

DVD Select: A civilized society can learn much from 'Into the Wild'

by Robert_J_Hawkins

In the end, the wisdom he was seeking came for Christopher McCandless. But in the end, young McCandless died alone and starving aboard the battered and abandoned old bus No. 142 of the Fairbanks City Transit System, a ways off in the Alaska wilderness.

The wisdom? That happiness is only real when shared.

'INTO THE WILD' - Emile Hirsch plays Chris McCandless in the much-acclaimed Sean Penn-directed drama 'Into the Wild.' CNS Photo courtesy of Chuck Zlotnick. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin That is the tragic irony of the superb "Into the Wild" (Paramount, 4 stars) the true story of a young man who wandered the country for two years in search of his own soul, only to die of starvation in the Alaskan wilds. Sean Penn wrote and directed this Oscar-nominated film.

McCandless, played by a most engaging Emile Hirsch, slipped the bonds of society and parental expectations almost immediately after graduating from Emory University in 1990. He donated his \$24,000 college fund to Oxfam, pocketed the remaining \$500 and took off in his beat-up Datsun.

Along the way he abandoned the car, burned the money and changed his name to the fanciful Alexander

Supertramp. "I don't need money," McCandless wrote. "It makes people cautious."

McCandless was putting some distance between himself and painful memories of a childhood dominated by raging, abusive and manipulative parents (William Hurt and Marcia Gay Harden) but also a beloved sister Carine (Jena Malone). It is Carine who provides much of the narrative for this story, based on the book by Jon Krakauer.

As wounded psychologically as McCandless was, he seemed to touch many people and heal a few hearts along the way, like the hippie couple Rainey (Brian Dierker) and Jan (Catherine Keener), the Colorado gypsy combine driver Wayne Westerberg (Vince Vaughn), the teenage singer/songwriter Tracy (Kristen Stewart) and the Army vet Ron Franz (Hal Holbrook in an Oscar-nominated performance) who lost both wife and son in a car crash.

For the better part of two years, McCandless knocked around the West. He hitched rides. He hopped trains. He paddled a kayak down the Colorado River to the Sea of Cortez and then walked back across the U.S. border. He drove a combine in the grain fields of eastern Colorado, worked in a Burger King for a while and mostly counted on the kindness of strangers.

Which is not to say that McCandless was a leech. He had an outsized personality that infused people with a greater appreciation of their own life. He was a seeker who opened the eyes of others to the beauty, spontaneity and love around them.

"If we admit that human life can be ruled by reason," he once said, "then the possibility of life is destroyed."

McCandless' relationship with the aging Ron Franz, a reclusive desert town dweller, is among the most touching. Ron came to look upon McCandless like a grandson and taught him leather crafting. McCandless, in turn, drew the gentle old man out of the emotional shell into which he'd retreated after the death of his wife and son.

Even by his absence, McCandless affected others. His sister observes that their anguished parents, with no communication for over a year from their son, became "people softened by the self-reflection that comes with loss."

Alaska's wilderness called relentlessly to McCandless and he did not enter it blindly. He prepared physically for the ordeal and learned what he could of survival techniques. He walked in with a tent, rifle, backpack, bag of rice and the necessary tools for survival and reflection. That he happened upon the bus was serendipity. It was a rough but somewhat idyllic existence for a while. McCandless' succumbing had more to do with the misfortunate consumption of poisonous plants that affected his nerves and kidneys, leaving him weak and partially paralyzed.

It is hard to watch this emotionally stirring story and not reflect on your own values, relationship with your children and material attachments. Christopher McCandless, through his all too brief life, is still working a magical effect upon those who encounter him.

In an awards season of violent films, this one stands apart as a stimulating and healing experience. A tragic story, lovingly told. Don't let it slip out of your Netflix queue.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium" (Fox) A magical tale about, well, a magical toy store owned for these 100 years by Mr. Magorium (Dustin Hoffman) who, upon turning something past 243 years old is ready to pass on the store to his loyal sales manager Molly Mahoney (Natalie Portman). The store itself isn't crazy about the transfer and expresses its displeasure in odd ways. Miss Mahoney must learn confidence to gain the upper hand.

"My Kid Could Paint That" (Sony) Intriguing documentary about a child prodigy who paints canvases in a style reminiscent of Jackson Pollock - maybe, or maybe not with the help of her father. Her works were sold for around \$300,000 - not bad for a 4-year-old girl.

"Things We Lost in the Fire" (Paramount) The recently widowed Audrey Burke (Halle Berry) invites her husband's best friend Jerry (Benicio Del Toro) to come live with her and her two kids. Jerry is wrestling with his own demons and in conquering his problems, teaches Audrey and her kids how to let go and deal with their own loss.

IT CAME FROM TV

Corbin Bleu keeps the teen throbs up in season two of Disney's "Flight 29 Down"; more aliens and more action in season three of Cartoon Network's "Ben 10"; the TLC Channel packs four home improvement shows into "Trading Spaces: The Specials"; a Dr. Seuss classic is brought to animated life "Horton Hears A Who!" with narration by Hans Conried under the direction of animator Chuck Jones; also, "Archie's Funhouse: The Complete Series."

The complete first and second seasons of "Perfect Strangers"; come a board "The Love Boat" season one, volume one; season eight of the beloved detective series "Magnum P.I.," also the last season.

FROM THE VAULTS

Incredibly, "12 Angry Men" from MGM was Sidney Lumet's directorial debut - and that was 50 years ago. This tense jury room drama stars Henry Fonda, Jack Warden, Martin Balsam, Ed Begley and Jack Klugman. The 50th anniversary edition includes two new features on the making of the movie.

Another fine director's tribute box debuts this week: The "Billy Wilder Film Collection" from MGM. While this package holds only a fraction of the 60 films by Wilder, it is a representative edition. There are two of the four films Wilder claims on the American Film Institute's Top 100 list: the Marilyn Monroe/Tony Curtis/Jack Lemmon comedy "Some Like It Hot" (14th) and the Jack Lemmon/Shirley MacLaine romp "The Apartment" (93rd and winner of five Oscars). Walter Matthau and Lemmon work an injury scam in "The Fortune Cookie" and Dean Martin is caught between Las Vegas and L.A. with Kim Novak in "Kiss Me, Stupid." The man knew funny.

Warner Home Video introduces a new batch of so-called pre-production code era films with the debut of "TCM Archives: Forbidden Hollywood Volume 2." The three-disc box contains five sassy and taboo pics: Norma Shearer in her Best Actress-winning role as "The Divorcee" as well as in "A Free Soul" with Lionel Barrymore and Clark Gable; Bette Davis, Joan Blondell and Ann Dvorak are in "Three on a Match" along with "Female" starring Ruth Chatterton as a no-nonsense CEO. On Disc 3: drama "Night Nurse," which stars Barbara Stanwyck with a very young Clark Gable. There's also a new documentary feature "Thou Shalt Not: Sex, Sin and Censorship in Pre-Code Hollywood."

Robin Williams is still sensational as the title character in "Mrs. Doubtfire: Behind-the-Seams Special Edition" with Sally Field as his estranged wife, Pierce Brosnan as her beau and Harvey Fierstein as the man who makes Williams the woman he is today in this very funny comedy. Loads of fresh extras accompany the 15-year-old film, including an interview with Williams.

Disney unleashes the hounds, or Dalmatians, for the first time in a decade with the two-disc DVD debut of the animated feature "101 Dalmatians: Platinum Edition."

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