

Death/Personal Mortality

- Think about the circumstances of Chris's death in Alaska. How did we learn about it, and what did you as a reader feel at that point in the story? Why does Krakauer decide to go to the location of Chris's death?
- Was Chris McCandless' death a "foolish, pointless, death" (71)? Did he lack "the requisite humility" to go into the wild (72)?
- What do you think the experience must have been like for Walt & Billie McCandless to learn that their son was dead? How do you share this kind of news with people (102)?
- Krakauer feared falling into a crevasse, "waiting for death to come, with nobody aware of how or where (he'd) met (his) end" (139). What is it to die alone? How do you think Chris felt in the final moments before his death?
- Krakauer said that when he was young, "personal mortality – the idea of (his) own death – was still largely outside of (his) conceptual grasp" (151 & 155). What does this mean? How do you think he grappled with his own personal mortality?
- There have been many speculations as to what led to the demise of Chris McCandless. What do you believe actually "killed" Chris McCandless?

The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun.

Christopher Johnson McCandless

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Discussion Guide

for

Into the Wild

By Jon Krakauer

First-Year Reading Experience

University of South Carolina

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We hope you will find this Discussion Guide useful for the development of your small-group discussions. The questions below are divided into themes found throughout the book, and are intended to serve as a guide for your conversations. A Student Reader's Guide and additional supplemental resources are available online at www.sc.edu/fyre

How the Story is Told

- Each chapter opens with 1-2 epigraphs (quotes/excerpts from other sources, interviews, or Chris's writings). What do these epigraphs do to focus our reading?
- We learn immediately that Chris dies during his journey, and the anecdotes and interviews are told in retrospective. Krakauer also presents the information about Chris in a non-chronological order. What is the effect of this narrative choice?
- Krakauer admits to not being "an impartial biographer" (ii). What do you think about his presence in the text (personal comments and opinions, work as a reporter learning about Chris's story, etc.)?
- What is the effect of the "extra" materials included with the story (photos & maps of Chris' journey)? In what way do they shape our reading of the book and understanding of Chris's adventure?

How the Story is Told (Continued)

- What do you think Krakauer's goals were in writing the text? Is this an informational piece? A tragedy we should feel bad about? A cautionary tale?
- The back of the most recent edition of *Into the Wild* classifies the book as an "adventure" story. Do you agree? If not, how would you categorize the text?
- How does your reading of Into the Wild influence your goals for college and plans for life after college?

Adventure/Personal Challenge

- In a letter to Ronald Franz, McCandless wrote, "nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure" (56). Was Chris right? Why or why not?
- In reference to Chris's mother, Billie, learning about Chris' death, Krakauer wrote, "such bereavement, witnessed at close range, makes even the most eloquent apologia for high-risk activities ring fatuous and hollow" (132). However, Krakauer also wrote, that to him, climbing was one of the only things that really mattered when he was young. What draws people to high risk activities? Is it fair to the loved one of the individuals who participate in high-risk activities?
- In chapters 14 & 15, Jon Krakauer shares his experience on the Stikine Icecap. Why does he do this? Why did Krakauer set out to climb the Devils Thumb? How does his story color our understanding of Chris?
- Krakauer noted that risk-taking is a rite of passage. Do you agree?
- Why does Everett Ruess' father say, "The older person does not realize the soul-flights of the adolescent" (186)? Do you believe he was right?

Relationships with Family

- Think about Chris's relationship with his family. Does the inclusion of this back story make us more or less sympathetic to him? Do you sympathize with his parents? His sister Carine?
- Compare Chris's relationship with his parents and the people he interacted with at Emory, to his relationships with people he met on the road. What made them so different?
- What kind of "kid, with so much compassion, could cause his parents so much pain" (104)? Why are relationships between parents and children so rocky at times?
- Jack London was not the adventurer he proposed to be in his books and Walt McCandless was not the ideal father he purported to be. Why do you think Chris judged both of these men so differently for their shortcomings? What would you do if you learned what Chris did about his father (121)?
- What are the different versions of family in the story? Discuss both Chris's biological family and the families he creates for himself along the road.

Principles & Values

- "God it is great to be alive. Thank you. Thank you," said Chris about his life on the road (37). Have you ever experienced such joy in life? Was Chris' journey a spiritual one?
- "For these were a life in conformity to higher principles" (47). What do you think Thoreau meant by this? What is it to lead a life that conforms to higher principles?
- Wayne Westerberg's mother said that, "there was something fascinating about (Chris)," and that he "insisted on living out his beliefs" (67). Everett Ruess "went out and did the things he dreamed about" (90). Why do you think people found these men appealing?
- Henry David Thoreau wrote, "rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth" (117). Chris highlighted this passage and wrote "truth" above it. Why do you think McCandless identified with this quote?

Connections with Nature

- “Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the last frontier will patch all of the holes in their lives” (4). What are the holes people are trying to fill? Why do we believe the frontier will save us?
- “Don’t hesitate or allow yourself to make excuses,” Chris writes to Ronald Franz (58). When have you held yourself back from success or failure?
- Everett Ruess preferred the “deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities” (87). What is it about cities that make people crave the wilderness, or what is it about the wilderness that draws humans to it? What did the people in Into the Wild hope to find in the wilderness that they could not seem to find in modern society’s cities and towns?
- “(Chris) soon discovered...what Muir and Thoreau already knew: an extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one’s attention outward as much as inward, and it is impossible to live off the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with, that land and all it holds” (183). What do you think Krakauer meant by this statement?
- How does Chris compare to other rebel figures in American popular culture? Why does the West seem particularly important to his quest?
- Is it possible to live fully without the extreme natural experiences that Chris seeks? Can you have an authentic relationship with nature otherwise?

Wealth

- “Chris was very much of the school that you should own nothing except what you can carry on your back at a dead run” (32). What do you think of this belief? What is the value of a minimalist lifestyle?
- Chris had a college degree, a new car, law school, and a trust fund in his future. Why did he leave it behind? What kind of life did he leave behind? What would you have done?
- Chris “believed that wealth was shameful, corrupting, (and) inherently evil” (115). What are your thoughts on wealth accumulation? Does it corrupt?

Planning & Preparation

- After Chris survived his expedition in Mexico with only a bag of rice, he felt confident he could do the same in Alaska. Was this decision one of arrogance? How can you adjust and prepare for different environments in college?
- About a half-mile downstream the Teklanika River from where Chris tried to ford it, there is a gauging station with a steel cable and basket. Jon Krakauer used a detailed map to find this gauging station and cross the river. If Chris had had a map, he too could have crossed the river safely. Why did he refuse to take a map? What is the value of having and using your resources?
- Krakauer wrote that McCandless was, “green, and he overestimated his resilience, but was sufficiently skilled to last for sixteen weeks on little more than his wits and ten pounds of rice” (182). Was Chris prepared or not prepared in your opinion? Was he aware of the struggles he would face in the wild?

Relationships with Others

- Chris wrote letters to the people he met along the road. In one of these letters he thanked Wayne Westerberg for all that he did for him and for being so good to him (33). How do we let people know how much they mean to us? Why do you think Chris was so touched by Wayne?
- Krakauer wrote, “no one was affected more powerfully by his or her brief contact with the boy than Ronald Franz” (48). How has your life or values been influenced by relationships with others?
- Chris McCandless fled intimacy, friendship, and baggage. How did that affect the people close to him? How did that affect him? Was his escape into the wild really a painless transition for anyone, including Chris? (55)
- Krakauer’s connection to the woman he met in Petersburg, AK, “exposed (his) self deceit and left (him) hollow and aching” (137). What was he missing in his life? What do you think makes us feel whole?
- Chris marked the following passage in Tolstoy’s *Family Happiness*, “He was right in saying that the only certain happiness in life is to live for others” (169) and then wrote, “Happiness only real when shared” (189). Why do you think McCandless marked this passage? What did he mean by his inscription?

Who was Chris McCandless & What is his Legacy?

- According to Krakauer, “Chris made an indelible impression on a number of people during the course of his hejira (a flight or journey), most of whom spent only a few days in his company” (48). Why do you think Chris made this kind of impression? What kind of impressions do you make on others?
- What are your impressions of Chris? Was he noble? Reckless? Selfish? Courageous? A pilgrim (85)?
- Chris McCandless recorded his adventures through photos, a journal, in books he read, and on the belt he wore. How do you record your life? What is the value of reflection and preserving experiences?
- On August 18, 1992, Chris passed away. Krakauer notes that, “one of his last acts was to take a picture of himself, standing near the bus under the high Alaska sky, one hand holding his final note toward the camera lens, the other raised in a brave, beatific farewell. His face is horribly emaciated, almost skeletal. But if he pitied himself in those last difficult hours, because he was so young, because he was alone, because his body had betrayed him and his will had let him down—it’s not apparent from the photograph. He is smiling in the picture, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God” (199). Do you think Chris died at peace?
- Many readers find it hard to have sympathy for Chris McCandless. His stubborn idealism and lack of preparedness, as some have pointed out, amount to arrogance. Yet to others he is seen as a hero. Critics point to Krakauer’s power as a writer to evoke sympathy for the young man. Where do you stand?
- Chris McCandless attempted to leave his outpost in Alaska. Why do you think Chris attempted to leave Alaska? What do you think Chris would have done once he left the wild?
- Chris McCandless’ story is still talked about today. What do you think his legacy is? What will yours be?
- Would Chris’s story have mattered if he had lived?
- Chris McCandless went into the wild “in search of a raw, transcendent experience” (AN1). Did he find it? Have you ever had such an experience? Could college be a similar type of experience?
- Chris often escaped into the stories of the characters in the books he read. How do you think this influenced his world view? His relationships with others? Or his goals and aspirations?
- “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). Why did Chris change his name? What does it mean to assume a new identity?
- Some people believe that Chris McCandless was on a suicide mission. In a letter to Wayne Westerberg he wrote, “It might be a very long time before I return south. If this adventure proves fatal and you don’t ever hear from me again, I want you to know you’re a great man. I now walk into the wild” (69). Krakauer believed that Chris was just seeking something greater than himself. Do you believe Chris ever intended to return from Alaska? Did Chris intend for his journey to end as it did?
- Everett Ruess carved NEMO, Latin for “nobody”, into the stone near where he inhabited, and then he vanished (93). Why do you think he carved NEMO? Why did Ruess and McCandless change their identities?
- Boris Pasternak wrote, and Chris McCandless highlighted, “You need to surrender to some such ultimate purpose more fully” (103). Chris wrote in the margin, “Need for a purpose.” What do you believe was the ultimate purpose Pasternak wrote about? Did Chris find his purpose?
- Krakauer, “never had any doubt that climbing the Devils Thumb would transform (his) life” (135). Why do we look for transformational experiences? Why do we chase things that will “change” our lives?
- Chris set out to “kill the false being within” (163). What do you think he meant by that?
- “Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature of the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul” (183). Why do you think he did this?

Searching for Meaning/Self