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| http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/images/spacer.gif | **ON LOCATION: Writer-director Sean Penn (left) and author Jon Krakauer in front of the bus Chris McCandless used as his Alaska base camp**Photo: Sean Penn and Jon Krakauer**.** | http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure/images/spacer.gif |

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| **Jon Krakauer + Sean Penn: Back Into the Wild****When the film version of Jon Krakauer's classic *Into the Wild* hits theatersthis fall, the haunting tale of Chris McCandless will come to life for a newgeneration. For director Sean Penn, the release marks the end of an 11-yearquest to cement the legend of "Alexander Supertramp."   Text by David Roberts   Photograph by Roman Dial/Sundance Channel** |

"Do you know L.A.?" Sean Penn asks over the telephone. "San Vicente and Barrington. There's this outdoor café. I used to stop in there for rotisserie chicken, and I'd usually cruise the bookstore next door." The time was early 1996. "The cover just caught me," Penn continues. "Something about the cover and the title and the text on the cover that told me roughly what the book was about. I just grabbed it, drove straight home, and read it two times right through, from four in the afternoon till the following morning."

The upper half of the cover in question displayed a black-and-white photo of a derelict school bus covered with snow, surrounded by dwarf spruce trees and aspens shedding their dead leaves. Below the photo a précis of the book began, "In April 1992 a young man from a well-to-do family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mount McKinley …." The title was *Into the Wild*.

Jon Krakauer's haunting account of the meteoric passage of Chris McCandless, the vagabond loner who cut all ties with family and society, plunged into a remote outback, and unwittingly slipped into his own death trap, was headed for the best-seller list. And if Sean Penn had had his way back in 1996, *Into the Wild* was also headed for the silver screen. Instead, an ill-timed dream that visited McCandless's mother just hours before Penn was to fly to the East Coast to close the deal brought an end to the project.

Or so both Penn and Krakauer thought. This September 21, 11 years after Penn's eureka moment in the Los Angeles bookstore, his film adaptation of the now classic tale of adventure gone wrong will premiere. If the movie turns out to be the success that many predict, a whole new generation of viewers will celebrate and mourn, as Krakauer and Penn have, the tormented hero of *Into the Wild*.

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Penn was not the only Hollywood insider interested in McCandless's story in 1996. Within months of the book's appearance, a number of directors approached Krakauer, who by that time had formed a close bond with the McCandless family. Krakauer even suggested to Chris's father, mother, and sister that they agree not to accept any film offers unless all four of them (Krakauer included) were unanimous in their choice of filmmaker, and that any one of them could veto making a movie altogether. The McCandlesses concurred.

Almost from the start, Carine, three years younger than her brother, became a key player in the vetting process. "I knew Chris better than anyone else ever did," she says today. And even though, in his headlong flight from his past, Chris broke off all communication with his sister too, Carine insists, "I've never felt a moment of anger at him."

The McCandlesses were not at all sure they wanted the movie made. And Carine, in particular, was put off by the hard-sell tactics some of the candidates used. "One producer told me, 'We've got Brad Pitt to play Chris,'" she recalls. "I answered, 'Oh, great, where do I sign?'"

After several months and many meetings, both the family and Krakauer leaned strongly toward Penn, whose only directing experience at that point had come in 1991's *The Indian Runner* and 1995's *The Crossing Guard*. Still, Carine recalls, "I trusted Jon the minute I met him. It took me ten years to trust Sean's vision."

By the end of 1996 the deal was all but done. Penn was going to fly to meet Chris's parents, Walt and Billie, for one last meeting to clinch the agreement. The director remembers what happened next: "I got up at five o'clock in the morning in Los Angeles to head to the airport. I'd just gotten out of the shower when the phone rang at 5:30. It was Billie. She said she'd had a dream that night. Chris didn't want a movie made."

Today, Billie McCandless is willing to describe the contents of that dream only in private. Suffice it to say, it was a nightmare of the darkest and most starkly symbolic nature, after which she realized going ahead with the movie would betray her son's memory.

Penn did not argue. "If I didn't respect dreams," he says now, "I wouldn't make movies."

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Not every reader of Krakauer's book finds its protagonist as sympathetic as Penn did. In Alaska, especially, the take could be summed up in the chauvinistic formula: One more clueless hippie from the lower 48 screws up in the wilderness and buys the farm. Why glorify him?

But Penn, who as a budding star in Hollywood had his own much publicized troubles, was quick to identify with the alienated youth. "Sharon Olds, who helped me with the narration, articulated it well," he says. "She said that on the pie chart of McCandless's life, there's a slice that has to do with the dark issues of his family and his life. But the biggest slice is a wanderlust that everybody can identify with. Whether that wanderlust comes from trauma, family, or from some purely positive place, it ties in with our unified desire to set out along that road."

In his flight from all things safe, familiar, and domestic, McCandless struck a deeply American chord, linking his real-life voyage to those of such fictional heroes as Jack London's sourdoughs and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Early on in his two-year odyssey, McCandless gave himself the pseudonym Alexander Supertramp. He then wandered, penniless, from the Salton Sea in southern California to Carthage, South Dakota, from the Pacific Crest Trail to the Oregon coast, and finally to Alaska. Letters and postcards that he sent to friends met along the road have the ring of vagabond manifestos. In an abandoned school bus that would become his Alaska base camp, he penned a graffito that stood as a testament to his insatiable pursuit:

*Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road …*

In the film, McCandless is played by 22-year-old Emile Hirsch, known mainly as a teenage heartthrob in *The Girl Next Door* and as a pioneering skateboarder in *Lords of Dogtown*. By turns gallantly romantic and awkwardly shy, jubilant and full of rage, hungry for experience yet saddled with something like a death wish, Hirsch's McCandless is calculated to make the viewer care deeply about this mixed-up young man.

When the real McCandless set off down the Stampede Trail, west of the railroad stop of Healy, Alaska, in April 1992, he had no map and carried only a ten-pound (6-kilogram) bag of rice for food. His solo attempt to live off the land in this subarctic wilderness represented the ultimate test and the ultimate adventure—a rite of passage for a young man in search of meaning. And McCandless (aka Alexander Supertramp) nearly pulled it off. After almost ten weeks in the outback, during which he foraged for berries and edible plants and hunted local game, he packed up his belongings and headed back toward Healy. But after ten miles, (16 kilometers) he found that the Teklanika River, which he had waded in late April, now blocked his path in raging midsummer flood.

McCandless returned to the bus as he tried to figure out what to do next. As it turned out, he lasted 113 days in the Alaska wilderness. He eventually died of starvation, possibly exacerbated by eating seeds of a wild potato plant that were coated with a poisonous mold. When his body was found it weighed 67 pounds (30 kilograms). He was 24.

In the film, McCandless's demise seems inevitable—and yet the final death scene forms the excruciating (and hypnotically beautiful) climax. Says Penn, "It was my assumption that people would know beforehand how the story ends, even if they hadn't read the book. You know, *Hamlet* still works. And people know how that ends."

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McCandless's story first gained attention as a magazine article by Krakauer in January 1993. To expand the piece into a book, the author hit the road, just as his antihero had a few years before. Technically, the most impressive thing about *Into the Wild* is how Krakauer, armed with only the most fugitive clues, was able to retrace nearly every step of McCandless's erratic path as he zigzagged all over the West, driving an old car, hitchhiking, and hopping freight trains, before arrowing north toward Alaska.

Throughout those months of Krakauer's sleuthing in 1993 and 1994, I was afforded a ringside seat. Twenty years earlier, in 1973, "fresh off the turnip truck from small-town Oregon" (as he would later write), Krakauer arrived at Hampshire College in western Massachusetts, where I was teaching literature and mountaineering. He quickly morphed from wide-eyed acolyte into colleague and drinking buddy. Jon was also the only Hampshire student to become my lifelong climbing partner. In 1983, after years of pounding nails to support his climbing-bum habit, Jon decided to try to write for a living.

Ten years later, as he careened around the West sniffing for McCandless's scent, Jon would call me from the road every few days. "Dave, I found the Datsun!" he chortled from an Arizona pay phone. (Three years earlier, McCandless had abandoned the battered used car he'd bought in high school in a forlorn desert ravine called Detrital Wash.) A few weeks later, "I located the 81-year-old guy who wanted to adopt Chris. Chris told him to change his whole life and hit the road, and by God, the old man did!"

For Krakauer, the agony of writing has always crystallized around getting the first paragraph down on paper. By 1993, he'd perfected his avoidance strategy, which was to convince himself he needed to flee the word processor to do more research. Now, as he followed McCandless's ghost, that strategy was paying off in spades. Even while he was burning through his book advance, he was getting to know Chris McCandless from the inside out. Each little find in the Mojave Desert or the South Dakota wheat fields went toward building the character that would burst forth so vividly in the pages of *Into the Wild*.

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The core question for both the book and the film is, What ultimately made McCandless tick? What drove him not only to his manic escape from society and his solitary death in the wilderness, but to the passionate idealism that fueled it?

For Krakauer a breakthrough in understanding his protagonist came when he won the trust of Carine. Alienated from the family ménage herself, Carine chose to rebel in a more private, less spectacular fashion. Although she remains in regular contact with her parents, she keeps a certain psychic distance. As she told me over the phone, "I went away too. I left. There's just no movie about it."

Months into Krakauer's research, Carine pointed him toward a skeleton in the McCandless closet that seemed to explain her brother's estrangement from his parents. In 1986, after graduation from high school, Chris took off from the family home in Annandale, Virginia, on a cross-country ramble four years before he would leave for good. He eventually made his way to El Segundo, California, where he had lived with his family for the first six years of his life. He knew that his father, an aerospace engineer, had had a first marriage, producing six children. But Chris learned a murkier truth from family friends in El Segundo. Walt had not in fact divorced his first wife until well after Chris was born. In secret, he had kept up the relationship and had fathered another son two years after Billie had given birth to Chris.

In Krakauer's view, Chris came home from that trip with a "smoldering anger" that, after years of brooding upon the deception, would ultimately motivate
his headlong flight. And herein lay a deep linkage connecting Krakauer to McCandless.

Jon, as I had long known, had a difficult relationship with his own father. As he writes in *Into the Wild*: "Like McCandless, figures of male authority aroused in me a confusing medley of corked fury and hunger to please."

Sean Penn's film subscribes wholeheartedly to Krakauer's theory of Chris's emotional wound, which informs some unsettling depictions of his upbringing. In a particularly disquieting scene, Walt (played by William Hurt) screams at and threatens to strike a cowering Billie (Marcia Gay Harden), while a preteen Carine, half-hidden by a door frame, watches in frozen terror. In general, Hurt's Walt McCandless is a less than sympathetic figure—until near the end, when the father's grief and sorrow over his lost son begin to redeem him.

I asked Walt if the movie did justice to his family. "I won't comment," he answered, "until I see the final version." The longer rough cut Penn had showed Walt and Billie some months before was, Penn admitted to me, easier on the McCandlesses than the shorter and nearly final version that I saw. Did Walt think Krakauer's book was fair to the family? "Absolutely," Walt answered without hesitation. A remarkable judgment, given how unblinkingly Krakauer lays out Walt's betrayal of his wife and children.

Penn not only met often with Carine as the film developed, but ended up involving her in a complex four-person "jam session" (his term) in San Francisco, as the director, Carine, Sharon Olds, and actress Jena Malone, who plays Carine, brainstormed to produce the extended voice-overs in Carine's head that carry much of the expository burden of the film.

If anything, those voice-overs intensify the picture of family dysfunction that lay at the heart of Chris's anguish. In a pivotal scene, Carine's disembodied monologue declares that the discovery of Walt's infidelity reduced her and Chris to the status of "bastard children." The contribution is Carine's, not Krakauer's.

On the eve of the film's release, Carine isn't backing down. Over the phone I mentioned the importance of Walt's disturbing secret to the story. "It was one of many," she said, deadpan. For Carine, what matters most is that Penn's film tell the truth about her brother. "People always think Chris was an idiot. But he wasn't. He was such an amazing person, such a pure spirit." It is crucial, she believes, that moviegoers understand that Chris had legitimate reasons for wanting to sever ties with his parents.

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But does the deceit that framed Chris's childhood really explain this odd, driven, alienated youth? In a perceptive *New York Times* review that appeared when the book first came out, Thomas McNamee wrote of McCandless: "His contradictions, in retrospect, do not illumine but rather obscure his character. In death, he passes beyond the reach of mortal comprehension."

It is possible to find Chris McCandless unattractive and still love the book. Reading Jon's manuscript, I thought McCandless's grandiose condescension toward others was insufferable—especially in the long letter in which he lectures the 81-year-old man he met in southern California about how he's wasting his life. And McCandless's appropriation of snippets from Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Pasternak as mottoes for the true path struck me as predictably callow, the facile idealism of a greenhorn adventurer. But I was completely won over by the book, and not just because Jon is my good friend.

Penn's film sweeps away any  doubts about the protagonist. Emile Hirsch is simply too good-looking, his Chris McCandless too appealing, for all but the most curmudgeonly to watch askance. In the few episodes Penn invents rather than adapts from the book, he spins rambunctious riffs, such as a rapids-running adventure in the Grand Canyon. In real life, McCandless spent a couple of days in the canyon, but his paddling amounted to a 400-mile (644-kilometer) flatwater journey by canoe below Lake Mead, from the Hoover Dam to the Sea of Cortez. Penn, however, puts McCandless in a kayak, making an illegal attempt to run Class IV waves, with Grand Canyon rangers in hot pursuit.

For the whitewater scene, Penn dared Hirsch to perform his own stunts. Hirsch agreed only on the condition that Penn run the rapids first. "He just wanted to see that the thing was survivable," the director told me. "Neither of us had ever run rapids before. But I was a surfer growing up, so I was comfortable
in the water. I made it about three-quarters of the way down when the skirt came up and the water came in, and I got tanked. It was good for Emile to
see how quick our safety guy came off the bank and grabbed ahold of me and pulled me away from the fangs."

Adds Hirsch: "As soon as I saw that the rapids didn't completely take Sean down, I was ready to do it. Some people were shocked that I ran them, but no one was more shocked than me. Then I tried it the next day, just for fun, and of course I ate it."

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Many of McCandless's Alaska critics point out that if the kid had had a map, he probably wouldn't have died. The USGS quadrangle of the wilderness into which he ventured clearly indicates a gauging station with a cable across the Teklanika River, only a mile (two kilometers) downstream from the spot where McCandless, as he tried to hike out, was turned back by the swollen river. The map also locates three cabins in which he might have found emergency rations and supplies. As I read the manuscript of *Into the Wild*, I voiced the same stricture.

Jon, however, had a compelling rejoinder. McCandless's deliberate choice not to take a map, like his choice to carry only a ten-pound (five-kilogram) bag of rice into the wilderness, was, Jon argued, the very kind of upping the ante that we admired in other adventurers. Many landmarks in the history of exploration have come about when bold innovators chose not to use all the means their predecessors had counted on. McCandless's deliberate self-limitation, in this view, was like Reinhold Messner climbing Everest without bottled oxygen, or Børge Ousland skiing across Antarctica without airdropped supplies or prelaid depots.

A long autobiographical digression in the middle of *Into the Wild* recounts the author's own solo expedition, at age 23, to a formidable Alaska mountain called the Devils Thumb. "People told me it was suicidal to try to hike up the Baird Glacier without a partner and a rope," Jon pointed out. On his trek from the seacoast to the base of the mountain, Jon had to negotiate a fiendish icefall riddled with hidden crevasses. His only insurance was the absurd arrangement of a pair of ten-foot (three-meter) curtain rods strapped to his backpack in an X-formation, a contraption he hoped would catch the lips of any crevasse into which he might fall. "I got away with it. Chris didn't. That's the only difference."

Sean Penn had his own answer to the "Alaska take" on McCandless—the clueless hippie who got what he asked for. "One hundred and thirteen days," Penn says, a terse declaration of McCandless's achievement. "That's more time than 99.9 percent of his critics have ever spent alone, even the Alaskans," Penn elaborated. "It's a long time. It's done a minute, an hour, a day, a week, a month at a time. It's got nothing to do with our judgment of his outdoor skills. It's the strength of the commitment that counts.

"As for those who want to nitpick, I start with the ones who tried to tell the world it wasn't a moose." On June 9, 1992, six weeks into his survival mission, McCandless recorded his greatest triumph in the journal he kept on the last two pages of a guidebook to Alaska plant lore. "MOOSE!" he wrote in capitals, double-underlined. He had shot the beast with his .22-caliber rifle.

The two Alaskan hunters who stumbled upon McCandless's body three months later read his diary, examined the bones of the great animal that still lay strewn about the camp, and declared it a caribou, not a moose. "The kid didn't know what the hell he was doing up here," one of the hunters later told Krakauer, and his buddy chimed in, "That told me right there he wasn't no Alaskan." So Krakauer reported in his magazine article. But the next summer, when he retraced McCandless's route to his fatal camp on foot with Alaska wilderness veteran Roman Dial, they found the same bones. Dial instantly recognized them as those of a moose. Photos later developed from McCandless's camera confirmed the animal's identity. In his book, Krakauer corrected the "caribou" error.

Says Penn, "There's know-it-alls in every section of life."

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If Billie McCandless's nightmare had seemed to shut down all hopes of making the film, what happened to make it possible a decade later? Billie's own explanation is a bit puzzling. "We'd heard that an unauthorized movie might be in the works," she told me over the phone. "So [in that film] Chris could magically survive. And then there'd be a sequel." Billie called up Krakauer and told him she was thinking of changing her mind. Krakauer called Penn to see if he was still interested.

"I got a phone call out of the blue," Penn recounts. "I just kicked up my heels and started writing."

During the past decade, Penn had stayed in touch with the McCandlesses. Of course, he could have made the film without consulting the family. But Krakauer found the cooperation of Chris's parents so essential to the story that he gave 20 percent of his royalties to Walt and Billie, who in turn established a foundation in their son's name. "I always hoped that at some point they would see that it was worthwhile," Penn says. "And maybe this helped: I stayed in touch, but I never talked about the film. I made a vow that I wouldn't push it."

No doubt other factors contributed to Billie's change of heart. Over the years a steady flow of contributions, as well as the Krakauer royalties, funneled into the Christopher Johnson McCandless Memorial Foundation. The money has found its way, via Christian charities, to such far-flung locations as an orphanage in Cambodia. "Basically," says Billie, "we want to reach out to children and help them and their families."

As Krakauer's book attained the status of a classic, it became required reading
in many secondary schools and Outward Bound–style programs. Billie says she's received scores of letters from students, and "I answer every one."

Finally the long process of grieving seems to have helped dissolve the nightmare. "For years after Chris disappeared," says Walt, "every time we'd go away even for a long weekend, we'd leave a note on the door just in case he showed up."

Near the end of Penn's movie, there is a charged but ambiguous fantasy sequence that portends a reconciliation between the parents and their prodigal son. As he packed up his belongings and started to head out of the wilderness on July 3, 1992, had Chris McCandless finally tamed the furies that had driven him to his perilous pilgrimage? "We always had a strong feeling he'd return," says Walt. "If wishes were fishes," adds Billie.

But Carine says bluntly, "Chris was not on his way back to Annandale."

I ask Penn how the viewer is supposed to read that fantasy sequence—the one scene in the movie about which I had qualms. Is it Chris's fantasy? His parents'? Or a kind of omniscient what-might-have-been?

Penn pauses over the telephone before answering. "When we meet face-to-face, I would be happy to tell you that." Another pause. "It's not that I'm without clarity about what I intended. It's just one of those things you don't want to go on record with."

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Penn and his producers originally planned to shoot the film in the Uinta Mountains of northern Utah. That choice was partly dictated by budgetary concerns, but, as Penn says, "I'd been to Utah, I'd been in the mountains there, but the one place I'd not yet been as I tracked the story was Alaska. So I called up Jon. 'Jon, is there any way you could shoot it in Utah?' " Penn imitates Krakauer's response—a kind of prolonged intake of his breath. I can see Jon's eyebrows rise, hear his unspoken curse: You gotta be kidding!

"I got it," Penn continues. "So we went to Alaska. I'd never seen anything like it. It was nature on steroids."

Shooting in Alaska meant more than budgetary headaches, however. It injected an urgency into the filming based on the seasons of the far north, as Penn tried to match the changing landscape with the arc of the true story. Recalls Penn, "Either we go now, or we go a year from now. We couldn't go four months from now. The juices were flowing, which is not something to take lightly."

Krakauer was right about Alaska. The panoramas and vistas of the foothills north of Mount McKinley, many shot from the air (Penn: "The imagery just called out for it") lend the film a gravity and magnificence that mirror the quixotic heroism of McCandless's quest.

Penn himself visited the derelict school bus in which McCandless had spent his last days—both during filming and again with Krakauer to make a documentary for the Sundance Channel's Iconoclasts series. For the film, Penn's technicians and designers were able to craft two replica buses and plant them near the Alaska village of Cantwell, where much of the footage was shot. The replicas were perfect, says Penn, "down to the rust spots."

Which is altogether fitting, for not long after *Into the Wild* was published, the bus became a shrine, to Krakauer's disbelief. It remains so 11 years later, as hundreds of pilgrims—including some who scorn McCandless as a screwup—annually make their way by snow machine, ATV, mountain bike, or on foot to the bus. There, they camp out, take pictures, muse upon Chris and his fate, and record their thoughts in makeshift registers that now stretch to multiple volumes. "His monument and tomb are a living truth whose flame will light the 'way of dreams' in other's lives," writes one. "Alex [Supertramp], you have inspired me and changed my life forever. If only more were like you," comments another.

More than a year after McCandless's death, Krakauer choppered in to the bus with McCandless's parents. There Walt and Billie left an emergency first aid kit, with a note imploring visitors to "call your parents as soon as possible," and mounted a brass plaque inside the door that memorializes their son and quotes McCandless's own last message, scrawled on a page torn out of a Louis L'Amour book: I have had a good life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!

Over the 15 years that have passed since McCandless died inside the bus, some of his belongings have been pilfered. But others rest in place—a furry toothbrush laid on a makeshift table, a pair of jeans draped beside the rusting woodstove—like the relics of a medieval saint.

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Last June, exhausted by the frenetic pace at which he wrote and filmed *Into the Wild*, tinkering with the last sound mixes and editorial nuances, Penn reflected on the decade during which he thought the project was dead for good. "It really stuck in my head," he said. "I just thought about it for all those years. I found myself talking about it a lot—talking it through and thinking it through. And whenever anybody brought up *Into the Wild* in conversation, I always said, 'That's the one I wanted to do more than any other.'"

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