

What Everyone Is Getting Wrong About Chris McCandless

By Ivan Hodes

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Magic Bus. Photograph by Laurent-34. Published under CC agreement.

On September 12, a [short article](#) appeared in the New Yorker blog, regarding the recent discovery that the seeds of the plant *Hedysarum alpinum* contain an amino acid called Oxalyldiaminopropionic acid, or ODAP—a neurotoxin that induces a debilitating paralytic condition called lathyrism.

The article provoked lengthy and contentious debate in the *New Yorker's* comments section and on its Facebook page was much reported-on by other media outlets, and even drew three grumpy article-length responses in the *Alaska Dispatch* (which themselves were responded to contentiously by the original author). This seems unusual for an article about biochemistry, so it will help to know that the author was Jon Krakauer, and that *H. alpinum* is the Alaska plant that in the late summer of 1992 may (or may not) have poisoned Christopher John McCandless, subject of Krakauer's famous book *Into the Wild*.

The forensic question “Were the seeds poisonous?” is of interest only because it sheds light on broader, more contentious question, expressed bluntly as “How stupid was Chris McCandless?” If, like *Alaska Dispatch* reporters [Dermot Cole](#) and [Craig Medred](#) (and [again](#)), you think McCandless was a clueless, crazy knucklehead, arrogant in his disdain for wild nature and its

perils, then you want to think the seeds weren't poisonous; the kid just died of starvation because he was too stupid/crazy/arrogant to make it to safety.

But if, like Jon Krakauer (and, in the interest of full disclosure, like me), you have some level of empathy with or sympathy for McCandless, you want to think the seeds were poisonous—he was doing his best to survive a difficult enterprise and was done in because he consumed something that was not known to be poisonous until two decades after his death. Questions of McCandless' motivation, level of competence, and general worth are complicated and subjective, and so subject to probably unsolvable debate.

But all this only raises another question: Why do people have such strong opinions about all this? Why do we care?

Millions of people have died before their time since 1992—why does this one particular death continue to excite strong emotion in so many people? The answer is, 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, and because what we read into McCandless has much to do with the way we perceive Alaska and its future.

Look at the pro-McCandless comments in the *New Yorker* article. They refer to him as “Chris,” as though he were kith or kin, suggesting the strangely intense emotional and spiritual bond some people form with this long-dead man. To readers like this—who tend to be sensitive, melancholy, and maybe even disaffected—McCandless represents freedom, purity of spirit, and rejection of the bourgeois conventionality of modern American life. They see *Into the Wild* as a paean to a Great Soul, someone who was able to rise above the grubby reality of daily existence and achieve a sort of wild sainthood.

For the most extreme holders of this view, McCandless's death itself was less tragedy than transcendence, the ultimate exercise in liberating oneself from this petty world.

In this reading, the Alaska wild is the place you go to transcend bourgeois society, the church where you achieve sainthood. It follows from this world-view that the sacred wild must be preserved and protected from tawdry and shallow enterprises like development and resource extraction.

Now, read through the anti-McCandless comments and note the severity and mean-spiritedness of tone. Those prone to dislike him suggest he got exactly what he deserved, as though making mistakes while living in back-country Alaska as a 23-year-old renders someone forever unworthy of the most basic human sympathy. The tone is always of the Wise Sourdough, the pragmatic, commonsense Alaskans (and it is mostly Alaskans) who Just Know Better, like the old men in Jack London stories.

For people like this, deriding McCandless is a way of nourishing their own sense of self-regard: If McCandless is stupid and incompetent then I am smart and competent; I have lived in Alaska for many years and perhaps traversed its back-country, and I am not dead; I have survived the Darwinian struggle and have been deemed fit to survive. This is attributable to having “real respect” for nature, which means not mystifying and venerating it.

McCandless, at least to the “sourdough Alaskans,” symbolizes fuzzy-headed, tree-hugging liberalism of the sort that wants to cavort in—and preserve from development—Wild Nature. It’s the attitude that’s right now trying to shut down Pebble Mine and keeping ANILCA “locked up”; the attitude of dumb-ass Outsiders who don’t really understand the way it really is. The cult of personality that has accrued around McCandless must be frustrating for Alaskans like these: the more people buy into it, the more the “Alaskan way of life” comes under threat from hippies and environmentalists.

Both of these understandings of McCandless-as-emblem are missing an important point and, perhaps, misunderstanding the book. *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.

Seen this way, McCandless is not an emblem of anything, and that’s the way it should be—because in the real world, people aren’t symbols.

McCandless was not a transcendent saint, nor was he a bumbling, arrogant dis-respecter of nature, and to press him into service as an emblem of anything is a mistake. If we examine the life of another and don't see them as a fellow-person—if we don't look into a dead face and see our own—we're missing something important. Chris McCandless was deeply kind and supremely selfish; tremendously brave and jaw-droppingly foolish; impressively competent and staggeringly inept; that is to say, he was hewn from the same crooked timber as the rest of us.

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The tale of Chris McCandless has been told many times over. In his 1996 book *Into the Wild*, author Jon Krakauer explored the fate of the fiercely ... McCandless, who told Westerberg his name was Alex, described his difficulty in getting to Fairbanks, AK, but was excited about his next steps. He wrote, "If you don't ever hear from me again I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild." McCandless left Fairbanks in April 1992, hitching a ride with Jim Gallien, a local electrician. Gallien (who played himself in the movie) spotted McCandless hitchhiking outside of Fairbanks and took him to Denali National Park. McCandless told Gallien he was going to "live off the land for a few months." Christopher McCandless broke from his past and died of starvation in the Alaskan back country. The writer Jon Krakauer w... The young man in question was Christopher McCandless. His identity was not confirmed for weeks, but in time he would become internationally famous as a bold, or very imprudent, figure. Mr. McCandless died alone in an abandoned bus on the Stampede Trail, a desolate stretch of backcountry near Denali, in August 1992. He was surrounded by his meager provisions: a .22-caliber rifle; some well-worn and annotated paperbacks; a camera and five rolls of exposed film; and the diary, 113 cryptic notes on the back pages of a book that identified edible plants. Chris McCandless is the subject of *Into the Wild*. McCandless is an intelligent, extremely intense young man with a streak of stubborn idealism. He grows up in a wealthy suburb of Washington, D.C., where he succeeds both academically and athletically. He graduates from Emory University with honors in 1990, and soon afterwards gives all of his savings to charity, starts going by the name of "Alex," abandons almost all of his possessions, and spends two years hitchhiking and traveling around the west. The Chris McCandless Obsession Problem. Every year, scores of *Into the Wild* fans tackle a dangerous river crossing to visit the last home of Chris McCandless. Why are so many people willing to risk injury, and even death, to pay homage to a controversial ascetic who perished so young? Ellie Henry good to know. ImageFind images and videos about into the wild and christopher mccandless on We Heart It - the app to get lost in what you love. Rosa Gravitt Truth. Nonchalant Compilation of 37 Remarkable Images - Funny Gallery. Chris McCandless - Alexander Supertramp. My only home is the open road Chris McCandless - Alexander Supertramp - YouTube. Marisa Bisping Travels + Adventures. Kristen- Into the Wild wallpaper in The Kristen Stewart Club.