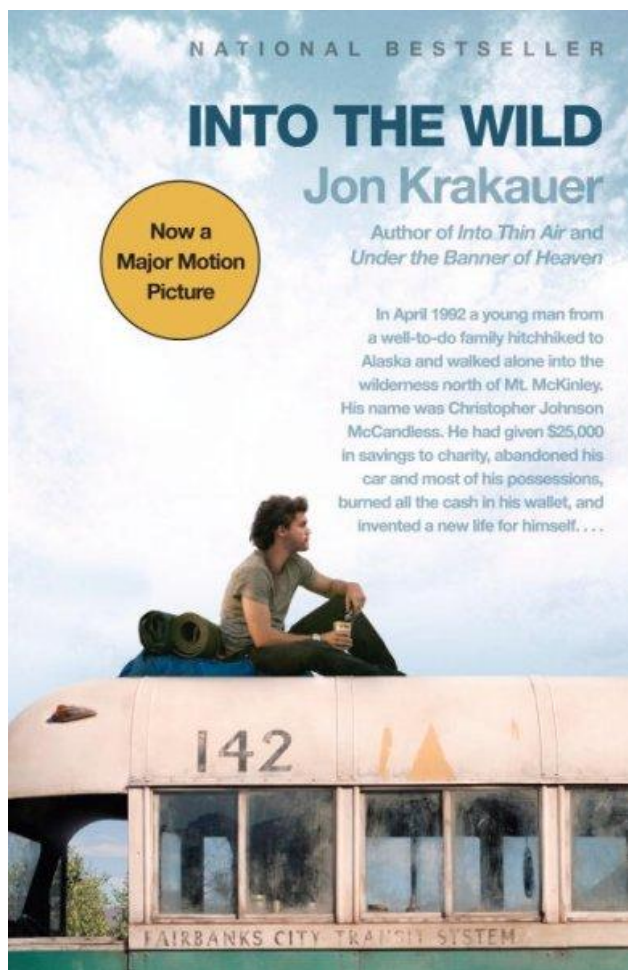


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1328060>

About the Book



Immediately after graduating from college in 1991, McCandless had roamed through the West and Southwest on a vision quest like those made by his heroes Jack London and John Muir. In the Mojave Desert he abandoned his car, stripped it of its license plates, and burned all of his cash. He would give himself a new name, Alexander Supertramp, and unencumbered by money and belongings, he would be free to wallow in the raw, unfiltered experiences that nature presented. Craving a blank spot on the map, McCandless simply threw the maps away. Leaving behind his desperate parents and sister, he vanished into the wild.

About the Author *Source: Literature Resource Center*

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>



Jon Krakauer was born in Brookline, Massachusetts, and raised from age two in Corvallis, Oregon, within reach of mountains that drew him into a lifelong love of climbing. His father, an active alpinist himself, introduced Krakauer to the sport at age eight. Krakauer graduated from Hampshire College in Massachusetts in 1976, then spent the next few years working solely to fund his passion for mountaineering, taking carpentry and commercial fishing jobs for five months and spending the rest of the year climbing.

His writing career began with a magazine article about a climb he completed in 1977, alone, during which he charted a new route to the peak of Devil's Thumb in Alaska. When he began receiving regular magazine assignments, he decided to take on journalism as full-time work. Krakauer married Linda Moore in 1980 and attempted to curtail his highly dangerous avocation for her sake, but found himself unable to resist; he told an *Outside Online* interviewer that the conflict almost ruined their marriage, but eventually Linda accepted climbing as an integral part of her husband's career. He published a collection of his articles, *Eiger Dreams*, in 1990, and his next two books, *Into the Wild* (1996) and *Into Thin Air* (1998) were highly successful. *Into the Wild* spent over two years on the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Into Thin Air*, also a bestseller, was named *Time* magazine's best book of the year and propelled Krakauer onto the list of finalists for the 1998 Pulitzer Prize in general nonfiction. Krakauer received an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1999 for *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air*. In response to the events he recounted in *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer established the Everest '96 Memorial Fund, which provides humanitarian aid to the peoples of the Himalaya region through royalties from the book as a tribute to those who perished during the expedition.

Krakauer's books have begun as articles on subjects that he wanted to investigate in greater depth than a short essay would allow. *Into the Wild* recounts the true story of Chris McCandless, a young man restless with conventional life who traveled to the Alaskan wilderness intending to live off the land; woefully unprepared, he died of starvation. Four months after he began his adventure, hunters found McCandless's body and a desperate plea for rescue scrawled on a torn book page. McCandless was roundly criticized as foolhardy, but Krakauer looked past his fatal choice and crafted a compelling story, providing a fuller account of McCandless's background, emotional state, and his objectives. *Into the Wild* was adapted for film, with a screenplay and direction by Sean Penn, and released in 2007.

With *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer unintentionally became part of the story, which began as an assignment from *Outside* magazine to write about the increasing commercialization of climbing expeditions on Mount Everest. Krakauer revived a childhood dream to scale the famous mountain and signed on to participate in a climb while chronicling the experience along the way. His group reached the summit, but several people, including a veteran guide, perished during the descent when a storm blew in. His account of the tragedy was published first as an article in *Outside* and sparked a backlash from other climbers. Krakauer changed topics with *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003), which explores the closed world of fundamentalist Mormons, a group with whom he had some contact as a child in Oregon. Krakauer did not shrink from controversial subject matter in this book either, delving into the highly charged topic of violence in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), also known as the Mormon faith, and the development of fundamentalist splinter groups that

have created legal and moral problems for the modern LDS movement. One such splinter group is profiled in *Under the Banner of Heaven*, which examines the true story of Ron and Dan Lafferty, brothers who in 1984 murdered their sister-in-law and her infant daughter in the name of God.

Krakauer has been praised for his ability to make nonfiction stories highly engaging--an ability critics find all the more impressive given that he has no formal education in journalism or literature. Critics received *Into the Wild* with kudos bordering at times on amazement at the skillful freshman entry into the literary world. Suzan Nightingale echoed the sentiments of many reviewers who reported that Krakauer's portrait gave them a curiosity about McCandless--and what he was seeking and may have failed to find. Krakauer's mountain-climbing tales benefit from his personal experience with the subject, which he says is not a sport but a way of life. *Into Thin Air* received strong criticism from many in the alpinist community who argued that Krakauer had profited from the tragedy. Krakauer responded by noting that he had joined the expedition as a journalist on assignment and, as such, it was his job to tell the story. Literary critics lauded *Into Thin Air* as skillfully told, but some also recounted arguments from other witnesses to the events who disputed Krakauer's account. In particular, Anatoli Boukreev, a well-known alpinist described by some as a champion of Himalayan climbing, took issue with Krakauer's characterization of him and wrote his own account, *The Climb*, which cast the descent in a different light. Critics praised Krakauer for not shying away from difficult issues in *Under the Banner of Heaven*, a book that to some is considered blasphemous. Krakauer's presentation of the history of the Mormon faith was described as insightful and thought-provoking, and some critics found parallels between the author's examination of religious fundamentalism in America and that of the Middle East. Robert Wright concluded that, in this way, the book "may have broader relevance than the author intended."

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

After graduating from Emory University in Atlanta in 1992, top student and athlete Christopher McCandless abandoned his possessions, gave his entire \$24,000 savings account to charity and hitchhiked to Alaska, where he went to live in the wilderness. Four months later, he turned up dead. His diary, letters and two notes found at a remote campsite tell of his desperate effort to survive, apparently stranded by an injury and slowly starving. They also reflect the posturing of a confused young man, raised in affluent Annandale, Va., who self-consciously adopted a Tolstoyan renunciation of wealth and return to nature. Krakauer, a contributing editor to *Outside* and *Men's Journal*, retraces McCandless's ill-fated antagonism toward his father, Walt, an eminent aerospace engineer. Krakauer also draws parallels to his own reckless youthful exploit in 1977 when he climbed Devils Thumb, a mountain on the Alaska-British Columbia border, partly as a symbolic act of rebellion against his autocratic father. In a moving narrative, Krakauer probes the mystery of McCandless's death, which he

attributes to logistical blunders and to accidental poisoning from eating toxic seed pods.

Library Journal

In April 1992, 23-year-old Chris McCandless hiked into the Alaska bush to "live off the land." Four months later, hunters found his emaciated corpse in an abandoned Fairbanks city bus, along with five rolls of film, an SOS note, and a diary written in a field guide to edible plants. Cut off from civilization, McCandless had starved to death. The young man's gruesome demise made headlines and haunted *Outside* magazine contributing editor Krakauer, who saw "vague, unsettling parallels" between McCandless's life and his own. Expanding on his 1993 *Outside* article, Krakauer traces McCandless's last two years; after his graduation from Emory University, McCandless abandoned his middle-class family, identity, and possessions in favor of the life of "Alexander Supertramp," wandering the American West in search of "raw, transcendent experience." In trying to understand McCandless's behavior and the appeal that risky activities hold for young men, Krakauer examines his own adventurous youth. However, he never satisfactorily answers the question of whether McCandless was a noble, if misguided, idealist or a reckless narcissist who brought pain to his family. For popular outdoor and adventure collections.

Booklist

Some Alaskans reacted contemptuously to Krakauer's magazine article about a young man who starved to death one summer in the shadow of Denali. Chris McCandless was an idealistic fool, they said. He didn't equip himself properly, couldn't tell moose from caribou, didn't know Alaskan rivers become unfordable torrents in the summer melt: hubristic ignorance dictated his fate. Such acid responses won't greet this book-length expansion of the article, a drama constructed deftly enough to earn a place in the canon of American nature writing. First, there is mystery: the emaciated body found in September 1992 in a bus-hut had no identity papers, just a name and a terse diary of final days. Then there is the question of personal identity: What existential longing led the twentysomething McCandless to that bus and at what cost to himself and his family? And finally, there is the majestic stage set of the American Far West, which Krakauer draws on to create his lyrical, mesmerizing testament to McCandless' odyssey. Krakauer starts with the discovery of McCandless' body and works backward, revealing that McCandless graduated from Emory University, severed contact with his family, assumed the alias "Alexander Supertramp," and began two years of vagabondage in search of Truth in living as advocated by Thoreau and Tolstoy, of whose works "Alex" was enamored. His earnestness indelibly impressed the itinerants he easily befriended--whom he, in truth, somewhat callously jettisoned--as Krakauer reveals throughout this sensitive narrative. A moving story that reiterates the bewitching attraction of the Far West.

Literary Criticism

The End of an Alaskan Odyssey

"I think I'm going to disappear for a while," Chris McCandless told his family upon graduating from college in the summer of 1990. Two years later, his emaciated corpse was found inside a bus parked deep in the Alaskan bush.

He'd evidently walked into the hostile outback equipped with K-Mart hiking boots, a .22 rifle and a half-full pack, crooked to the metaphysical gills on Jack Kerouac, Jim Morrison and Henry David Thoreau. Intending to live off the land, he had starved to death instead. The last words in his journal were "Beautiful Blueberries."

Working with precious few clues (and, obviously, no interview), Jon Krakauer pieced together this detailed account of McCandless's troubled, troubling life [*Into the Wild*]. As he traces McCandless's wanderings around the gristlier regions of American society, from a grain elevator in South Dakota to various counter-cultural encampments in the Southwest, Krakauer sketches for us a remarkable character. Intelligent, original and talented, McCandless left an indelible impression on nearly everyone he met, but he shunned lasting relationships and treated his family with special cruelty.

The narrative is propelled by two persistent questions: Was Chris McCandless some kind of visionary or a jerk? And did he intend to die? Krakauer dearly empathizes with his subject, even incorporating a long passage on his own McCandless-like journey to the brink, but this baggage, and other assorted literary freight, fails to slow his gripping tale.

To escape his imperfect family life and his stifling suburban hometown of Annandale, Va., McCandless gave his \$24,000 savings to charity and headed West, where he embarked on a sequence of ever-more-harrowing solo voyages. Once in Arizona he bought a canoe and attempted to paddle down the Colorado River, only to discover that the river expires in a maze of Mexican irrigation canals. Undaunted, he rode a pickup truck the last few miles and resumed paddling south along the Gulf of California until a freak storm nearly drowned him.

Chris McCandless specialized in getting himself into trouble. Every time he did, some kindly stranger would appear and bail him out, which led him to mistake his good luck for hardiness. So when he finally headed north for what he called his "great Alaskan odyssey," he was frightfully unprepared mentally and physically. Yet he ignored the advice of Alaskans he met on the way (who were quite accustomed to wising up greenhorns) and forged on into the wilderness. "I now walk in the wild," he wrote, insufferably, in his final postcard. The only food in his pack was a 10-pound sack of rice.

But McCandless wanted to be Lewis and Clark, no easy feat in the days of global positioning systems and geological survey maps. There are, Krakauer writes, "no

more blank spots on the map--not in Alaska, not anywhere. But Chris, with his own idiosyncratic logic, came up with an elegant solution to this dilemma. He simply got rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would remain *incognita*."

It was a solution worthy of Thoreau, who conducted his own experiment in solitude just a short walk from Concord. It also smacks of fatal arrogance, a lack of respect for nature that would have horrified Thoreau, who was never much of a risk-taker. As Krakauer pieces together McCandless's last days, it becomes clear that he wasn't suicidal. Two or three minor and avoidable mistakes were enough to doom the young man.

As hard as Krakauer tries to cram McCandless into a literary bookshelf with Thoreau and Tolstoy and assorted Beats, McCandless just doesn't fit. His tale is too rough, too unliterary. His experiences make Jack Kerouac look like a cruise-ship tourist, but he was no writer and certainly no philosopher; his muddle-headed insights are shared by millions of Tom Robbins readers. He was, finally, an adolescent working himself through a phase.

Yet he touched people, most memorably an elderly man identified as Ron Franz, whom McCandless befriended near "the Slabs," a disused military base turned hippie encampment near Salton City, Calif. In a long letter, McCandless persuaded him to adopt an independent, nomadic existence, living off the grid: "If you want to get more out of life," he wrote Franz, "you must lose your inclination for monotonous security and adopt a helter-skelter style of life that will at first appear to you to be crazy. But once you become accustomed to such a life you will see its full meaning and its incredible beauty."

The 81-year-old Franz took McCandless's advice, dumping his possessions in storage and setting up camp in the desert. Day after day, month after month, he waited for his young friend, who would never return. McCandless probably never intended to come back; he walked easily out of people's lives, as he had blithely forsaken his family. Those he left behind confronted a troubling void.

"Considering that I only spent a few hours in his company," muses one middle-aged woman who met him, "it amazes me how much I'm bothered by his death."

Source: Gifford, Bill. "The End of an Alaskan Odyssey." Washington Post Book World 26.3 (28 Jan. 1996). Rpt. in Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol. 248. Detroit: Gale, 2008. Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions *Source: <http://www.viterbo.edu/>*

1. In the author's note Jon Krakauer claims that Christopher McCandless "invented a new life for himself" searching a "raw, transcendent experience." Do you agree with the author's assessment? How did McCandless re-invent himself? How was his life "transcendent" after he graduated from college?

2. Krakauer titles his book *Into the Wild* which echoes Jack London's work, *The Call of the Wild*. McCandless was obviously influenced by London, and Krakauer suggests that McCandless's experience demonstrates the "grip wilderness has on the American imagination, the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind..." How do you define "the call of the wild?" Does the call still exist in the same form it existed in previous periods in America's history? How is the "wild" or the wilderness important to us as a people? To you as an individual?
3. McCandless was also greatly influenced by Henry David Thoreau. What did he borrow from Thoreau's interaction with nature? How did he differ from Thoreau?
4. Gordon Young, who reviewed *Into the Wild*, said that McCandless did not die in vain, and that his life was enviable in many respects. Young asserts that McCandless was "a profoundly American figure, uncompromising 'in his approach and thoroughly optimistic about the future.'" How is McCandless representative of the American character? Or how does McCandless fall short of what it means to be an American? Indeed, does McCandless in any way represent everything that is wrong about the American character?
5. Jon Krakauer first wrote about McCandless in "Death of an Innocent" in *Outside* magazine, January, 1993. According to McCandless the article generated more mail than any other article in the magazine's history. How did the story affect you?
6. How is this story a "*bildungsroman*" story? How does it deviate from the definition of a *bildungsroman*?
7. Is *Into the Wild* a man's book, in the same way that *Refuge* is a woman's book? Are there gender issues in the narrative?
8. The author claims that *Into the Wild* is very much a story about a son's relationship with his father. What conclusions did you make regarding McCandless's response to his family? What did you learn about parental relationships from the narrative?

Multimedia

***Into The Wild* (Movie)**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1307405>;

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1328740>

(Call number: DVD Drama Into; Blu-ray Drama Into)

Freshly graduated from college with a promising future ahead, Christopher McCandless instead walked out of his privileged life and into the wild in search of adventure. What happened to him on the way transformed this young wanderer

into an enduring symbol for countless people - a fearless risk-taker who wrestled with the precarious balance between man and nature. Based on a true story.

Movie Boosts Traffic to 'Into the Wild' Shrine & Film Captures Young Man's Journey 'Into the Wild' (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15005476>

Two discussions of the book and the movie made from it, both held on NPR's *All Things Considered*.

Further Reading

Into Thin Air by Jon Krakauer

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1119568>

(Call number: 796.522 Kr)

A bank of clouds was assembling on the not-so-distant horizon, but journalist-mountaineer Jon Krakauer, standing on the summit of Mt. Everest, saw nothing that "suggested that a murderous storm was bearing down." He was wrong. The storm, which claimed five lives and left countless more--including Krakauer's--in guilt-ridden disarray, would also provide the impetus for *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer's epic account of the May 1996 disaster. By writing *Into Thin Air*, Krakauer may have hoped to exorcise some of his own demons and lay to rest some of the painful questions that still surround the event.

Under the Banner of Heaven by Jon Krakauer

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1209109>

(Call number: 289.33 Kr)

Jon Krakauer's literary reputation rests on insightful chronicles of lives conducted at the outer limits. He now shifts his focus from extremes of physical adventure to extremes of religious belief within our own borders, taking readers inside isolated American communities where some 40,000 Mormon Fundamentalists still practice polygamy. Defying both civil authorities and the Mormon establishment in Salt Lake City, the renegade leaders of these Taliban-like theocracies are zealots who answer only to God.

Read-Alikes *Source: Seattle (WA) Public Library*

A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir by Donald Worster

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1321928>

(Call number: 921 Muir)

In Worster's magisterial biography, John Muir's "special self" is fully explored as is his extraordinary ability, then and now, to get others to see the sacred beauty of the natural world. Based on Muir's full private correspondence, it is full of rich detail and personal anecdote, uncovering the complex inner life behind the legend of the solitary mountain man.

The Immense Journey by Loren C. Eiseley

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1022862>

(Call number: 575 Ei)
An exploration of human evolution.

The Wolf Willow by Wallace Stegner
<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1064329>

(Call number: 971.24 St)
A history, a story, and a memory of the last plains frontier.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Extras!

Set the stage for your discussion by holding it in a park with fields or woods – if possible, venture far enough from buildings and roads to create a feeling of wilderness.

