

FROM SCRIPT TO SCREEN

# Into the Wild



Emile Hirsch and Sean Penn on the set of *Into the Wild*

The short life and lonely death of Christopher McCandless is a familiar tale now, thanks to Jon Krakauer and his best-selling book *Into the Wild*. The book, which established Krakauer as a major nonfiction writer, has become required reading in some college courses and a touchstone for many young men.

For those who've missed the story, McCandless graduated from Emory University in 1990, gave away the \$24,000 left in his college fund, abandoned his car, burned his cash, and set off on an odyssey through the West and Mexico. He renamed himself "Alexander Supertramp," kayaked the Grand Canyon and the Sea of Cortez, drove a combine in the Great Plains, and hung out with latter-day hippies in the California desert—charming people wherever he went.

His goal was to go alone into the Alaskan wilderness and purge himself of the noxious effects of civilization, keeping a journal all the while to track his own spiritual progress. In April 1992, he walked into the bush near Denali National Park. Four months later, his body was found by moose hunters. He had apparently died of starvation.

McCandless was driven in part by a troubled relationship with his parents but in a larger sense, he was on a quest to sever ties to a society he considered materialistic and corrupt. That makes his story a difficult topic for movies, which tend to celebrate the social pleasures of family and romantic love, not asceticism. But if there's one Hollywood figure who might be expected to relate to McCandless' journey, it's the very man who has adapted Krakauer's book and directed the film: Sean Penn.

Hirsch stars as Christopher McCandless



Though an Oscar®-winning actor and the son of director Leo Penn and actress Eileen Ryan, Sean Penn has never seemed comfortable with movie stardom or the Hollywood scene. He doesn't go out of his way to court the press or the public. He doesn't make light comedies or superhero movies to keep his profile—and his quote—high. He wears his politics on his sleeve, and if the resulting talk-radio hostility bothers him, he's not showing it.

Maybe Penn identified with McCandless' spiritual quest, or with his rejection of materialism, or maybe even his love of nature. But for whatever reason, from the day he bought a copy of *Into the Wild* more than 10 years ago, Penn knew he wanted to turn the story into a movie.

"I read it two times in a row the day I bought it," Penn told *Script* by phone from San Francisco. "Within about two weeks of reading the book, I got through to someone

Penn's screen version is no small accomplishment. While the film plays out smoothly enough, Krakauer's best-seller presented some enormous challenges for a screenwriter.

### Dogged Pursuit

As Penn talks about the history of the project, he says over and over again that he had the movie in his head from the time he read the book. That didn't matter, though, until the McCandless family would consent to sell the rights to their story.

Year after year they said no, but Penn kept after them anyway, checking in now and then to ask if they'd changed their minds. Finally, almost 10 years after he began, his persistence paid off. He got a call from their representative: Penn could buy the rights. He and producer Art Linson jumped in to secure them.

The McCandless family put no conditions on the sale, says Penn, and he did not give

the boy's starvation and by vague, unsettling parallels between events in his life and those in my own."

Krakauer's identification with McCandless is an important piece of *Into the Wild*. He goes so far as to write himself into the book, interrupting the narrative of McCandless' journey to relate part of his own life story, including how, as a young man, he climbed a remote Alaskan peak, the Devil's Thumb, alone—an exploit more dangerous than anything McCandless did in Alaska. That approach let the audience see McCandless' journey through Krakauer's experience and feel the same empathy with him that Krakauer does.

That empathy is hardly universal. McCandless was, and still is, something of a controversial figure. Krakauer identifies with McCandless, and his book is sympathetic toward him. Yet Krakauer includes the views of those who

"I shared every new page I wrote with the family. They were able to register their feelings about them, inform them, complain about them."

—SEAN PENN

who represented [Krakauer] and we talked and then he took me to meet the family."

Penn wasn't alone in pursuing the rights at that time. But the death of Chris and the family secrets the book laid bare were painful. "It's a dangerous mess to get into for a family that's been through this kind of a loss to roll the dice on a film," Penn says. Eventually, the McCandless clan decided to say no to a movie.

But Penn never gave up, and now his film version of *Into the Wild* has arrived, garnering some stellar reviews and becoming an early contender for major awards. The film is a Paramount Vantage release, written and directed by Penn. Emile Hirsch stars as Chris McCandless, Jena Malone plays his sister Carine, and Marcia Gay Harden and William Hurt play his parents. Others in the cast include Hal Holbrook, Catherine Keener, and Kristen Stewart.

them script approval, but he did give them some verbal assurances and consult with them. "I shared every new page I wrote with the family. They were able to register their feelings about them, inform them, complain about them. Whatever it was, I would take that in and look at it and so on."

Penn had the movie so firmly in his mind that he didn't even bother to go back and read the book. That may sound audacious, but Krakauer's take on the material was so personal that another look at the book could easily have been as confusing as it was helpful.

Krakauer's first iteration of the McCandless story was a 9,000-word article in the January 1993 issue of *Outside* magazine: "Death of an Innocent." Three years later, he expanded that article into a book. He explains in his author's note: "I was haunted by the particulars of

regard McCandless simply as a narcissistic fool who got himself killed through recklessness and naiveté. (Those views are well-represented in the Wikipedia entry on McCandless, and in the film, some may find McCandless as exasperating as he is inspiring.) Krakauer tries to refute those views, but they're represented.

Penn, though, was not going to include that debate. "The opinions of who the guy is I find trivial and silly and uninformed," he says. "And by the way, my own [version] was not an opinion, it was the movie I saw. It was what I felt about him while reading the thing."

"But the book talks about some of the controversial takes, some of the things that came after the article came out. None of those things ever interested me very much. I was more in line with Krakauer from go."

The point of view Penn shares with Krakauer,



McCandless traveled across the country before meeting his goal—and his fate—in Alaska

he says, is about seeing McCandless' journey as a rite of passage. Though some parts of the story are about how people react to trauma, he says, "The lion's share of what Jon and I responded to came from a wanderlust I think is universal, but to varying degrees. And a rite

of passage that's necessary and under-noticed or under-valued."

There was still the problem of how to put that point of view on the screen. Krakauer put McCandless' story in the context of his own. Penn says Krakauer's personal anecdotes,

including the Devil's Thumb story, "become, in a nonfiction attack on something, the camera through which the writer is photographing the story.

"In the case of making a movie, you have a camera right there. So my Devil's Thumb would be compositional, casting, the way the story's painted. And then the effect of that shoot, if I've done my job, it'll be there for the audience."

Besides that, there was an even more basic problem: A large chunk of the book follows McCandless alone in the wilderness, with no one to talk to or interact with. Only rarely does he even encounter animals. For part of that time, he is weak, sick and starving. How to put that on the screen?

Penn solved that problem by intercutting McCandless' time in Alaska with the journey that brought him there.

"I knew there was a lot of time alone, with one guy alone in Alaska particularly. I was interested in an American journey that breathed." The risk, Penn knew, was that if he let the story breathe and then went off to Alaska for a long stretch, "you can lose track of your narrative and be a kind of Alaskan travelogue."

He always planned to intercut between Alaska and the rest of Chris' story, but did not

even try to write the script that way. Instead, Penn's shooting script tells the story in linear time, with a note before the first page indicating that he intends to intercut.

"Whenever I thought of doing an actual pass [with the intercutting written in], I only had to remind myself that I was directing the movie as well and I would be able to do what I always do, which is write a movie three times. You write it, you write it in shooting, and then you write it again in the editing room."

### A Full Life

Penn did impose his own structure on the story, inspired by one of the sad ironies of McCandless' life.

While in the wilderness, McCandless read and pondered the life he'd led and the journey he'd been on. At one point, he wrote in the margins of a book "Happiness is only real

when shared." The young man who'd sought to shed the shackles of human connection had discovered that those human connections were actually the wellspring of any joy in his life.

At that point, he packed up to leave and return to civilization, though his exact plans are unknown. It was then he discovered that the route he'd taken was now cut off and that he was trapped in the wild.

One could argue that McCandless discovered the truth about himself and his life too late. But Penn says, "I felt like what was moving to me about [the story] is 'What's too late?' I don't know that there is a too late.

"So what always moved me about it was he had lived life on his own terms. There was a photograph of him that's a clue to where he was at the end, where he was holding up the note that said 'I've had a happy life, thank the Lord.' He looks like a concentration camp inmate at

the time. And there's a light in his eye that felt like, at the same time while discovering he was probably going to die, he felt he had fulfilled the complete arc of life."

So Penn frames the film in chapters that cover the stages of a life, "from the time he birthed and named himself to the time he came to a kind of getting of wisdom and completed. That was always the structure of it in my head, to tell it as a complete, though short, life."

### Pacing and Smoking

Penn had written so much of the script in his head, he says, that he could write the first draft in just a month. When it comes to the actual physical process of writing, Penn doesn't sit down at a word processor; "I can't make a computer work," he says. When he would write alone, he would type at a typewriter sometimes but mostly he would write in longhand.



Jena Malone plays Carine McCandless, Christopher's sister

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But Penn wanted to get the script down on paper fast, so he spent a lot of time dictating to his assistant, Sato.

"She has faster fingers than I have on a keyboard, and I can't make a computer work anyway, so I was pacing with cigarettes and dictating it out word for word, and then I started working with pen in hand. Once I got this gigantic thing in my head onto the page, then I started writing."

Penn doesn't exactly collaborate with his assistant, but he calls her "a partner in the sense that, when she doesn't like something, she's got a certain look in her eye, and I'll say, 'What!?'"

"She'll say, 'Nothing, nothing,' leaving Penn to say, 'Okay, okay, erase that.'"

But, Penn says that kind of feedback is "More effective than 'Do this instead.' And generally speaking, it makes sense that the best ideas should come from you. But being pushed into it and being pushed further along is something we could all use."

Penn says he seeks feedback on anything he writes. "On *The Crossing Guard*, I typed with an old typewriter, but every day I got four or five pages, and at the end of every day, I sent them to David Morse. He would tell me what he thought of what was happening. I can be guilty of talking to myself in this life and then, when I try to share that idea with somebody, they're looking at me cross-eyed."

"When you're trying to tell a story to other people, you want to make sure you're speaking in a language that isn't self-indulgent, that somebody can get on the ride with you."

### Free Rein

Once Penn finished his first draft, he went back to read the book again. "[The script] was very much like the movie that I saw reading the book the first time."

He spent a few more weeks on the script after re-reading the book, then went on the road to retrace McCandless' meandering route through the West and Mexico.

Penn was able to track down many of the real-life people that McCandless encountered on his trek. "There were legal issues even that way, because as soon as you put words in people's mouths that are not in the book or not on the record, you have to get some kind of agreement with those people." As a result

of that and other complications, some of the characters have different names than their real-life counterparts.

Penn's research-road trip was broken up over several months. During that time, Linson and Penn also lined up financing from River Road and Paramount Vantage. Once he had another draft done, "I sent it to Jon [Krakauer], I sent it to the family. I got a lot of input from all of them, and then I went back and did what became our shooting draft, and then that changed every day."

Penn works with an unusual degree of freedom, at least compared with other directors.

"I guess this is just the good fortune of my own strong will in the first place years ago and then good representation at the time, but it is understood that when I direct a movie, I'm a final-cut director. What input they have is they ask, 'What's it going to cost you?' and then they struggle with you about that. Then, once you've got to a point where the numbers match up to what you think you're going to be able to make the movie for, then for me it's not a threat to treat everybody like a partner."

"In the case of Vantage, it's an unusually smart group, so there was an open-door policy on notes at all times. And that's with Vantage, with Art Linson, with [producer] Bill Pohlad, with everybody on my set, frankly."

"[The financiers'] feelings are of concern to me, I respect them, but the money is based on the faith that they have [at the beginning], and that's what I hold them to. Unless I'm going to vary dramatically from what I have written, there's no approval outside of my own that's necessary, and there are no restrictions outside of my own imagination that are necessary. But in a practical sense, I got a lot of good ideas from many people throughout the shooting."

Though the film had the biggest budget he'd ever worked with, the far-flung locations and eight-month shooting schedule meant "we were stretching this

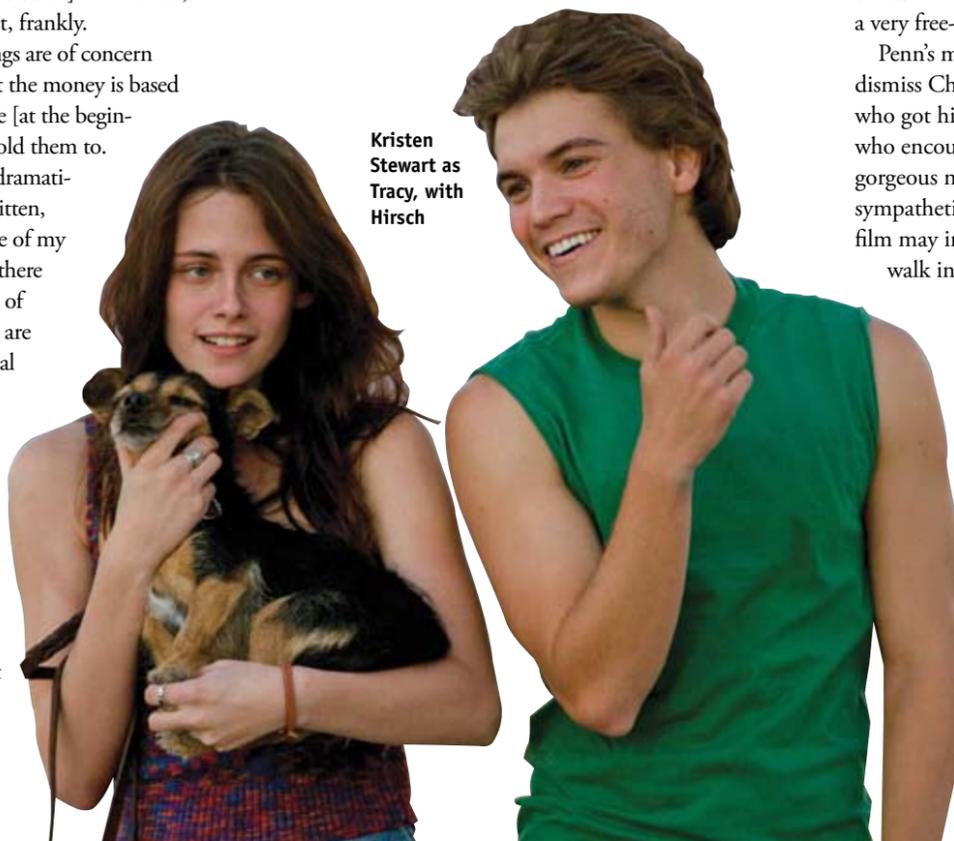
baby." That meant there wasn't latitude to make major changes on the fly, even if Penn got a good suggestion. Nonetheless, he was able to do those rewrites in shooting and in editing, as usual.

Of "writing" in shooting, he says, "There are a lot of ways that happens. There's what's written in terms of the word, there's what's written in terms of behavior, and there's what's not written in terms of the word and behavior that would work just as well to influence a scene."

He points to a scene where McCandless, while kayaking down the Grand Canyon—without a permit—and fleeing the river patrol, encounters two Danish tourists camped on the riverbank.

"I'd try to give the three of them the privacy that long lenses afford. Then you just follow them and let them just play it a few times, rehearse it on film. And you get little quirks and details and spontaneous things in performance that you wouldn't otherwise get."

"Largely in that case, it's the written scene minus some lines by the time I cut it. And it's minus lines because the life they brought to it was enough, faster than I had written it."



Kristen Stewart as Tracy, with Hirsch

"So, that's an adjustment that you're making both on the set and in the cutting room. You're less dependent on the time that was required to tell the original scene as written. You're always thinking of the relative pace. Not necessarily speeding things up, but where in the broad story are you going to want to jazz things up and get things at a faster pace, or bring things back at a slower pace, be more internal, be more external, that kind of thing."

As for editing, he says, "I find that is where actors give you the biggest gifts. It's the cliché about how much can be told with the eyes. You can narrow down."

### Three Muses

The film has voiceover from Jena Malone as Carine McCandless, Chris' sister. Penn had already written the voiceover parts when he got a chance to bring Malone, the real Carine, and poet Sharon Olds into a recording studio in San Francisco.

"We did a kind of jam session, re-recording everything, largely within the realm of what I'd written in the first place but with three women helping—the actress who played it, the woman who lived it, and one of my favorite female writers, coming up with colors and bends to the language and things. So, that was a very free-form, Brill Building kind of deal."

Penn's movie may infuriate those who dismiss Christopher McCandless as a fool who got himself killed, especially Alaskans who encounter his many imitators. With its gorgeous nature photography and basically sympathetic portrait of its protagonist, the film may inspire even more young men to walk into the Alaskan bush.

Yet it is one thing to read of McCandless' death, another thing to see him on the screen, emaciated, dying and lonely. Perhaps it will give some pause before they strike out on their own.

Either way, though, Penn has put his vision on the screen—not just the vision he put on paper, but the vision he had the day he read the book.

"It landed in my head as a movie," says Penn, "and then I wrote that movie." 🦋



**T**he stereotype for scripts written by actors is "Great scene after great scene, but the story doesn't move forward." Sean Penn calls that a myth, but sees a deeper connection between acting and writing than acting and directing.

"I think the greatest gift that I can give actors comes not from me being an actor, because every actor's process is so personal. The closest process is writing and acting. Actors appreciate a narrative moving forward also. They don't want to have to be the writer to tell the story."

"So, I think that it just probably shows more when some actors have a knack for the kind of emotional music that would make it look like just a bunch of good scenes piled on top of each other."

"But, I don't see that as the trap. The trap lies in not recognizing where your connection to your actors is and where your service is. What I am doing as a director, what the actors are doing, we're all serving whoever wrote it. In this case, it was me. But even as a director, I'm serving that. When you're writing and you're making these connections, it's very immediate and it's something that happens in that moment, it's like jazz music. There's an obligation to that moment when you're discovering it as a writer. So, I kind of become in the same boat with [the actors], and where I have something to offer them is as the writer, in particular."

"If your service is to yourself as a director, then each day you go, you put a 1,000mm lens on, get a little smoke goin', and you can make incredible images, shot after shot. You're going to forget the rhythm of the story. You're going to forget that there's a different grammar to a 35mm and a 17mm lens than a 1,000mm lens. That it's going to go on for two-plus hours. That you can't just do what's exciting on the day. You don't make the whole movie in one day. And you don't make it in 30 days. But you might write a script in a stream of consciousness, and you always have to respect where it came from and what the rhythms are you need to fulfill."

"So, it's recognizing that and recognizing the voice you have with your actors comes from when you walked in their shoes. When you were in a room, whether it was at a typewriter, or pen in hand, or dictating to a wise assistant, what was moving you at that time? What did it feel like to go through those emotions? Where did you go to get them? And where can that help this actor in finding the same thing?"