

# Into the Wild Summary

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## Summary: Chapter 1

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Outside Fairbanks, Alaska, an electrician named Jim Gallien picks up a teenage hitchhiker who introduces himself as Alex. Gallien is concerned that Alex, who claims to be 24, is underprepared for the several months' stay he plans in Alaska's Denali National Park. Gallien asks Alex questions about his hunting license, since the young man is carrying a rifle, but Alex says that he doesn't care about the government's rules and insists that he'll be fine. The narrator, who we know to be the author Jon Krakauer, points out that this is typical of Alex. Gallien also notices that Alex's gun isn't necessarily powerful enough to kill large animals. In exchange for the ride, Alex gives Gallien his few spare possessions, including less than a dollar in change and a plastic comb. Gallien insists that Alex take a pair of his work boots and some extra food his wife has packed for his lunch. He drops Alex off at the edge of the park, on the Stampede Trail. He is convinced Alex will leave the park and come back to civilization as soon as he faces real hardship.

## Analysis

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The opening of *Into the Wild* establishes a number of narrative expectations and introduces its protagonist, Christopher McCandless. It reveals his objective of living for an extended time in Denali National Park, and also hints at the consequences that may await him. The narration begins through the perspective of a stranger who encounters McCandless on the road, thus offering the reader a chance to evaluate McCandless's entry into the wild without knowing anything about his fate. The reader is implicitly invited to experience Jim Gallien's concern for McCandless after he decides to pick up the young hitchhiker, which establishes sympathy for McCandless early in the narrative. In addition, the fact that Gallien does not stop McCandless from heading into the wild and decides that he will be fine strikes a note of tragic irony that will continue throughout the book. Gallien's attempts to give McCandless what help he can suggests that McCandless will provoke heartache and concern from those who knew him as the story of *Into the Wild* continues. The arrival of the hunters at the bus to find McCandless's body inside it at the end of Chapter Two confirms this tragic suspicion.

The opening section of *Into the Wild* clarifies the book's formal technique for the reader. The inclusion of maps shows Christopher McCandless's geographical location in each chapter, allowing the reader to track his movements and to think through his journey. Krakauer also inserts epigraphs from McCandless's diary, his reading, and books that Krakauer himself finds of relevant interest at the beginning of each chapter. He sets the expectation that each epigraph can be used as a clue or a thematic hint as to what will be contained in the chapter to follow. Taken together, both maps and epigraphs render *Into the Wild* what could be called an interactive reading experience. The reader may choose different modes and different forms of documentation through which to encounter and navigate Christopher McCandless's story. This mimics Krakauer's journalistic work in assembling that story and also offers a metaphor for the progress of a traveller through an unknown territory. Moreover, *Into the Wild*'s evocative and often poetic use of media underlines that it is a literary work as opposed to a work of strictly objective reportage.