Does 'The Wild Truth' Tell the True Story of Chris McCandless?

An explosive memoir by Carine McCandless provides new details about a toxic family environment that drove her brother to embark on the famous and fatal quest immortalized by Jon Krakauer's Into the Wild



The Wild Truth, the new memoir by Carine McCandless, is rough going at times. The book covers many years and a lot of ground, and much of it is emotionally powerful in a positive way, including new details that Carine offers about what the late Christopher McCandless was like as a brother. (Short answer: loving and protective.) But this family history features a startling amount of toxic behavior, most of it coming from Carine's and Chris's parents, Walt and Billie McCandless. Carine describes them as a pair who, at their best, were good providers and fun, caring people. But at their worst, she writes, they were cruel and abusive, and this side of them was on display all too frequently when the kids were growing up in El Segundo, California, and, later, Annandale, Virginia.

According to Carine, Walt was a violent bully who drank heavily and sometimes flew into rages that ended with whippings and beatings for his wife and children. Billie was the primary victim, Carine writes, but she was also a victimizer, belittling and betraying both kids at crucial junctures. A vivid example occurred a week after Carine graduated

from high school in 1989, when she came home from a date just before a household curfew. Walt, she writes, was waiting for her at the door, intoxicated, and he jerked her violently into the house.

"My feet crossed over the threshold without touching it," she writes, "my sandals falling to the floor as he lifted me by the neck and shoulders, repeatedly slamming me against the wall. A deep, fierce roar escaped him as he threw me onto the couch and trapped me under his weight." Walt soon let Carine go, but not before putting his hands around her throat and calling her a "f*** b***." Billie was away that night, at a family beach house in Maryland. Carine says that when she got Billie on the phone and told her what had happened, her mother said: "You know what, Carine? I think you're a lying b***."

The book also explores in great detail another McCandless family drama: the fact that Chris and Carine were illegitimate. In the early 1960s, when Walt was working at Hughes Aircraft in southern California, he was married to a woman named Marcia, with whom he eventually had six children. Billie worked at Hughes as a secretary, and she and Walt began having an affair. For years, Walt kept two households: one for Marcia and her kids, one for Billie, Chris, and Carine. Chris was born to Billie in 1968, only three months after Marcia had given birth to a fifth child, a boy named Shannon. Quinn McCandless, Walt and Marcia's sixth child, was born in 1969. Carine, the youngest of Walt's eight children, was born to Billie in 1971. Walt and Billie finally married a few years after Marcia divorced Walt in 1972.

This second family proved to be a godsend for Carine over the long haul—she's close with them still—but the legacy of abuse and deception weighed heavily on Chris, and one of the driving points of *The Wild Truth* is that his famous, ultimately fatal journey of adventure and discovery was motivated in large part by a desire to escape his parents, a theme that will be familiar to anyone who saw Sean Penn's film version of *Into the Wild*, released in 2007. But Carine's new book fleshes out the causes of Chris's actions with much more detail and impact. "People think they understand our story because they know how his ended," she writes, "but they don't know how it all began."



Finally, the book includes another fascinating piece of backstory, unknown until now: Carine told Jon Krakauer, author of 1996's best selling *Into the Wild*, about Walt and Billie's flaws when he was researching his book. At the time, Carine wasn't ready to go public with this information, and she asked Krakauer to keep that part of the story private. In a foreword to *The Wild Truth*, he says that honoring this promise was no problem—journalists keep information off the record all the time. In addition, he writes: "I shared Carine's desire to avoid causing undue pain to Walt, Billie, and Carine's siblings from Walt's first marriage."

Krakauer also thought people would be able to grasp, from "indirect clues" in his narrative, that Chris's behavior during his final years was explained by "the volatile dynamics" of his upbringing.

"Many readers did understand this, as it turned out," Krakauer writes. "But many did not. A lot of people came away from reading Into the Wild without grasping why Chris did what he did. Lacking explicit facts, they concluded that he was merely self-absorbed, unforgivably cruel to his parents, mentally ill, suicidal, and/or witless."

The Wild Truth will be published on November 11, and what remains to be seen is how Walt and Billie respond to a work that purports to lay everything bare and could be extremely damaging to their reputations. They have made only one blanket public statement so far, in response to a request from ABC's *20/20* that they comment for a segment about *The Wild Truth* that aired on November 7.

"After a brief review of its contents and intention, we concluded that this fictionalized writing has absolutely nothing to do with our beloved son, Chris, or his character," they wrote. "The whole unfortunate event in Chris's life 22 years ago is about Chris and his dreams—not a spiteful, hyped up, attention-getting story about his family." Walt and Billie declined a request from *Outside* to comment further on the book.

In advance of *The Wild Truth*'s release, Carine McCandless spoke with *Outside* editorial director Alex Heard about the what, why, and why now of a memoir that seems destined to arrive with a bang.