Movie Review: `Into the Wild'

by James Hebert

As the words of Chris McCandless' favorite writers float throughâ€•Into the Wild,â€• it's tempting to think a different literary diet might have saved the doomed adventurer from starvation in Alaska. Less Byron; more Darwin.

'INTO THE WILD' - It's a tough but beautiful trek for Chris (Emile Hirsch) in Sean Penn's northern wilderness drama 'Into the Wild.' CNS Photo courtesy of Paramount Vantage. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) But the quotes from Thoreau, Tolstoy, Byron and others fit beautifully into the movie, an ambitious and evocative biography that at times achieves a poetry all its own. Sean Penn's film about McCandless, the young wanderer who died in 1992 after stranding himself in the Alaskan bush, shares some of its subject's grandiose notions. It feels drunk on nature and the romance of loneliness, and its busy, almost baroque structure (including quasi-mystical Å chapter titles) reflects the self-conscious drama in McCandless's journals and other writings.

The movie, based on Jon Krakauer's 1996 book, also is sympathetic to the point of nearly beatifying the late 24-year-old. It depicts McCandless as a bold searcher whose ideas leave an unmistakably spiritual impression on the people he encounters during two years on the road.

He's like Buddha in hiking boots. Or, as one character asks him half-jokingly: â€œYou're not Jesus, are you?â€•

It's true that some now look upon the real-life McCandless as a romantic hero and a martyr to the cause of self-discovery. It's also true that others (particularly Alaskans) see him as a clueless goofball whose demise was as avoidable as it was predictable.

But Penn's version of the man works because it presents McCandless as a vivid original, a dreamer who's like some cross between Quixote and a bulldog.

As McCandless, Emile Hirsch is a natural at evoking the character's guileless charm, but also at conveying the simmering rage that helped drive McCandless from his family and (ultimately) to Alaska. (Hirsch memorably played another real-life angry rebel, 1970's skateboarder Jay Adams, in 2005's â€œLords of Dogtown.â€•)

Though Hirsch carries the movie, he's backed by a strong cast: Marcia Gay Harden and William Hurt as his battling, status-minded parents, Catherine Keener and Brian Dierker (a non-actor originally hired as a river guide) as a pair of latter-day hippies who become Chris' surrogate parents; Vince Vaughan as a Midwestern farm boss who hires McCandless and eventually becomes his sole pen pal. (For authenticity's sake, Vaughan might've lost the circa-1996 goatee.)

Some of the richest scenes are between Hirsch and Hal Holbrook, who plays an aging widower living out his days in the Anza-Borrego desert. There's an ease between them that speaks deeply of the characters' mutual yearning to salvage a sense of family.

Jena Malone's voice-overs as Chris' sister, Carine, link his ill-fated quest to the troubles back home. Though Carine was close to her brother, neither she nor her parents knew where McCandless was for two years â€¦ from the time he gave away his $24,000 law-school fund to charity and disappeared, to the day his body was found in the hulk of an old bus used as a hunters' shelter.

Between the layers of narration and the way Penn skitters back and forth in time from Alaska to McCandless' earlier journeys, the storytelling can feel a little overcooked. Eddie Vedder's moody, understated music helps unify things, and the quiet drama of the film's natural scenery illuminates McCandless' mental landscape.

There's a striking final image of Hirsch's sallow, scraggle-bearded face turned up to the sky, a slight smile on his lips. Maybe McCandless did find what he wanted, Penn seems to suggest. All it cost him was everything.

Director: Sean Penn. Writers: Sean Penn, Jon Krakauer. Cast: Emile Hirsch, Catherine Keener, Vince Vaughan, William Hurt, Marcia Gay Harden, Jena Malone, Hal Holbrook, Kristen Stewart, Brian Dierker. Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes. Rated R. 3 1/2 stars.

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