

Hans Grim

Only Real When Shared

After the emotional experience of reading McCarthy's *The Road*¹ I was not excited about reading another book centering around an ill fated journey and early death. *The Road* was particularly emotional for me because I resonated so much with the father/son dynamic portrayed there and could feel the pain of the son losing his most important companion. I finished the book in a chair on the third floor of the West library minutes before class and found myself a total emotional wreck for the first thirty minutes of class. One classmate thought I was stoned.

This theme of the effect of losing a family member is revisited in Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, but from a different angle and not in the way you might suppose at first glance. We find out that McCandless dies in the opening pages of the book and I feel no remorse for him. It is not that I think he deserved death as some punishment, but rather that I had no time to become emotionally involved with his character. Even after having read the book in its entirety I still have no deep feelings of sadness for McCandless. It is with the living that my empathy runs hottest. At every turn in McCandless' journey perfect strangers fall all over themselves to provide for what they perceive as a deficiency of parental nurturing. The first flicker of this theme comes from Jan Burres when she defends her mothering tendencies by saying, "...because of what happened [with her] own son... ...I'd want someone to look after him like I tried to do with Alex² (aka Chris McCandless)." It is Franz's reawakened paternal instincts that send me towards despair though. There is no greater example of the level of intensity with which people want to parent McCandless than when Franz ultimately asks Chris to allow him to adopt him.³ It is for these souls that I feel so much pity. Of course meeting

¹Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (Kindle Edition 2006) Location 1622

²Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (iBooks edition) Location 122/603

³ Krakauer, 159/603

McCandless' father clinches it when his opening line to Krakauer is, "How is it that a kid with so much compassion could cause his parents so much pain?" I suppose that is the biggest question I struggle with in reading this book. I don't think McCandless is crazy for wanting to adventure out in Alaska. I get that. What I don't understand is his refusal to allow others to show him nurturing love and compassion. He leaves in his wake countless souls aching to share happiness with him. It is actually possible McCandless began to realize the effect he was having and the value of sharing his life with others as exhibited in his scribbling notation, "HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED".⁴ Perhaps this is part of what he was searching for when he traveled to Alaska. Perhaps that's why he was ready to leave. Unfortunately he was unable to put into practice this philosophical discovery.

⁴ Krakauer, 544/603