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Into the Psyche: Mental Illness' Depiction in Entertainment using Chris McCandless's story as told by Jon Krakauer and Sean Penn

The story of Chris McCandless continues to fascinate and inspire audiences as presented by author Jon Krakauer and director Sean Penn, but there is evidence from those McCandless knew personally as well as professional psychologists which indicates that he should not provoke admiration, but concern. McCandless displayed symptoms of mental illness, possibly bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, and his irrational behavior is more logically explained by psychology than by the dreamy tale of wanderlust and self-searching that Krakauer provides. Indeed, the author presents only one interpretation of the story, and he unfortunately presents it as the truth. Romanticizing non-fiction to make it appeal to audiences is not a new concept, but with the rapidly growing list of mediums through which the stories can be told and the vast number of people who can be influenced, it is becoming increasingly important that the values communicated are carefully evaluated and reputable. In the case of *Into the Wild*, this principle is particularly important because the story deals with an issue as sensitive and commonly-stigmatized as mental illness. Instead of embracing the theme of mental illness and using it to raise awareness and neutralize the stigma as he could have done, Krakauer chose to disregard this theme in favor of a more sentimental representation. Krakauer's exceptional talent for romantic writing led film director Sean Penn astray; Penn's cinematic depiction of the story conveys the same misleading themes and motifs as Krakauer's. In comparing the works of

Krakauer and Penn to what is known about the real Chris McCandless, it becomes clear they took many liberties in their creative approaches to the story while ignoring the signs of mental illness which drive it; in modern society, this plays a more prominent role than ever in propelling the stigmatization of mental illness due to the media's growing sphere of influence.

In 1990, a 22-year-old Virginian man rejected the expectations of both society and his well-to-do family, leaving them with the statement, "I think I'm going to disappear for a while" (Krakauer 21). With that, the young man embarked on a journey across the American West. He ditched his car early on, making his way through eight western states by only walking and hitchhiking. Raised near Washington, D.C., he traded his family home in the suburbs for transient camps, soup kitchens, and an opportunity to explore nature as only one who has sacrificed everything else is able. In the midst of his travels, he also made a 400-mile canoe trip down the Colorado River. All of this built up to his departure into remote Alaska with a small-caliber rifle and a ten-pound bag of rice in the spring of 1992. This young man was Chris McCandless, but all those he encountered on his journey knew him by his alias, "Alexander ('Alex') Supertramp." In 1992, however, it was his real name which achieved household status after his body was discovered by hunters in an abandoned bus just outside of what natives consider the Alaskan wilderness. The autopsy report that followed stated starvation as the cause of death.

When Chris's death was publicized, it sparked an enormous reaction from the public. Here was a handsome, well-to-do young man with romantic dreams and all the potential in the world, turned up dead in remote Alaska. The tragedy of Chris McCandless struck a chord with the nation, which became perplexed at how someone so young, strong, and harmless reached such a tragic and abrupt end. Many found his story tragically inspiring, wanderlust being a

commonly suppressed conviction. Chris's story was, in many ways, proof that there is no single right way to live out one's life, despite the common trends of society. Others, however, particularly those native to Alaska, were quick to hurl insults at Chris, pertaining to his lack of experience and perceived foolishness.

Outside magazine asked Jon Krakauer to write a piece discussing the exciting travels and untimely death of McCandless, and this article's publication in 1993 was only the start of Krakauer's fight to defend Chris's honor. In 1996, after much additional research beyond that which he attained for the *Outside* piece, Krakauer published his more informed take on this mystifying story: this time, in novel format. His immediate connection to Chris is reasonable, given his extensive experience with travel and mountaineering, which he refers to frequently in order to "throw some oblique light on the enigma of Chris McCandless" (Krakauer, *Into the Wild* Author's Note). He found shared interests, nature and travel, and a sort of idol in McCandless, one who fearlessly pursued his goals no matter how far-fetched they seemed to everyone else.

His writing makes evident that Krakauer sees himself as an apt advocate for McCandless, but there is a thin line between familiarity and bias, and even Krakauer admits he wrote with rose-colored glasses on. In his author's note for *Into the Wild*, he stated, "I won't claim to be an impartial biographer. McCandless's strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible." Krakauer justifies McCandless's actions using the young man's dysfunctional familial background, impulsive personality, and, most predominately, the "obsessive need to conquer mountains," that he identifies with (Ryan).

When taking Chris's story to the big screen fifteen years after his death, film director Sean Penn romanticized the young man even further. Penn selected actor Emile Hirsch to portray him as one wise beyond his years, something like a transcendental messiah, leaving a trail of

softened hearts and opened minds behind him as he traversed across the West. According to film critic Jack Ryan, when Sean Penn first came across Jon Krakauer's 1996 novel, he read it twice through in one sitting and proceeded to track down film rights immediately afterward. Ryan describes the kind of character Penn typically gravitates towards, in his career, as people "cut off from the world, people who instinctually know more than others." He later adds that, "For Penn, restraint is a flaw" (Ryan). It is easy to see, then, why Penn took such a keen interest in McCandless. The most definite thing about the young man is that he went against the grain of the nine-to-five-structured American society in pursuit of a vastly different, much simpler way of life. He intentionally cut ties with the world, and had no restraint to speak of. Disregarding the less pleasant theories of how and why Chris underwent this journey, no matter how plausible they are, allows for Penn's favorite kind of character study. Ryan describes the movie Penn adapted, produced, and directed as "unapologetically romantic," "uneven," and "self-indulgent"—all adjectives supportive of the idea that Penn, like Krakauer, contorted McCandless to be the kind of hero he wanted to write about, rather than the emotionally damaged, mentally ill individual he likely was.

In his essay discussing both works, Jonah Raskin explains, "Krakauer's meditation on manliness, and Penn's adventure picture with a moral message all exploit the properties of the medium in which their authors work and each makes a distinctive call on eye and ear…" (Raskin). The literary critic goes on to say that Krakauer "exploited the properties of his medium" because, in his non-fictional narrative, he continuously circles back to his personal experiences as a way to justify McCandless's perplexing behavior. As he continues, Raskin claims that Penn took advantage of his artistic medium through his camera and editing work. Scenes transition abruptly, changing both the time and location, "to arrange a series of jig-saw

puzzle scenes" (Raskin). Disorienting viewers makes it difficult for them to formulate careful interpretations of the story and evaluate the main character's actions; they wind up focusing primarily on the film's visual aesthetic which, in turn, leads them to believe the most important lesson to take away from the film is that one must oppose social norms if one wants to acquire a fulfilling life.

Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and its film adaptation were commercial successes. The novel was a best-seller and even won the American Library Association's award for "Best Book for Young Adults" in 1997 (ALA). The movie accumulated 24 awards and 102 nominations, including nominations for two Oscars, and has grossed nearly 56 million dollars worldwide, despite limited release (IMDb). A Google search of the title "Into the Wild" boasts over two billion results, which shows that the discussion on Chris McCandless is wide and ongoing. Responses are largely positive; Krakauer's aptitude for storytelling turned McCandless into a modern folk hero. In a 2012 entry for *Huffington Post*, Pete Mason wrote,

> The thrill of adventure I gained from reading *Into the Wild* and seeing where [Chris] traveled is inspirational. Wandering the country for more than two years with no phone, no car, no cigarettes, serves as a lesson that the material goods we all cherish and seek to obtain as status symbols are doing nothing but holding us back from doing what we are truly capable of doing. What is inside each of us -- the need to satisfy curiosity, to explore, to converse and think critically, all these are the lessons of Christopher Johnson McCandless, 20 years after his death (Mason).

These are not the lessons of Christopher Johnson McCandless, but, rather, those of Jon Krakauer. Critical thinking is certainly not among the things people can learn from Chris; he was impulsive and took nothing and no one into consideration when making his decisions. There is

little glory and even less wisdom in the way he accomplished his exploration and the satisfaction of his curiosity. Instead, these are the morals Krakauer saw fit to draw from Chris's experiences and those for which he tailored the evidence to support. Krakauer took snippets of the truth, built elaborate explanations around them, and drew radical conclusions from them. Unless readers are "foolish enough" to align themselves with the allegedly irrational native Alaskans, they are left with little choice but to take Krakauer's personal convictions to heart. Literary critic Bill Gifford wrote, "Although Krakauer tries to cram McCandless into a literary bookshelf with Thoreau and Tolstoy and assorted Beats, McCandless just doesn't fit," because McCandless's story is not a romance, it is a real-life tragedy in which a young man fell victim to real-world issues that are still being disregarded by the industry with the greatest opportunity to address and destigmatize them. In Krakauer's account as in real life, Chris McCandless starved. Everything leading up to that in the novel, inspired by reality though it may be, is embellished to the extent that it deprives readers of open interpretation. If readers were presented with a more honest, raw account, they could still learn from Chris's experiences while also understanding that his story is far more cautionary than motivational, and tragic rather than inspiring.

Mason is not the only one for whom Krakauer's fairytale-esque fabrication hit home. In a formal review for *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Robert Imbelli stated, "Krakauer restores spiritual depth and dignity to the young man's quest (and offers a plausible reconstruction of the unwitting ingestion of poisonous seeds that ultimately provoked his death). One closes the book in awe at witnessing a terrible purification and (dare one say) redemption." Imbelli's word choice here is bold and reveals that he fully bought into Krakauer's tale. "Restores" indicates that Chris's quest had a degree of "spiritual depth and dignity" to begin with, which is not something that stands out in accounts of his childhood and development. In an attempt to give McCandless

this spiritual credibility, Imbelli refers to Krakauer's comparison of McCandless and Everett Ruess to early Irish monks (Krakauer 97). These ancient sojourners abandoned civilization and risked their lives "on a quest for solitude and salvation" (Imbelli). The crucial difference between the monks and McCandless is that the monks were, as a brotherhood united by a church, martyrs for a higher power. Their actions are justified in that they had already sacrificed their conventional lives and felt that to complete their spiritual journeys, they needed to distance themselves from the society they no longer identified with. They were serving a nonhuman higher power; Chris McCandless's only god was Alexander Supertramp. Another, perhaps larger, issue with Imbelli's assessment is that he offers no personal research on which to construct his opinion; he discusses only the perspective Krakauer spoon-feeds to his readers. Because Krakauer's narrative is devoid of disclaimers and classified as nonfiction, Imbelli, like many others, is under the impression that it is all factual. Imbelli even goes so far as to mention potato seeds as the underlying cause of McCandless's death, when, with relatively little outside investigation, one learns that this is merely one of Krakauer's theories. Krakauer did not purify the story to convey the facts, as Imbelli has been led to believe, but rather, contorted the facts to suit the kind of story he wanted to tell.

When his McCandless article was first published in *Outside*, Krakauer reports being shocked at the immense public response it received. In his author's note for *Into the Wild*, he wrote:

> A surprising number of people have been affected by the story of Chris McCandless's life and death. In the weeks and months following the publication of the article in *Outside*, it generated more mail than any other article in the magazine's history. This correspondence, as one might expect, reflected sharply divergent points of view: Some

> readers admired the boy immensely for his courage and noble ideals; others fulminated that he was a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity—and was undeserving of the considerable media attention he received (Krakauer).

Many people die every day without making headlines; indeed, many homeless people of Chris's migrant lifestyle pass away without anyone ever knowing except the police officer who exhumes the body and the owner of the morgue it is delivered to. Still, one cannot deny that the circumstances surrounding Chris's death were newsworthy and that Krakauer could have anticipated the widespread response. Perhaps, if he had taken under consideration how many people his story would reach and how many lives it would impact, he would have been less inclined to dance around the symptoms of mental illness Chris exhibits. Instead of constructing a quixotic narrative in which the hero's primary flaws are that his parents are too oppressive and that he "marches to a different drummer" (Krakauer 107), and choosing to address issues of mental illness head-on, he could have used the public's interest in and empathy for Chris McCandless as a vessel to draw attention to the effects of mental illness and contribute to its de-stigmatization.

Recent studies from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the U.S. Department of Justice have shown that one in five adults suffered from mental illness in 2018, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Despite how common mental health issues are, the general public struggles to define and understand them. With such widely varying forms of mental illness which cause people to exhibit, or possibly conceal, different symptoms, mental illness is a broad concept. Although there are disparities even among healthcare professionals about the

exact definition of mental illness (NAMI), Mayo Clinic describes it as a disorder which affects one's mood, thinking, and behavior. Mental illness being the umbrella term, associated disorders include, but are not limited to, anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia.

Everyone struggles with mental health occasionally as a result of internal changes, such as natural hormone imbalances, or external factors, such as stress, and even changes in the weather. A mental health concern becomes a mental illness when one experiences consistent symptoms that hinder their ability to function in their usual roles (Mayo Clinic). Serious mental illnesses make nearly everything overwhelming: dealing with emotions, handling relationships, and the very prospect of everyday life.

In 2000, Darcy Haag Granello and her partner, Paul F. Granello, performed a study to examine the relationship between how college students believed mental health disorders should be defined and how tolerant and understanding the students were towards individuals suffering from them. They used a questionnaire to assess the students' opinions about what constitutes a mental illness, in combination with the Community Attitudes Toward the Mentally Ill questionnaire (Granello 100). This research team found that students with the broadest, most widely-encompassing idea of mental illness also had the most benevolent and least socially restrictive attitude towards affected individuals.

Unfortunately, people like this are the minority. As is often the case in misunderstandings, people's lack of knowledge when it comes to mental illness frequently translates into an intolerance and lack of empathy. People battling mental illness have not only their internal conflicts to address, but, additionally, they must battle external conflicts which result from a largely ignorant and intolerant society, making recovery all the more difficult (Esses).

Of course, it does not help that much of what the general public knows about mental illness comes from the media. If one has never studied psychology, it is likely that most of what he or she believes about mental illnesses has been accumulated from the news sources they follow, the music they listen to, the books they read, or the television and movies they watch. (Looking at you, Krakauer and Penn.) The danger here is that inaccurate and often harmful representations of mental illnesses are easily accessible, and many people attain negative views because it is what they are unwittingly exposing themselves to. In an article from *U.S. News*, psychology professor Stephen Hinshaw from the University of California-Berkeley says, "The worst stereotypes come out in such depictions: mentally ill individuals as incompetent, dangerous, slovenly, undeserving…The portrayals serve to distance 'them' from the rest of 'us'" (Fawcett). As this article seeks to convey, the media is fraught with misrepresentations of mental illness; this issue makes it all the more important for people with large social platforms to relay accurate information. If more made the effort to do this, people with mental illnesses would seem more understandable, empathetic, and human than they currently do. It would narrow the gap Hinshaw refers to which exists between "us" and "them," and help people suffering from mental health disorders feel like they have both a valid affliction and a meaningful, respected place in society. One leg of McCandless's journey is particularly telling in regard to his psyche, and is thus appropriate for segueing into a discussion of the symptoms of mental illness he displays.

Surprisingly, McCandless applied for a job using his given name and real social security number at a McDonald's in Bullhead City, Arizona. Considering he had been on the road only a year and had no intention of returning home as of yet, it is unclear why he briefly lost face and took this unnecessary risk. His revealing application is not the only factor that causes psychological speculation; it is also his behavior during employment. When Krakauer

interviewed McCandless's previous McDonald's manager Lori Zarza, she remarked, "He always worked at the same slow pace… Customers would be stacked ten-deep at the counter, and he wouldn't understand why I was on his case. He just didn't make the connection. It was like he was off in his own universe…" (Krakauer 40). Zarza adds later, "When he talked, he was always going on about trees and nature and weird stuff like that. We all thought he was missing a few screws" (40).

In addition to being distant and withdrawn during his time employed at the fast food chain, McCandless flat-out refused to bathe. Comments from his coworkers upset him to the point that he ended up quitting (Krakauer 41). He stayed in Bullhead City for a little over two months, which is thought to be the longest he stayed in one place, up until the Magic Bus. It is noteworthy that this period of latency and frustration occurred in September, because it is widely-recognized that the reduced sunlight of autumn causes major declines in mental health.

It does not require a particularly careful character study of Chris McCandless, as depicted in the Krakauer novel or described by those who knew him, to notice obvious signs of both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Krakauer states, "McCandless's personality was puzzling in its complexity. He was intensely private but could be convivial and gregarious in the extreme" (Krakauer 115). According to the Mayo Clinic, symptoms of bipolar disorder are wide-ranging, with some of the most prominent symptoms being mood swings, abnormally increased energy, euphoria, talkativeness, rapid and obsessive thoughts, and irrational decision-making and risk-taking. McCandless exhibited many of these symptoms, and he fits within the age demographic of when the disorder is typically diagnosed: the teenage years through the early 20s. Obsessive thoughts accompanied by intense, focused energy, impulsive decision-making, and euphoria,

which leads to uncontrolled risk-taking, are the most obvious symptoms of bipolar across all the interviews and stories in Krakauer's account of Chris McCandless's short life.

An obsession with nature, transcendentalism, "living off the land," and "walking into the wild" are what drove Chris's young adulthood as well as what drives Krakauer's narrative. The author frequently calls upon the obsession with nature to form parallels between Chris and himself as well as Chris and other wanderers in an effort to legitimize the young man's irrational behavior. The difference between Krakauer, most of his examples, and Chris, is that Chris's obsession caused him to abandon his family, abandon his car, burn his money, and repeatedly put his life on the line. Eventually, his obsession is what killed him.

According to the McCandless family, Chris never had the patience to learn any sports or take heed of anyone hoping to impart wisdom. "Nuance, strategy, and anything beyond the rudimentaries of technique were wasted on Chris. The only way he cared to tackle a challenge was head on, right now, with the full brunt of his extraordinary energy. And he was often frustrated as a consequence" (Krakauer 111). As far as specific examples of irrational decision-making go, there are significantly fewer samples of rational decisions throughout the McCandless story. The migrant way of life is not something the faint of heart would be well-equipped for. People who lead this lifestyle have few or no social ties, no stable job or place to stay, and no access to healthcare or even the assurance of their next meal. Chris brashly chose to pursue this path and would have burned the bridges behind him were it not for the refusal of those who cared for him to give up hope.

Euphoria is best described as an exaggerated sense of well-being and self-confidence (Mayo Clinic). Krakauer never mentions the term until Chris is on his death bed, including it among the rumored side-effects of starvation (Krakauer 198), but Chris exhibits euphoric

behavior across the course of the novel and, indeed, he is remembered by those who were closest to him for having this sense of invincibility. While reflecting back on family trips to the mountains, Chris's father, Walt, remarked, "He didn't think the odds applied to him. We were always trying to pull him back from the edge" (Krakauer 109). It is difficult to imagine anyone without either an unabashed disregard for mortality or a death wish venturing into the wilderness with little more than a bag of rice.

McCandless wrote to Wayne Westerberg, "If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again I want you know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild" (Krakauer 134). While this bold announcement may have simply been characteristic of McCandless's flare for the dramatic, it has also been scrutinized due to the fact that it makes Chris sound like he could care less whether or not he returned to civilization from the Alaskan Bush. It makes his bold departure sound something like a suicide mission. Krakauer does his best to refute this idea, again drawing from his own experiences and qualities of willfulness and self-absorption (134). However, thoughts of suicide are not unheard of among those with bipolar disorder, especially those whose day-to-day life seems to be too much for them: people like Chris.

Bipolar disorder and schizophrenia have many common symptoms. However, schizophrenia is much rarer and more potentially severe. If untreated, this chronic mental illness can cause psychosis (Mayo Clinic). Some symptoms of schizophrenia that Chris displayed were a lack of interest in everyday life, a withdrawal from socialization, including that with close friends and family, an almost childlike opposition to criticism and teaching, and possible delusions. An article from *Psychology Today* argues that Chris was a schizophrenic and that "Krakauer chose to ignore the meaning of the evidence."

At various points in the novel, Krakauer touches on the ways Chris perplexed his parents. While it is not uncommon for parents to be puzzled at the actions of their teenagers and early 20-somethings, conflicts generally arise over misdemeanors such as sneaking out late, procrastinating, or mouthing off to teachers. With Chris, the issue had to do not only with abrupt and surprising changes in behavior, but complete transformations of his personality. According to his family and college friends, Chris sometimes seemed the very spirit of benevolence. At other times, however, a "darker side" came out, known for being impatient and completely self-absorbed (Krakauer 120). An unpredictable fluctuation between temperaments is characteristic of both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

Although it is impossible to formally diagnose Chris now, nearly 30 years after his death, it is clear that he displayed many symptoms of mental illness and that Krakauer and Penn chose to ignore these signs in favor of a more romantic, "Happy Hollywood," narrative. In doing so, they threw away the opportunity to allow Chris's death to serve a larger purpose, one which would have benefitted a margin of society with few media advocates. Everyone relates to feelings of wanderlust from time-to-time; these wishful emotions are easy to provoke and will certainly continue to sell well. It is a greater challenge to confront an issue as commonly avoided, misunderstood, and stigmatized as mental illness. Although developing projects to address these topics in the entertainment industry is not a frequented route as of yet, it has been done occasionally and remarkably well in recent decades. Popular examples of movies fitting into this category include *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), a realistic take on living with bipolar disorder, *Rain Man* (1988), a study on autism, *Good Will Hunting* (1997), which discusses depression resulting from childhood trauma, and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) in which the main character suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. What all these films have in common is that they

reflect people with mental illnesses in a positive light, focusing on the affected individuals' good qualities and the benefits of their conditions, as well as giving the rest of society a realistic idea of what it is like to live with a mental health disorder day-in and day-out.

Craig Medred of the *Anchorage Daily News*, one of Krakauer's most outspoken critics, wrote, "Painting [Chris] as the representative seeker of wilderness truth—instead of the messed-up anomaly—was a good way to sell books, and no more. That's understandable. A writer needs to make a living" (Medred). As an author and one attempting to succeed in his career like everyone else, Krakauer had the right to theorize and romanticize McCandless's story to his personal satisfaction, as well as to the tastes of his publisher and his audience. Penn, in turn, acquired the rights to adapt the novel how he saw fit, conveying whatever messages to his audience he found most appealing. It does make one wonder, however, given how many were affected by the romantic tale Krakauer spun, how many more would have been positively impacted if he had chosen a deeper, more realistic, and honest approach to Chris's life.

In their respective mediums, Jon Krakauer and Sean Penn told the story of Chris McCandless, leaving out the crucial detail that he was very likely suffering from mental illness. In doing so, the artists surrendered the opportunity to assist in destigmatizing this issue, which affects such a large yet poorly represented part of our society. The fantastic narration of Jon Krakauer and the beautiful imagery and camerawork of Sean Penn are likely to resonate with and be remembered by audiences for years to come. What audiences should also take away from *Into the Wild* is that there is always more to people and stories than initially meets the eye. In a society that continues to mask what it sees as ugly and glorify the beautiful, one must use discretion, because these perceptions are only that: fantasies created when people choose to judge or distance themselves from what they do not fully understand. Perhaps if artists like

Krakauer and Penn chose to confront the issue of mental illness and portray it in a sympathetic light, they could contribute to the construction of a society future Chris McCandlesses do not feel the need to escape from.

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