Into The Wild: Book Review

Title: Into The Wild Publication Date: 1996Author: Jon Krakauer Nationality: AmericanAuthor's Birth/Death Dates: April 12, 1954 - Now

Distinguishing Traits of Author:

Jon Krakauer is an American writer and mountaineer born in Brookline, Massachusetts, but was raised in Oregon. From a young age, his father taught Krakauer how to climb mountains and he fell in love. Similar to the main character in Into the Wild, Krakauer spent about 3 weeks alone in the wilderness of Alaska. Krakauer was also part of the group caught in the 1996 Mount Everest Disaster. Luckily he was able to reach the peak and return to camp safely. He gained popularity through his work in the magazine "Outside" and then began publishing his own books aside from working on the magazine.

Setting:

In the beginning of the novel, Into the Wild follows Chris McCandless' story in the late 1980s to the early 1990s over mostly the western United States, but including Alaska, Mexico, and certain areas in other parts of the U.S. Chris grew up in the suburbs of Washington D.C. He then left for college, attending Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. After college, he decided to drive west until he reached Lake Mead where he abandoned his yellow Datsun. He then hitchhikes to Lake Tahoe, California and explores the Sierra Nevada mountain range. He meets Wayne Westerberg in Montana where he then goes with Wayne to Carthage, South Dakota to work for him. He buys a canoe and canoes down the Colorado River to Mexico. He travels to Los Angeles, then camps at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. From there, he hitchhikes to Las Vegas, Nevada. He then leaves for Bullhead City, Arizona where he worked at McDonald's for some time. He then decides to leave for Alaska, stopping at Liard Hot Springs in Columbia, Canada. Eventually makes it to Denali National Park in Alaska where he finds the abandoned bus and sets up camp.

Brief Plot Synopsis:

The novel includes two different plot lines instead of only one. The first plotline discusses the journey of Chris McCandless into the wild and how he got there. The other discusses how the author, Jon Krakauer, came to understand the motives and logic behind Chris's decision to go into the wild. The two plots do not follow a certain pattern and are a bit mixed up when it comes to which chapters follow which plot.

Into the Wild begins with the story of a man named Jim Gallien driving down the roads of Alaska when he spots a young hitchhiker and offers him a ride. The young hitchhiker was Chris McCandless, but he chooses to introduce himself as "Alex" instead and he explains that he wants to "live off the land for a few months" (4). Jim notices that he does not nearly have enough supplies to live off the land and offers to help "Alex" buy more supplies, but he refuses Jim's help. "Alex" leaves Jim with Jim's work boots and lunch and makes his way into the

forests.

Later the same year, 3 moose hunters, a couple and a man driving an ATV happen to come across an abandoned bus in Denali National Park that had Chris's dead body inside. Alaska state troopers retrieve the body and later lab work pinned the cause of death to be starvation.

About two months after Chris's body is found, Krakauer interviews Wayne Westerberg, a grain elevator operator. Wayne retells his story of the day he picked up Chris or "Alex" in Carthage, South Dakota. Chris started to help Wayne in his grain elevator crew and eventually offers him a job. Shortly after, Wayne is arrested for stealing satellite TV codes forcing Chris to be on his way again.

Just after graduating from Emory University, Chris immediately starts driving west towards Lake Mead, Nevada. There, the engine of his yellow Datsun gets flooded so he decides to abandon it there. After 2 months of hitchhiking, Chris decides to buy a canoe and paddle down the Colorado River to Mexico. The journey took a total of 5 months and in the meantime, Chris's family start to investigate their missing son. After his canoeing journey comes to an end, Chris briefly works at McDonald's while living with a man named Charlie in Bullhead City, Arizona. He later departed and met Jan Burres and her boyfriend Bob in California. He takes part of Jan's drifter's camp for a while until departing determined to hike into Alaska.

In 1992, Chris returns to Carthage to work for Wayne again. He, however, left at the end of the month after gaining enough money to get him to Alaska. He hitchhikes north until he gets to Alaska in April of 1992. He follows the Sushana River until he discovers the abandoned bus where he intends to set up camp. Through the summer, Chris hunts animals and forages for food. He even mentions shooting a moose but feels regretful of doing so. Chris eventually has had enough and has decided it was time to return to civilization.

He, however, could not cross the Teklanika River due to thawing floodwaters and is left with no other choice but to return to the bus. On July 30, Chris writes in his journal that he is very weak and in danger, but also mentions something about potato seeds. Too weak to hunt or forage, Chris dies soon after.

After looking into why Chris would write about potato seeds at that time, Krakauer thinks that Chris actually died of swainsonine poisoning after eating wild potato seeds with toxic mold.

Krakauer visits Chris's parents, Billie and Walt, to gain more insight into Chris's relationship with his family. He learns that after graduating high school, Chris traveled to California where he discovered he had been a bigamist. He believes this could have been the roots of the family problems Chris was facing and ultimately leading him to run away. Krakauer accompanies Chris's parents to the abandoned bus to pay their respects to Chris.

Brief Description of Characters:

Chris McCandless or "Alex Supertramp": The protagonist of the novel. He grew up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C. where he did very well in school academically and athletically. He graduated from Emory University in 1990 with honors and soon after gives all his savings to charity and hitchhikes his way through the western U.S. He adopts the name Alex while on his

journey. He, then, hitchhikes to Alaska where he plans to live off the land in the wilderness. He travels into the wilderness of Alaska in April 1992. He is found dead in an abandoned school bus 4 months later.

Jon Krakauer: Krakauer is the author and narrator of the story, but also plays a key role within the novel as well. He mostly serves as the mediator between the storyline and why Chris decided to do the things he did. Krakauer chooses to include himself as a character in the novel, which is not seen as often unless the novel is an autobiography. Krakauer is, in some ways, similar to Chris. Krakauer was obsessed with mountain climbing since he was a teen and, like Chris, has issues with his father.

Jim Gallien: Jim Gallien is a union electrician and a hunter. He picks up “Alex” about 4 miles outside of Fairbanks and drove him to the edge of Denali National Park. He is very kind and offered to buy “Alex” some better supplies for his trip, but “Alex” refuses and says he will be fine. Jim still gives “Alex” his work boots and sandwiches though.

Ken Thompson: Ken is the owner of an Anchorage body shop. He went out hunting on a hunting trip with Gordon Samel and Ferdie Swanson when they discover McCandless’s dead body in the abandoned bus.

Gordon Samel: Gordon Samel is an employee of Ken Thompson and he went with Ken and Ferdie Swanson on a hunting trip. On that trip, Gordon was the one to find McCandless’s dead body.

Ferdie Swanson: Ferdie Swanson was on a hunting trip with Ken Thompson and Gordon Samel when Chris’s dead body was found.

Butch Killian: Butch Killian is an emergency medic and coal miner from Healy. He arrives at the abandoned bus soon after Gordon Samel discovers Chris’s body inside.

Wayne Westerberg: Wayne Westerberg owns a grain elevator in Carthage, North Dakota. He meets Chris when he picks him up hitchhiking. He gives Chris a job multiple times in the story, which helps him out financially for his trip.

Walt McCandless: Walt is Chris’s father who is a well known aerospace engineer. He has a total of 8 children from 2 different marriages. He is very passionate and stubborn, like his son, and also musically talented with a bad temper.

Billie McCandless: Billie is Chris’s mother who met Walt while she was working as a secretary. They eventually started their own company together.

Carine McCandless: Carine is Chris’s younger sister and he is very close to her. Carine looks a lot like Chris and is energetic and intelligent. She, however, is not as hot-tempered as the rest of her family and is instead a very forgiving girl.

Bud Walsh: Bud Walsh is a National Park ranger that discovered Chris’s abandoned yellow Datsun near Lake Mead.

Jan Burres: Jan Burres is a middle-aged woman who travels while selling random knick-knacks

at flea markets all over the western U.S. She meets Chris when she picks him up after seeing him hitchhiking. They become very close until he leaves for Alaska.

Peter Kalitka: Peter Kalitka is the private investigator hired by Chris's family to find Chris.

George Dreeszen: George Dreeszen is the assistant manager at the McDonalds where Chris worked shortly in Bullhead City.

Lori Zarza: Lori Zarza is the other assistant manager at the McDonalds in Bullhead City. Lori states that she is surprised that Chris was hired considering his hygiene was not very good.

Ronald Franz: Ronald Franz is an 80-year-old Christian soldier who picks Chris up hitchhiking. He had lost his wife and children, so he felt a fatherly admiration for Chris and took a strong liking to him. He even offers to adopt Chris.

Mary Westerberg: Mary Westerberg is Wayne Westerberg's mother who asks Chris to come over for dinner. She took a strong liking to him even though she mentions she never really liked any of Wayne's workers.

Gail Borah: Gail Borah is Wayne Westerberg's on again off again girlfriend. She is a mother of two and is divorced. She also becomes close to Chris while he is staying in Carthage.

Charlie: Charlie is a slightly weird old man who offers a mobile home for Chris to stay in while he is temporarily in Bullhead City.

Gene Rosellini: Gene Rosellini is a wealthy man who decides to test if he could live similar to how cavemen lived. He succeeded for over 10 years before he deemed his experiment a failure and killed himself.

John Waterman: John Waterman is a young climber from Washington D.C. His drive to continue to climber more dangerous slopes eventually led him to an assent in Denali where he was never heard from again.

Everett Ruess: Everett Ruess was a twenty-year-old born in 1914, who absolutely loved nature and spent pretty much all his time moving around since he was 16. He eventually disappears in Utah.

Carl McCunn: Carl McCunn was an amateur photographer who hired a pilot to drop him off in the middle of the wilderness so that he could take photos of nature. He forgot to arrange for someone to pick him up, so he died after he ran out of rations.

Sam McCandless: Sam is one of Chris's half-brothers and he is the first to be notified of Chris's death by the authorities.

Loren Johnson: Loren is Chris's maternal grandfather. He is very similar to Chris in many ways and they got along very well. He really loves wildlife and finds hunting very hard.

Eric Hathaway: Eric Hathaway is a friend of Chris's from his cross country team in high school.

Kris Maxie Gilmer: Kris was a member of the girl's cross country team in Chris's high school and she was also one of Chris's closest friends.

Chris Fish: Chris is Carine's husband and partner in their auto-repair business.

Kai Sandburn: Kai Sandburn is a bubbly and cheerful woman that Krakauer meets on his climb of the Devil's Thumb.

Lewis Krakauer: Lewis Krakauer is Jon Krakauer's father who wished for Jon to be a doctor, but Jon refused. He ended up going crazy from a misguided dose of medication for a painful medical condition.

Gaylord Stuckey: Gaylord Stuckey is an old man who meets Chris in the Liard River Hotsprings and drives him to Fairbanks, Alaska.

Roman Dial: Roman Dial is an Alaskan who accompanies Krakauer to visit Chris's abandoned bus.

Dan Solie: Dan Solie is another Alaskan who accompanies Krakauer to visit Chris's bus.

Andrew Liske: Andrew Liske is a friend of Roman Dial's from California that also accompanies Krakauer to visit Chris's bus.

Symbols:

The Bus

The bus symbolizes Chris's good fortune because it was very lucky for him to be able to find a stable shelter while attempting to live in the wilderness. The bus, however, is not a natural part of nature, so Chris leaves the bus seeking a wilder form of living. He returns to the bus later because he struggled to survive without it. The bus also symbolizes dependence vs. independence because of his struggle to live without the shelter of the bus. McCandless does, however, die inside the bus as well. The bus gives off the sense of ambiguity because the things that are associated with the bus could be opposites. Chris needed the bus to live, but he died inside the bus as well. Also, he wanted to live on the bus, but because the bus was not natural he left only to return again.

The Moose

The moose symbolizes Chris's relationship towards the wild. After shooting the moose Chris described himself to be overjoyed, but that joy "turned to remorse soon after he shot the moose" (166). McCandless planned to smoke the meat of the moose, but it proved to be very difficult for him and he let a majority of the meat go to the wolves. The lack of food was what eventually led Chris to die. Since the moose symbolizes Chris's relationship with the wild after the moose dies his want to live in the wild dies as well. Still traumatized from killing the moose, he decides to return back to civilization, but he could not because of the high floodwaters. He is forced to go back to the bus, but he does not have enough food to last because he did not properly preserve the moose meat.

Motifs:

Musical instruments

Musical instruments show up in the book multiple times throughout the novel. Chris leaves his guitar behind when he abandoned his yellow Datsun. He can also be seen playing the piano at several places he stopped on his way to Alaska. It is noted that he played the organ at one of his stops. The novel also mentions that Chris can sing as well. Chris never has gone out of his way to show off his musical abilities. This could possibly be because he associates music with his father and he is not on good terms with him at the moment.

Allusions:

Henry David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy

Before abandoning his yellow Datsun he, “in a gesture that would have done both Thoreau and Tolstoy proud, he arranged all his paper currency in a pile on the sand … and put a match to it” (29). Henry Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy were both authors that questioned a materialistic lifestyle in their works. McCandless drew inspiration from them to burn his money, which is a materialistic object, and live a more natural lifestyle.

Archetypes:

The Explorer

One character archetype is the explorer portrayed by Chris McCandless. One common trait of the explorer is that they want to experience the world and not be fenced in by society’s rules. Chris is very similar to the archetype of the explorer, but certain traits are not completely the same. He did not want to be tied to a materialistic life, so he dropped all his possessions to go and explore the world. A common trait of the explorer is that they want to try and find themselves through nature, but I do not think Chris’s main goal was to find himself. I believe he just trying to escape the conformity of his life for a little while.

The Tragic Hero

Chris McCandless can also be portrayed as a tragic hero. Tragic heroes have traits that make the character likable, yet they also have other flaws that lead them to their tragedy. Chris is very likeable as seen from the numerous other characters in the novel that have taken a very strong liking to him. He is very friendly, musically talented and kind. These traits cause the readers of the book to feel sympathy seeing him lead himself into the woods alone. He eventually died because he was too naive to realize that living alone in the wilderness brought a lot of challenges. He did not know how to properly preserve moose meat, so he died.

The Journey

This archetype is the most obvious one considering the whole story is about the journey of Chris McCandless. In this archetype, the entire story revolves around the main character or

characters going through a journey. The journey could be physical, emotional or mental. The entire novel is based on a journey where Chris McCandless decides to leave his comfortable life behind and hitchhike across the western U.S. to Alaska where he plans to live in the wild for a while.

The Mother Figure

I think the loving mother figure could be represented by Jan Burres. The mother figure is the character that often guides and provides nourishment for the protagonist. The mother figure often helps take care of the protagonist and teach the protagonist. Jan serves as a good mother figure to Chris as she immediately develops a motherly like love for Chris after he picks him up hitchhiking. Even though they were only together for a week, she still protected, taught and encouraged him in many ways. Even after he left, he still often sent her postcards of his journey. Since Chris broke off contact with his family, Jan could be a replacement for Chris's real mother.

Themes:

Materialism

"The trip was to be an odyssey in the fullest sense of the word, an epic journey that would change everything. [McCandless] had spent the previous four years as he saw it, preparing to fulfill an absurd and onerous duty: to graduate from college. At long last he was unencumbered, emancipated from the stifling world of his parents and peers, a world of abstraction and security and material excess, a world in which he felt grievously cut off from the raw throb of existence." (22)

Materialism is the belief that physical health and worldly possession hold the greatest value. The reason behind Chris's sudden want to leave is that he wants to give up all the materialism in his life and live more simply. Chris donates the rest of his savings, $24,000, to OXFAM, a charity organization trying to deal with world poverty. He, thereby, rejects his wealthy upbringing. He also chooses to abandon his yellow Datsun in the middle of the Mojave Desert. He could not get the Datsun to move so the only way for him not to get tracked was to "simply abandon the Datsun and resume his odyssey on foot. And that's what he decided to do" (29). He chose to abandon one of his most prized possessions at the time just so that he could continue his journey untraced. His distaste for materialism was mostly because of the books he chose to read as a kid. He read a lot of books by David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy, who are both authors that wrote about their dislike for materialism. Chris, therefore, grew up being influenced to not be bothered by materialism, which then prompts him to abandon his materialistic life and start fresh.

Nature

"The beauty of this country is becoming part of me. I feel detached from life and somehow gentler … I have always been unsatisfied with life as most people live it. Always I want to live more intensely and richly" (91).

Nature plays a strong role in the novel as a whole. Chris mentions that he feels more at peace

and calm when he is in nature without any other distractions. He set up camp in an abandoned bus in Denali National Park to be closer to nature and to find himself. Nature, however, can also be very harsh on Chris. While Chris was canoeing in Mexico, he recorded that “violent gusts started blowing down from the desert, and the wind and tidal rips conspired to carry him out to sea” (36). These conflicts between nature being calming for the soul and also causing hardships contrasts the polar ends of nature’s capabilities. It also poses the question as to whether or not nature is kind to us. With Krakauer characterizing nature as both brutal and relaxing, Krakauer is conveying that once people step into nature, you are under its laws.

Memorable Quotes:

“Alex pulled a camera from his backpack and asked Gallien to snap a picture of him shouldering his rifle at the trailhead. Then, smiling broadly, he disappeared down the snow-covered track. The date was Tuesday, April 28, 1992” (7).

“Gave the bag a shake. There was definitely something in it, but whatever it was didn’t weigh much. It wasn’t until I walked around to the other side and saw a head sticking out that I knew for certain what it was.’ Chris McCandless had been dead for two and a half weeks” (13).

“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” (23).

“I have lived through much, and now I think I have found what is needed for happiness. A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to having it done to them” (169).

“After weighing his options, therefore, he settles on the most prudent course. He turned around and began walking to the west, back toward the bus, back into the fickle heart of the bush” (171).

“There’s no way to bring him back. You can't fix it. Most things you can fix, but not that” (203).

Distinctive Characteristics of the Work:

The main thing the author does in this novel that most other authors do not do is include themselves as an active character in the novel. He mentions the research he has done to get all the details of Chris McCandless’s life and even mentions his own experience climbing Devil's Thumb in Alaska. He compares his own journey to Chris’s and compares their personalities partially as well.

Comments:

Overall, I really enjoyed reading the novel. I was able to feel how Chris felt because I understand what it feels like to want to get away from the struggles in life. I also really enjoyed Jin Krakauer’s writing style where he chose to include himself as a character in the novel I was emotionally and mentally engaged in the book and I would recommend it to others.