

# Taking Risk to Its 'Logical' Extreme

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## **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 clichéd 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.