in medias res

Understanding and comparing Krakauer’s and Penn’s openings to Into the Wild.

in medias res - a Greek storytelling tradition of ‘starting in the middle’ of the story.

Tasks

Read through the text extract and re-watch the opening sequence from the film, then complete the tasks below.

Task 1: How does Krakauer’s opening present Christopher McCandless? Find details from the text to support your answer.

Task 3: Look at the opening of the film. How does the music, setting and camera angle create a sense of adventure?

Task 4: Look at the description of setting in the text extract. How does this present the Alaskan wilderness?

Task 5: Both the film and the book begin in medias res. This technique was used in epic Greek poetry that involved long journeys by great heroes (Iliad and Odyssey for example). Why might both Krakauer and Penn have borrowed this feature? How does it portray McCandless? What details are there in each text to support your interpretation?

Extract A - Chapter 1, Into the Wild

Jim Gallien had driven four miles out of Fairbanks when he spotted the hitchhiker standing in the snow beside the road, thumb raised high, shivering in the gray Alaska dawn. He didn’t appear to be very old: eighteen, maybe nineteen at most. A rifle protruded from the young man’s backpack, but he looked friendly enough; a hitchhiker with a Remington semiautomatic isn’t the sort of thing that gives motorists pause in the forty-ninth state. Gallien steered his truck onto the shoulder and told the kid to climb in. The hitchhiker swung his pack into the bed of the Ford and introduced himself as Alex. “Alex?” Gallien responded, fishing for a last name. “Just Alex,” the young man replied, pointedly rejecting the bait. Five feet seven or eight with a wiry build, he claimed to be twenty-four years old and said he was from South Dakota. He explained that he wanted a ride as far as the edge of Denali National Park, where he intended to walk deep into the bush and “live off the land for a few months.”

Gallien, a union electrician, was on his way to Anchorage, 240 miles beyond Denali on the George Parks Highway; he told Alex he’d drop him off wherever he wanted. Alex’s backpack looked as though it weighed only twenty-five or thirty pounds, which struck Gallien—an accomplished hunter and woodsman—as an improbably light load for a stay of several months in the back-country, especially so early in the spring. “He wasn’t carrying anywhere near as much food and gear as you’d expect a guy to be carrying for that kind of trip,” Gallien recalls.

The sun came up. As they rolled down from the forested ridges above the Tanana River, Alex gazed across the expanse of windswept muskeg stretching to the south. Gallien wondered whether he’d picked up one of those crackpots from the lower forty-eight who come north to live out ill-considered Jack London fantasies. Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing.

Key Concept

Both Krakauer’s novel and Penn’s film start with the same opening moment - Chris McCandless’ last interaction with a human being before death. How does this structural choice to start in the middle of the story affect our understanding of character?