

*Into the Wild*. Jon Krakauer. Villard, New York, 1996. 224 pages. \$22.00.

*Into the Wild* belongs to that small handful of books to receive both a full page review in the *New York Times Book Review* and a review in the pages of the *American Alpine Journal*. What elicits such a range of interest? Is the story itself so compelling, the writing so polished? Or have wilderness-related tales finally impressed themselves into the nation's consciousness? In this case, all of the above. A more apt question for us might be: Why should the book interest climbers? There is, after all, only one section about climbing, when the writer turns his spotlight inward with the tale of his brash solo climb of Devil's Thumb, done in his youth. Readers of our literature may have seen it before in slightly different versions, either in *Climbing*, where it first appeared, or collected in Krakauer's superb first collection, *Eiger Dreams*. But it is precisely this juxtaposition of Krakauer's bold climb against the story of Chris McCandless, his subject here, that ought to interest us. In fact, had Krakauer omitted this section and left the pages blank, many of us could fill it in with similar tales of youthful adventures, our innocence and hubris balanced by boundless energy and simple good fortune.

The story of Chris McCandless, the 24-year-old from the suburbs who walked into the Alaskan wilderness with a small-caliber rifle and a 10-pound bag of rice, and whose malnourished body was found four months later, was the stuff of national news. The first mystery was in identifying the corpse — a task made difficult by McCandless's deliberate renunciation of the trappings of industrialized suburban America. We all know people who live to climb and make material sacrifices to do so, but not many of those give away \$24,000 to charity, abandon their car, and burn all the cash in their wallet. These details sound crazed out of context, but in Krakauer's view they are the acts of a high-minded idealist.

Krakauer's obsession with McCandless's story began with his quickly-written article for *Outside*, which led to the largest audience response in the magazine's history. The structure of Krakauer's tale is not only thoughtful and thorough, but compelling as well. We begin with the last person to see McCandless alive, and move to the discovery of his body. From there Krakauer has reconstructed the previous two years of McCandless's travels. He puts McCandless into historical perspective with other pioneers of disappearance and misjudgment (many of whom were mentally ill), and devotes a full chapter to the precedent set by Everett Ruess, another talented, idealistic youth who disappeared, possibly by design, into the desert outside of Escalante, Utah, in 1934.

From there the narrative moves back into McCandless's family history, on to Krakauer's youthful exploits on Devil's Thumb, and finally

Krakauer's literal retracing of his subject's last adventure — a journey to the outback and the abandoned school bus where McCandless died.

Krakauer admits — warns, actually — that he is not an impartial biographer. His book has an ambitious structure: We know the outcome before we even open the book; the book's dust cover and introductory author's note tell us the facts of the case. Krakauer works backward, as a detective, from effect to cause. His purpose, and really the subject of the book, is to answer the question *why*: Why did McCandless undertake this strange solitary wilderness adventure that ended in his death? It is the same question, of course, that we climbers bumble through inarticulately or, more often, avoid altogether when asked to explain the death of a friend in the mountains or why we climb at all. Just beneath the surface is the question: Why should McCandless's story matter so much to the writer? And by extension: Why should it matter to the climber?

Climbers are likely to respond passionately, but dividedly, to McCandless's fate (as did the readers of *Outside*). To some he was idealistic, naive to the point of arrogance, ill-prepared, or just plain stupid. Others of us will agree with Krakauer: It could have just as easily been me. Who among us has not reconsidered our personal epics with a cooler head and acknowledged that we have been lucky?

But there's more to Krakauer's obsession than the mere recognition that there but by the grace of God go I... The purity of McCandless's vision and the rigor with which he addressed it (naivete aside) are standards that few of us even aspire to, much less achieve. Krakauer's respect for McCandless's undertaking the spiritual quest of the pilgrim borders on admiration. In a self-deprecating moment of introspection, Krakauer observes that in their intellect and lofty ideals subject and writer differ greatly. But the gap may be narrower than Krakauer himself perceives. The writer is donating 20 percent of his profits to a scholarship fund in Chris McCandless's name. And he tells the story with more intelligence and heart than anyone has a right to hope for in his or her biographer. If McCandless was not lucky in life (and Krakauer makes a convincing case for this) he is, at least, lucky that a writer of Krakauer's disciplined and polished prose chose to take up his story.

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*Summits: Climbing the Seven Summits Solo*. Robert Anderson. Clarkson-Potter, New York, 1995. Color photography, 160 pages. \$65.00.

Robert Anderson's book, *Summits: Climbing the Seven Summits Solo*, has much in common with his quest to do the same. Both are ambitious, big