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Literary Amplification: Jon Krakauer's Use of Intertextual References in Into the Wild and Their Role in The McCandless Phenomenon

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“Literary Amplification”

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And Their Role in the Formation of “The McCandless Phenomenon”

In the summer of 2013 alone, twelve hikers had to be air-rescued off the remote Stampede Trail in the Northern Alaskan wilderness. The route is not particularly accessible or particularly beautiful, and it covers twenty-two miles of soggy, bug-infested, beaver-ponds and muskeg. Throughout the year, powerful rivers of glacial snow-melt cross the path; only in the winter and early spring is it even remotely safe or easy to follow the trail. In her 2013 essay “Chasing Alexander Supertramp,” Eva Holland quotes one Alaskan woman who, shaking her head, pronounced “of all the places you could hike in Alaska…” Yet each year, hundreds of people regularly hike the Stampede Trail. Despite risking, and occasionally losing, their lives crossing the swollen Teklanika river, they continue trekking through the bush with an attitude that borders on religious fervor.

The people undertaking this journey are known as pilgrims. Unlike medieval pilgrims travelling to holy shrines in Rome and Jerusalem, these modern pilgrims travel to Fairbanks Alaska's City Transit's former Bus 142; once towed into the wilderness to house miners, where the body of Christopher John McCandless was found in September 1993. The impetus for such pilgrimage comes from the “Chris McCandless Phenomenon,” a phenomenon largely resulting from Jon Krakauer’s best-selling account of Christopher McCandless, *Into the Wild.* Not long after the discovery of McCandless' body in 1993, Krakauer published his first article, “The Death of an Innocent,” in *Outside Magazine*. He spent the next three years enlarging the article, and in 1996, *Into the Wild* was published. After the book was released, a small number of non-Alaskans and tourists began to undertake the journey to visit Bus 142. The number of visitors remained small until Paramount Pictures released Sean Penn’s film adaptation in 2007. Starring Emile Hirsch as Chris McCandless, the film amplified Krakauer's romanticized vision of McCandless and made him a household name.

Originally a mountaineer and journalist for *Outside Magazine,* Krakauer spends the majority of *Into The Wild* attempting to explain the motivations and situation of someone like Chris McCandless, someone who would flee a seemingly happy home and upbringing, donate respectable life savings to charity, and go live on the road without any of the comforts of modern society. Many of the bus pilgrims offer their own interpretations in a spiral bound guest-book left inside the bus by the McCandless family. One entry, quoted by Eva Holland and addressed directly to McCandless, reads "I envy the ability you had to put this world aside and live out your dream, something so many of us lack." Another quote, by a pilgrim Holland interviewed on the Stampede Trail, hearkens back to the reclusive ideal of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*: "I really associate with Chris not liking the world, not liking society, and not turning his back on it, exactly, but wanting to pick and choose the parts he wanted to be involved in."

Krakauer's depiction of McCandless in *Into the Wild* encourages these kinds of comparisons and frequently makes intertextual references to the works of famous authors such as Jack London, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, and Robinson Jeffers. All of these authors had a great effect on the life of McCandless and all of these authors are used by Krakauer to situate McCandless' story into the canonical literary tradition. This essay seeks to examine how Jon Krakauer uses these inter-textual references in *Into The Wild*, specifically in how he uses them to mythologize Chris McCandless, building a literary character out of a real life person, and also seeks to explain the role that this process of mythologization has played, and continues to play, in the formation of the McCandless Phenomenon.

The devout of the McCandless Phenomenon, the Cult of McCandless, is made up of loyal followers of Chris McCandless' ideals, those who view him as a person who, according Ken Ilgunas, "had the courage to live a full life before a long one." These followers usually see the movie and fall in love with its idealized portrayal of McCandless. Next they read the book and are further inspired.

Finally, the most devout take time to live like Chris. If they are lucky, they make the pilgrimage to Alaska, and travel to the cult's Mecca—Bus 142. “The most vivid thing that I remember,” says bus pilgrim Dan Grec, “is that you get inside, and Chris died there, you think it’s going to be like a funeral. But there’s something going on there that I don’t understand. Some kind of happiness or energy. That’s why I want to go back – I’d like to spend a week there and just soak it in” (Holland). Grec makes up the highest tier of McCandless followers, what Eva Holland calls “a true believer— someone who sought out the bus because he felt a connection to McCandless after reading the book and seeing the movie. Holland found that within this core group of dedicated pilgrims, many even travel to the bus multiple times.

The first mention of the term 'pilgrim' in *Into The Wild* comes in the form of an epigraph taken from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: “There was some books. . . . One was Pilgrim's Progress, about a man that left his family, it didn't say why. I read considerable from it now and then. The statements was interesting but tough” (61). To posit that the entire Cult of McCandless comes out of this statement seems far-fetched on the surface, but is actually quite accurate. The quote speaks of a man leaving his family for unknown reasons, yet the astute student of literature will understand that *Pilgrim's Progress* is not about a simple runaway, but a quest inspired by religious devotion—a pilgrimage. If McCandless is described as a “pilgrim” with a story like *Pilgrim's Progress* as an intertextual reference, his followers must be pilgrims as well. This is only a small example, however, of how Krakauer controls the reader's understanding of the McCandless narrative through epigraphs and intertextual references.

Krakauer's Use of Intertextual References

Intertextual references can serve many uses. The standard use is to enhance a text by providing greater meaning than the writer's own words will allow. The primary source of Krakauer’s references to other texts is his substantial number of epigraphs. Every chapter starts with at least one, usually two, epigraphs, taken from texts of Krakauer's choosing. Commenting on Krakauer's first page of epigraphs,

Caroline Hanssen explains that first and foremost they establish Jack London's formative role in McCandleess' life. The first quote is simply "Jack London is King" (emphasis McCandless'), which Krakauer states was found carved into a piece of wood at the site of McCandless' death. The next epigraph quotes London's *White Fang*, establishing the location as "the Wild, the savage, frozen-hearted, Northland Wild" of Alaska. Hanssen argues that the juxtaposition of the two pieces together "highlights the irony of McCandless' apparent appreciation of an author who's works for at least a century have warned against man's hubris in nature in general, and accidental death in the subarctic wilderness in particular" (191). Krakauer's use of intertextual allusions reference not only the literary tradition of wilderness writings, but also a body of knowledge shared by the author and reader—in this case knowledge of the irony that Chris McCandless died in a similar manner to one of his favourite author's protagonists.

Krakauer's intertextual literary references can be sub-divided by function into three types of reference, each providing the reader with a differing mental image in response to what the quote depicts. The three types of intertextual references are the "Saint/Seeker" image, the "Adventurer" image, and the "psychological" image. By far the most commonly used by Krakauer is the "Saint/Seeker" image. These are the most inspiring for potential Cult of McCandless initiates, and are the most relevant references to McCandless' inner journey. This category includes pieces like "The desert is the environment of revelation . . . to the desert go prophets and hermits," quoted from Paul Shepard's *Man in the Landscape,* "chastity is the flowering of man" from Thoreau's *Walden*, or "for children are innocent and love justice, while most of us are wicked and prefer mercy" from G.K. Chesterton. The next type of intertextual allusion, the "Adventurer" image, includes quotes about "the dominant primordial beast" from Jack London's *Call of the Wild*, epic imagery about climbing to treetops in thunderstorms by John Muir, and grand references like those by Estwick Evans and Roderick Nash to the glory and freedom of the American wilderness. Krakauer links the first two types of quotes, noting that "unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to

ponder nature or the world but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul" (183). Krakauer argues that not long after arriving in the bush McCandless discovered that "an extended stay in the wilderness inevitably brings one's attention outward as much as inward"(183). Through allusions like these, Krakauer insists on reading McCandless according to both an inward spiritual image and an outward, adventurous, image. He uses two more types of allusions in conjunction with these images—one obvious, and one more covert. The obvious reference, along the same lines as the Spiritual/Seeker and the Adventurer, is the "Psychological" image. Krakauer's psychological allusions reference books and stories that either discuss the psyche of those who die in the wilderness or those who travel to it with the aim of healing. A prime example of such healing aims is Krakauer's quotation from Edward Hoagland's "Up The Black To Chalkytsik" essay, which states "we have in America the "Big Two-Hearted River" tradition: taking your wounds to the wilderness for a cure, a conversion, a rest, or whatever . . . if your wounds aren't too bad, it works" (71). Earlier on the same page, Krakauer offers a "psychological" assessment from Theodore Roszak's "In Search of the Miraculous." Roszak writes, "it may, after all, be the bad habit of creative talents to invest themselves in pathological extremes that yield remarkable insights but no durable way of life for those who cannot translate their psychic wounds into significant art or thought" (71). This quote insists on a psychological examination of McCandless, yet it importantly steers clear of any actual diagnoses of McCandless or the people who endeavour to undertake a similar way of life. Importantly, the quote still hints at a judgment of McCandless a judgment by Krakauer of how McCandless lived out his final days. This judgment is explained by the last type of intertextual reference: intratextual allusions to Krakauer's own life.

Krakauer and Intratextual Allusions

Krakauer's presence in the story is that of a narrator, so his narrative intrusions are perhaps better explained as *intratextual* allusions than *intertextual* allusions. The reader understands that they are reading a book about Chris McCandless and that Krakauer is the text's narrator, yet Krakauer is at times such an obtrusive narrator, that he is more accurately described as a character in his novel. In the

article “What Everyone is Getting Wrong about Chris McCandless” Alaskan Schoolteacher Ivan Hodes argues that Krakauer is so obtrusive as a character, that he effectively steals the spotlight from McCandless.

> *Into the Wild* is not actually a book about Chris McCandless—it’s a book about one complicated, interesting, troubled guy (Jon Krakauer) trying to understand and process the early death of another. Krakauer is constantly injecting his own thoughts and ideas into the narrative —most tellingly, the long narration of his own nearly-fatal ascent of the Stikine Ice Cap. In certain points, there is a hint of desperation about his inquiry: Krakauer needs to know what happened, because he looked into the dead face of McCandless and saw his own. He felt empathy, and needed to understand the circumstances—psychological and physical—that caused McCandless to die and himself to live and grow grey.

Krakauer spends three chapters of *Into the Wild* narrating his own experiences. Two describe his attempt at climbing the “Devil's Thumb” section of the Stikine Ice Cap, the third describes his personal helicopter journey, with Walt, Billie, and Carine McCandless, to the site of Bus 142. Krakauer is not the only non-McCandless modern adventurer to make the book, but he does devote far more attention to his own story than he does to those of others. Hanssen finds that the “indirect comparisons and selected testimony” of Krakauer and “other modern adventurers who have sought personal transcendence in the farthest reaches of the American Wilderness, sheds oblique light on what may or may not have spurred McCandless to strike out”(192). Hanssen fails to appreciate, however, that Krakauer’s intratextual comparison of his own youthful arrogance atop the Devil's Thumb to McCandless' directly sets the two up as a literary foils. McCandless's apparent lack of “the requisite humility” (72) necessary to survive in the wilderness dramatically highlights Krakauer’s abundant humility, the very quality that keeps him alive.

Krakauer also apparently possesses the requisite humility to forgive his father of his wrongdoings, evident in his extended personal reflections. At the request of McCandless' sister, both the literary and the movie adaptations of the McCandless story deal delicately with the McCandless' family home-life. Still, both mediums provide hints that describe a relationship more flawed than superficial analysis might give reason to expect. One of these hints is Krakauer's digression into his own home life, specifically the relationship between himself and his father. Krakauer believes himself and McCandless were "similarly affected by the skewed relationships we had with our fathers" (155) a notion which Krakauer expands upon in great length. He spends several pages talking about the pressures his father put on him, arguing that "like Walt McCandless, his [father's] aspirations extended to his progeny" (147). Krakauer further describes his own raging rebellion against his father's seeming "oppression" over him. Throughout this section Krakauer builds a crucial difference between himself and McCandless, that being his own eventual forgiveness of his father. Krakauer describes how he eventually discovered that his rage had "been supplanted by a rueful sympathy and something not unlike affection"(148). His capacity to forgive his father establishes a binary literary foil between Krakauer and McCandless, between the man who eventually "came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams" and "lived to tell [his] tale" (155) and the boy who died trying to climb successively higher spiritual mountains. Between the man who "found the power to forgive" (148) and the boy who would, "with one abrupt, swift action" divorce his parents from his life (64), depicts McCandless as emotionally deficient. By using intratextual references Krakauer accomplishes more than building a literary foil between himself and Chris McCandless. Krakauer not only situates himself within the story of McCandless, he transforms himself into a literary character on par with with writers such as Thoreau, Twain, and Muir. To accomplish this, Krakauer transforms himself into the frame narrator of a traditional "hermit's tale."

The Mythologizing Effect of Krakauer's Intertextual References

According to Coby Dowdell, the "hermit's tale" genre became intensely popular in America in

the 1790s, “attesting to a sustained cultural interest in both male and female hermitic figures during the post-Revolutionary period” (121). Generically speaking, the hermit's tale is a “highly formulaic genre” with several characteristic features (130). Among the most important conventions of these tales is the narration of the hermit's personal story, which Dowdell argues “represents the main thematic thrust of the hermit’s tale, explaining his or her reasons for withdrawal while under-scoring the central critique of society that the hermit’s actions point to” (131). The final and most crucial element of the story is the hermit's gifting of their manuscript to the departing travelers (having invariably written a manuscript), usually with a request that they be “published for the greater benefit of society” (131). This portion of the story usually follows the travelers' attempt to bring the hermit back to society, and the hermit's refusal to accompany them.

While the story of *Into the Wild* is not exactly a hermit's tale, it does bear a striking resemblance to the genre and features many its central tropes. McCandless was found in a pristine Alaskan valley, and his bus (hut) was certainly far enough from society that he never saw a person from the time he walked into the wilderness. Through his repeated interjections, Krakauer frames McCandless' “reasons for withdrawal” and his “central critique of society” in ways typical of the hermit’s tale (Dowdell 131). Hiking down the stampede trail, “two traveling adventurers” discover McCandless’ body (Dowdell 130). Had they found him alive, they might well have stayed, found him hospitable, shared his food, and convinced him to return to society with them. In the end, however, McCandless' story inevitably plays out differently than the traditional hermit's tale.

The officials collecting McCandless' body brought back his writings as well, what could be deemed his 'hermit's manuscript'. Critics of McCandless have called the journal of his one hundred-thirteen days in the bush “pathetic in the description of anything” (Medred). The journal does indeed mostly consist of jot-notes of day-to-day happenings and of what food he was able to catch. Perhaps, however, an alternative view of what constitutes a hermit's manuscript is needed. It seems reasonable that McCandless' tally of days, when combined with the many scribbled notes in the margins of his

books, and the photographs he took of himself, might constitute a sort of multimedia hermit's manuscript. McCandless had already written an account of his travels in the years prior to Alaska, describing the journey of Alexander Supertramp in clipped third-person narration: “He screams and beats canoe with oar. The oar breaks. Alex has one spare oar. If loses second oar is dead” (Krakauer 36). To several of the people he stayed with on the road, McCandless also expressed a desire to write a full account of his travels in the future, the completion of which may have offered a more coherent critique of society and declaration of the goals of his *Walden*-esque journey into the woods. In the absence of these texts, the reader is left with Krakauer's interpretations of McCandless' writings. The literary form adopted by Krakauer shares many of the conventions of the hermit's tale, the chief difference being McCandless' death before the creation of a manuscript. The hermit's tale is a malleable genre, and it could be suggested that in writing *Into the Wild* Krakauer completed both McCandless' hermit's manuscript and the frame narrative that encloses it. Krakauer's multiple literary intrusions and his frequent use of the first person situate him as a framing narrator of Chris McCandless’s story, a be-all and end-all without which the story would be untellable. He tells the reader of his travels into the woods to McCandless' 'hut', of his reading of McCandless' multimedia manuscript, and of his attempts, in the classic position of the hermit's frame narrator, to bring McCandless back to society. Krakauer’s success in launching an industry and cult around the tragic figure suggests that, in a sense, he succeeded in bringing McCandless back.

In situating himself as a narrator-character in *Into the Wild*, Krakauer creates one of most the crucial aspects of the McCandless industry: self involvement. Because of Krakauer's semi-journalistic writing style, all those who would comment on McCandless' death, no matter how academic they may attempt to be, fall into the habitual use of several tropes introduced by Krakauer’s text: (i) self-comparison (to McCandless); (ii) self-authorization (to write on the subject of McCandless); and (iii) self-righteousness (in that, while they may once been similar to McCandless, they survived). Peter Christian, the Alaskan Park Ranger and author of what might be called the McCandless Hater’s

manifesto, provides the best example of these tropes in action. Speaking of the "McCandless Phenomenon," Christian describes "people, nearly always young men, come to Alaska to challenge themselves against an unforgiving wilderness landscape where convenience of access and possibility of rescue are practically nonexistent. I know the personality type because I was one of those young men" (1). In the first sentence alone, Christian exemplifies the tropes introduced by Krakauer's text. Type-casting McCandless, Christian admits that he was once of that type (self-comparison) and argues that because he was once of this type he is an authority to speak on them (self-authorization). Further into the essay, Christian fulfills the trope of self-righteousness, delineating himself as superior to McCandless by arguing:

> …essentially, Chris McCandless committed suicide while I apprenticed myself to a career and a life that I wanted more badly than I can possibly describe in so short an essay. In the end I believe that the difference between us was that I wanted to live and Chris McCandless wanted to die (whether he realized it or not). (2)

In this quote Christian begins the McCandless Hater's obsession with writing McCandless off as "crazy" by their own societal (not medical) standards. The McCandless followers and pilgrims take the exact opposite approach to this argument, even if they still fall into the same three aforementioned tropes. Ken Ilgunas, a fellow Alaskan Park Ranger, refuses to endorse Christian's denunciation of McCandless, instead taking the self-comparison to a far greater degree. Ilgunas argues that "it should come as no surprise that I am a fan of the book and movie. I think it's even fair to say that McCandless and I are, in some sense, kindred spirits. So naturally I can't help but take Pete's views personally because, when he calls McCandless stupid, insane, and suicidal, he's inadvertently calling me these things, too". Ilgunas continues the trend of self-authorization, claiming that he is "in a unique position" and can "speak with some authority on the subject." Ilgunas even ends his article by conceding to a

gently self-righteous rebuke of McCandless: “McCandless did make several simple mistakes on his trip, as well as break several wildlife and game restrictions, not to mention putting his family through incredible pain.” Despite this rebuke, Ilgunas still thoroughly supports McCandless, positioning him as someone who followed their dreams in an age of insecurities. He treats McCandless like a literary character instead of a true person, a trend encouraged by Krakauer’s best-selling text.

Chris McCandless as a Literary Character Among Giants

Throughout the narrative of *Into the Wild,* it is often difficult to decipher where the real McCandless ends and where Krakauer's depiction begins. Though Krakauer concedes to sometimes depicting McCandless as a tragic Quixote, the majority of the book romanticizes him. For example, Krakauer interprets McCandless' final photograph, in which he smiles and holds out his hand to the camera in a last farewell, as follows: “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 to God” (199). McCandless is indeed smiling, but it would be difficult to accurately argue that he was entirely at peace, or that he was indeed “serene as a monk to God.” Yet Krakauer sees no problem with giving his character of McCandless thoughts and feelings we can in no way be sure he had.

Krakauer’s mythologization of Chris McCandless into a fictional character proved especially appealing to readers. Many of the texts that quote *Into the Wild* invariably adopt Krakauer’s representation of McCandless as a literary character: “Although by birthright he was more of a Tom Sawyer, pirate books and all, McCandless daringly pulled off a Huck Finn and lit out for the territory” (Brandt 189). Many commentators seem unable to disconnect McCandless from the intertextual literary references in the book about him, arguing that “once inside Krakauer’s narrative one soon discovers that McCandless was a serious reader, and the influences of London, Twain, Melville, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Jeffers, and others played significant roles in shaping his beliefs” (Brandt 2). Referring to McCandless’ reference to London's *Call Of The Wild*, Jonah Raskin argues that “[McCandless] seems

also to have had in mind John Thornton, the one really heroic human character in *The Call of the Wild* (1903), since Thornton, London writes, 'was unafraid of the wild. With a handful of salt and a rifle he could plunge into the wilderness and fare wherever he pleased and as long as he pleased'"(199).

The difficulty of disconnecting McCandless from his literary heroes stems from two crucial points: (i) McCandless did his best to emulate his literary heroes in his everyday life; and (ii) Krakauer intentionally situates these literary giants in his narrative, bringing the connotation of their stories into his. By using their books in his epigraphs, Krakauer places McCandless in the same situations as the "legendary" literary characters and their authors: John Thornton, the man who could survive anywhere in Jack London; Huckleberry Finn, the peripatetic territory-lighting boy in Mark Twain; Captain Ahab, the single-minded sailor whose ideals ultimately killed him in Herman Melville; Henry David Thoreau, the self-styled hermit of Walden Pond; and Leo Tolstoy, who lived "holy" and penniless among the poor. The inclusion of these characters and authors, alongside both Krakauer and McCandless' situations, brings an "epic" air to *Into the Wild*, transforming a tragic story into something more reminiscent of John Muir's romp among the treetops in a thunderstorm.

I call the process *literary amplification*. Without the high-minded literary references and glorious adventure, Krakauer's narrative is simply the story of a dead backpacker. Krakauer changes everything by borrowing the height of the literary tradition, as far as adventure, romance, and wilderness glory go. By intertwining some of the greatest literary adventure stories of all time with his own narrative, Krakauer effectively amplifies the connotations of McCandless' story. McCandless may have liked these passage, but Krakauer uses them to multiply his own imagery, appropriating their connotations for his own. For example, the passage cited from London's *Call of the Wild* is the phrase "the dominant primordial beast" (31). As Jonah Raskin points out, in London this phrase refers to the dog Buck, who has just killed the leading dog of the pack. "McCandless tweaks the phrase," Raskin observes, "and writes, 'All hail the Dominant Primordial Beast!'(38), which makes it sound like a hymn to brute conquest" (199). Just like McCandless turning "the dominant primordial beast" into "All

hail the Dominant Primordial Beast!", Krakauer turns the real Chris McCandless into an Alexander-Supertramp-like, mythologized, version of a real person, creating a hymn to a dead saint, rather than to brute conquest.

The Results: Fictionalization and Image Creation

Reduced to a literary character, Chris McCandless becomes nothing more than a symbol to those who read the book, albeit a complicated symbol. To the lovers of McCandless, the pilgrims, followers, and cultists, McCandless is a symbol of someone who follows their dreams, a modern-day Thoreau who perished tragically after successfully circumventing the perils of our modern, corrupt society. To those who hate McCandless, the sourdough Alaskans who seek to diminish the fact that he lived one hundred-thirteen days in the Alaskan bush without proper supplies, who compare him to "the Man" in "To Build a Fire" and degrade him as crazy with disorders like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and narcissistic personality disorder, McCandless is a symbol of that which they would seek to distance themselves from: the greenhorn, the unprepared, or the lower caste, unfit to belong in their "society". In "The Beatification of Chris McCandless", Ivan Hodes goes so far as to argue that "people don't really care about Chris McCandless, the young man from Virginia who died on the Stampede Trail; they are invested in Chris McCandless as a symbol. The rancor comes because he symbolizes different, conflicting things for different people".

In relation to the Hollywood and literary industry now surrounding his life, Chris McCandless has become a symbolic object in the psyches of both haters and followers, consumers and moviegoers, academics and journalists. In this sense, Hodes is certainly correct. McCandless has ceased to be a human being and now exists only as a symbol. I would posit that none of this process would have taken place without *Into the Wild's* conscientious mythologizing of Krakauer and McCandless. The real Chris McCandless attempted to live the life of his favourite literary giants and he succeeded, though it cost him his life. Thoroughly romanticized by Krakauer, Chris McCandless not only lives the life of his favourite literary characters, he becomes a literary character. By situating him alongside literary giants,

Krakauer ensures that McCandless continues to live today. In other words, Krakauer's use of literary amplification, his proliferating intertextual references and allusions, creates the symbolized McCandless, creates a mythologized image separated from the true Chris McCandless. Without Krakauer's representation, there would be no Cult of McCandless, no Chris McCandless industry, and certainly no more talk about the "real" Chris McCandless.

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