

JON KRAKAUER

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Jon Krakauer (“Krakauer” being a synonym for Cracovian [Foster 151]) was born in 1954 in Brookline, Massachusetts (Marquis Who’s Who). His father, Lewis, was born in Brooklyn in 1927, but he studied medicine in Brookline and then moved to Corvallis, Oregon, with his wife Carol Ann to work and raise his son (150-51). Lewis Krakauer passed on his interest in mountaineering, his “love of the outdoors”, and his “gift for writing” (Lewis was the occasional editor of *The Year Book of Sports Medicine*) to Jon, even though he had not a perfectly stable relationship with him (151-52). Jon’s father was an atheist Jewish person, and his mother was a Unitarian Scandinavian woman, so Jon had “no religion to speak of” as a child and claimed that he was “envious of his Mormon friends’ conviction” (Speaker Jon Krakauer).

He went to Corvallis High School and then to Hampshire College, Massachusetts, where he graduated in Environmental Studies (MA) in 1972 (Krakauer, Jon 1954- | Encyclopedia.Com). He got married in 1980 with former climber Linda Mariam Moore and has lived with her in Boulder, Colorado, since the release of his book *Into Thin Air* (Miller). Before he started writing, Krakauer was a carpenter for a few years, then a fisherman in Alaska, and claimed he only “became a writer because [he] was broke” and “needed to pay the bills” (Speaker Jon Krakauer). He began as a freelance writer of articles on various topics (often on demand) ranging from mountaineering—his main hobby—to architecture, which were published in magazines such as *Outside*, *National Geographic*, *Rolling Stone*, *Architectural Digest*, or *Smithsonian*.

His first “real” book (*Eiger Dreams* [1990] is a collection of articles and essays, most of which were previously published in the magazines *Outside*, *Smithsonian*, and *New Age Journal*), *Into the Wild*, was published in 1996 and was a commercial success. In addition, it introduced Krakauer’s idiosyncratic narrative techniques, which have remained throughout his career. One of them is the intimate connection that he establishes with his subjects and with the people about whom he writes, which occasionally results in passages that build on his own personal experience. Because of the overall journalistic or biographical (and not autobiographical) approach of his work, this practice has sometimes earned him criticism. *Into the Wild*, for example, includes introspective

sections about his successful ascents of mountains (e.g., the two chapters entitled “The Stikine Ice Cap”), whereas the book revolves around the story of Chris McCandless, an idealistic young man who dropped out of college to embark on a journey to lead a self-reliant life in the Alaskan wilderness. Krakauer argued that McCandless reminded him of himself, and that the autobiographical passages of his book were aimed at helping the readers to also better understand the complexity of McCandless’s motivation and character (Speaker Jon Krakauer). Christopher Lehmann-Haupt wrote in *The New York Times* that the “Stikine Ice Cap” chapters were “among the most moving chapters of the book” and that Krakauer managed to transform the clichés that *Into the Wild* promotes (e.g., the romantic rejection of an artificial life in society and the resulting individual’s isolation in a presumably more “real” wilderness) into a “heart-rending drama of human yearning” (Lehmann-Haupt). Krakauer also uses epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter in the form of quotations from other writers, philosophers, or personalities. Considering McCandless’s affinities with the American transcendentalist movement, *Into the Wild*’s chapters often begin with quotes from the likes of Henry David Thoreau or John Muir, an ingenious and poetic way of referring to the book’s central theme, especially since most of the quotes were highlighted in McCandless’s copies of these authors’ works. In a 2019 interview, Krakauer claimed that *Into the Wild* was his favorite book, and that he enjoyed writing it even though he usually prefers doing the research rather than the writing (Speaker Jon Krakauer). *Into the Wild* was adapted in 2007 to a critically acclaimed -- although it probably overromanticizes McCandless’s story -- movie of the same name directed by Sean Penn. Seven years later, McCandless’s sister Carine published her memoir, *The Wild Truth* (2014), which validated many of the claims and information mentioned in Krakauer’s book while adding some other biographical details to the story. While some critics have deplored the clichés that can be identified in the book, calling it, for example, “an uncomfortable queasy [...], very North American [story]” (Jamie), others have praised the structure of Krakauer’s narrative as “not only both thoughtful and thorough, but compelling as well”, and have emphasized its relevance to the history of U.S. literature and culture (Stevenson).

While *Into the Wild* ends with the mysteries surrounding McCandless’s death, Krakauer’s second book, published the next year, draws on another tragic event that is explicitly mentioned in the title: *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster* (1997). *Into Thin Air* is Krakauer’s cathartic book and attempt to show, by means of his own 1996 traumatic climb of the Everest (which Krakauer regrets, describing it as a “terrible” and “horrifying experience” [Speaker Jon Krakauer]), that climbing is “idealized risk-taking”, and that most mountaineers do not realize its dangers (Krakauer, *Into Thin Air* 287). Such a romanticization of mountaineering is also, Krakauer suggests, promoted by the gradual transformation of ascents into hazardous and competitive “money-making ventures” (25), which, as Roberta Garner argues, is masterfully rendered in Krakauer’s “explicit, hard-hitting analysis” (Garner). Apart from the controversy surrounding his fellow climbers, which has been commented on by Anatoli Boukreev in his book *The Climb* (1997) and by Galen Rowell in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Into Thin Air* has been said to be one of the author’s best works, partly because of its rigorous attention to facts (Steck). The 2015

movie adaption of the story, *Everest*, which depicts Krakauer as “the writer who stays in his tent while his climbing teammates are marooned in a blizzard” did not reach such an attention and was highly criticized by Krakauer himself (Kaufman).

As Jim Steck writes, Krakauer’s next book *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (2003) confirms the author’s interest in “extremism” (201). Krakauer himself, however, would probably deny this claim inasmuch as he just tends to write stories with which he has or had at some point a personal connection (Speaker Jon Krakauer). As previously mentioned, Krakauer had no religious upbringing and was somehow jealous of his high school friends’ strong Mormon beliefs. As a result, he decided to write this book “to grasp the nature of religious belief” (Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven* 335), although it eventually turned out to be about the history of Mormons and about the violence perpetuated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Again, Krakauer’s achievement is comparable to that of his previous works, partly because he maintains “the same plain, candid style” (Steck 200). If he presents himself as an agnostic who “do[esn’t] even know if God exists” (Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven* 340), Krakauer underlines the dangers to which religious fundamentalism can lead, or, as he writes: “Faith is the very antithesis of reason, injudiciousness a crucial component of spiritual devotion. And when religious fanaticism supplants ratiocination, all bets are suddenly off. Anything can happen” (xxiii). Krakauer’s account of the 1984 Utah v. Lafferty murder case is one among the many examples he provides of the dominant power relations that organized religion can establish (e.g., through polygamy, also called “celestial marriage”, “spiritual wifery”, and “plural marriage” in Mormonism [Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven* 118]). The book received expected criticism from religious figures such as Richard E. Turley, managing director of the Family and Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Craig L. Foster, who both accused him of fostering stereotypes about Mormons and pointed out a number of both valid—which Krakauer corrected in a subsequent edition of the text—and questionable factual errors while openly criticizing Krakauer’s arguments. Krakauer responds to Turley’s criticism in the latest edition of the text. The book has been generally considered as convincing and “fascinating”, despite a structure that may appear as “lumpy” or “rambling” (Hayes) and therefore not as effective as his previous compelling works. In 2022, *Under the Banner of Heaven* was adapted to a TV series of the same name which, although generally welcomed by critics, did not please certain Mormons who claimed that it misrepresents their people as “a threat to the American project” (Coppins).

Reviewers, critics, scholars, and Krakauer himself have acknowledged the polemical and controversial aspects of his work. Two other notable works align with these aspects: *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman* (2009), and *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town* (2015). The first book echoes Chris McCandless’s story, and more specifically Krakauer’s demystification of “society’s desire for heroes” (Lingle 33). To investigate the death of this famous football player, Krakauer went as far as to go to Afghanistan and experience war, even though he never found the evidence that would be compelling enough to prove that it was friendly

fire that killed Tillman (Speaker Jon Krakauer). Arguably, the book shows compellingly enough that “Tillman’s comrades kill[ed] him, and nearly all levels of military and government leadership conspire[d] to hide the tragedy” (Lingle 33). As its title makes clear, *Missoula* deals with another important issue that is conveyed with facts and details that are not always easy to read. Because of the seriousness of this issue, the book has not been exempt of criticism, which would mainly shed light on its focus on one case study in Montana or on its “one-side and biased” stance “in favor of the victims” (Flores et al. 231–32). *Missoula* exemplifies, however, Krakauer’s willingness (and fearlessness when it comes) to scrutinize controversial topics, which translates here to a successful contribution “to the ongoing discussion regarding sexual assault” (Wood 3).

Krakauer published three other non-fiction works during his career as a book writer (*Three Cups of Deceit: How Greg Mortenson, Humanitarian Hero, Lost His Way* [2011], *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* [2018], and *Classic Krakauer: Essays on Wilderness and Risk* [2019]), which he said has now ended. “I’m 66, about to turn 67”, Krakauer says in a 2021 interview, “I’m not writing any more books. I’m done. I want to spend what good years I have left not in my basement obsessing over sentences that are painful to write. I want to write less, live more” (Krakauer, Jon Krakauer on the 25th Anniversary of ‘Into the Wild’). It is perhaps not accidental that his last book is entitled *Classic Krakauer* insofar as it gathers a series of essays that best illustrate his taste for wilderness and risk, but also his commitment to unveiling the many contradictions that have shaped American (white) culture and fascinated the scholars who still study and critique it.

Despite the many awards that he received, which include the Walter Sullivan Award for Excellence in Science Journalism in 1997 and an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1999 (Marquis Who’s Who), and the fact that most of his books became bestsellers, few literary scholars have written about his nonfiction, with the exception of five of them who mainly discuss intertextuality (e.g., references to Jack London and Henry Thoreau) or adventure narration in *Into the Wild* and/or *Into Thin Air* (Lehman; Raskin; Hanssen; Vera; Hustis). His body of work, however, epitomizes the successfully original marriage between meticulous fact-based journalism and creative, stylistically rich narrative writing. Krakauer touched on serious and complicated subjects that have so far remained understudied and made them both accessible to the general audience and interesting from a literary perspective. Besides, he wrote about the lives of people who were (or have become thanks to his work) cultural icons or heroes, as well as about faith and existential questions, leading readers always a little bit closer to the truth(s) that many of them keep seeking in literature.

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