

Emile Hirsch as
Christopher
McCandless in
Into the Wild



Incredible Journey

A heroic figure or just tragically misguided?

INTO THE WILD: Directed by Sean Penn. Written by Sean Penn, based on the book by Jon Krakauer. Cinematography, Eric Gautier. Music, Michael Brook, Kaki King and Eddie Vedder. Starring Emile Hirsch, Marcia Gay Harden, William Hurt, Catherine Keener, Jena Malone, Brian Dierker, Vince Vaughn, Kristen Stewart and Hal Holbrook. Paramount Vantage, 2007. R. 140 min. ★★☆☆☆

The story behind Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* is by now too familiar to require much recounting: Recent Emory University grad Christopher McCandless gave away his savings and dropped out of society to wander the American West, eventually forging his way to Alaska, where he made himself a home in the abandoned bus where he was eventually found dead. Jon Krakauer was drawn to the story and turned it into a best-selling book; more than a decade later, Penn's sympathetic, sprawling version arrives on screen.

Penn's story loops around and around through time, starting near the end and then darting back to the past, to McCandless' graduation and an icy dinner with his traditional parents (William Hurt and Marcia Gay Harden). It's a clever enough structure, and it makes good use of the juxtaposition between McCandless' solo Alaskan trek and the social atmosphere he repeatedly finds himself in elsewhere. People simply take to the smiling young man; often, he becomes a stand-in for a missing son. But rarely do we get a true glimpse of the mentality that would lead this apparently gregarious, intelligent kid to try himself in the middle of nowhere. In a bar with Wayne Westerberg (Vince Vaughn), McCandless repeats "Society! Society!" until the word loses all meaning; here and there he drops quotes about nature and happiness and being in the moment. There's a clichéd ring to his occasional pronouncements about life and living, a recognizable standardness that both establishes and diminishes McCandless' character.

But much of that character is provided by a voiceover by the nicely cast Jena Malone as Chris' sister Carine. Her fragile

voice gives emotional weight to Carine's sometimes treacherous descriptions of her brother's temperament and the childhood that shaped his personality, but it can't bring together the two sides of the character — the friendly one and the one that, impossibly, demands truth in everything and everyone — into a believable whole.

Penn's film turns the story of an individual into something of a fable, but in an unexpectedly uncomfortable way, leaving the caution out of what reads to many like a cautionary tale. The question that first arises in many conversations about *Into the Wild* — the book or the film — is whether a person finds in Chris McCandless a heroic figure or a misguided one, a brave soul seeking a different kind of truth or a young man whose naïveté and hubris led to his death. Penn almost manages to leave the question in the air, carefully juggling an appreciation of McCandless' ideals with subtle depictions of the effects Chris' many departures have on the people he meets. Time and again, strangers take the younger man in like family; time and again, he leaves, with nary a regret on that wide-eyed, unreadable face.

The moments Penn spends understanding the effect McCandless had on those around him are the film's strongest, even when they veer into something a little too pat, but his sympathies clearly lie with McCandless. At the end of the film, mine were with the boy as well; no matter how misguided Chris was when he wandered into Alaska, he didn't deserve the end to which he came — an end which Penn presents almost mythically. But the two hours spent journeying to that emotional end feel too bright, too easy, too reluctant to probe the darker corners of McCandless' still-enigmatic character. Could Chris' journeys really have been so simple, so blessed, that only once, when thrown off a train, is he truly tripped up by the restrictions of society? Only nature, in this telling, could stop Chris McCandless on his journey.

EW

Into the Wild opens Friday, Oct. 19, at the Bijou.

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