless could have easily become just another idealistic young man who walked into the woods never to be heard from again.

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The Evolution of *Into the Wild*.** Jon Krakauer first covered McCandless's death for *Outside* Magazine in January 1993. In the years following, he extended the article into a full-length book, *Into the Wild*. Actor Sean Penn adapted the book for the screen, writing and directing a critically acclaimed film version, starring Emile Hirsch, in 2007.

**A Mysterious Chemistry.** The confounding circumstances of McCandless's death prompted Krakauer to turn to botany and chemistry for answers. In *Outside* magazine Jon Krakauer initially theorized that McCandless died because he mistook poisonous sweet pea seeds for those of an edible potato plant. After working with a team of chemists while writing *Into the Wild*, Krakauer proposed another theory for McCandless's death—alkaloid poisoning from wild potato seeds. Krakauer amended his theory in later editions of the book, attributing McCandless's death to paralysis and starvation by swainsonine poisoning. In 2013, Krakauer published an article in *The New Yorker* that definitively asserted McCandless's death to be the result of lathyrism, a paralyzing neurological disease caused by a toxin in potato seeds, known as ODAP (beta-N-oxalyl-L-alpha-beta diaminoipronic acid).

However, the case is not settled and there is still debate about what exactly caused McCandless's death.

died. Though comforted by the surrounding landscape's beauty, Walt and Billie leave still nursing heavy hearts.



## PLOT OVERVIEW

When the body of a young male hiker is discovered in Alaska's Denali National Park, [Outside magazine](#) assigns journalist Jon Krakauer to cover the story. The young man turns out to be the runaway son of a well-to-do East Coast family, **Christopher (Chris) McCandless**, who after graduating from Emory University in May 1990, gave away his savings to charity, abandoned his car, burned all his [cash](#), and hitchhiked across the country "to live off the land" in the Alaskan wilderness.

Five months earlier, on April 28, 1992, **Jim Gallien**, driving on the outskirts of Fairbanks, Alaska, spots a young hitchhiker and offers him a ride. The young man is Christopher McCandless, but he introduces himself as "**Alex**" and says that he intends to "live off the land for a few months" in Denali National Park. Gallien, noticing that Chris's [backpack](#) is far too light to be carrying enough supplies for an extended camping trip, tries to dissuade from hiking alone into the woods. But Chris refuses Gallien's advice, so Gallien insists that the young man take his lunch and [boots](#) with him. Chris reluctantly accepts these gifts and walks onto the snowy [Stampede Trail](#). Gallien figures that the boy will reemerge out of the forest when he becomes [hungry](#).

Later that year, in September, a trio of moose hunters, a couple from Anchorage and an ATV driver, happen upon an abandoned [bus](#) in Denali National Park, where they discover Chris' decomposing body. Alaska State troopers recover the corpse, taking it to a crime lab, which determines the cause of death to be starvation.

Two months after the discovery of McCandless' body, Krakauer interviews grain elevator operator **Wayne Westerberg**, who recounts the day he picked up Chris, (going by "Alex" at the time), on his way back to Carthage, South Dakota. Chris works so hard on Westerberg's grain elevator crew that Wayne offers him a job. Yet Wayne is arrested for stealing satellite TV codes, forcing Chris to hit the road in search of work.

Going back to October 1990, McCandless' [yellow Datsun](#) is found abandoned in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area. Through his research, Krakauer figures out that after a flash flood dampened the Datsun's engine, Chris abandoned the malfunctioning car to conceal his predicament from his parents and the authorities.

Chris then hitchhikes throughout the west. Along the way, he camps with drifters **Jan Burres** and her boyfriend **Bob**, flips burgers at McDonald's in Bullhead City, [canoes](#) the Colorado River to Mexico, and befriends eighty-one-year-old **Ronald Franz**.

On March 14, 1992, Chris returns to Carthage to work for Wayne Westerberg, but leaves at the end of the month, having gathered just enough money and supplies to pursue his dream of living out in the Alaskan wilderness.

Hitchhiking north, Chris arrives in [Alaska](#) on April 18, 1992 and crosses the Teklanika River onto the Stampede Trail ten days later. Off the Sushana River, Chris discovers an abandoned city bus, where he makes camp. Throughout the summer, Chris hunts and forages, eventually shooting down a [moose](#). Butchering the moose's messy carcass to preserve its meat fills Chris with regret, but through reading, journaling and self-reflection, McCandless comes to terms with his kill and decides to return to civilization.

However, the thawing summer floodwaters of the Teklanika River prevent Chris from crossing, so he returns to the bus to regroup.

On July 30, Chris frantically writes in his [journal](#) that he is very weak and in grave danger, but also mentions [potato seeds](#). Too weak to hunt or gather, McCandless dies soon thereafter, having spent his last days discovering that the greatest happinesses in life must be shared with others.

Investigating the potato seeds further, Krakauer theorizes that McCandless died of swainsonine poisoning after consuming wild potato seeds laced with a toxic mold.

Having solved the mystery of McCandless's death, Krakauer accompanies Chris' parents, **Walt** and **Billie**, to pay their respects at the bus where Chris



## CHARACTERS

**Chris McCandless** – a.k.a. Alex /Alexander McCandless/ Alexander Supertramp, McCandless is an idealistic young man from a well-to-do D.C. family, who gives away all his worldly possessions, hitchhikes his way through the U.S. between 1990 and 1992, and eventually makes it to Alaska, where he treks into Denali National Park and spends a summer living in the wilderness, before he dies from eating poisonous seeds and his body is discovered in an abandoned [bus](#).

**Jon Krakauer** – The journalist who narrates **McCandless's** adventures, interviews Chris's friends, family, and the people he met on his journey, and investigates the young man's death. He shares his experience of a harrowing climb on [Devil's Thumb](#) to offer insight into McCandless's life and death.

**Wayne Westerberg** – A grain elevator operator who befriends **McCandless** on the road in Montana. He offers Chris a ride, food, shelter, and later a job working at his grain elevator in Carthage, South Dakota. Wayne receives Chris's last [postcard](#).

**Jan Burres and Bob** – A "rubber tramp" couple who pick up **McCandless** off Highway 101 in Northern California. Jan develops a motherly attachment to Chris. Chris sends her [postcards](#) every few months.

**Ronald Franz** – An eighty-year-old man who drives **McCandless** from Salton City, California to Grand Junction, Colorado. He develops a fatherly fondness for Chris. After McCandless dies, Franz follows the young man's advice to lead a nomadic life on the road. Chris writes to him often.

**Jim Gallien** – Drives **McCandless** to [The Stampede Trail](#). He gives Chris his [boots](#) and some food. He is the last person to see McCandless alive.

**Everett Ruess** – A twenty-year old Californian who walks into the Utah desert in 1934 and never returns.

**Gene Rossellini** – A man who experiments with living without the help of modern conveniences for more than a decade. He eventually grows disillusioned with his caveman existence and kills himself.

**John Waterman** – A gifted alpinist who successfully scales Mt. Hunter, but after several attempts to climb Denali becomes psychologically unhinged and recklessly walks out onto the glacier, allowing himself to fall into its giant crevices.

**Carl McGunn** – An absent-minded Texan who spends a summer camping in the Alaskan bush, but forgets to arrange for a pilot to pick him up at the end of the season. He ends up perishing because he fails to properly flag down a passing plane.

**Walt McCandless** – **Chris's** father. A NASA engineer and entrepreneur, he establishes an aerospace consultancy firm with his second wife **Billie**, Chris's mother. Chris's discovery of his father's philandering between his first and second wife causes tension between Walt and Chris.

**Billie McCandless** – **Chris's** mother and **Walt's** second wife. She helps Walt run their joint consulting business. While Chris is missing, she wakes up in the middle of the night, claiming to hear her son's voice.

**Carine McCandless** – **Chris's** younger sister and confidant. She offers intimate insight into her brother's teenage years and personality.

**Sam McCandless** – **Chris's** older half-brother, who confirms Chris' identity with the authorities.

**Marcia McCandless** – **Walt's** ex-wife. Walt has an affair with her after moving in and having children with **Billie**.

**Buck** – **Chris's** dog.

**Charlie** – A crazy old man who allows **McCandless** stay in a trailer on the outskirts of Bullhead City, Arizona.

**Bud Walsh** – The park ranger who discovers **Chris's** abandoned [yellow Datsun](#) in Lake Mead National Recreation Area.

**Ken Thompson, Gordon Samuel, and Ferdie Swanson** – Moose hunters who happen upon the **Anchorage couple** and the **bus** where Chris McCandless perished.

**Butch Killian** – An ATV driver who radios Alaskan State Troopers to retrieve Chris McCandless's body.

**Crazy Ernie** – The rancher **McCandless** works for briefly in Northern California, but Chris leaves the ranch when he realizes that Crazy Ernie won't pay him.

**Peter Kalitka** – The private investigator **Chris'** parents hire to find their son.

**Anchorage couple** – A pair of hikers who are horrified to discover Chris's **S.O.S.** **not** posted to the **bus** and the rotting smell emanating from its insides

**Gail Borah** – **Westerberg's** girlfriend, who develops a motherly affection for McCandless.

**Tracy** – A teenage girl at **the Slabs** who develops a crush on **McCandless**.

**Nick Jans** – A writer and schoolteacher from an Inupiat village, who sends a long letter to **Krakauer**, criticizing **McCandless'** ignorance, arrogance and naiveté.

**Gaylord Stuckey** – An RV driver who drives **McCandless** to Fairbanks, **Alaska**.

experienced mountaineer or naive explorer, all who enter Mother Nature's domain are subject to her laws.

## RISK AND SELF-REINVENTION

**McCandless's** journey into the wilderness is ultimately one of self-discovery and reinvention. Through his travels he transforms from a willful recent graduate, eager to break away from his stifling family, into a practiced wanderer and amateur mountaineer. Underscoring his transformation is his transition from his given name, "Chris McCandless," to "Alex," or "Alexander McCandless" on the road, to finally "Alexander Supertramp," on the **Stampede Trail**. McCandless's name changes document his shift in character and speak to the creation of his new identity. In casting off his family name, McCandless derives his new name, "Supertramp," from his life on the road, creating an identity that evokes this itinerant and trying lifestyle.

**Krakauer** pairs McCandless's reinvention of himself with the risky behavior he exhibits throughout his travels. For instance, Krakauer surmises that McCandless abandons his beloved **yellow Datsun** in the desert, instead of seeking help from the authorities, so that his parents won't find out and end his cross-country road trip. While Krakauer suggests that McCandless's new identity stems from his flirtation with danger, he also aligns his own daring climb on **Devil's Thumb** with McCandless's venture into the Alaskan bush. The young Krakauer believes that scaling this treacherous mount will transform his life for the better, paralleling McCandless's belief that living off the land in Alaska will also change his life for good. In the end, however, Krakauer realizes that such a risky escapade did nothing to fundamentally change him. What Krakauer does recognize in himself is a deep urge to test his limits and live on the edge, a willfulness he suspects McCandless of possessing. By inserting his personal experience into his investigation of Chris McCandless's quest for a "raw, transcendent experience," Krakauer shows that the path towards self-discovery is fraught with unnecessary risks that are more often life-threatening than life altering. Even so, he recognizes that such risks for "young men of a certain mind"—stubborn, passionate, idealistic and proud—hold an incredibly compelling power, like the thrilling unknowns of death or sex.

In describing his state of mind on Devil's Thumb, Krakauer writes, "At that stage of my youth ÉI was stirred by the dark mystery of mortality, I couldn't resist stealing up to the edge of doom and peering over the brink. The hint of what was concealed in those shadows terrified me, but I caught sight of something in the glimpse, some forbidden elemental riddle that was no less compelling than the sweet hidden petals of a woman's sex." While Krakauer indicates that a "raw, transcendent experience" is an elusive, almost inaccessible state of being, he does acknowledge the appeal of discovering one's self along the edges of death and danger, thereby suggesting that risk is a temptation, rather than a necessary component, of reinventing one's self.

## ARROGANCE, INNOCENCE, AND IGNORANCE

When news of **McCandless's** death of apparent starvation breaks, native Alaskans ridicule him, assuming that Chris's lack of preparation for the frontier indicates the young man's incompetence, arrogance, stupidity, narcissism, and fundamental misunderstanding of the wild. Yet **Krakauer** questions whether McCandless's death is just another instance of a young man getting in over his head and suffering the consequences. In this way, *Into the Wild* is not just a biography of McCandless's "brief and confounding life," but also an inquiry into McCandless's death, much like the investigations that drive mystery novels, or crime dramas. Like a sleuth, the book circles around the question of "how and why did Chris McCandless die?"

For Krakauer the answer lies within McCandless's character—his arrogance—as well as his lack of experience—his innocence and ignorance. Though Krakauer concedes that McCandless did possess a certain degree of arrogance in venturing into the woods underprepared and ill-equipped, he characterizes this incautiousness as stemming from McCandless's overestimation of his ability to survive off the land alone, rather than a haughty disregard of nature's might and mercurial ways. Krakauer attributes McCandless's death to "one or two seemingly insignificant blunders"—his inability to circumvent a system of dangerous rapids on the **Stampede Trail** and mistakenly eating potato seeds laced with a poisonous mold. Both are honest mistakes made on sound judgment. McCandless would have risked life and limb if he tried to ford the river's powerful floodwaters on his own.



## THEMES

In LitCharts each theme gets its own color. Our color-coded theme boxes make it easy to track where the themes occur throughout the work.

### THE AMERICAN WILDERNESS

**McCandless's** journey is part of a long tradition of men seeking to find themselves in nature, including naturalists like John Muir and writers such as Henry David Thoreau. **Krakauer** points out that McCandless had a particular fascination with Thoreau's *Walden*, an extended personal essay in which Thoreau documents his experiences living in the woods of Concord, Massachusetts. Not only did McCandless carry a heavily annotated copy of the text with him throughout his travels, like Thoreau, who lived in a secluded cabin to simplify his life, McCandless made camp at an abandoned bus in the middle of Denali National Forest in order to find himself. By closely observing the quality of animal behaviors, as well as deeply analyzing the effect of the passing seasons upon his personal development, Thoreau idealized such self-isolation within the wilderness, beautified nature, and romanticized its transformative ability, establishing an American legacy steeped in reverence for those who seek themselves in the wild.

In *Into the Wild*, Krakauer explores the "grip wilderness has on the American imagination" by recounting the stories of **Everett Ruess**, **Gene Rosellini**, **John Waterman**, and **Carl McGunn**, young men like McCandless who perished in the wild searching for transcendent experiences. But Krakauer also interrogates the romantic mythology surrounding the portrayal of the American wilderness, its adventurers, and their mysterious disappearances. Juxtaposing literary passages that idealize nature against the actual rough circumstances that McCandless encounters in the wild, Krakauer complicates the inspiring image of the American wilderness. In one instance, casting the desert as a place of "revelation" with a quote from *Man in the Landscape*, Krakauer then moves into a detailed description of the bear-paw poppy's majestic habitat, but ultimately leads the reader to the morbid discovery of McCandless's abandoned **car** in the Mojave Desert.

Even while drawing inspiration from nature, Krakauer is quick to point out its unforgiving and ferocious qualities, never shying away from depicting the precarious situations McCandless encounters—barely escaping from a flash flood in the Mojave Desert, getting lost in the Colorado River's channels, nearly dying off the Mexican coast during a storm. Krakauer also uses his own harrowing climb on **Devil's Thumb** to demonstrate the intense cruelty of nature. He almost falls to the bottom of an ice crevice when he makes a false step on the glacier and nearly plummets to his death when the ice that holds his pick ax drastically thins. Both instances choke Krakauer with a sudden fear of death at nature's hands, but also force him to recognize nature's awful power and terrible beauty. In characterizing the wilderness as both idyllic and brutally uncaring and dangerous, Krakauer underlines that whether one is an

McCandless also ate the **potato seeds**, based on the advice of an authoritative edible plant guide, which left out some little known, yet important information about swainosine that could have saved McCandless's life.

Instead of indicting McCandless of unforgivable hubris, Krakauer characterizes McCandless as the victim of his own ignorance and innocence, an inexperienced young man whose death resulted—in part—from his severe naiveté, rather than any sort of extreme arrogance. In doing so, Krakauer uncovers the tragedy of McCandless's death—in pursuing self-knowledge and experience, he fell victim to his lack of both. Krakauer thus reveals the paradox underlying all ventures of self-discovery—though motivated by a thirst for knowledge and experience such journeys are inevitably underwritten by a lack of both.

## LUCK, CHANCE, AND CIRCUMSTANCE

While focused on the circumstances surrounding **McCandless's** death, *Into the Wild* is also concerned with the adventures leading up to it. **Krakauer** spends the majority of the book documenting **Chris's** movements across the United States, Mexico, and finally **Alaska**. Though McCandless discloses his intention to go to Alaska to the people he befriends throughout his journey, his itinerary is not shaped by design, but by chance meetings, happenstance occurrences, and instances of luck. For instance, McCandless comes close to death four times before ever reaching Alaska. A flash flood in the Mojave Desert doesn't take his life, but causes his car to malfunction, signaling his close call with death. He nearly succumbs to heat stroke around Lake Mead but manages to flag down some passing boaters who drive him out. While lost in the canals of the Colorado River, "by fantastic chance" he comes across some duck hunting guides who also happen to speak English. They give him a ride and directions towards the sea, ending his meandering journey. Underscoring the life-saving rescue, McCandless dubs it a "miracle" in his journal. Lastly, while canoeing in the open ocean off the Mexican coast during a storm, he loses one of his oars, yet makes it to shore, using only one. McCandless describes it in his journal as a "very fateful day," yet his survival was due as much to dumb luck as his precarious predicament was due to his incautious ways.

While McCandless views these instances of survival as predestined or significant, Krakauer highlights the danger of these situations in order to emphasize the understanding that, had circumstances turned out differently, McCandless could have easily been injured, died, or stranded before he ever reached Alaska. Conversely, McCandless could have just as easily survived in Alaska had circumstances unfolded in an alternate manner. In this way, Krakauer suggests that McCandless's death is a confluence between chance and ignorance—a perfect storm of forces coming together to ill effect—rather than just a mystery to be solved. For Krakauer, death is not simply a logical conclusion at the end of a case, but also an almost inexplicable interaction between luck, chance, and circumstance.

## MATERIALISM AND IDEALISM

**Chris McCandless's** reinvention into "**Alexander Supertramp**" is marked by his rejection of money and material objects, as well as his quest for a "raw, transcendent experience." McCandless donates the remainder of his college fund, \$24,000, to OXFAM, thereby renouncing his affluent upbringing. He abandons his **yellow Datsun** in the Mojave Desert, forgoing the convenience of a car to travel on foot. During this time he also burns his leftover cash in a gesture that clearly points to his rejection of capitalistic society.

Underlying McCandless's rejection of money and materialism is his devotion to his ideals, which take shape through the authors and **books** McCandless reads during his journey. A fan of Leo Tolstoy, (a great novelist who renounced his wealth and privileged background to lead a simple life among the poor), McCandless's itinerant and impoverished lifestyle is almost mirror-like reflection of the ideals Tolstoy espoused in his works. Additionally by hitchhiking across the country, McCandless appears to live his personal philosophy—"that you should own nothing except what you can carry on your back at a dead run"—to the fullest.

Yet McCandless's rejection of material culture comes into friction with society, eventually becoming so extreme that it is unsustainable. While traveling with **Jan Burres** and **Bob** he is ticketed for **hitchhiking**. When crossing the U.S.-

Mexican border he is arrested for not carrying an I.D. At the same time, McCandless shows an ambivalent attitude towards work and charity. He expresses discomfort about getting a job and carrying an ID in Los Angeles, and displays listlessness and rebelliousness when flipping burgers at McDonald's in Bull City, but enjoys doing manual labor on **Wayne Westerberg's** grain elevator in Carthage, South Dakota. Moreover, McCandless is very willing to give away his money and belongings to others in need, but resists receiving help from others, such as food and boots from **Jim Gallien** and money from Jan Burres, even though his primary mode of transportation—hitchhiking—inherently relies on the goodwill of strangers.

Further, McCandless's resistance to help only goes so far against the elements of the wild. **Krakauer** notes, "[McCandless] was an extremely intense young man and possessed a streak of stubborn idealism that did not mesh readily with modern existence." He also highlights a journal entry from the time McCandless was camping in the Grand Canyon. McCandless describes the "toll" of such Spartan traveling on his body—severe malnutrition and 25 lbs. lost—but declares that, "his spirit is soaring." While McCandless believes heartily in the transcendence of his soul, Krakauer is quick to point out the unsustainability of Chris's idealism within the physical world. In calling attention to McCandless's laser-focused scrutiny of his soul over his physical wellbeing, Krakauer does not assert that McCandless's search for a "raw transcendent experience" is nearly impossible, but suggests instead that McCandless's idealism is ultimately unsustainable. That McCandless's pursuit of ideals—an idyllic existence in nature cut off from human contact—leads to his downfall appears to prove Krakauer's point.

## ISOLATION V. INTIMACY

Throughout *Into the Wild*, **Krakauer** describes **McCandless's** journey as a struggle between isolating himself from society and forging intimate relationships with others. While gregarious with the strangers he meets on the road, McCandless breaks off all contact with his family. While carrying on genial correspondences with his newfound friends, McCandless writes about "[feeling] extremely uncomfortable with society" in his journal.

McCandless's complicated relationships with others stem from his estrangement from his family, a break initiated by his discovery of his father's philandering in years past that sets Chris on a journey towards self-isolation. Krakauer characterizes McCandless's constant traveling as his way of running away from human connections: "McCandless was 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."

Though McCandless spurned human contact by leading a solitary life on the road and in the Alaskan bush, Krakauer notes how the very people McCandless evaded actually became surrogates for the family he was fleeing. **Jan Burres** shows a motherly concern for McCandless's wellbeing, **Ronald Franz** asks McCandless if he can adopt him, and Krakauer describes **Wayne Westerberg's** grain elevator workers as McCandless's "surrogate family." Meanwhile, McCandless's deep respect for Wayne supplants McCandless's broken relationship with his father, **Walt**. That McCandless sends his last **postcard** to Wayne, instead of Walt, speaks to his continuing disdain for his biological father and admiration for Wayne.

Even though McCandless ultimately cuts off contact with all his friends and family when he enters the Alaskan wilderness, his late **journal** entries show a young man coming to terms with his relationships with others and ready to reenter society. A highlighted passage from McCandless's copy of "Family Happiness" by Tolstoy reads, "He was right to say the only certain happiness in life is to live with others." That McCandless discovers a need for human contact through his solitary sojourn shows his reconciliation between his tendency to self-isolate and his deep need to connect with others.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **red text** throughout the Summary & Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### HUNGER AND STARVATION

Hunger and starvation are reoccurring symbols throughout *Into the Wild*. **McCandless** becomes a champion against widespread starvation by donating \$24,000 to OXFAM, an organization dedicated to fighting hunger. Yet **McCandless** himself is often plagued by hunger. He wanders in the desert with little food or water, subsists on rice, and eats hungrily whenever he's offered a free meal. Ironically, **McCandless** dies of starvation, as a result of his foraging for edible wild plants in the Alaskan bush. Yet **McCandless** does not just hunger for food, but craves, what **Krakauer** calls, a "raw, transcendent experience." In this way, **McCandless's** journey is driven by a deep yearning, or hunger to explore the world, nature, and himself.

### RICE

During his travels, Chris primarily lives off of rice, carrying pounds of it in his backpack. Rice thereby represents Chris' devotion to living a simple, yet dangerous life, always on the edge of **hunger** and **starvation**.

### MONEY

**McCandless** has a conflicted relationship with money. He vacillates from rejecting it outright—giving away the remainder of his **college fund** to OXFAM and burning his remaining cash in the desert—to doing any number of odd jobs and hard labor at **Wayne Westerberg's** grain elevator to scrape together enough money for his "great Alaskan odyssey." He works as a burger flipper for minimum wage at McDonald's, yet **Krakauer** describes Chris as a natural "salesman" who demonstrates enough business sense to make \$7,000 in one summer. Chris's complicated connection to money shows his unwillingness to live an affluent or indulgent lifestyle, but also **McCandless's** difficulty reconciling his footloose existence with the monetary demands of modern living.

### POSTCARDS, NOTES AND LETTERS

While **McCandless** cuts ties with his family, he writes often to the people he has befriended on the road, such as **Jan Burres**, **Wayne Westerberg**, and **Ronald Franz**. These **notes and postcards**, as do Chris's **letters** to his sister **Carine** offer a glimpse into his thoughts, feelings, and travels. In this way, these correspondences represent Chris's attempt to reach out and connect with others—his need for fellowship, friendship, and companionship. Yet these written artifacts are also harbingers of death. **McCandless's** S.O.S. letter asking for help reveals his near-death state, while his final postcard to Wayne Westerberg is eerily prophetic, foretelling Chris's "fatal" demise on **The Stampede Trail**.

### BOOTS

Noticing that **Chris McCandless** lacks proper footwear to survive in the Alaskan wilderness, **Jim Gallien** gives the young man his pair of rubber boots, which Chris reluctantly accepts. That **McCandless** does not think about acquiring proper boots for his "Alaskan odyssey" when he has spent so much time planning for it is emblematic of his absentminded, dreamy, and stubborn nature.

### THE BUS

As the site where **McCandless's** body is discovered, the **bus** alludes to death, but also symbolizes Chris's good fortune and search for solitude. That he stumbles upon the old Fairbanks City bus in the middle of Alaskan bush is an amazing stroke of luck that not only helps Chris to survive in the wild for 113 days, but also gives him a place to contemplate his life and beliefs, as the philosophical inscriptions he writes on the bus's walls reiterate.

### THE YELLOW DATSUN

**McCandless** buys a secondhand **yellow Datsun** in high school with money he earned from selling construction contracts one summer. His attachment to the

car is so great that he vehemently refuses his parents' offer to buy him a new one for his graduation. Even so, Chris abandons his beloved car in the desert, when salvaging it would mean prematurely ending his solo cross-country trip. He forgoes the convenience and safety of his car for the adventure and uncertainty of **hitchhiking**. Because of these events, the yellow Datsun symbolizes Chris's pride in his hard work, his scorn for his parent's materialism, and his rejection of a safe and convenient lifestyle.

### HITCHHIKING

**McCandless's** hitchhiking is symbolic of his transient lifestyle and unwillingness to be tied down to any place, any person, or any rules.

### THE STAMPEDE TRAIL

**The Stampede Trail** is a remnant of the Yutan Construction Company's attempt to build a road in the wild, but construction halted before connecting bridges could be built. As the place where Chris's journey ends, as well, the trail represents premature conclusions and failed attempts.

### THE SLABS AND OH-MY-GOD-HOT-SPRINGS

As locations where hippies and vagabonds coalesce to run away from their fears, responsibilities, and everyday life, the Slabs and Oh-My-God-Hot-Springs are a symbol of "itinerant society" and the transient, alternative culture of nomads and hitchhikers.

### DEVIL'S THUMB

A merciless glacier and peak of sheer ice that **Krakauer** attempts to scale alone as a young man, **Devil's Thumb** represents the allure of risky activities and the unrealistic goals that young men set for themselves because of their hubris, eagerness for a challenge, and sense of invincibility.

### THE STIKINE ICE CAP

A merciless and threatening glacier that **Krakauer** must cross to climb **Devils Thumb**, it represents danger and risk.

### ALASKA

**McCandless** shares his dream of going on a "great Alaskan odyssey" to almost everyone he meets on the road. Chris's starry-eyed regard for the Alaskan wilderness represents the dream of escape, discovery, and adventure.

### THE TEKLANIKA RIVER

Because of its fluctuating waters, **Chris** is able to cross the river easily in early spring, but finds it impossible to ford in late summer. As such, it stands as a symbol of nature's ever-shifting ways.

### THE MOOSE

In the Alaskan bush, **Chris** accomplishes an impressive feat—shooting a **moose**. But butchering the animal's meat traumatizes him, causing him to question his stay in the wild. As such, the moose represents nature's powerful impact on the human spirit, as well as defends Chris' skill as a huntsman.

### CHRIS' RIFLES

**McCandless** cherishes his rifles very much, but ends up losing one in a Mexican jail and carrying another in the Alaskan bush that is ill suited for taking down big game. In this way, Chris' rifles embody the contrast between his vision of the wild and real conditions on the trail. While Chris thinks that a gun prepares him for life in the wild, it only highlights his fragility in and inexperience with the wilderness.

### CHRIS' BACKPACK

**Chris'** mother **Billie** says that he "was very much of the school that you should own nothing except what you could carry on your back at a dead run." Chris actively practices this philosophy throughout his travels and hitchhiking by only carrying enough rice to subsist upon. This lack of equipment within his **pack** thereby symbolizes his ill preparedness for life in the wild.

## CHRIS'S CANOE

On impulse, **McCandless** buys a canoe to paddle down the Colorado River into Mexico. He nearly dies in the canoe when he loses an oar during a storm. The canoe stands as a sign of Chris's thirst for adventure, compulsive nature, and risky behavior.

## CHRIS'S MAP

When **McCandless** ventures into the Alaskan bush, he carries with him a crude and crumbled **map** that shows an obscure pathway to **The Stampede Trail**. But it fails to show a cluster of cabins, stocked with food and supplies, nearby Chris's bus-campsite. **Krakauer** suggests that had Chris known about them, he might have looked to them for survival. In this way, Chris's map is a symbol of his attempt to live off the map without help from the outside world and his ill preparedness for danger.

## CHRIS'S BOOKS

Throughout his journey, **McCandless** carries many books with him and reads avidly, highlighting passages from *Doctor Zhivago* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as well as encouraging the people he meets to read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*. **McCandless** takes the views espoused by these authors to heart and seeks to live them out through his itinerant lifestyle off the grid. These books embody Chris's idealism and quest for wisdom.

## CHRIS'S JOURNAL

A fragmented, but honest account of his life on the road, written in the third person, the journal gives insight into **McCandless's** state-of-mind and travels. It symbolizes Chris's beliefs, worldview, and his search for truth.

## CHRIS'S CAMERA AND PHOTOGRAPHS

**McCandless** ruins his first camera by burying it in the desert, signaling his youthful foolishness. Chris's second camera is found among his remains with five rolls of film. The pictures developed show a skinny, but happy young man, who seems to have found peace. They symbolize Chris's acquisition of wisdom and self-knowledge through his adventures.

## CHRIS'S FIELD GUIDE TO EDIBLE PLANTS

**McCandless** intently studies Priscilla Russell Kari's *An Ethnobotany of the Dena'ina Indians of Southcentral Alaska* in order to forage for plants and seeds in the Alaskan bush. While a knowledgeable guide, it fails to warn Chris of a poisonous element in the potato seeds that kill him, thereby suggesting that wisdom can be as deadly as ignorance.

## POTATO SEEDS

Plants with unexpected chemical properties, the potato seeds are sources of mystery, but also unlock the secret behind **Chris McCandless's** death.

his name became the stuff of tabloid headlines, and his bewildered family was left clutching the shards of a fierce and painful love.

—*Krakauer*



Some readers admired the boy [Chris] immensely for his courage and noble ideals; other 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.

—*Krakauer*



## CHAPTER 1

This is the last you shall hear from me Wayne...If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild.

—*Chris McCandless*



Gallien wondered whether he'd picked up one of those crackpots from the lower forty-eight who come north to live out ill-considered Jack London fantasies. Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing.

—*Krakauer*



'I figured he'd be OK...I thought he'd probably get hungry pretty quick and just walk out to the highway. That's what any normal person would do.

—*Jim Gallien*



## CHAPTER 2

Jack London is King.

—*Chris McCandless*



## CHAPTER 3

The trip was to be an odyssey in the fullest sense of the word, an epic journey that would change everything. [McCandless] had spent the previous four years, as he saw it, preparing to fulfill an absurd and onerous duty: to graduate from college. At long last he was unencumbered, emancipated from the stifling world of his parents and peers, a world of abstraction and security and material excess, a world in which he felt grievously cut off from the raw throb of existence.

—*Krakauer*



...[McCandless] intended to invent an utterly new life for himself, one in which he would be free to wallow in unfiltered experience. To symbolize the complete severance from his previous life, he even adopted a new name. No longer would he answer to Chris McCandless; he was now Alexander Supertramp, master of his own destiny.

—*Krakauer*



## QUOTES

The color-coded boxes under each quote below make it easy to track the themes related to each quote. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In trying to understand **McCandless**, I inevitably came to reflect on...the grip wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind, [and] the complicated, highly charged bond that exists between fathers and sons.

—*Krakauer*



For most of the sixteen-week ordeal...**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...as anonymously as he had walked into them. Instead, his innocent mistake turned out to be pivotal and irreversible,

## CHAPTER 4

[Alex] was big-time hungry. Hungry, hungry, *hungry*.

—Jan Burres



Chris was very much of the school that you should own nothing except what you could carry on your back at a dead run.

—Billie McCandless



Tramping is too easy with all this money. My days were more exciting when I was penniless and had to forage around for my next meal. I couldn't make it now without money...

—Chris McCandless



Can this be the same Alex that set out in July 1990? Malnutrition and the road have taken their toll on his body. Over 25 pounds lost. But his spirit is soaring.

—Chris McCandless



It is the experiences, the memories, the great triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent in which real meaning is found.

—Chris McCandless



## CHAPTER 5

[Chris] was so enthralled by [Jack London's] 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 subarctic wilderness.

—Krakauer



'I'd thought he'd be fine in the end...he was smart. He'd figured out how to paddle a canoe down to Mexico, how to hope freight trains, how to score a bed at inner-city missions. He figured all of that out on his own, and I felt sure he'd figure out Alaska, too.'

—Jan Burres



## CHAPTER 6

McCandless...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.

—Krakauer



You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us.

—Chris McCandless



## CHAPTER 7

Both father and son were stubborn and high-strung. Given Walt's need to exert control and Chris's extravagantly independent nature, polarization was inevitable. Chris submitted to Walt's authority...but the boy raged inwardly all the while. He brooded at length over what he perceived to be his father's moral shortcomings, the hypocrisy of his parents' lifestyle, the tyranny of their conditional love. Eventually, Chris rebelled—and when he finally did, it was with characteristic immoderation.

—Krakauer



No, I want to hitch north. Flying would be cheating. It would wreck the whole trip.

—Chris McCandless



[Chris] was hungry to learn about things. Unlike most of us, he was the sort of person who insisted on living out his beliefs.

—Gail Borah



I noticed he was crying. That frightened me.... I figured he wouldn't have been crying unless he intended to take some big risks and knew he might not be coming back. That's when I started having a bad feeling that we wouldn't never see Alex again.

—Gail Borah



## CHAPTER 8

Such willful ignorance [on the part of McCandless]...amounts to disrespect for the land, and paradoxically demonstrates the same sort of arrogance that resulted in the Exxon Valdez Spill—just another case of underprepared, overconfident men bumbling around out there and screwing up because they lacked requisite humility...McCandless's contrived asceticism and a pseudoliterary stance compound rather than reduce the fault.

—Nick Jans



McCandless didn't conform...well to the bush-casualty stereotype. Although he was rash, untutored in the ways of the backcountry, and incautious to the point of foolhardiness, he wasn't incompetent—he wouldn't have lasted 113 days if he were. And he wasn't a nutcase, he wasn't a sociopath, he wasn't an outcast. McCandless was something else.... A pilgrim, perhaps.

—Krakauer



## CHAPTER 9

[The papar] were drawn across the storm raked ocean...by nothing more than a hunger of the spirit, a yearning of such queer intensity that it beggars the modern imagination.

—Krakauer



## CHAPTER 10

It didn't occur to me that the hiker might be Chris. Never even crossed my mind. It's ironic because when I read the article I thought, 'Oh, my God, what a

terrible tragedy, I really feel sorry for the family of this guy, whoever they are. What a sad story!

—Sam McCandless



## CHAPTER 11

Chris was fearless...He didn't think the odds applied to him. We were always trying to pull him back from the edge.

—Walt McCandless



[Chris] the teenage Tolstoyan, believed that wealth was shameful, corrupting, inherently evil—which is ironic because Chris was a natural-born capitalist with an uncanny knack for making a buck.

—Billie McCandless



## CHAPTER 13

More even than most teens, he tended to see things in black and white. He measured himself and those around him by an impossibly rigorous moral code.

—Krakauer



Chris didn't think twice about risking his own life...

—Carine McCandless



## CHAPTER 14

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...Climbing mattered.

—Krakauer



## CHAPTER 15

...like McCandless, I was a raw youth who mistook passion for insight and acted according to an obscure, gap-ridden logic. I thought climbing the Devils Thumb would fix all that was wrong with my life. In the end, of course it changed almost nothing. But I came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams. And I lived to tell the tale.

—Krakauer



## CHAPTER 16

I was stirred by the mystery of mortality. I couldn't resist stealing up to the edge of doom and peering over the brink. The hint of what was concealed in those shadows terrified me, but I caught sight of something in the glimpse, some forbidden and elemental riddle that was no less compelling than the sweet, hidden petals of a woman's sex.

—Krakauer



Two years he walks the earth...an aesthetic voyager whose home is the road....After two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventures. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution....Ten days bring...him to the great white north. No longer poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild.

—Chris McCandless



## CHAPTER 17

[McCandless] was green, and he overestimated his resilience, but he was sufficiently skilled to last sixteen weeks on little more than his wits and ten pounds of rice. And he was fully aware when he entered the bush that he had given himself a perilously slim margin for error. He knew precisely what was at stake.

—Krakauer



## CHAPTER 18

HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED.

—Chris McCandless



EXTREMELY WEAK. FAULT OF POT. SEED. MUCH TROUBLE JUST TO STAND UP. STARVING. GREAT JEOPARDY.

—Chris McCandless



## EPILOGUE

Many people have told me that they admire Chris for what he was trying to do. If he'd lived, I would agree with them. But he didn't, and there's no way to bring him back. You can't fix it. Most things you can fix, but not that. I don't know that you ever get over this kind of loss. The fact that Chris is gone is a sharp hurt I feel every single day. It's really hard. Some days are better than others, but it's going to be hard every day for the rest of my life.

—Walt McCandless



## SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

The color-coded boxes under "Analysis & Themes" below make it easy to track the themes throughout the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Author, journalist, and narrator **Jon Krakauer**, introduces *Into the Wild* by presenting the circumstances surrounding the death of **Christopher McCandless**: "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 Mt. McKinley. Four months later his decomposed body was found by a party of moose hunters."

*Jon Krakauer's introduction, reads like a newspaper article, speaking to the author's journalistic background, but it also sounds like the start of a mystery novel. Krakauer's statement of the facts invites the reader to wonder: why does a wealthy young man wander into the wilderness alone and how does he come to die?*



Asked by [Outside magazine](#) to cover the story, **Jon Krakauer** investigates **McCandless'** life and death. Krakauer gives a brief account of McCandless, reporting that he grew up in an affluent suburb of Washington D.C., where he was a star-student and elite athlete. After graduating with honors from Emory University in the summer of 1990, McCandless went off the grid by changing his name, donating the remainder of his [college savings](#) to charity, abandoning his [car](#), giving up his possessions, and burning all the [cash](#) in his wallet.

"Working on a tight deadline," **Krakauer** quickly publishes an article on McCandless's death in [Outside magazine](#) in January 1993. But intrigued by the boy's life, death, and travels, Krakauer continues to investigate the "convoluted path that led to his death," culminating this research into the book before the reader, *Into the Wild*.

**Krakauer** presents the thematic outline of his book, which explores the "grip wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure [of] high-risk activities...for young men of a certain mind, [and] the complicated, highly charged bond...between fathers and sons."

**Krakauer** refuses to claim that he is an "impartial biographer" of McCandless, revealing that the boy's story "struck a personal note." While asserting his largely successful attempt at minimizing his "authorial presence," Krakauer warns the reader that he interrupts McCandless's story with narrative excerpts from his own youth.

**Krakauer** describes **McCandless** as an "extremely intense young man," whose "streak of stubborn idealism...did not readily mesh with modern existence." A devotee of Leo Tolstoy, McCandless emulated the Russian novelists' renunciation of wealth and privilege for a simple and morally rigorous life in poverty.

*Krakauer presents these facts to explain his fascination with McCandless and intrigue the reader further. Educated, affluent and talented, McCandless appears to have led a happy and fortunate life, with a promising future. That he gives up all his worldly possessions makes his disappearance and death even more puzzling, enticing Krakauer and the reader to continue investigating.*



*Krakauer's prolonged investigation into McCandless's death, from article to full-length book, highlights the pursuit of ideals. Just as McCandless pursues an idyllic life in the wild, Krakauer goes in search of answers that will ideally explain McCandless's death.*



*Krakauer points out three major themes: the romantic appeal of the American wilderness, the risks of youthful reinvention, and tortured dynamics of family ties. Reoccurring, these themes shape Krakauer's thesis about McCandless' life and death.*



*Krakauer suggests that he is an unreliable narrator. By identifying with his subject, Krakauer undermines his objective journalistic training, creating a book that is not only a biography of McCandless's life, but also a memoir of Krakauer's own life.*



*By characterizing McCandless as an idealistic young man suggests that McCandless's whole-hearted devotion is not sustainable, nor compatible with modern society. Yet by noting his connection to Leo Tolstoy, Krakauer indicates that McCandless is part of a tradition of such people, and that this sort of idealism can sometimes lead to greatness.*



**Krakauer** claims that **McCandless** ventured into the Alaskan bush not pursuing illusions of a land filled with "milk and honey," but in search of "peril and adversity." He asserts that McCandless, during his sixteen weeks in the wild, "more than held his own," and that he would have survived if were not for "two seemingly insignificant blunders."

Noting the great number of mail correspondences and opinions **McCandless'** story has generated—some readers believe he was noble and courageous, others assert that he was crazy, reckless and arrogant—**Krakauer** invites the reader "to form his or her own opinion," saying that his own convictions will soon be made apparent.

## CHAPTER 1 - THE ALASKA INTERIOR

**Krakauer** opens the chapter with a [postcard](#), dated April 27th, 1992, that **McCandless**, (going by the name Alex), wrote in Fairbanks, Alaska and sent to **Wayne Westerberg** in Carthage, South Dakota: "This is last you shall hear from me Wayne...If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild..."

**Jim Gallien**, driving on the outskirts of Fairbanks, Alaska spots a young hitchhiker shivering on the road and picks him up. Though carrying a [rifle](#), the young man is friendly and introduces himself as "**Alex**." He requests a ride to the edge of Denali National Forest, where he intends "to live off the land for a few months."

Though **Gallien** suspects "**Alex**" of being a Jack London fanatic, bent on living out his "ill considered fantasies" in the Alaskan wilderness, he agrees to drive him to the park. Gallien also notices that Chris' [backpack](#) is especially light for an extended camping trip. While Chris admits to only carrying a ten-pound bag of [rice](#), Gallien observes that the quality of the boy's hiking [boots](#) is poor for the wintry weather and his [rifle](#)—.22 caliber—is too small to take down big game.

Like a detective, Krakauer indicates a motive for Chris' pursuit of the wild and suggests a theory for his death. Contrary to Chris' detractors, Krakauer believes that Chris actively pursued danger in life, but was undone by small and innocent mistakes, rather than arrogant ones. Put another way, Krakauer doesn't condemn McCandless as being a fool. He respects him.



*Krakauer's cover story elevates Chris' death to the national stage, setting off a heated debate about Chris' character that also compromises Krakauer's journalistic integrity. By disclosing his bias, but also engaging diverse opinions, Krakauer reestablishes his position as a consummate investigative reporter.*



*McCandless' postcard to Wayne is eerily prophetic because it anticipates Chris' untimely and tragic death. By suggesting that he won't be heard from again and that his venture could be "fatal," Chris broadcasts his willingness to face death and seems to predict his own death, as well as speak from the grave.*



*While Chris' rifle appears threatening, it actually highlights Chris' fragility, inexperience and naiveté. Chris' friendly demeanor does not match up with his fierce exterior, suggesting that he may not be wholly prepared for the wild land and experiences he pursues.*



*Gallien's suspicion of Chris reflects Krakauer's mistrust of romantic portrayals of the American wilderness, propagated by London's canon of adventure fiction. Meanwhile, Chris' lack of suitable supplies shows that he is ill prepared for the hike, suggesting that he is either extremely confident in his camping skills or very naive about conditions on the trail.*



On the drive, “Alex” appears to be a charming, well- educated, and adventurous young man because he boasts about nearly dying off the coast of Mexico during a storm. He shows Gallien his “**crude map**” of the national park, pointing out his intended hiking route: the **Stampede Trail**.

*Chris’ well-mannered ways contrast with his itinerant lifestyle, as well as Alaska and Mexico’s rough and risky landscapes. Chris’ “crude map” again signals that he is ill prepared—or wants to be unprepared—for the hike ahead.*



Sensing that “Alex” is unprepared, **Gallien** attempts to dissuade him from hiking alone into the forest. But **Chris** refuses his advice, declaring that he will handle all obstacles on his own and without the help of anyone, including his family, with whom he has cut ties.

*Chris’ unwillingness to listen to Gallien, or receive help from anyone, demonstrates his fierce independence and extreme self-reliance. Chris’ lack of preparation, however, signals that he may not be ready for the life in the Alaskan woods.*



Gallien drops “Alex” off on the edge of **The Stampede Trail**. **Chris** attempts to give Gallien his watch and loose change, but Gallien implores “Alex” to take his leftover lunch and pair of **rubber work-boots**, so that his feet will stay warm and dry. **Chris** reluctantly accepts these gifts and hikes onto the trail. Gallien believes that “Alex” will be all right, figuring that he will turn back once he gets **hungry**.

*While very generous with his own possessions, Chris is reluctant to accept Gallien’s gifts, highlighting Chris’ generosity, but also his misunderstanding of material goods. By compensating Gallien, Chris recognizes the monetary value of his things in society, but underestimates the practical value that Gallien’s food and sturdy boots will serve in the wild.*



## CHAPTER 2 - THE STAMPEDE TRAIL

In September 1992, six people in three separate parties happen upon a refurbished city **bus** off the **Stampede Trail** in Denali National Park. **Moose hunters**, **Ken Thompson**, **Gordon Samel** and **Ferdie Swanson** ford the Teklanika river in their all-terrain vehicles to arrive at the bus, where they spot a frightened looking **Anchorage couple**. Horrified by a rotting smell emanating from the bus and a disturbing **SOS note** from **Chris McCandless** attached to its door, they refuse to enter, but Samel ventures in, uncovering McCandless’s body. **Butch Killian** also happens on the scene and radios for troopers to recover the body. A **camera** with five rolls of exposed film, the **SOS note**, and a **diary**, written on the pages of a **field guide to edible plants**, are recovered along with the remains.

*The discovery of Chris’ body illustrates the convergence of luck, chance and circumstance. Though rarely visited and very remote, the bus site is miraculously encountered by six individuals, on the exact same day. Tragically and ironically, this happenstance occurrence does not occur during Chris’ time of dire need, (indicated by the emergency S.O.S. note), but only after his death. The coincidental nature of the discovery of Chris’ body creates the sense that had these hunters and hikers found the bus sooner, Chris could have been saved.*



**McCandless’s** body is taken to a crime lab in Anchorage. From the body’s badly decomposed remains, it is difficult to determine the cause of death, but its thinness indicates **starvation**.

*The signs of starvation on Chris’ body are a physical expression of his deep desire to live under extreme conditions, but they also highlight his body’s limitations and fragility.*



Though **Chris** signed the **SOS note** with his full name and took many self-portraits with the **camera** discovered, no identification is found on his person, mystifying the authorities as to who **Chris** was, where he was from and why he was there.

*Chris’ identity is as much a mystery as the cause of his death. Though clues to his identity abound, the essence of his character—to both the people who find him and to **Krakauer**—remains a complex conundrum.*



## CHAPTER 3 - CARTHAGE

Grain elevator operator **Wayne Westerberg** picks up **Chris McCandless**, (going by “**Alex**”), in September of 1990, while driving back to Carthage, South Dakota. **Krakauer** imagines what **Chris** would have looked like to **Wayne**—vulnerable and “**hungry**.” **Westerberg** remembers that, at the time of their meeting, **McCandless** had not eaten for days and had no more money. When they dined at a friend’s house that night, **McCandless** “wolfed down” the meal and fell fast asleep at the table.

*Chris’ journey is plagued by hunger. Starved when he meets **Wayne**, he demonstrates a hardy, almost wolfish appetite when offered food. However, **Chris** does not only hunger for food, he also hungers for novel life experiences, like hitchhiking. By pairing **Chris’** craving for food with his yearning for adventure, **Krakauer** suggests that **Chris’** desires are extreme, even unsustainable.*



**McCandless** stays with **Westerberg** and works on his crew for three days. **Wayne** is so impressed by “**Alex’s**” work ethic that he offers him a job.

*Chris’ strong work ethic demonstrates his highly principled nature, as well as his growing loyalty towards the father figure of **Wayne Westerberg**.*



During his second stay, **McCandless** develops a “lasting bond” with the town and **Wayne**, becoming a part of a “surrogate family” of workers who live, cook and chase women together as part of an informal co-op. During this time, **Wayne** also learns from tax records that “**Alex’s**” real name is actually **Christopher**.

*Chris’ familial attachment to **Wayne**, **Carthage**, and the co-op contrasts with the itinerant and lonely lifestyle he leads on the road, illustrating the tension between intimacy and isolation in his life. **Chris’** concealment of his identity indicates that he is trying to escape something, that his sense of self is in flux.*



Two weeks after **McCandless** arrives in Carthage, **Westerberg** is arrested for stealing satellite TV codes. With **Wayne** in jail, **Chris** is left jobless and leaves town earlier than expected, on October 23rd. Before leaving, he gives **Wayne** a copy of **Leo Tolstoy’s War and Peace**, inscribed with a directive to “Listen to **Pierre**,” the **novel’s** “questing, altruistic, and illegitimately born” protagonist. He continues to write to **Wayne** and identifies South Dakota as his home.

*Like an evangelist espousing the gospel to an atheist, **Chris** passes on **War and Peace** to **Wayne** in the hopes that he will listen to **Pierre’s** wisdom. **Chris** identifies with **Pierre** because they are both idealistic and betrayed by their fathers (**Pierre** through his illegitimacy; **Chris** through his father’s affair). He uses the novel to communicate his beliefs to **Wayne**, whom he deems worthy of receiving his message.*



In spite of **McCandless'** claim to South Dakotan heritage, **Krakauer** reveals that Chris is actually the son of a successful aerospace engineer, **Walt**, and his business partner-wife **Billie**. They raised Chris and his younger sister **Carine** in the affluent D.C. suburb of Annandale, Virginia. Krakauer also discloses that Chris has six half-siblings from Walt's first marriage.

*Chris disguises his well-to-do upbringing by pretending to hail from humble origins. His creation of an alternate identity suggests that Chris is ashamed of his background. By disclosing the nature of Chris' blended family, Krakauer hints at unrest in Chris' home.*



Upon his graduation from Emory University, **Chris** refuses his parents' offer to pay for law school and to buy him a new car, preferring instead to spend his summer driving his **yellow Datsun** on a solo, cross-country journey "to disappear for a while."

*By refusing a new car, Chris rejects his parents' wealth and love (and perhaps the idea that such things should be combined). Keeping his old car, which he bought himself, embodies Chris' devotion to a simple life; the car also serves as a vehicle of escape from his parents and society.*



After graduation, **McCandless** mails his final transcript to his parents. After not hearing from him again, **Walt** and **Billie** drive down to Atlanta, where they find his apartment available for rent. Back home they find all their **letters** to Chris returned in a bundle. Having instructed the post-office to hold his mail for a month to throw his parents off his trail, Chris drives westward in his **yellow Datsun** on a road trip to reinvent himself and discover the wild.

*The strategy Chris employs to deceive his parents is not only calculated and cruel to his parents, it is selfish and self-destructive to himself. By sending nothing but his transcripts, Chris ensures that he disappears without a trace, not only shaking his parents' peace of mind, but also purposely undermining his personal safety net as ventures into the west on his own.*



## CHAPTER 4 - DETRITAL WASH

In October 1990, a team of park rangers, led by **Bud Walsh**, discovers **McCandless's yellow Datsun** abandoned in the Detrital Wash, near Lake Mead. Some **loose change** and twenty-five pounds of **rice** are left in the car with the keys in the ignition. Another ranger starts the Datsun and drives it out of the dessert, while the rest of the team searches for the car's owner.

*The condition in which the car is left suggests that its owner is absentminded and irresponsible. But its mysterious appearance in the desert also suggests that there is more to Chris' story than meets the eye, encouraging the reader to investigate further.*



Using notes from Chris' **journal**, **Krakauer** reports that on July 6, **McCandless**, ignoring posted warnings, drove off-road into the Detrital Wash and sets up camp. A thunderstorm's flash flood nearly sweeps Chris away, but leaves the **car's** engine wet, preventing him from starting the ignition immediately. Thinking that his car is broken, Chris abandons his car, hides it, and buries his belongings in order to conceal his predicament from the authorities and his parents. He then burns his remaining **cash**—nearly one hundred and twenty dollars—and sets off into the desert.

*Unwilling to seek help, Chris puts his road trip above the law, his wellbeing and parents' peace of mind, showing his journey of self-discovery to be, at the same time, both an extreme exploration of himself and selfish and self-destructive. This incident also demonstrates Chris' reckless behavior and good fortune. Chris could have drowned, but survives. Similarly, had Chris had more patience, he would have discovered that his car still worked. By moving on without car or cash, Chris renounces materialism, but also pushes his luck, forgoing safety, security and convenience for adventure.*



Suffering from heat stroke and realizing the folly of hiking into the desert without water or proper supplies, **Chris** flags down some boaters on the edge of Lake Mead. "Allowing his life to be shaped by circumstance," he begins hitchhiking, traveling from Lake Tahoe to Oregon.

*Though liberated by his itinerant lifestyle, Chris' desert rescue highlights his reliance upon the goodwill of others, who save him from his foolish mistake. Chris' footloose way appears carefree, but the risks and stakes are high.*



Chris works as a ranch hand for a rancher named **Crazy Ernie** for a short time, but takes to the road when he realizes that he will not be paid for his labor.

*Despite denouncing money, Chris maintains a traditional view of labor relations. This can be seen as undermining his strong held disdain for material wealth, or his insistence on personal individual dignity.*



On U.S. Highway 101, drifters **Jan Burres** and her boyfriend **Bob** meet **McCandless**. Reminded of her estranged son, Jan takes Chris under her wing, teaching him the ways of tramping and hitchhiking. They camp for a week together. After leaving, Chris sends them **postcards** every few months.

*By showing Chris the ropes, Jan becomes a surrogate mother to Chris. While Chris' real parents attempt to buy their son's affection, Jan earns Chris' respect—represented by his postcards to her—by sharing knowledge of the road.*



Before meeting **Jan** and **Bob**, **McCandless** is ticketed for hitchhiking and uncharacteristically gives his parents' address to the officer. When the ticket arrives, **Walt** and **Billie** hire private eye **Peter Kalitka** to investigate. Kalitka does not find Chris, but learns that he donated the remainder of his **college fund**—\$24,000—to OXFAM.

*By donating to OXFAM, Chris not only renounces his wealth, but also cuts ties with his affluent family. However, Chris' run-in with the law tests his resolve to shun his parents, showing that his determination to be family-free is not as firm as it appears.*



Later, in Arizona, **Chris** buys a **canoe** "on impulse," deciding to boat down the Colorado River and across the Mexican border to the Gulf of California.

*Chris' spontaneous purchase highlights his impulsive nature, thirst for adventure, and risky behavior.*



In his canoe, **McCandless** sneaks through the Mexican border. He becomes lost in a labyrinth of canals for days, but "by fantastic chance" happens upon a troupe of English-speaking Mexican hunting guides, who pick him up and drive him to the ocean. Chris calls the encounter a "miracle" in his journal.

*Chris' adventurous spirit and good luck serendipitously converge to rescue him from a risky situation. Chris' description of the encounter emphasizes his good fortune. Had luck not struck so fortuitously, he might not have survived.*



**McCandless** paddles south and camps along the coast, subsisting upon five pounds of **rice** and the fish and other marine life he catches. On a "very fateful day" in January his boat nearly capsizes in a storm, causing him to abandon his **canoe** and head north.

*Though Chris lives in concert with nature his life is threatened during a storm, highlighting his precarious position in the wild. His survival is not "fate," simply good fortune. There is little difference between his survival here and death in Alaska other than luck.*



While crossing the border without ID, **Chris** is detained by immigration authorities. He concocts a story to get out of jail, but loses his beloved **rifle** in the process.

*Chris shows a disregard for rules and authority by crossing the border illegally. That he loses his cherished rifle as a consequence hints that Chris' reckless actions come at a cost.*



**Hitchhiking** throughout the Southwest, **Chris** goes to Los Angeles to get a job and ID, but returns to the road, feeling "uncomfortable in society."

*Chris attempts to integrate into society after his run-in with the law, but his free spirit cannot be contained, nor comforted by city life.*



After abandoning another job in Las Vegas, **Chris** returns to the desert to retrieve his backpack, but finds that his **camera** has been destroyed. Even so, he exuberantly writes in his **journal** that he has successfully fended for himself on city streets and is thankful to be alive.

*Having stripped himself of most of his worldly possessions, Chris fully embraces poverty and his itinerant life. Chris' camera may seem like a small casualty, but suggests that his quest for freedom and self-knowledge also comes at a price.*



## CHAPTER 5 - BULLHEAD CITY

**Krakauer** picks up **McCandless'** trail at Bullhead City, Arizona where Chris stays for two months, flipping burgers at McDonald's. Chris' coworkers remember Chris as a responsible, but rebellious worker, who would always show up, but worked slowly at the grill and resented wearing socks and shoes to work.

*Though willing to take low-paying jobs and work hard for his money, Chris shows disdain for his menial job and capitalism by subverting McDonald's company policies, further demonstrating Chris' complicated relationship with work and wealth. He works for money only in order to free himself from having to work from money for a while.*



**McCandless** takes a liking for Bullhead City and makes an arrangement with an old man named **Charlie** to squat in an abandoned trailer on the outskirts of town. **Chris** writes to **Jan Burre**, inviting her and **Bob** to visit him, but before they can depart Chris arrives at their campsite located at **the Slabs**, an unconventional campground for vagabonds and drifters. Chris explains that he was tired of life in Bullhead City.

*McCandless' rapid movements from one town to the next not only underscore his itinerant lifestyle, but also his mercurial ways. Just as Chris' attitudes and moods change, so too do his movements and living arrangements. Yet while Chris is quick to change, he fails to recognize that nature and society shift in unpredictable ways, as well.*



**Chris** helps **Jan** sell secondhand **books** at **the Slab's** flea market by recommending books and stories by his favorite author and chronicler of the Klondike, Jack London. He frequently talks about his plans to go on a "great Alaskan odyssey."

*Chris' Alaskan adventure is inspired by the fictions of Jack London, suggesting that Chris does not appreciate the nuances between the fiction he reads and the realities he will face in Alaska.*



A seventeen-year-old girl named **Tracy** develops a crush on **Chris**, but he doesn't take her seriously. Instead he bonds with **Jan**, revealing to her that he actually hails from D.C.

*Chris tends to gravitate towards motherly figures over romantic relationships. While he flees his own family, there is a hint that some part of him is seeking a familial love he can believe in.*



After a week, **McCandless** decides to leave **the Slabs**. **Jan** drives him to Salton City, California so that he can pick up his last McDonald's paycheck. She attempts to give Chris some **money**, but he refuses. She finally persuades him to accept some knives and long underwear for **Alaska**. Jan later finds the long underwear tucked under the car's seat. Though angered by Chris' action, she figures he'll be all right.

*Chris' refusal of Jan's money and supplies, not only demonstrates Chris' unwillingness to accept the aid of others it also suggests that his extreme self-reliance is also extremely self-destructive. Such supplies could aid Chris on his journey, but Chris places his pride above his wellbeing and comfort. Further, his decision to leave indicates that he feels the need to prioritize his independence over making human connections.*



## CHAPTER 6 - ANZA-BORREGO

On January 4, 1993, **Krakauer** receives a **letter** from eighty-one year-old **Ronald Franz**, requesting a copy of the article Krakauer published in **Outside magazine**. Ron knew "**Alex**" and wants to confirm what became of him.

*From Krakauer's articles Chris becomes famous, but his story still remains a mystery to those who knew him. Though known by many, Chris is never truly known by anyone.*



After leaving **Jan Burre** in Salton City, California, **McCandless** hikes into the desert, setting up camp in Anza-Borrego, Calif. On one of his day hikes into Palm Springs, he meets **Ronald Franz**, an eighty-one-year-old man and a devout Christian, who gives him a ride to **Oh-My-God Hot Springs**, a winter refuge for hippies and nomads, that is close to Chris' campsite.

*Chris' campsite near Oh-My-God-Hot-Springs represents Chris' mission to live on the borders of conventional society. That Ron drives Chris out to this remote location signals Ron's connection to him, and foreshadows that Ron will soon follow in Chris' footsteps.*



**Ron**, having lost his son in a car accident many years earlier, enjoys **McCandless'** youthful company. Chris urges Ron to abandon his sedentary life, sell his belongings and live on the road. Franz teaches McCandless how to do leatherwork. Chris creates a tooled **leather belt**, which records his wanderings in pictures, symbols and initials.

*Bonding over long talks and handiwork, Chris and Ron's relationship is akin to that between a father and son. That Chris befriends Ron readily, yet abandons his family so carelessly highlights the tension between isolation and intimacy that exists in all his relationships.*



In February, **McCandless** decides to go to San Diego to find a job. He reluctantly accepts a ride from **Ron** to that city. Yet Chris leaves San Diego soon after arriving because he can't find work.

*Chris' tenacious endurance fails when it comes to conventional jobs and common courtesies, further illustrating his difficulty at meshing with societal norms.*



Restless, **McCandless** rides the rails up north to Seattle, where he sends **postcards** to **Jan** and **Ron**, gleefully bragging about his near violent run-in with a railway security guard.

*Chris' cavalier disregard for authority not only brushes up against the law, but also compromises his personal safety, becoming increasingly dangerous and life threatening.*



Stranded in Coachella, California, **McCandless** calls **Ron** to ask for a ride to Salton City. Ron offers to drive McCandless all the way to Grand Junction, Colorado so that he can make it to a job he has arranged with **Westerberg** in Carthage on time (. During the drive, Ron asks Chris if he can adopt him, but Chris dodges the question, slipping out of Ron's life.

*While Ron gives greatly of himself, Chris is unwilling to reciprocate emotionally in spite of the many kindnesses Ron has shown him. This imbalance situates Chris' relationships at emotional extremes—fast friends or distant relatives.*



In April, **Ron** receives a long **letter** from **Chris**, exhorting him to turn to the road to find life's great joys and meaning. Ron takes Chris' advice to heart, moves out of his apartment and camps in the desert, waiting for his friend Chris to return.

*By taking to the road, Ron becomes a devotee of Chris' way of life and idealizes Chris almost as a Christ-like figure. Like a disciple, Ron receives the word and waits upon his Chris' return. Chris' devotion and idealism makes him extremely charismatic—even great—to some people.*



Eight months later, **Ron** picks up two hitchhikers who share a story from **Outside magazine** about a hiker who froze to death in **Alaska**. Ron realizes it is "**Alex**." Grief-stricken, he denounces God and takes up drinking

*Ron believed in Chris. For him Chris had a kind of connection to God. Again Krakauer is showing that Chris had a kind of greatness in him, and yet at the same time that this greatness was connected to his self-destructiveness and even willful foolishness.*



## CHAPTER 7 – CARTHAGE

On a cold March day, **McCandless** arrives at **Westerberg's** grain elevator in Carthage, ready to work. He plans to raise enough money and supplies for his departure to Alaska on April 15. For four weeks, McCandless eagerly works at dirty and tedious jobs around the warehouse.

*Though considered arrogant and incompetent by his critics, Chris shows humility and a tenacious work ethic by taking on undesirable and menial tasks to achieve his goal of traveling to Alaska.*



In an interview with **Krakauer**, **Westerberg** comments on **Chris'** absentminded behavior, recounting an instance when the usually tidy McCandless failed to notice an odorous mess of rancid chicken grease, leftover in the microwave.

*While extremely intelligent, Chris is more book-smart than street-smart. His lack of common sense and forgetfulness is a foreboding indicator that Chris may not be fully prepared for Alaska.*



During his stay in Carthage, **McCandless** engages in deep conversations with **Westerberg's** girlfriend **Gail Borah**, a mother of two, who becomes Chris' confidant. **Westerberg** doesn't press Chris about his family, but suspects that McCandless has fallen out with his father.

*Though alienated by his own parents Chris becomes easily attached to strangers, like Gail and Wayne, who take on a parental role in his life. They seem to know more about Chris than his own parents, painfully pointing out Chris' severe disconnect from his biological family.*



**Krakauer** describes **Chris'** "sexual innocence," noting that Chris showed interest in girls, but likely lived a chaste and celibate life, much like his hero Thoreau who remained a lifelong virgin.

*Chris' innocence about intimacy mirrors his naïveté about the world, but also highlights his disconnection from it. Like Thoreau, Chris' chastity embodies his dedication to a pure and simple life, but also removes him from some of life's pleasures and connections.*



Meanwhile, in Carthage, **McCandless** takes every opportunity to talk about his Alaskan voyage by seeking out the advice of experienced hunters.

*Even to achieve his dream, Chris is unwilling to take a more convenient mode of transportation to Alaska. His steadfast dedication to hitchhiking makes his journey quite noble, like a quest or pilgrimage, but also highlights Chris' penchant for taking the hard road instead of the easy one. The hard road is the road Chris wants.*

**Westerberg** tries to persuade McCandless to stay for a few more weeks to work. He even offers to fly McCandless out to **Alaska**, but Chris refuses, determined to hitchhike all the way north without "cheating."



Upon leaving, **Chris** gives **Wayne** his **journal**, **photo** album and **leather belt** for safekeeping, and tearfully says goodbye to **Gail Borah**, who senses that she will never see him again. From **Alaska** McCandless sends **postcards** to Wayne, **Jan Burres** and **Bob**, bidding them a final farewell before walking "into the wild."

*In giving his belongings to Wayne, Chris entrusts his legacy to **Westerberg**, much like a father passes on his inheritance to his son. Gail's premonition casts an ominous shadow over Chris, pitting fate against the serendipitous circumstances that have unfolded in Chris' life.*



## CHAPTER 8 – ALASKA

In the months following **McCandless'** death, **Krakauer** receives mounds of mail criticizing his portrayal of McCandless in **Outside magazine**. In one long **letter**, **Nick Jans'** rails against Chris' ill preparedness, ignorance of the land, and aesthetic values, comparing his death to the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

*Chris' identity is refashioned post-mortem by the media and critics. By likening Chris' death to an environmental disaster, Jans characterizes Chris' actions as arrogance in the face of nature. Krakauer, through his book, seems to argue differently, to cast Chris as not simply arrogant but part of a tradition of people moved to extreme action, often in connection with nature.*



To explore **Chris'** personality and his motivations for venturing into the wild, **Krakauer** relates the story of **Gene Rossellini**, the son of a wealthy, well-connected family and a savant who experiments with living like a Neolithic caveman on the shores of Prince William Sound. After spending a decade camping, foraging, hunting and living in extreme poverty, Rossellini inexplicably stabs himself, becoming front-page news and a local legend.

*Like Rossellini, Chris reverts to a primitive existence to test out his life beliefs and the limits of his endurance. Their deaths are similarly scrutinized in the public eye, and make both of them look to some people like fools and to others like legends. Unlike Rossellini, Chris did not kill himself—he wanted to live.*



**Krakauer** then tells the story of **John Waterman**, a mountain climbing prodigy who scales Mt. McKinley at age sixteen, whose sanity gradually unravels in tandem with his parents' divorce and the untimely deaths and disappearances of family and friends. To publicize an anti-hunger campaign, the half-crazed Waterman impulsively decides to ascend the most treacherous face of Mt. McKinley alone, during wintertime, with a minimum of food, supplies and gear. Haunted by Waterman's fatalistic final goodbyes and missives, friends and authorities believe that he likely fell through the ice crevasses to his death, without ever attempting to save himself.

*Like Waterman, Chris takes on dangerous challenges with a minimum of resources and planning, but his S.O.S. note at his campsite indicates that he actively strived to live, even when death loomed closely. While Waterman actively embarks on a journey of self-destruction, Chris shows more stamina for living by surviving on his own in the wild for 113 days and by seeking out help when he needs it most. His self-preservation suggests that Chris searches for life in the wild, not death.*



**Krakauer** next moves to the story of **Carl McGunn**, an affable and absentminded Texan who hires a pilot to drop him in a remote region of the Alaskan bush, where he plans to camp for the summer. In an "astounding oversight," he fails to arrange with the pilot a time to fly out at the end of the season. Yet just as winter approaches and McGunn's supplies grow thin, a small plane flies over his campsite. Signaling to the pilot, he punches his fist in the air, but after two passes the plane does not stop. McGunn later realizes that his signal indicated that he was all right. If he had raised two arms he would have signaled for help. **McGunn** continues to fantasize about being rescued, but overwhelmed by starvation and the cold he ultimately shoots himself in his tent. Alaska State Troopers discover his body two months later.

*Like McGunn, Chris is absentminded, naïve, and lacks common sense, but Chris intends to enter and exit the wild on his own terms. McGunn depends on others to get him in and out of the wood, but Chris takes charge of himself to and from the wild. For instance, he turns down Wayne's plane ticket offer so that he can hitchhike all the way to Alaska and when he decides to leave the woods, Chris attempts to hike back out on his own. While McGunn falls victim to his dependence on others, Chris actively resists depending on anyone for help. Yet there is also a similarity between the two, as their deaths ultimately arise out of simple mistakes that could just as easily be chalked up to luck.*



## CHAPTER 9 - DAVIS GULCH

**Krakauer** goes onto to relate the story of another young man who disappeared into the wild: **Everett Ruess**, a hitchhiker and photographer who pursued beauty and adventure throughout the American Southwest during the 1930s. During his journey, Ruess changes his name several times, until he wanders into Davis Gulch, where he inscribes his new name "Nemo," Latin for "nobody," into the sandstone, before disappearing.

*Like Ruess, Chris changes his name, eventually dubbing himself "Alexander Supertramp." Chris' name is a triumphant claim on his new identity as a person who has cut himself free of the dependencies of society—home family, money. In contrast, Ruess' final name, literally "nobody," diminishes his sense of identity, showing that Chris comes into his own through his travels, instead of fading away.*



It is widely held that **Ruess** fell to his death while climbing the region's crumbly canyon walls, but no human remains are ever recovered. Some believe that Ruess continued to live in secret by assuming an alternate identity, while others theorize that cattle rustlers murdered Ruess for his belongings. A local river guide suggests that Ruess drowned while trying to swim across a river.

**Ruess** and **McCandless'** lives, deaths and "hunger of the spirit," remind **Krakauer** of the *papar*, ancient Irish monks who sailed to a remote island off the coast of Iceland in search of peace and solitude.

*The theories that abound around Ruess' death reflect the mystery surrounding McCandless's death, but also point to the myriad of possibilities that could have befallen Chris, intensifying the sense that any number of factors and circumstances could have led to McCandless' death, or even survival.*



*By relating Ruess and Chris' to the *papar*, Krakauer again connects them to tradition and endows their travels with a sense of holiness, ennobling their journeys as quests for solitude.*



## CHAPTER 10 - FAIRBANKS

Through local and national media outlets, **Jim Gallien** and **Wayne Westerberg** hear about the discovery of a young hiker's body in the Alaskan wilderness. Believing the body to be "Alex's," they each call Alaska State Troopers separately in an attempt to help authorities identify the body. The officers do not take either seriously until Westerberg provides Chris' social security number from work documents. This clue leads authorities to Chris' half-brother **Sam McCandless**, who confirms Chris' identity and must tell **Walt** and **Billie** the terrible news.

*For the authorities and those who meet him on the road, Chris' real identity is difficult to confirm and ever elusive. The search to confirm Chris' identity also reflects Chris' own journey for self-discovery, as well as parallels Krakauer' mission to get to the bottom of Chris' mysterious death and understand what drove Chris to his final end.*



## CHAPTER 11 - CHESAPEAKE BAY

When Chris is six, the family moves to the D.C. suburbs, where **Walt** works for NASA, then starts a consulting firm with **Billie**. With **money** tight, **Walt** and **Billie** work long hours and fight frequently over the business, while **Chris** and **Carine** lean on each other for support.

*While money puts a strain on Chris' family, the lack of it also makes him closer with his sister Carine. Because money is a divisive and binding element in Chris' family it complicates and tangles his family ties.*



On one family vacation, **Walt** takes twelve-year-old **Chris** and his siblings on a hiking trip, which inspires Chris to keep climbing higher, but **Walt** puts his foot down before Chris can make his way up a dangerous slope.

*When Chris is young, Walt puts a check on his son's adventurous spirit. By breaking from his father, Chris eliminates any check on himself.*



To earn **money** to buy his **yellow Datsun**, **Chris** canvasses neighborhoods, selling construction services for a local contractor. So successful at his job, Chris not only buys his car, but the contractor offers to hire him if he will stay in Annandale. Chris turns the offer down to drive across the country on his first road trip.

*Though disdainful of his parents' money-driven lifestyle, Chris is a natural salesman, who thrives at his job. His car purchase is driven by money, but also motivated by wanderlust, making the car a symbol of Chris' conflicted relationship with wealth and the freedom it affords him.*



## CHAPTER 12 - ANNANDALE

Before heading off on his road trip, **Chris** gives **Walt** an expensive telescope for his birthday, to show his thanks, and promises to call the family frequently.

*Chris and his father do not exchange affections, but express gratitude in gifts, underscoring that their relationship is based on things, instead of love.*



After **Chris** returns from his cross-country trip he is withdrawn and cold towards his family because of information he uncovers while visiting family friends during his journey. **Chris** learns that his father carried on an affair with his ex-wife **Marcia**, having a son with her, even after he had already settled with **Billie**. Feeling betrayed, **Chris** hides his knowledge of his parent's secret.

*After learning the truth about his parents, and his father in particular, Chris feels betrayed. Yet the secret hate Chris harbors is also a betrayal of his parents' love and trust. Chris' unwillingness to forgive is a severe punishment. Chris's rigid moral beliefs are at once noble and punishing, and show no leniency toward the fact that people are humans and make mistakes.*



In July 1992, two years after **Chris** disappeared on his post-college ramblings, **Billie** awakens in the middle of the night to the sound of **Chris'** voice, shouting for help.

*Whether real or imagined, Billie's experience communicates her deep love for her son and anguish at not being able to care for him. Whether Chris really was thinking of his mother at this time is of course impossible to know, though his realization (described later in the novel) that happiness must be shared does show that he was ready to give up his solitary lifestyle.*



## CHAPTER 13 - VIRGINIA BEACH

**Carine** relives the day she learned of her brother's death, musing that if their family dog **Buck** had accompanied **Chris**, he might have taken fewer risks.

*The question of "what if," lingers over Carine's rumination, heightening the sense that Chris could have survived.*



Now a successful and ambitious businesswoman, **Carine** remembers how **Chris** used to tease her for her capitalistic zeal, yet remained her closest confidant.

*Though Carine's values oppose Chris', their bond remains strong, suggesting that the differences between Chris and his family were not entirely irreconcilable, as Chris so ardently believed.*



As **Chris'** family continue to mourn his death, **Carine** and **Billie** lose weight suddenly, while **Walt** overeats, gaining several pounds.

*The McCandless's weight fluctuations parallel Chris' own experiences with hunger, bringing the family closer to Chris than ever before.*



## CHAPTER 14 - THE STIKINE ICE CAP

In 1977, at age 23, **Krakauer**, lured by the challenge of climbing a dangerous mount, decides to climb **Devils Thumb** alone. He is convinced that the experience will change his life.

*Krakauer's youthful vision of climbing Devils Thumb mirrors Chris' Alaskan dream, creating a narrative alignment between Chris and Krakauer.*



To reach the summit, **Krakauer** must cross the **Stikine Ice Cap** during a snowstorm. Barely able to see, **Krakauer** slips through a crevice in the ice, but the cross-shaped poles strapped to his body save him from a fatal fall.

*Through this close call, Krakauer highlights the risk and danger of the journey ahead. Death lurks around every corner and any step could be his last. Krakauer is making the point that he survived (to eventually become a famous writer) and Chris did not, but that these different endings don't actually say anything about their relative merits—it was just luck.*



Nearly out of food, **Krakauer** anxiously waits for days at the base of **Devils Thumb** for a plane to drop off supplies. But heavy snow delays it. At first sight of the plane, **Krakauer** frantically waves it down. The supplies arrive just in time for **Krakauer** to continue on his hike.

*In contrast to Carl McGunn, Krakauer has the foresight to arrange for a plane, but the plane's delay demonstrates that timing is an equally crucial and even more uncertain factor in the face of nature's fury.*



As **Krakauer** climbs higher up a sheer wall of ice, he shifts into a kind of happy trance. But his focus breaks when he can't secure a foothold in the ice with his pick-ax. Startled by the ice's thinness, **Krakauer** descends, decides to stop.

*On Krakauer's climb, nature nurtures a transcendent state of mind. Yet it also rears its head against Krakauer by becoming a slick and uncertain surface upon which to climb, underlining its untamable quality.*



## CHAPTER 15 - THE STIKINE ICE CAP

Rattled by his brush with death, **Krakauer** smokes some pot to calm his nerves, but accidentally lights his tent on fire, burning his hand.

*Krakauer's fiery accident is reminiscent of Chris' rash actions, making his mistakes in the wild seem more probable and forgivable.*



Nearly burning the tent reminds **Krakauer** of his volatile relationship with his father. The two became estranged because **Krakauer** did not pursue a college and medical career like the one his father wanted. Concluding that his ambitions are just as important as his father's, **Krakauer** makes a second attempt to scale the mountain, but turns back when a snowstorm nearly buries him alive. Realizing that desire alone will not save him from death on the trail, **Krakauer** decides to ascend a less challenging route.

*Like Chris, Krakauer diverges from his fathers' expectations to define his own measure of success. The relentless snowfall teaches Krakauer that his will power is no match for the powers of nature and that he must adapt to conditions in order to survive and accomplish his goals, anticipating a lesson that McCandless will also learn in Alaska.*



On the path, the view of a distant city fills **Krakauer** with an intense sense of loneliness, as he imagines people watching TV, eating dinner, and making love.

*The absence of human contact compels Krakauer to recognize the value of companionship, foreshadowing a similar discovery Chris will uncover in Alaska.*



Almost at the summit, **Krakauer's** pick-ax nearly fails to latch, but he finds a solid spot to anchor himself and mounts the peak. He lingers briefly, takes some photographs, and then descends. Krakauer hitches a ride with a boater who doesn't believe that he climbed Devils Thumb, nor do any of the locals care about his ascent. Krakauer realizes that his climb did not change his life, predicated as it was upon chance and motivated by his innocent fascination with the unknown. He believes that McCandless was not suicidal when he walked into the woods, but simply curious and eager to test his limits.

*Krakauer's climb is fraught with danger, but the climax at its peak is rather brief and uneventful, emphasizing Krakauer's point that this climb was more life threatening than life changing. That no one believes or cares about Krakauer's achievement underlines this point. Krakauer has earlier connected Chris to nonconformists of the past. In this story he connects Chris to young men in general, presenting Chris' desires as similar to his own and just extreme versions of all young men's desires to test themselves. That such tests do not actually create change in the young men who go through them is, perhaps, the important lesson for them.*



In June, **Chris** proudly shoots down a moose. Yet butchering it traumatizes Chris, making him regret killing the animal. By reading Thoreau and Tolstoy, Chris comes to terms with his "errors," and decides to return to civilization in July.

*The experience of butchering the moose seems to make Chris see how extreme and rigid his actions have been. He gains a different sort of respect for nature, and an ability to reconcile his mistakes, an indication of personal development.*



When he tries to return, however, he encounters the rising summer floodwaters of the Teklanika River, and realizes that he cannot safely cross. He turns back towards the woods and the bus to wait for the rapids to recede. Chris's failure to realize that he could re-cross the Teklanika in the spring is the first of McCandless's "insignificant blunders."

*Yet Chris' decision to return is not enough. The Teklanika's waters present a dangerous challenge to Chris, but having been chastened and humbled by nature he makes a prudent move, instead of a risky one, by deciding not to try to cross. Ironically, this smart decision is actually a fateful one as it leads to Chris' demise.*



## CHAPTER 16 - THE ALASKA INTERIOR

On April 15, 1992, **McCandless** leaves Carthage for **Alaska**, hitching a ride with RV driver **Gaylord Stuckey** along the way. Reluctant to help "Alex" go off on what seems to Stuckey an ill-considered adventure, Stuckey is nonetheless charmed by Chris and ends up driving him all the way to Fairbanks. On the road, Chris expresses his displeasure with his father's past infidelities and his excitement about living alone in the woods. Stuckey warns him that the snow is still thick and that there will be few plants and berries to eat.

*Usually as Chris grows closer to someone, he becomes more withdrawn, but with Stuckey he divulges more information about himself than he has to any other stranger. This uncommon candor and openness on the Alaskan border shows that even as Chris moves farther away from civilization he actually starts to extend himself towards others.*



Preparing to head into the forest, **McCandless** picks up a **guide to edible plants** and purchases a **rifle**. He hitches a ride from **Jim Gallien**, then enters the Alaskan bush alone, carrying nothing else but his rifle, his backpack filled with **rice**, and a small collection of **books**.

*While Gallien is alarmed by Chris' lack of supplies, Chris carries all that he feels he needs—rice for food, a rifle for hunting, a guide for foraging, and books to feed the soul. That Chris carries books over supplies suggests again that his true hunger is for a search for truth, or for himself.*

On the **Stampede Trail**, **McCandless** crosses the unseasonably low Teklanika River waters and discovers the **bus**, where he makes camp.

*Krakauer's notation that the river is low foreshadows the pivotal role that the height of the river will play in Chris' demise.*



Struggling to shoot game in the wintry weather, **McCandless** finally starts to thrive when the summer days turn warmer and longer, allowing him to hunt and forage successfully. Buoyed by this change, Chris decides to continue walking westward, but bogged down by the terrain's thawing muck, realizes his folly and turns back to the bus.

*The harsh Alaskan weather and terrain dramatically illustrate to Chris the limits of his will power in the face of nature strength and disregard for human life. Through this reality check, Chris adjusts his routine and adapts to environmental conditions.*



## CHAPTER 17 - THE STAMPEDE TRAIL

In search of clues at **Chris' bus**, **Krakauer** and two friends zip line across the **Teklanika River**. Had Chris known about this line a year earlier he might have lived, but he refused to carry a detailed **map**.

*While the river is a roadblock for Chris, Krakauer crosses it with relative ease, ironically pointing to Chris' ignorance of his surroundings. Had Chris not insisted on total isolation—avoiding even good maps—he could have left when he wanted to.*



**Krakauer** uncovers **Chris' campsite**, scattered with **moose** bones, refuting critics' claims that McCandless actually shot a caribou, not a moose.

*The moose bones not only taint the campsite with death, but also prove that Chris is a competent hunter, contrary to popular belief.*



Examining **McCandless' possessions** in the **bus**, **Krakauer** notices that Chris lacked some essential equipment for surviving in the wild. Krakauer is reminded of the ill-prepared Arctic expeditions of British explorer, **Sir John Franklin**, whose arrogance in the face of harsh conditions led to the demise of 140 souls. Krakauer observes, however, that Franklin sought to tame the land with obsolete military techniques and equipment, while McCandless sought to live in harmony with nature by living off the land itself.

*Though Chris' Alaskan journey is similar to Sir John Franklin's Arctic expedition, the ethos that drives it is very different. Franklin's approach is that of a conqueror who must tame the land with man's tools in order to claim it. Chris, on-the-other-hand, by casting aside equipment, attempts to be one with the landscape, suggesting that Chris is more reverent towards nature than previously believed.*



Making camp near the **bus** site, **Krakauer** and his friends talk about **McCandless** late into the night, but refuse to sleep inside the bus.

*Tainted by Chris' death, the bus is a taboo site that invites curious investigations of Chris but forbids intimate knowledge of him.*



## CHAPTER 18 - THE STAMPEDE TRAIL

Back at the **bus**, where nature flourishes in the summer heat, **McCandless** continues with his routine of hunting and gathering, though he grows very thin. In the margins of *Doctor Zhivago*, McCandless scribbles an inspired epiphany: “happiness [is] only real when shared.”

*Though Chris' body thins, life thrives around and within him. Nature has not only blossomed, but so has his soul, which has discovered that true happiness is communal experience, celebrated among others. Again, remember that this is happening right around the time when his mother in Chapter 12 hears his voice in her dreams.*



Near the end of July, **McCandless** frantically writes in his **journal** that he is very weak and in grave danger, also rather cryptically mentioning **potato seeds**.

*Chris' sudden and stark entry disrupts the peaceful tempo of his life in the woods, signaling that danger is ahead.*



Going off this lead, **Krakauer** popularizes the theory in *Outside magazine* that a starving **McCandless** ate wild **potato seeds** at the recommendation of his **edible plant guide**, but mistook the wild potato for the similar-looking, yet poisonous sweet pea plant.

*By assigning Chris' death to a simple mistake, Krakauer's cover story portrays Chris as a careless and incompetent woodsman, incapable of distinguishing between safety and danger.*



Yet unsatisfied with his own theory and still suspecting **potato seeds** to be involved with **McCandless'** death, **Krakauer** takes some seeds from Chris' campsite to scientists for testing. The results show no trace of poisonous toxins. Upon further investigation over the next four years, however, Krakauer concludes that McCandless, following the suggestions of his **guidebook**, unknowingly ate a plethora of edible potato seeds that happened to be laced with mold, thereby inciting swainsonine poisoning, which produces an effect that stops the body from being able to absorb energy from food, leading to **starvation**.

*These seemingly innocuous potato seeds actually reveal a complex biochemistry, becoming a metaphor for Chris' story. While Chris' death initially appears as an instance of incompetence, Krakauer here shows that Chris's death was not the result of such a simple, ignorant mistake as mixing up two types of seeds. Rather his death resulted from something that was beyond his knowing, as it was not explained in his foraging book.*



**Krakauer** further observes that had **Chris** carried a **map**, he would have known that four cabins circled the **bus** site. Chris could have sought them out for help, though in fact they were unoccupied at the time and Chris was too weak to walk.

*While Chris' willful ignorance of the land and extreme self-isolation appear to contribute primarily to his death, Krakauer's comment that the cabins were empty show that even had he known of them it wouldn't have helped. In this way Krakauer once again emphasizes the role of luck in Chris' death.*



Unable to walk, **McCandless** spends his last days reading **books** and pens a goodbye in his **journal**, thanking God for a happy life, before crawling into the **bus** for his final rest. In one of his last acts, Chris photographs himself. In the **picture**, Chris looks emaciated, but **Krakauer** believes he is at peace.

*Even though Chris has traveled thousands of miles, his soul makes the greatest leaps and bounds when he is lost in thought. His picture—as interpreted by Krakauer—is a reminder that life's greatest discoveries are made in the country of the soul.*



## EPILOGUE

**Krakauer** accompanies **Walt** and **Billie** in a helicopter to the site of **Chris'** death. They originally intend to travel overland on *The Stampede Trail*, but the Teklanika's waters are too high for safe crossing.

*Like their son's venture into the wilderness, Walt and Billie's visit is also a pilgrimage and is subject to nature's same volatile circumstances.*



At the site, **Walt** and **Billie** inspect the **bus** and assemble a memorial to **Chris** inside the its door with flowers, a plaque, a survival kit and a note urging whoever comes here to call their parents.

*By memorializing the site, Walt and Billie create a sanctuary for Chris's spirit to rest, but also transform the bus into a warning sign against nature and the wild ways of youth.*



Though comforted by the surrounding landscape's beauty, **Walt** and **Billie** leave with **Krakauer** in the helicopter, still nursing heavy hearts.

*Though Chris found solace in the wild, it is a poor salve for his parents' heartache, underlining nature as both a place of pain and promise, and familial love as something that pushed Chris away but would also have welcomed him home.*

