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Letters: Innocence or Ignorance?

I was very moved by Jon Krakauer's "Death of an Innocent." When I was 25 I organized an expedition to walk across the Canadian Arctic. Like Christopher McCandless, my crew and I shared a deep longing to understand our place in the world outside the context of civilization. We were young, self-absorbed, and confused. What alarms me now is that a single newspaper ad for my expedition attracted more than 400 responses. The story of McCandless advises us to temper our dreams with knowledge and experience and to respect wilderness rather than try to conquer it.

Peter Harmathy

North York, Ontario, Canada

Krakauer skillfully reminds us that the wilderness is not a place to lose ourselves in order to find ourselves. McCandless's death was perhaps a humble reconciliation with what it means to be human in the context of wild spaces far larger than we are.

Laura A. Freshman

Prescott, Arizona

How many of us, like Chris McCandless and the young man who dissipates the Maze in Ed Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, have wandered our own outbacks, clearly without a death wish but naively oblivious to the potential pain to those who love us? But then God loves a fool, and most of us have survived our own recklessness. I'm grateful to have made it through my own attempts to peer over the edge and solve life's riddles in a single bound.

Tom Hoopingarner

Breckenridge, Colorado

I take exception to the premise of Krakauer's story: I don't admire people who suffer from willful ignorance of the land and Chris McCandless seems like a classic example. Close calls are part of the deal; they're hardly news. In Alaska I've run into several McCandless types--idealistic, energetic young guys who overestimate themselves, underestimate the country, and end up in trouble. They've become almost cliché. I'd also have to say that there was a world of difference between McCandless, with his pseudoliterary, narcissistic sense of melodrama, and the papar who sailed to Iceland and Greenland: Those Irish monks didn't blab nonstop in bars over what they'd done or take a series of self-portraits in their scary little tubs.

Nick Jans

Ambler Alaska

I've had adventures and tested myself in my lifetime, but never have I understood the urge, romantic as it sounds, to be minimalistic. To venture forth into unfamiliar environments ill-prepared in intellect, experience, or equipment and immediately immerse oneself in subsistence is to court disaster.

Richard V. Simon

Newport Beach, California

Krakauer did a magnificent job of communicating McCandless's existential struggle. McCandless wanted to be independent of people, but he was dependent on nature--even the most self-reliant among us still needs air, warmth, food, and water. So his search for independence was ultimately suicidal, since death is the only way we can no longer be dependent on this world. After similar searchings myself, I've realized that spiritual awakenings ironically occur among people, not apart from them.

John Shaughnessy

Boston, Massachusetts

In many cultures the asceticism of the young, through their vision quests into the wild, bridges the gap between idealism and reality, adolescence and adulthood. McCandless was young and foolish and never returned to share his vision, but at least he was a seeker. Krakauer should be thanked for reminding us to keep looking.

James V. Murphy

Fargo, North Dakota