[Into The Wild: The False Being Within](http://www.farnorthscience.com/2007/10/13/media-watch/into-the-wild-the-false-being-within/)

By Craig Medred

**Source: [Into The Wild](http://www.intothewild.com/)**

**Many Alaskans have long been exasperated or downright hostile over the mythologizing of Chris McCandless, the hapless college graduate who starved to death in a derelict bus a day’s walk up a mining access road on the north side of Denali National Park. Here is an essay by Alaska writer Craig Medred, with new reporting and insight into what really drove McCandless “into the wild.”**

Already the Interior Alaska winter has locked the spruce forests along the Stampede Trail in its long, cold embrace. Gone back to the central-heating comfort of civilization are the pilgrims who made the summer trek out to the “Magic Bus.” And playing in movie theaters across America is the story of the hero who died out there.

It was on a fall day 15 years ago a trio of Alaskans hunting moose not far from the George Parks Highway north of Denali National Park found a disturbing note tacked to the old school bus long before abandoned along the rough, old mining road.

“SOS,” it said. “I NEED YOUR HELP. I AM INJURED, NEAR DEATH, AND TOO WEAK TO HIKE OUT OF HERE. I AM ALL LONE. THIS IS NO JOKE. IN THE NAME OF GOD, PLEASE REMAIN TO SAVE ME.”

Inside the rusting vehicle, the hunters found the starved and rotting remains of a young man. The body was later identified as that of 24-year-old Christopher McCandless, a continental wanderer originally from Annandale, Va. Death was attributed to starvation.

As McCandless’s story of suffering and failure on the fringe of the last great American wilderness emerged, Alaskans largely wrote him off of as yet another of those poor, unprepared fools fallen victim to Jack London’s Great White Silence.

Four years after his death, however, author Jon Krakauer elevated McCandless to iconic status in the best-selling book, “Into the Wild.” Krakauer saw in the cross-continent wanderings of McCandless and his final, tragic Alaska death the footprints of “the grip the wilderness has on American imagination, the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind, the complicated,highly charged bond that exists between fathers and sons.”

The fact the journey ended early in an old bus with little left behind but some sketchy journals (not nearly enough for a book), Krakauer blamed on the seeds of the wild potato. The seeds, he theorized, poisoned McCandless.

That theory was quickly debunked. The seeds weren’t poisonous.

So when director Sean Penn got around to rendering his version of Krakauer’s reality this year in the film version of **[Into the Wild](http://www.intothewild.com/)**, the seeds of the wild potato became the seeds of the wild sweet pea, which might or might not be poisonous to some degree depending on where and when they are eaten.

None of which deterred Penn, the creature of that Hollywood mentality that make truth secondary to story, from portraying an Alaskan plant guide as claiming that eating the sweet pea leads to “starvation and death.” This is now America’s take.

In a land where the Native peoples survived for thousands of years without farms or firearms, without automobiles or TVs, without almost anything, New York publishing and Hollywood glitz have combined to glorify a misguided young man who ate some poisonous peas, or maybe it was potato seeds after all.

Still clinging to some pretense of journalism, Krakauer, who dismissed the idea of sweet pea as the culprit in his book, is now theorizing that it was a fungus growing on the wild potato seeds, not the wild potato seeds themselves, that did McCandless in.

All of the attention paid seeds has served to focus so much debate on the highly speculative topic of “what” might have killed McCandless (other than simple starvation) that no one has thought to ask another obvious question:

“Who” might have killed McCandless?

There were, after all, not one but two entities in that bus — McCandless, and a creature of his imagination known to the world as “Alexander Supertramp,” or Alex for short.

Could it be that in a psychological war raging between McCandless and Supertramp, his alternative personality, the body found in the bus ended up being the physical remains of what the U.S. military might call “collateral damage”?

Neither the book nor movie version of Into the Wild bother to address this question. But then why should they?

The book really isn’t about McCandless to begin with; the book is about Krakauer. McCandless is a literary vehicle Krakauer uses to portray the extreme example of every young man who turns his back on today’s society and goes into the wilderness to find himself.

And the movie, well, the movie is about pretty scenery, rebellion and the most establishment of messages: The wilderness is Eden; the city is Hell, but don’t you dare venture into Eden because it is not for mere mortals.

**Supertramp is born**

“Driving west out of Atlanta,” Krakauer wrote in “Into the Wild,” “(McCandless) intended to invent an utterly new life for himself, one in which he would be free to wallow in unfiltered experiences. 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.”

The year was 1990. McCandless had just graduated from Emory University, and Supertramp had appeared fully born for the first time.

Supertramp gave away what was left of a trust fund that had paid McCandless’s way through college. Supertramp abandoned all of McCandless’s friends, cut off all contact with McCandless’s family, and hit the road.

Krakauer later recovered some of Supertramp’s journals from those days. In one of them, “Alex” recounts his failed efforts to paddle a canoe down the Colorado River to the Pacific Ocean:

“Canals break off in a multitude of directions. Alex is dumbfounded….he has not been traveling south but west and is headed for the center of the Baja Peninsula. Alex is crushed.

“At last, Alex finds what he believes to be the Wellteco Canal and heads south. Worries and fears return as the canal grows ever smaller.”

Supertramp’s journals, Krakauer duly notes, are “written in the third person in a stilted, self-conscious voice.”

**The voices within**

Schizophrenia is an illness reported to affect one in 25 families in this country. It is caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain that leads people to delusions, hallucinations and the general loss of touch with reality. It often afflicts formerly personable and intelligent young men in their late teens or early 20s.

“A conspicuous feature of this (mental) disintegration concerns the individuals’ identity,” Drs. Anthony David, Roisin Kemp, Lade Smith and Thomas Fahy write in “Method in Madness: Case Studies in Cognitive Neuropsychiatry.” “Commenting on . . .actions with a third-person form of address may be the consequence of a person’s failure to recognize the self-origin of inner speech, and so he or she attributes it to someone else.”

Experts consider this a “first rank symptom” of schizophrenia.

“Personal identity is frequently disturbed in schizophrenia. Early symptoms include the feeling that one is different or altered in some as yet indefinable way,” they write. “In other cases, patients may believe that they are someone else, either known or unknown, famous or infamous.”

Many people have probably written about themselves in the third person at some time, as Supertramp did in his journals.

But how many of them flip back and forth between competing identities?

**McCandless resurfaces**

Even Krakauer seemed surprised by how sometimes, as he retraced the transcontinental trail of his young quarry, he was tracking Alexander Supertramp and other times Chris McCandless.

“Curiously, when McCandless applied for the McDonald’s job (in Arizona), he presented himself as Chris McCandless, not as Alex, and gave his employers his real Social Security number,” Krakauer writes.

By the time the journey reached Alaska, though, Supertramp was clearly back in charge. It was “Alexander Supertramp” who in May 1992 signed a scrawl later found inside the now infamous bus:

“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. ESCAPED FROM ATLANTA. THOU SHALT NOT RETURN, CAUSE ‘THE WEST IS THE BEST.’ AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMATIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE. TEN DAYS AND NIGHTS OF FREIGHT TRAINS AND HITCHHIKING BRING HIM TO THE GREAT WHITE NORTH. NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY THE CIVILIZATIONS HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME LOST IN THE WILD.”

Krakauer characterizes this message as “an exultant declaration of independence.”

But who was that “false being within” who needed to be killed?

Could this have been Alexander Supertramp writing about killing Chris McCandless?

**Our dirty little secrets**

Mental illness might be one of the last, great, personal behaviors still closeted in America.

It is now OK to be left handed; no longer do teachers try to force lefties to write with the “proper” hand.

It is now OK to be mentally challenged; no longer do we try to hide those once labeled as “retarded.” Quite the opposite, in fact. We now have events like Special Olympics to celebrate their achievements.

It is now OK to be gay; no longer is sexual identity a crime even if there are people in the country who don’t much like the idea of people of the same sex pairing up for life.

And despite all of this, it is really not OK to suffer from mental illness. Confess to alcohol, drug or sex abuse; undergo treatment; and all is fine. Confess to mental problems, and you’re toast. Being publicly labeled “mentally ill” is a professional death sentence. Crazy Uncle Fred remains the family secret, the relative kept in the closet and mentioned only in hushed tones.

It is so not-OK to be crazy, in fact, that Krakauer tried to rationalize the irrational behavior of Supertramp by blaming it on an overbearing and hypocritical father. As evidence, the author cited a letter McCandless wrote to his sister, Carine, on the eve of becoming Supertramp:

“Since they won’t ever take me seriously, for a few months after graduation I’m going to let them think they are right, I’m going to let them think that I’m coming ‘around to see their side of things’ and that our relationship is stabilizing. And then, once the time is right, with one abrupt, swift action I’m going to completely knock them out of my life. I’m going to divorce them as my parents once and for all and never speak to either of those idiots as long as I live. I’ll be through with with them once and for all, forever.”

Certainly, there are many who have irrationally railed against their parents in this manner as young adults, but how does one explain the severance of contact with a sibling who has been an ally all through life?

Once Chris morphed into Alex, Krakauer noted, “from then on, he scrupulously avoided contacting either his parents or Carine, the sister for whom he purportedly cared immensely.”

Penn, in his rendering of Krakauer’s book, tries to soften McCandless’s crazier behaviors, though some still show through, and blames everything else on a turbulent relationship between Supertramps parents. It might be the first time anyone has ever tried to attribute schizophrenia to being exposed to warring parents.

**Does anyone really care?**

As a reporter in Alaska for more than two decades, I was among the first to wallow in the McCandless story, and I confess to early on thinking he was but another of those poor, misguided fools who die in the north with some regularity. I no longer believe that.

Almost every psychiatrist, psychologist or mental-health professional I’ve talked to about “Into the Wild” over the years has noted — at least among those who’ve read the book — that schizophrenia or bipolar disorder was one of the first things that popped into their thoughts. Most have been reluctant to go on record saying so.

Psychiatrist Dr. Michael Cull of Remote Medical in Seattle is an exception.

McCandless, he said, was “probably schizophrenic. I read (the book) some time ago, and it was an interesting book. If he was totally insane, as in psychotic, he wouldn’t have lasted more than a few days. (But) it’s a trip into insanity. It’s his journey into psychosis, and it gets more and more bizarre as times goes on.”

Schizophrenics, Cull added, often tend to be loners like McCandless because they function best as such.

“For a shizophrenic, if they are isolated from society, they can sometimes do better because what confuses them is external input,” the psychiatrist said. Unfortunately, if they are living in the wilderness and their psychosis worsens, there is no one to help them. And in a state of severe psychosis, Cull said, “they have a lot of difficulty just getting food in their mouths and clothes on their back.”

Cull said there have been psychiatrists who have discussed McCandless’s apparent mental problems, but they don’t do so very publicly. One cannot help but wonder how much this reluctance has to do with mental illness being one of those things we just don’t talk about in this country. Because to leave such a diagnosis unstated, or to at least fail to raise a discussion of it as a possibility, is to further the idea crafted by Krakauer and furthered by Penn, the idea that Supertramp/McCandless was a sad but iconic victim of the search for that knowledge many seek when they wander into the wilderness McCandless was a sad victim, all right, but not of the search for knowledge.

And he most certainly wasn’t just the poor unprepared and under-equipped fool so easily dismissed by most Alaskans. He didn’t have the mental faculties to rise to that level.

In Krakauer’s book, there is a section that details Supertramp abandoning his car in Arizona shortly after fleeing Emory and arranging “all his paper currency in a pile on the sand — a pathetic little stack of ones and fives and twenties — and (putting) a match to it. One hundred and twenty-three dollars in legal tender promptly reduced to ash and smoke.”

Krakauer sees this as part of McCandless’s search for himself. There is another view:

When you abandon your car and burn your money, you aren’t searching for yourself; you’ve lost yourself.

**So what really happened in that bus?**

Did Chris McCandless accidentally starve to death or kill himself by mistakenly eating something poisonous, as Krakauer believes and Penn now advocates?

Or did Alexander Supertramp cover Chris McCandless with a hallucinatory veil under which he succumbed to death by starvation?

Personally, having taken a few steps down the road to starvation not by choice and discovering the hallucinations there not all that different from those in the strange world of sleep deprivation, it is easy to imagine someone already having trouble maintaining a grasp on reality falling into a hopeless state of confusion, a state wherein disappears even the very basic idea one must eat and drink in order to survive.

Could Supertramp have taken McCandless to this point?

Consider that it was “Alexander Supertramp” who led the journey to the edge of the wilderness. And it was Alexander Supertramp who signed that May statement of purpose that talked about killing “THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUD(ING) THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE.”

Yet, it appears to have been Chris McCandless who made a lot of the early jottings in the meager journal found left behind in the bus. Gone from the early parts of the journal are the third person references. In their place are complete sentences in the first person:

“I am reborn. This is my dawn. Real life has begun.”

A few days after writing that, McCandless tried to walk from the bus back to highway. Confronted by a swollen Teklanika River, he turned back. His journal entries from that point on take a decided turn toward the choppy, stitled style of Supertramp:

“Diaster…Rained in. River look impossible. Lonely, scared.”

It continues that way almost until the end.

“Death looms as serious threat,” the journal says for Aug. 5, 1992. “Too weak to walk out, have literally become trapped in the wild — no game.”

Complete sentences written in the good grammar learned at Emory, where McCandless once wrote for the school paper, don’t return until they appear on the SOS note in the final days. Against the backdrop of the choppy journal entries, the note is startling for its sudden adherence to the rules of proper English:

“I NEED YOUR HELP. I AM INJURED, NEAR DEATH AND TOO WEAK TO HIKE OUT OF HERE. I AM ALL ALONE. THIS IS NO JOKE. IN THE NAME OF GOD, PLEASE REMAIN TO SAVE ME. I AM OUT COLLECTING BERRIES CLOSE BY AND SHALL RETURN THIS EVENING. THANK YOU.”

The note comes not from Alexander Supertramp, but from Chris McCandless.

Could it have been the last message of a man being murdered by a demon within?