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**Taking Risk to Its 'Logical' Extreme**

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**Lead:**

**INTO** THE **WILD**
By **Jon** **Krakauer**
Illustrated. 207 pages. Villard Books. $22.

Readers may at first have some trouble sympathizing with Christopher Johnson McCandless, the young man whose mysterious death in the Alaska wilderness **Jon** **Krakauer** explores so movingly in his new book, ''**Into** the **Wild**.''

**Text:**

As Mr. McCandless's story unfolds in these pages, he seems to have been lacking in both adequate supplies and proper know-how when he waved goodbye to a trucker who had given him a lift and tramped off into the bush on April 28, 1992. What's more, the idealism that prompted this fatal romantic adventure appears both flawed and badly articulated, amounting as it does to phrases like ''plastic people'' and the need to ''revolutionize your life and move into an entirely new realm of experience,'' and cliched affirmations that writers like Tolstoy, Thoreau and Jack London were leading him on.

What's particularly tough to take is Mr. McCandless's refusal to tell his devoted family his whereabouts after he graduated with honors from Emory University in 1990 and set off on his cockeyed hegira. Mr. Krakauer does not even offer speculation about some heroic psychic drama his subject might have been unconsciously acting out.

In short, at least at the beginning of ''Into the **Wild**,'' you share the outraged reactions of so many who read the article by Mr. Krakauer in Outside magazine from which this book developed. As one angry Alaskan put it in a letter to the author: ''While I feel for his parents, I have no sympathy for him. Such willful ignorance . . . 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 the requisite humility. It's all a matter of degree.''

Yet if Mr. Krakauer too readily exposes his subject's shortcomings, he also does a masterly job of keeping the reader's condemnation at bay. While conceding his subject's many flaws, he keeps hinting that something was special about this case. He reveals through the eyes of many who met Mr. McCandless during his flight how particularly intelligent, unusual and just plain likable this young man was.

He describes Mr. McCandless's many forerunners who were driven to climb mountains too high, plumb wastelands too deep or brave elements too unforgiving. He introduces each of his 18 chapters and his epilogue with quotations from the literature of the wilderness that often articulate acutely what Mr. McCandless must have been feeling.

What is it that finally pushes you off the fence? On which side of it do you fall? Yet another skill that Mr. Krakauer displays in his reconstruction of Mr. McCandless's life and death is that of artfully withholding the pieces of his puzzle until the last one falls into place in the final pages. So one hates to give any of the mystery away.

But certainly among the most moving chapters in the book are the two in which the author discloses why he identified with his subject so strongly. Here Mr. Krakauer reveals how he too was once the rebellious son of a loving but overbearing father and how he too acted out his rebellion by throwing himself into the arms of nature.

More precisely, he decided to plunge himself into the Alaskan wilderness and climb a mountain, the Devil's Thumb, by a route that had never been taken before. What follows is a terrifying account of the author's own desperate venture, full of passages that rival the best in mountaineering literature. ''A trancelike state settles over your efforts; the climb becomes a clear-eyed dream,'' he writes. ''Hours slide by like minutes. The accumulated clutter of day-to-day existence -- the lapses of conscience, the unpaid bills, the bungled opportunities, the dust under the couch, the inescapable prison of your dreams -- all of it is temporarily forgotten, crowded from your thoughts by an overpowering clarity of purpose and by the seriousness of the task at hand.''

Unlike Mr. McCandless, the author survived his mad adventure, although in his view he probably didn't deserve to. From his experience he concludes: ''At that stage of my youth, death remained as abstract a concept as non-Euclidian geometry or marriage. I didn't yet experience its terrible finality or the havoc it could wreak on those who'd entrusted the deceased with their hearts.''

Moreover, ''engaging in risky behavior is a rite of passage in our culture no less than in most others,'' Mr. Krakauer writes. ''It can be argued that youthful derring-do is in fact evolutionarily adaptive, a behavior encoded in our genes. McCandless, in his fashion, merely took risk-taking to its logical extreme.''

Mr. Krakauer himself outgrew his need to take dangerous risks, and Mr. McCandless apparently was beginning to do the same. Without giving away too much of the story, one can reveal that eventually he wanted to come out of the **wild** and settle down. But it was too late. In Mr. Krakauer's eloquent handling, this is not merely sad. Because the story involves overbearing pride, a reversal of fortune and a final moment of recognition, it has elements of classic tragedy. By the end, Mr. Krakauer has taken the tale of a kook who went into the woods, and made of it a heart-rending drama of human yearning.

**Movie Review: Following His Trail to Danger and Joy**

**By** [A. O. SCOTT](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/a_o_scott/index.html?inline=nyt-per)

**Published: September 21, 2007**

There is plenty of sorrow to be found in [“Into the Wild,”](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/352389/Into-the-Wild/overview) [Sean Penn](http://movies.nytimes.com/person/106027/Sean-Penn?inline=nyt-per)’s adaptation of the nonfiction bestseller by Jon Krakauer. The story begins with an unhappy family, proceeds through a series of encounters with the lonely and the lost, and ends in a senseless, premature death. But though the film’s structure may be tragic, its spirit is anything but. It is infused with an expansive, almost giddy sense of possibility, and it communicates a pure, unaffected delight in open spaces, fresh air and bright sunshine.

Some of this exuberance comes from Christopher Johnson McCandless, the young adventurer whose footloose life and gruesome fate were the subject of Mr. Krakauer’s book. As Mr. Penn understands him (and as he is portrayed, with unforced charm and brisk intelligence, by Emile Hirsch), Chris is at once a troubled, impulsive boy and a brave and dedicated spiritual pilgrim. He does not court danger but rather stumbles across it — thrillingly and then fatally — on the road to joy.

In letters to his friends, parts of which are scrawled across the screen in bright yellow capital letters, he revels in the simple beauty of the natural world. Adopting the pseudonym Alexander Supertramp, rejecting material possessions and human attachments, he proclaims himself an “aesthetic voyager.”

Mr. Penn serves as both his biographer and his traveling companion. After graduating from Emory University in 1990, Mr. McCandless set off on a zigzagging two-year journey that took him from South Dakota to Southern California, from the Sea of Cortez to the Alaskan wilderness, where he perished, apparently from starvation, in August 1992. “Into the Wild,” which Mr. Penn wrote and directed, follows faithfully in his footsteps, and it illuminates the young man’s personality by showing us the world as he saw it.

What he mostly saw was the glory of the North American landscape west of the Mississippi: the ancient woodlands of the Pacific Northwest, the canyons and deserts farther south, the wheat fields of the northern prairie and Alaska, a place that Mr. McCandless seemed to regard with almost mystical reverence. Mr. Penn, who did some of the camera work, was aided by the director of photography, Eric Gautier, who previously turned his careful, voracious eye on the wilds of South America in Walter Salles’s “Motorcycle Diaries.” That movie, like “Into the Wild,” finds epic resonance in a tale of youthful wandering and proposes that a trek through mountains, rivers and forests can also be a voyage of self-discovery.

Mr. Salles’s film, in which Gael García Bernal played Che Guevara, found a political dimension in its hero’s journey. And while Chris’s fierce rejection of his parents’ middle-class, suburban life contains elements of ideological critique, Mr. Penn and Mr. Krakauer persuasively place him in a largely apolitical, homegrown tradition of radical, romantic individualism.

An enthusiastic reader (with a special affinity for Tolstoy and Jack London), Chris is in many ways the intellectual heir of 19th-century writer-naturalists like John Muir and especially Henry David Thoreau, whose uncompromising idealism — “rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth” — he takes as a watchword. (Had he survived, Mr. McCandless might well have joined the ranks of latter-day nature writers like Edward Abbey and Bill McKibben.) His credo is perhaps most succinctly stated by Thoreau’s mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, who advised that “the ancient precept, ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study Nature,’ become at last one maxim.”

One problem with this strain of American thought is that it sometimes finds expression in self-help nostrums and greeting-card sentiments. “If you want something in life, reach out and grab it,” Chris says to Tracy (Kristen Stewart), a teenage girl who develops a crush on him, collapsing Self-Reliance into something like an advertising slogan. But the movie’s theme, thankfully, is not so simple or so easily summed up in words.

Mr. Penn, even more than Mr. Krakauer, takes the Emersonian dimension of Chris McCandless’s project seriously, even as he understands the peril implicit in too close an identification with nature. The book took pains to defend its young protagonist against the suspicion that he was suicidal, unbalanced or an incompetent outdoorsman, gathering testimony from friends he had made in his last years as evidence of his kindness, his care and his integrity. The film, at some risk of sentimentalizing its hero, goes further, pushing him to the very brink of sainthood. After Chris offers wise, sympathetic counsel to Rainey (Brian Dierker), a middle-aged hippie he has befriended on the road, the older man looks at him with quiet amazement. “You’re not Jesus, are you?” he asks.

Well no, but it’s a comparison that Mr. Penn does not entirely discourage. (Note the final, man of sorrows image of Mr. Hirsch’s face and also an earlier shot of him floating naked in a stream, his arms extended in a familiar cruciform shape.) At the same time, though, “Into the Wild” resists the impulse to interpret Chris’s death as a kind of martyrdom or as the inevitable, logical terminus of his passionate desire for communion with nature.

Instead, with disarming sincerity, it emphasizes his capacity for love, the gift for fellowship that, somewhat paradoxically, accompanied his fierce need for solitude. Though he warns one of his friends against seeking happiness in human relationships — and also rails incoherently against the evils of “society” — Chris is a naturally sociable creature. And “Into the Wild” is populated with marvelous actors — including Mr. Dierker, a river guide and ski-shop owner making his first appearance in a film — who make its human landscape as fascinating and various as its topography.

The source of Chris’s wanderlust, and of the melancholy that tugs at the film’s happy-go-lucky spirit, is traced to his parents (William Hurt and Marcia Gay Harden), whose volatile marriage and regard for appearances begin to seem contemptible to their son. (His feelings for them are explained in voice-over by his younger sister, Carine, who is played by Jena Malone.)

Fleeing from his mother and father, Chris finds himself drawn, almost unwittingly, to parental surrogates: a rowdy grain dealer in South Dakota (Vince Vaughn), a retired military man in the California desert (Hal Holbrook) and Rainey’s companion, Jan (Catherine Keener), who seems both carefree and careworn.

Chris reminds some of these people of their own lost children, but all of them respond to something about him: an open, guileless quality, at once earnest and playful, that Mr. Hirsch conveys with intuitive grace. “You look like a loved kid,” Jan says, and “Into the Wild” bears that out in nearly every scene.

He is loved, not least, by Mr. Penn, who has shown himself, in three previous films ([“The Indian Runner,”](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/24750/The-Indian-Runner/overview) [“The Crossing Guard”](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/135058/The-Crossing-Guard/overview) and [“The Pledge”](http://movies.nytimes.com/gst/movies/titlelist.html?v_idlist=166194;140693;232639&inline=nyt_ttl)) to be a thoughtful and skilled director. He still is, but this story seems to have liberated him from the somber seriousness that has been his hallmark as a filmmaker until now. “Into the Wild” is a movie about the desire for freedom that feels, in itself, like the fulfillment of that desire.

Which is not to say that there is anything easy or naïve in what Mr. Penn has done. “Into the Wild” is, on the contrary, alive to the mysteries and difficulties of experience in a way that very few recent American movies have been. There are some awkward moments and infelicitous touches — a few too many Eddie Vedder songs on the soundtrack, for example, when Woody Guthrie, Aaron Copland or dead silence might have been more welcome — but the film’s imperfection, like its grandeur, arises from a passionate, generous impulse that is as hard to resist as the call of the open road.

*“Into the Wild” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has profanity, brief nudity and some violent or otherwise upsetting scenes.*

**INTO THE WILD**

*Opens today in New York and Los Angeles.*

Directed by [Sean Penn](http://movies.nytimes.com/person/106027/Sean-Penn?inline=nyt-per); written by Mr. Penn, based on the book by Jon Krakauer; director of photography, Eric Gautier; edited by Jay Cassidy; score by Michael Brook with songs and additional music by Eddie Vedder and Kaki King; production designer, Derek R. Hill; produced by Mr. Penn, Art Linson and Bill Pohlad; released by Paramount Vantage. Running time: 140 minutes.

WITH: Emile Hirsch (Christopher McCandless), Marcia Gay Harden (Billie McCandless), William Hurt (Walt McCandless), Jena Malone (Carine), Brian Dierker (Rainey), Catherine Keener (Jan Burres), Vince Vaughn (Wayne Westerberg), Kristen Stewart (Tracy) and Hal Holbrook (Ron Franz)