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"If Ever There Was Someone to Keep Me at Home": Theorizing Screen Representations of Siblinghood Through a Case Study of *Into the Wild* (2007)

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Introduction

Narratives of siblinghood on screen are both ubiquitous and under-discussed. Film and television abound with narratives of sibling discontent, sacrifice, and rivalry. Themes of mistaken identity, childhood separation, and incest, with their roots in theater and literature, remain prevalent.[1] Just as often, siblinghood is not an overt aspect of the narrative but a benign backdrop to broader family dramas. To date, however, little sustained work exists on the representation of sibling relationships on screen. Nor have the ways that siblinghood is modeled in these images been sufficiently interrogated. Accordingly, this article re-centers discussion of the sibling relationship through an examination of the film *Into the Wild* (Dir. Sean Penn 2007).

The film is an adaptation of part of Jon Krakauer's 1996[2] nonfiction work of the same name. Krakauer's[3] book explores themes of adventure, travel, and the transcendent lure of the outdoors, focusing particularly on the story of Christopher McCandless,[4] a young American man who, after graduating from Emory University in 1990, turned his back on conventionality and traveled across the United States in search of nature and adventure. McCandless'[5] eventual destination was the Alaskan wilderness, where he aimed to live off the land—and where he died in the summer of 1992, at age 24. By design, his quest was (in real life) and is (on screen) largely solitary. Chris—later choosing the name Alexander Supertramp—ceases contact with his parents, whom he regards as superficial and emotionally abusive, and forms various transitory relationships on his travels. These include the hippie couple Jan (Catherine Keener) and Rainey

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(Brian Dierker), teenager Tracy (Kristen Stewart), Wayne (Vince Vaughn), a grain elevator owner who employs Chris, and retired veteran Ron (Hal Holbrook), with whom Chris forges an ersatz father–son bond. There remains one relationship that spans almost Chris's entire existence, from childhood to his death: that with his sister, Carine (Jena Malone). Chris and Carine's relationship effectively bookends the film, from early scenes in which they celebrate Chris's graduation to the closing caption, which details Carine's final commitment to her brother as she flies to Alaska to collect his ashes and transport them home in her rucksack.

The choice of *Into the Wild* as the focus of this discussion recognizes its compelling representation of a sibling relationship between adolescence and adulthood. As such, it functions as an instructive case study through which to examine a number of key aspects of screened sibling representation, not least the inherent unease that frequently surrounds close adult brother–sister bonds and the on-screen separation that often occurs as a form of safety valve against concerns of incest. This focus is also a useful example through which to consider the construction of siblings as soulmates and their role as a buffer against failed parental figures. Although by no means the only screen example of such concerns, it does provide a concrete text through which to begin discussing wider issues and tropes of sibling representation. Accordingly, it is the main text under discussion here; where instructive, other screen examples are noted.

Although sibling relationships are commonly represented on screen, they are less frequently the central narrative focus. Indeed, on the surface *Into the Wild* is not a film about siblinghood, foregrounding as it does Chris's individual experience and reinforcing his self-imposed familial exile. The film is frequently perceived as a narrative of self-discovery, what critic A. O. Scott[6] suggests is an "Emersonian … project" in which Hirsch's Chris is variously labeled as an "idealist,"[7] a "heroic loner,"[8]or else "self-indulgent"[9] and "self-contain[ed]."[10] Both the film and its critical reception reinforce the isolated nature of Chris's quest and his ultimate skepticism of relying on others as a source of fulfillment ("You're wrong if you think that the joy of life comes principally from human relationships," he tells Ron as he strikes out into the wilderness). Despite this perception, the film's negotiation of the sibling relationship remains both compelling and revealing. This article excavates Chris and Carine's relationship from the edges of the film and demonstrates how the brother–sister bond is central to *Into the Wild*. It draws on existing psychological research into sibling identity and relationships to better understand the representation of siblinghood, the conflicts underlying this representation, and the curious absence of enduring scholarship on contemporary cultural images of siblings. In particular, this article examines the tension between closeness and

loss and the anxiety inherent in a primary bond between adult brothers and sisters that is so frequently interrupted in contemporary narratives of siblinghood, whether through separation, illness, or death. Using a contemporary discourse of soulmates, the article also explores the potential for new ways of modeling siblinghood. In doing so, it aims to address a long-standing gap in analyses of film representation. Although numerous scholars discuss cinematic representations of motherhood),[11] fatherhood,[12] and childhood,[13] little work exists that focuses on the representation of brothers and sisters in any form. The interdisciplinary approach taken here opens a variety of avenues for discussion, foregrounding the sibling relationship within a field that has, traditionally, cleaved to the Freudian tradition of prioritizing the Oedipal relationship.

The preoccupation with the vertical relationship between parents and children at the expense of the lateral-horizontal sibling bond is well-documented in the psychotherapeutic, psychological, and sociological literature of sibling studies.[14] The continued dominance of the Oedipal model, with its insistence on the ability of the parental relationship to shape a child's psyche, leaves little space to consider the role of a sibling in this same identity development. Even when "sibling interaction" is investigated it may be theorized as "displacement for a deeper Oedipal pattern," with "brothers and sisters … regarded as pale reflections of the central parental drama."[15] In a model that privileges the parent–child dyad, siblings have often been sidelined or subsumed into this same structure.

Studies of film and representation are often similarly indebted to Freudian psychoanalysis, and so largely maintain this preoccupation. Cinema's fascination with the family as an audience[16] and as a subject[17] is undeniable, and the complexities of familial relations ensure that it remains a source of rich narrative investigation. However, though sibling relationships are ubiquitous on screen, and, although "ties with sisters and brothers are likely to be the longest-standing ones that we have," critical consideration of their representation has been slow to emerge.[18]

One notable exception is Barbara Jane Brickman's analysis of the sibling dynamic in slasher films.[19] Brickman notes that Oedipal readings of slasher films have routinely overvalued the slasher-killer figure as a parental proxy at the expense of interrogating the genre's frequent recourse to sibling dynamics.[20] This dynamic includes the pairing of a murderous brother and victimized sister (*Halloween* [Dir. John Carpenter 1978], *Sorority House Massacre* [Dir. Carol Frank 1986]), the figure of a vengeful sibling (*Prom Night* [Dir. Paul Lynch 1980]), or the death of one or both of a sibling pair (*Night of the Living Dead* [Dir. George A. Romero 1968], *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [Dir. Tobe Hooper 1974]). In *Halloween*, 6-year-old Michael Myers's first victim is his teenage sister Judith. Her murder results

in Michael's incarceration in a psychiatric hospital, his release from which marks the beginning of his killing spree as an adult. However, despite this initial act of sororicide, the sibling dynamic is seldom discussed in relation to *Halloween*. Brickman's specific point—that Michael is "never just a *brother*"[21] but rather pressed into service as a surrogate for, variously, patriarchal anger, a nation in crisis, or "the dominant culture" (136)—captures the essence of this problem and the way that siblinghood is often overlooked as a productive site of enquiry. Inevitably, even in the following analysis of the film *Into the Wild* some consideration of the parent–child dynamic is necessary, not least when considering the troubled childhood that provides the backdrop to Chris's story. (The circumstances of Chris and Carine's childhood are hinted at in Krakauer's book but not addressed explicitly at Carine's original request; this context is reflected in the film, which features a scene in which Walt and Billie physically fight. The extent of the emotional and physical abuse experienced by the McCandless siblings would not be fully explicated until in 2014 with the publication of Carine McCandless's book *The Wild Truth*.) Often the turn toward the close sibling relationship on screen suggests in itself the specter of parental failure. In foregrounding Chris and Carine's relationship this article re-centers the siblings in the narrative and explores the unique boundaries of their relationship, recognizing rather than dismissing the distinctive bond between brothers and sisters on screen.

Conflict and Collaboration: Psychological Narratives of Siblinghood

The 2003 publication of Juliet Mitchell's interdisciplinary work *Siblings: Sex and Violence* marks a resurgence of interest in the study of siblings and a reconsideration of the significance of the sibling relationship. Although birth rates are declining in many nations, siblings are still an expected feature of many people's lives. Siblings are considered to be "essential in any social structure and psychically in all social relationships" (Mitchell, *Siblings* 1) and "fundamental to human experience."[22] However, reflecting the often "divisive" nature of sibling relations,[23] existing research has often focused on negative or schismatic aspects of siblinghood.[24] This focus includes issues around birth order,[25] competition,[26] and incest.[27] Of sustained interest has been sibling rivalry,[28] to the extent that Prophecy Coles suggests that such rivalry "has become a cliché that allows us to abandon further thinking."[29] Sibling rivalry also endures as a common narrative trope in cinema across multiple genres, from *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Dir. Robert Aldrich 1962) to *The Godfather* (Dir. Francis Ford Coppola 1972), *A League of Their Own* (Dir. Penny Marshall 1992), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (Dir. Wes Anderson 2001), *The Fighter* (Dir. David O.

Russell 2010), *Knives Out* (Dir. Rian Johnson 2019), and numerous films that take their cue from Shakespeare, including *The Lion King* (Dir. Roger Minkoff and Rob Allers 1994), *10 Things I Hate About You* (Dir. Gil Junger 1999), and *Ran* (Dir. Akira Kurosawa 1985). Such rivalry frequently provides neat narrative justification for conflict—a shorthand that benefits from the cultural pervasiveness of the model.

Mitchell's work on siblinghood addresses a suggested annihilation of the self that is triggered by the birth of a younger sibling.[30] Animosity, hostility, or "ambivalent emotional responses"[31] are perceived as common reactions when young children are faced with the prospect or reality of a new sibling. Mitchell characterizes this type of response as arising from a loss of singularity[32] and quotes Sylvia Plath's proclamation on the birth of her brother in the essay "Ocean 1212-W": "I would be a bystander."[33] The concept of having to step aside, make space, and give up a psychic claim to uniqueness suggests a form of traumatic erasure. Within this framework, siblings are constructed not as lateral equals but figures born into conflict, rendered in acrimony rather than unity. Again, such fears manifest on screen, projecting and reinforcing this same (usually temporary) anxiety of usurpation. This is conflict particularly evident in films targeting a family audience, such as *Lady and the Tramp* (Dir. Clyde Geronimi et al. 1955), *Look Who's Talking Too* (Dir. Amy Heckerling 1990), *Paradise* (Dir. Mary Agnes Donoghue 1991), *Addams Family Values* (Dir. Barry Sonnenfeld 1993), and *The Boss Baby* (Dir. Tom McGrath 2017).

Reflecting this frequent recourse to narratives of opposition, Helen Harris Perlman laments that "sibling rivalry" is a more well-worn phrase than "sibling support," although the latter is just as crucial to an understanding of the relationship.[34] Lamb and Sutton-Smith, for example, note that the possibility for "resentment and rivalry" should not obscure the positives of "emotional support, advice and companionship."[35] Likewise, Gillies and Lucey[36] observe that, although antagonism is often a "defining feature" of siblinghood, it is "almost always underpinned by a sense that sibling connections transcend conflict." While accepting that sibling relationships are commonly sites of tension, the potential for positive, affirmative, committed, and resilient sibling relationships is increasingly recognized. For example, Yucel and Yuan contend that sibling relationships may impact positively on socioemotional development,[37] and Abramovitch observes that anthropological research frequently emphasizes the function of siblings as "the main social glue by which societies are held together."[38]

Regardless of its quality, siblinghood is a bond that may represent the "longest standing [relationship] that any of us have."[39] Siblings frequently share a childhood, and so brothers and sisters may possess privileged insight into each other and an enduring emotional connection that is not

easily replicated. At the same time, there is an expectation that siblings will separate as they reach adulthood. A significant amount of sibling research focuses on children and adolescents, mirroring dominant Western cultural understandings of siblinghood as something that is primarily a feature of childhood. It is assumed that the sibling relationship endures at least in part through proximity because many brothers and sisters (by no means all) grow up in the same household. However, the benefit of a sibling may far outlast a shared home, not only in practical support but also emotional continuance. Jennifer Silverstone suggests that siblings frequently "hold the family narrative for each other, and become the containers for each other of a history of their childhood."[40] This concept of "hold[ing] the family narrative" becomes a fruitful starting point for examining the representation of Chris and Carine's siblinghood.

"Do What You Are Going to Do, and I Will Tell About It"

Part way through *Into the Wild*, a flashback reveals that the McCandless[41] family narrative is built on a false history. A teenage Chris discovers that his and Carine's mother Billie (Marcia Gay Harden) was their father Walt's (William Hurt) mistress before becoming his wife. After Chris was born, Walt had another son with his first wife. In voiceover Carine reflects that, on finding out the truth, she and her brother were "suddenly redefined … as bastard children." She observes that the discovery of their parents' lies "made [Chris's] entire childhood seem like fiction. Chris never told them he knew and made me promise silence, as well."

The revelation provides added context for Chris's parental antipathy, beyond his distaste for what he perceives as their bourgeois lifestyle. It also exemplifies the way that Chris and Carine, to use Silverstone's phrase, "hold the family narrative for each other."[42] In belatedly discovering their father's duplicity and their mother's obfuscation, they are cast into an alternative narrative in which they are united. Although they have a number of half-siblings, in this moment their family narrative becomes exclusive to the two of them, encompassing both the story that has been upheld by their parents and the truth. In asking for his sister's silence, Chris ensures that this narrative remains their own. There is an intimacy in this shared confidence. Perlman's etymological investigation of the word *sibling* is instructive here.[43] Originating in Old English from *sib[b]* (kinship), *sibling* is also related to the Middle English word *bisib*, which means to be related by blood,[44] and, as Perlman notes, to *gesib*, a word etymologically linked to *gossip*.[45] Archaically, a *gossip* suggested "spiritual affinity" through baptism, comparable to acting as a godparent (*godsib*) (*Oxford English Dictionary*).[46] In Middle English, *gossip* connotes "kin" or "comrade," someone with

whom intimacies could be shared to the exclusion of those outside the kinship circle.[47] In this scenario Chris and Carine's shared story (that which to others may well become "gossip"), the exclusion of their parents, and the heightened sense of affinity between them, are all indicators of their siblinghood, not simply through their biological relation but a deeper bond of spiritual kinship.

This metaphysical bond continues after Chris's departure. In fact, the construction of the film overtly emphasizes this enduring sibling link, even while narratively focused on Chris's solitary travels. Once the siblings are separated, Carine's voiceover punctuates *Into the Wild*, filling in the gaps of Chris's story. Such a structure emphasizes both presence and absence. Although absent from her brother's immediate experience, Carine's presence is inscribed through the voiceover. Chris, conversely, is present on screen but his ultimate absence can only be bridged through his sister's words. In this sense, Carine is once again "hold[ing] the … narrative," ensuring that her brother's story is told. The scene in which Chris and Carine share the truth of their parents' marriage underlines an assumption that the siblings do not simply hold *a* narrative but *the* narrative: theirs is deemed to be closest to the truth, and so it follows that Carine's telling of Chris's story will be the most authentic. Carine alone, the film suggests, has the authority and affinity to speak her brother's life.

For this authenticity to happen, there is an elision of difference between the siblings. The line between "you" and "I" is blurred in Carine's need to document her brother's final years, even as they are communicatively and geographically disconnected. Early in the film, Chris recites the Sharon Olds poem "I Go Back to May 1937" to his sister, the final line of which is "Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it."[48] Most of Chris's recitation takes place over hazy images of their parents as young adults, as discussed later in text. However, this final line is delivered in the present, as Chris and Carine sit together in his car. Given that Carine will become the narrator of Chris's life—the one who will "hold [his] narrative"—these words have immense significance. In narrating the poem, Chris implicitly becomes the "I" and Carine the "you," although, in reality, the roles will be reversed: That which Chris ("you") will do, Carine ("I") will tell. In Chris's earnest delivery of this line, there is a sense of exhortation, an unspoken request. Although Carine maintains that "Chris was writing his story, and it had to be Chris who would tell it," the reality determines that it is in fact Carine who will "tell," her voiceover acting as a proxy for her brother. Likewise, when Carine suggests that "Everything Chris is saying has to be said," the film obfuscates the "saying" and the "said." What Chris is "saying" must, in the end, be "said" by Carine. She continues, "And I trust for him that everything he is doing has to be done. This is our life." Here,

despite their later separation, the siblings are merged: their disconnected lives coalesce into one shared "life." For all that it is a story of a lone adventurer, *Into the Wild* relies heavily on a sister's commitment to her brother. Whatever actions Chris takes are not fully realized until they are given voice by Carine. This concept of the sister giving voice to the brother would be further reinforced in 2014 when Carine McCandless[49] published *The Wild Truth*, which documents their childhood and the physical, verbal, and emotional abuse that both Chris and Carine endured from their parents. In this book, Carine seeks to redress the perception of her brother as selfish or misguided and instead illuminate his justifications for leaving his family. "People think they understand our story because they know how his ended," she states, "but they don't know how it all began." Although *The Wild Truth* was only published later, *Into the Wild* captures the necessity of placing Carine at the center of Chris's story as the only person capable of "saying" what needs to be "said."

What constitutes a "sibling" is subject to various definitions. Treffers et al., for example, suggest 26 different types.[50] Although commonly brothers and sisters are defined in biological terms, this obscures instances of adopted, fostered, or step-siblinghood and, in reality, sibling kinship may be linked to various factors including parentage, living arrangements, and family structures.[51] Despite their biological relation it becomes apparent that what unites Chris and Carine above all is not blood, proximity, or name—but knowledge. With this knowledge comes the potent promise of understanding, and Carine's intermittent narration confers a sororal authority whose tone is explanatory rather than speculative. This perspective is true of relatively minor claims, such as affirming that Chris "found comfort in the books he loved," but also extends further to definitive declarations regarding his decisions, notably when Carine states, "It was inevitable that Chris would break away." This claim to inevitability is significant not simply in justifying Chris's actions but in reaffirming Carine's understanding. In her brother's absence, but with the confidence of knowing his mind, she does not require an explanation, unlike their bemused parents. "I understood what he was doing," she confirms, the implication being that she is the only one who does so. In the summer following Chris's graduation, Walt and Billie have become increasingly concerned about his welfare. Unable to contact him by telephone, they drive to his apartment in Atlanta to find it vacated. Back home, Carine presents them with a bundle of returned letters from the post office. "Did you know about this?" Walt challenges his daughter. "He didn't say anything," she responds, although immediately following this response her voiceover is unequivocal in assuring that she "understood." This parallel suggests that the understanding between brother and sister is not based so much on factual (spoken)

knowledge but rather intuition, a rarefied emotional intelligence between siblings.

This connection is later confirmed when she states, "He [Chris] said I was the only person in the world who could possibly understand what he had to say." Perlman suggests that for siblings, "there exists … the securing sense that those who are bound by blood and battle have close quick bonds, [and] communication that is visceral as well as verbal."[52] This implication of visceral communication remains useful here in explicating the sibling bond. Their understanding of each other, it suggests, is not borne of conversation so much as a non-verbal recognition of each other as akin, what Carine has described as being "eternally and emotionally parallel" despite physical distance.[53] Vivienne Lewin suggests that "siblings have an important place in our inner world,"[54] whereas Silverstone observes that "siblings have each other in reality or in mind."[55] Both suggest a psychic link that transcends physical proximity and evoke the notion of that etymological "spiritual affinity" just presented.

Discussing the specifics of sibling loyalty, Bank and Kahn posit that it "involves feeling and identification with the other person"[56] that goes beyond superficial contact, where "identification" demands deep cognizance of the sibling in question. When Carine reflects on how Chris has removed himself from his family, she induces the primacy of such knowledge. "He knew I loved him enough to bear with the not knowing," she says, revealing a multi-layered assumption of sibling identification. Put simply, Carine *knows* that Chris *knows*—the "knowing" is mutual. Paradoxically, even in "not knowing" where Chris is, a different kind of knowledge is revealed. More valuable than the factual detail of Chris's precise location is the sheer force of understanding and of being understood. Crucially, this understanding is framed in the film as being born of exclusivity. Carine understands her brother precisely because he *is* her brother, because together they are an exclusive unit whose bond has been forged in childhood, in which a pre-verbal knowledge of the other has been cultivated. Such conditions become the prerequisite for their ability to "know" each other. This knowing, in turn, excludes others—their parents, the people Chris meets on his travels—while binding Chris and Carine across considerable geographic and narrative separation. Jan may speculate that Chris "look[s] like a loved kid," and Ron may offer advice based on the "bits and pieces" he gleans from Chris's stories, but only Carine is afforded the privilege of absolute knowing.

Chris and Carine's separation is tempered by key shots that frame the siblings together early in the film, underscoring their closeness. At Chris's graduation ceremony, the only familial moment belongs to the two of them: they embrace affectionately as a smiling Carine congratulates her

brother. Walt and Billie are visible in the crowd, watching their son, but this gaze is not reciprocated. Although brief, these graduation scenes are fundamental in establishing Chris and Carine's bond and the primacy of the lateral, rather than vertical, relationship. Meanwhile, their parents are swiftly relegated to a disjointed flashback that bridges the gap between the ceremony and Chris's graduation meal.

In this flashback, footage of a young Walt and Billie at their respective graduations appears. The sun-bleached, slightly jerky style evokes an amateur home video. Visually it is out of step with the rest of the film, a stark reminder of the gulf between Chris and his parents. When a flurry of mortarboards is tossed into the air at Billie's graduation, the shot fades into an almost identical one at Chris's ceremony. However, rather than being a point of unity—the affectionate linking of past and present to forge a generational link—it only emphasizes distance and difference. In voiceover Chris recites "I Go Back to May 1937," a poem that expresses the speaker's regret over the parents' marriage and a desire to have been able to prevent it, thus sparing both parents and children pain. Once the film returns to the present and the siblings are sitting in Chris's car, Carine asks, "Who wrote that?" Chris, gifting her the book of poetry, observes, "Well, it could have been either one of us, couldn't it?" Just as the film decisively splinters a link between the McCandless[57] parents and their son, so the link between their son and daughter is reinforced. In condemning Walt and Billie, Chris's dialogue unites himself and Carine; as children of their parents they possess a shared experience that belongs only to the two of them. Once again, a synthesis takes place. In declaring that it could have been "either one of us," Chris makes no distinction between the siblings. "One" of them could easily be the other. The link is further reinforced by passing on the physical artifact of the poetry book. Carine inherits the book from Chris, inheritance being more usually the process of handing down an object from one generation to the next rather than a lateral exchange. Clearly its transfer from brother to sister is meaningful. Chris is not unthinkingly offloading his college possessions but bequeathing an item of some personal significance.

The emotional bond between Chris and Carine continues to be underpinned visually in the scenes that follow. Although their time together on screen is necessarily brief, in these graduation scenes the siblings are framed resolutely together to the exclusion of everyone else, most significantly Walt and Billie. This framing occurs first at the ceremony, as just noted, and here too in the car, where medium close-up shots emphasize a sense of easy intimacy, the two of them cheerfully apart from the rest of the world. This exclusion continues as they approach the restaurant. Walt and Billie are visible through the window and in its reflection Chris and

Carine can be seen getting out of the car, the glass partition reinforcing the distance between parents and children. As they walk arm-in-arm toward the restaurant, the perspective switches. Now Chris and Carine are seen from their parents' point of view, prompting Walt to grumble about Chris allowing Carine to drive his car. It is difficult not to read this trivial outburst as masking a broader disquiet over his children's interactions beyond the auspices of Walt's control, as he recognizes his children's loyalty to each other over and above himself. Once inside the restaurant, the framing continues to privilege Chris and Carine's relationship. Frequently they appear together in the center of the shot, the camera positioned between Walt and Billie, who are relegated to the edges of the frame. When Walt proposes to buy Chris a new car, his son's protest can only be quieted by Carine. She grabs his knee under the table in what appears to be a well-worn shorthand between the two of them, urging him to stop. The gesture is caught in close-up, emphasizing the intimacy of this non-verbal communication. Although Chris and Carine spend the rest of the film apart—indeed, this time is the last that Carine will see her brother alive—these scenes affirm visually what will be further established aurally: the two of them are a kindred unit.

"Parents, Hypocrites, Politicians, Pricks": The Specter of Parental Failure

If on-screen depictions of siblings are remarkably commonplace, the persistent foregrounding of the sibling relationship in a number of contemporary screen representations suggests anxiety over the parental role. Sometimes the renewed sibling relationship, or increased sibling reliance, is a product of parental death, as seen in *You Can Count on Me* (Dir. Kenneth Lonergan 2000), *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* (Dir. Brad Silberling 2004), *Oculus* (Dir. Mike Flanagan 2013), *Frozen* (Dir. Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee 2013), and *This Is Where I Leave You* (Dir. Shawn Levy 2014). In other cases, parents may be absent (*Nobody Knows* [Dir. Hirokazu Koreeda 2004]; *Winter's Bone* [Dir. Debra Granik 2010]), ill (*My Neighbor Totoro* [Dir. Hayao Miyazaki 1988]), divorcing (*Jurassic Park* [Dir. Steven Spielberg 1993]; *Jurassic World* [Dir. Colin Trevorrow 2015]), or simply ambivalent (*The Ice Storm* [Dir. Ang Lee 1997]). What is striking is not so much the individual circumstances as the collective implication of a fundamental ambivalence toward the parents, their authority within the family, and their ability to protect their children. In *Into the Wild*, the parental failure as perceived by the McCandless[58] siblings binds Chris and Carine together. In this context, their reliance on each other is heightened by feelings of alienation from Walt and Billie.

The opening lines of the film do hint at a long-buried but instinctive link between mother and son. Faintly, Chris's voice is heard: "Mom! Mom, help me!" At home in Virginia, Billie awakes with a start. In this moment, the question is raised: has Chris called out for his mother, and has Billie heard her lost son? However, this bond is not explored again and hitherto it is Carine who occupies a privileged position in relation to Chris. Kearney and Murray's[59] work on motherhood and origin stories positions the mother as the family documentarian, keeper of the stories and myths that hold a family—past and present—together. Storytelling between mothers and children can be particularly beneficial in adoptive families[60] and in cases of migration[61] although, as Merrill and Fivush note, storytelling is integral to daily family life in general and is often driven predominantly by mothers.[62] That it is the sister who becomes the custodian of Chris's story—both within and beyond the diegesis—once again invokes parental failure. Billie, it emerges, has lied to her children. The family origin story she and Walt have told has been proven false; Carine explicitly refers to her mother as an "accomplice in deceit," telling "calculated lies" to "[mask] an ugly truth." As Billie's version of events is rejected, so too is her role as storyteller. The fleeting, primal link between mother and son glimpsed through Billie's dream extends no further than this momentary fragment of connection. On a conscious level, Billie and Chris remain disconnected.

In light of Billie's perceived failure and Carine's privileged role, it is perhaps tempting to consider Carine as a maternal surrogate. Not only does she take responsibility for Chris's story but—as discussed later in this article—she also comes to represent "home" for her brother, a constant presence that anchors his waywardness. It is common to equate the caring responsibilities of sisters with what Pollack calls "auxiliary mother[hood],"[63] which recognizes the historic role of (usually older, female) siblings as caregivers. Arguably, this precedent continues to influence the perception of those who take some form of responsibility for their siblings, whether physical or emotional. However, to view Carine within the framework of a maternal surrogate figure is to re-invoke the primacy of the parent–child dyad, the very preoccupation that has stymied discussion of the sibling relationship on its own terms. This perspective recalls Davidoff's contention that brothers and sisters are often viewed as mirroring the "central parental drama," invoking mimicry rather than distinction.[64] Examining representation in "twin stories," de Nooy[65] suggests that the issue stems from a lack of cultural models of close adult sibling relationships: "I suspect … there is an alternative, potentially more radical story … that we do not know how to tell, or for which we do not have readily available models." Similarly, discussing Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997), Kokkola and Valovirta suggest the sibling

relationship in the novel is "fundamentally untranslatable," something that exists yet cannot be expressed through language.[66] It recalls Perlman's observation that no common term exists for positive sibling bonds.[67] It also invokes the central question of Mitchell's seminal work on siblings: "Why should there be only one set of relationships which provide for the structure of our mind, or why should one be dominant in all times and places?" (*Siblings* 1) Therefore, rather than envisaging Carine as a replacement mother figure, it is more productive to expand an understanding of her sisterhood beyond the pseudo-parental model to consider alternative ways of conceptualizing the brother–sister relationship in *Into the Wild*.

Siblings as Soulmates

In addressing the changing discourses of heterosexual relationships, Leslie and Morgan map the shift in emphasis from discourses of "security" to "romantic love."[68] They suggest a further reorientation into the twenty-first century, incorporating ideas of "intimacy, compatibility and soulmates." (11) The latter offers another way of conceptualizing the heterosocial sibling relationship as it is configured in *Into the Wild*. Leslie and Morgan observe that the concept of soulmates is separate from that of romantic love, marking it out as "a new discourse with some distinct assumptions."[69] Whereas discourses of romantic love privilege "infatuated attraction" (15) and understand such attraction as evidence of future long-term happiness, more recently the discourse of "soulmates" has emphasized an "intuitive component" within a relationship (19).

The idea of soulmates first found mainstream traction in Western society in the 1960s, when it emerged as a tenet of New Age thinking. In this version, the belief that soulmates were linked through shared past lives was crucial, although Leslie and Morgan note that this overt focus on reincarnation does not persist in current mainstream discourse.[70] Rather, it is the "intuitive component" that chimes with the representation of the McCandless[71] siblings. In particular, it resonates with Carine's emphasis on "knowing" what Chris is thinking and feeling even over considerable—geographic, temporal, communicative—distance. Drawing on Yolande Bloomstein's[72] research, Leslie and Morgan suggest that soulmate discourse is formed around four key assumptions: "predetermination; mystical identification; paranormal communication and complete self-enclosedness."[73] All these elements can be applied to the depiction of Chris and Carine's siblinghood. First, the self-enclosed nature of their relationship and the privileging of their bond is, as noted previously, embedded in the visual framing of the two characters before their separation. It is also apparent in flashbacks to their childhood, where Chris and Carine are united by their

experiences of their parents' antagonistic behavior. Despite their numerous half-siblings (with whom, in reality, Chris and Carine had a relationship), within the narrative interest their affinity is not extended to these unknown figures; Chris and Carine find safety in their closed circle of two. The concept of "society" is a thread running through *Into the Wild*, from the opening quotation from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*[74] ("There is society, where none intrudes") to the title of one of the original songs on the soundtrack. Although Chris attempts to eschew the concept of society, it is clear that he and Carine retain it on a micro level, a self-enclosed sibling-society that endures and sustains.

Secondly, the idea that soulmates possess a mystical identification with each other manifests in the very act of Carine narrating Chris's journey from a position of undisputed authority. As discussed previously, the lack of concrete distinction between "I" and "you" suggests an unspoken yet shared sense of identification. Carine's statement, "I understood what he was doing," conjures that higher level of communication—perhaps akin to the "paranormal communication" just noted—and understanding that characterizes their relationship. Again, the structure of the film is important here, as Carine's voiceover unfolds in the present tense, giving the impression that although she is not with Chris, she retains an omniscient presence. When her faith wavers after a year of silence from Chris, Carine does question her ability to understand her brother. However, this wondering is momentary: "I catch myself," she says in mild self-admonishment. While the siblings' connection is not infallible, it is not erased through time or distance. Indeed, this separation only heightens those aspects of "mystical identification" and "paranormal communication" described herein.

Reflecting the fourth pillar of this soulmate discourse, the concept of "predetermination," Carine states that Chris believes she is the "only person in the world" who could understand him. Such a statement invokes a common assumption within the discourse of soulmates, of there being a sole person who can be recognized as one's fated "other half." Granted, this discourse is generally reserved for romantic partners. However, as Leslie and Morgan make clear, it is also removed from the explicit assumption of "romantic love" and sexual attraction,[75] bypassing the physical in favor of the spiritual. Unlike romantic partners, Chris and Carine are not tasked with finding each other. Nor is the fact that they are siblings a guarantee of their closeness. Rather, their shared experiences and their visceral recognition of each other bind them together. The discourse of soulmates, mapped onto the lived experience of siblings, suggests just one alternative way of conceptualizing the sibling relationship into adulthood, beyond an assumption of intimacy based on proximity and—often, but not always—biological relation.

This configuration of siblings as soulmates runs counter to more established narratives of siblinghood that privilege rivalry and usurpation, not least Mitchell's theory that the knowledge of the possibility of a sibling can be as potent as the arrival of an actual sibling. For the first-born child who must accept that nonpareil status is no longer to be, this knowledge may be experienced as a psychic trauma, not unlike that associated with the Oedipal complex. Indeed, the sibling may figure as confirmation of the parents' sexual relationship and the child's exclusion from the parental dyad.[76] In Sylvia Plath's reflections on the birth of her younger brother in "Ocean 1212-W," she describes this trauma as "this awful birthday of otherness."[77] The sibling here figures as divisive, simultaneously othering the subject and becoming the other that the subject will strive to self-define against. However, *Into the Wild* provides an alternative configuration. Chris and Carine are distinct from each other, as reinforced through numerous binary distinctions (female/male, here/gone, obedient/willful), yet their relationship suggests that Carine's birth, far from inflicting a lasting trauma on Chris, is in fact the birth of their shared whole.

Framing siblings as soulmates perhaps inevitably invokes the uncomfortable intimation of incest. Certainly, the incest taboo is at the root of a cultural unease with unusually close sibling relationships, particularly those between a brother and sister. On screen, the revelation of a (heretofore unknown) brother–sister relationship may be deployed as a narrative twist to thwart romance, notably in *Star Wars* (Dir. George Lucas 1977). The relief of disproved siblinghood, meanwhile, allows for romance to bloom (*From Up on Poppy Hill* [Dir. Gorō Miyazaki 2011]). Where brother–sister incest is not prevented, deep and abiding trauma emerges, as in *Oldboy* (Dir. Park Chan-wook 2003). The separation of siblings, particularly twins, is an enduring narrative trope in theater and literature, and it is striking how this separation is routinely maintained in films dealing with close adult brothers and sisters. In contemporary cinema, both *Adult Life Skills* (Dir. Rachel Tunnard 2016) and *Personal Shopper* (Dir. Olivier Assayas 2016) portray adult sisters grieving the loss of a twin brother. Death is arguably the safety valve that both affirms (through grief) the siblings' deep connection and ensures this connection does not supersede a more appropriate (read: heteroromantic) bond. Both films end with the sister turning back toward a heterosexual romance. Conversely, the danger of an adult sister's over-investment in her brother is plainly addressed in *Love Actually* (Dir. Richard Curtis 2003), when Sarah's (Laura Linney) commitment to her brother Michael (Michael Fitzgerald), who is hospitalized due to his mental health, prevents any hope of longed-for romantic fulfillment with Karl (Rodrigo Santoro).

Put simply, adult siblings who fail to separate pose a challenge to the heteronormative nuclear family unit. Commonly born of the nuclear

family, they are also a threat to it. Siblings are expected to separate into their own nuclear families as adults, and to fail is to jeopardize their own heteroreproductive future. Siblings who remain in proximity are often coded as dysfunctional. In sitcoms such as *3rd Rock from the Sun* (NBC 1996–2001), *Arrested Development* (Fox 2003–2006; Netflix 2013–2019), and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (FX/FXX 2005-present) adult siblings living, working, and/or socializing primarily with each other all retain overtones of immaturity and maladjustment; in the case of *3rd Rock*, three adult siblings living together is literally an alien concept. In the cinematic examples presented, as in *Into the Wild*, a close adult sibling relationship may be acknowledged, but some form of uncoupling is almost inevitable. Jenny DiPlacidi, in her work on incest in Gothic literature, argues that sibling bonds may be "dangerous and potentially destructive to patriarchal society."[78] The disruptive possibility is certainly compelling when considering how, in these contemporary examples, the close sibling connection is viewed as something to be suppressed. In *Into the Wild* Chris and Carine's physical proximity is limited to the early scenes at Chris's graduation and the flashbacks to their childhood. Chris's departure functions in much the same way as the pre-narrative death of the brothers in *Adult Life Skills* and *Personal Shopper*, as a safety valve against the implication of, if not incest, then certainly unusual closeness between siblings. Arguably, the film is able to foreground their close bond precisely because they barely share the screen.

There is an interesting—if again implicit—reference to this anxiety in scenes where Chris visits Jan and Rainey in Slab City, a Californian desert campsite. Chris attracts the attention of teenage resident Tracy and is encouraged by Rainey to reciprocate her interest yet, when Chris discovers that Tracy is underage, he rejects her advances. His objection, however, may be read as more than simply legal or moral. Despite Rainey's encouragement, he appears surprised when Tracy propositions him. Perhaps this reaction can be attributed to a certain naïveté on Chris's part, reinforcing a purity of spirit that underpins his quest. In rejecting materialism as antithetical to his worldview, it is feasible that Chris is also rejecting romantic and/or sexual entanglement. However, there is also arguably a moment of recognition when Chris sees Tracy reclined on the bed. Malone and Stewart, as actors, possess a notable physical similarity and thus Tracy bears a striking resemblance to Carine. This visual link between the two young women is a fleeting reminder of the incest taboo and the anxiety inherent in any consideration of close siblings. Chris's sexual rejection of Tracy is a repudiation

of this incestuous specter, but the necessity of this proxy rejection suggests the existence of an underlying disquiet.

"Owning Me Like Gravity": Constructing Sororal Identity

The title of this article refers to a lyric in the song "Guaranteed," written and performed for the film's soundtrack by Eddie Vedder.[79] Both Vedder[80] and director Sean Penn acknowledge the importance of the film's music to the storytelling process. In discussing the aforementioned lyrics ("Don't come closer or I'll have to go/Owning me like gravity are places that pull/If ever there was someone to keep me at home/It would be you"), Vedder[81] suggests "that line is for [Carine]."[82] Again, the primacy of Carine as Chris's "family" is evident. The sentiment also chimes with the project of the film more broadly: for Chris, it is his sister who symbolizes "home." Nevertheless, the tone of these lyrics, and indeed the film more broadly, is somewhat bittersweet in its recognition that Chris ultimately could not be saved by Carine.

Carine does, however, perform one final act of saving her brother, as attested in the film's final frames. A still photograph appears of the real-life McCandless[83] sitting by Fairbanks Bus #142 (the "Magic Bus"), his makeshift home on the Stampede Trail and the place his body was discovered. Accompanying a shot of a plane crossing a blue sky, the closing caption reads, "On September 19, 1992, Carine McCandless[84] flew with her brother's ashes from Alaska to the eastern seaboard. She carried them with her on the plane … in her backpack." The text is poignant, a reminder that Hirsch and Malone's Chris and Carine are stand-ins for a real-life sibling pair. This final conjured image, of Carine transporting her brother's ashes in her backpack, suggests a physical holding of Chris's remains, a holding that will come to encompass his narrative too. Silverstone suggests that "where there has been a loss of continuity, a loss of history of containment of the family narrative, siblings can compensate by containing their history for each other."[85] Here, the sister contains the brother, bringing him home and telling his story. It is a project that goes beyond the margins of the film, as Carine McCandless[86] has become the custodian of Chris's legacy. Later revisiting the site of her brother's death, Carine leaves a photograph of all eight McCandless[87] siblings and a journal containing their messages, noting of the image, "I see wholeness. I see a family."[88] Ultimately, an alternative familial vision in which siblings come to signify continuation, remembrance, and unconditional understanding is established.

Into the Wild represents a largely positive and beneficial sibling relationship in which both Chris and Carine find solace and meaning. For Carine in particular, whose life beyond Chris remains unseen within the frame,

the status as "sister" is key to her identity. When Ron asks Chris where his family is, Chris declares, "Don't have one anymore," while—to paraphrase Brickman[89]—Carine is never *not* a sister. Carine is effectively framed entirely in terms of her sororal identity, while Chris is not bound by the same narrow distinctions. Of course, this approach has much to do with his status as the protagonist. Chris is a brother but also a son (and frequently a surrogate son), a wanderer, an employee, a protégé, and a romantic interest. This, after all, is Chris's story, as Carine herself reminds the viewer. Nonetheless, the strict maintenance of Carine's sororal status ensures that she remains a safe space, something concrete to which the brother might, and could, always return. In striking out into the unknown, Chris eschews home in all but one way. Carine is the anchor (or "gravity"), echoing the sentiment of "Guaranteed" as the only thing that has the power to "keep" Chris at home. The implicit expectations placed on Carine—to remain as a symbol of home, to tell her brother's story and to "keep" or "hold" his legacy—are both a product of her sisterhood and a condition of it. There is a tension here, to be sure, between recognizing how Carine's identity is defined so rigidly in sororal terms and avoiding the replication of dominant cultural expectations of siblingship, which often applaud closeness and cooperation in childhood and assume separation in adulthood. It is perhaps most useful to understand Carine's sororal identity as both defining and self-defined, an integral aspect of her own identity that is not diminished through geographic or temporal dislocation from her brother but rather reinforces the importance of this lateral relationship across time and space.

Conclusion

Into the Wild is only one of many films that in some way reflects on and illuminates cultural constructions of siblinghood. Although sibling relationships are frequently central to people's lives, their importance has been routinely undervalued. In excavating the sibling bond from the edges of the film, this analysis reflects a broader need to examine the representation of siblinghood and to consider the ways that it might be reconceptualized, remodeled, and renewed as a site of productive enquiry. As noted in the Introduction, the film is by no means the only text that offers an opportunity to interrogate cultural representations of siblinghood on screen. It does, however, provide a fruitful starting point from which to begin thinking about how images of siblings have been constructed and how they might be theorized beyond the Oedipal model—and indeed at all. Further research, bringing together a larger sample of film and television texts, including those mentioned briefly throughout this article, would be useful

to facilitate further exploration of the significance of these sibling representations.

Although the image of siblinghood portrayed in *Into the Wild* is by no means universal, it does engage with some common conceits, such as the implicit anxiety regarding incest, the bonding of siblings in the face of perceived parental failure, and the expectation of division in adulthood. Notably, the film replicates a persistent trope of sibling representation in the separation of an adult brother and sister, first through distance, then by a lack of communication, and, finally, through death. The potential threat to an unrealized (hetero)reproductive future contained within an enduringly close relationship between a brother and sister remains a point of anxiety yet, ultimately, the primacy of the sibling bond is realized despite this distance. In using Carine's voice to tell Chris's story, the instinctive understanding and visceral identification between siblings is permitted space and recognition.

What emerges in *Into the Wild* as a crucial facet of siblinghood is the ability to be truly known by another person. Within the scope of future consideration for what de Nooy[90] suggests regarding unexplored models of siblinghood, the existing discourse of soulmates travels some distance to illuminate this aspect of the sibling bond and particularly the relationship between the McCandless[91] siblings. For all the self-searching that characterizes Chris's solitary quest, there is redemption in the simple fact of his sister's understanding. While this experience by no means replicates every experience of siblingship, it does make space on screen for a pair of adult siblings whose connection endures, affirming rather than erasing this lateral bond. *Into the Wild* has been variously perceived as an ode to nature, to adventure, to the wilds of America, and to the impetuousness of youth. At its heart, perhaps it is most purely a love song to a brother and sister.

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There are no competing interests to declare.

Notes

1. de Nooy, "Reconfiguring the Gemini," 75–6.
2. Krakauer, Into the Wild.
3. Ibid.
4. McCandless, The Wild Truth.
5. Ibid.
6. Scott, "Following his Trail to Danger and Joy."
7. Bradshaw, "Review of *Into the Wild* by Sean Penn."
8. Ebert, "Off the Road."
9. Tookey, "*Into the Wild* Gets Lost in a Self-Indulgent Wilderness."

10. Romney, "Review of *Into the Wild* by Sean Penn."
11. Addison et al., Motherhood Misconceived; Arnold, *Maternal Horror Film*; Åström, *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination*; Fischer, *Cinematernity*; Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*; Sayed, *Screening Motherhood in Contemporary World Cinema*.
12. Barnett, Fathers on Film; Bruzzi, Bringing up Daddy; Hamad, Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary US Film.
13. Brown, *The Children's Film*; Cousins, A Story of Children and Film; Lebeau, Childhood and Cinema; Sinyard, Children in the Movies.
14. Coles, "Sibling Rivalry," 255; Lamb and Sutton-Smith, Sibling Relationships, ix.; Mitchell, *Siblings,* 1; Mitchell, "Siblings and the Psychosocial," 3; van Beekum, "The Oedipal as a Defence Against the Sibling," 367.
15. Davidoff, "The Sibling Relationship and Sibling Incest in Historical Context," 34.
16. Austin, Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*;* Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film*.
17. Brown and Babington, *Family Films in Global Cinema;* Chopra-Gant, *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America;* Jenkins, *Home Movies*.
18. Edwards et al., Sibling Identity and Relationships, 2.
19. Brickman, "Brothers, Sisters, and Chainsaws."
20. Ibid., 139.
21. Ibid., 136.
22. Abramovitch, Brothers and Sisters.
23. See note 29 above, 18.
24. Maciejewska-Sobczak et al., Siblings, xxviii.
25. Sulloway, To Rebel*;* Sutton-Smith, "Birth Order and Sibling Status Effects."
26. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," 111–2.
27. Wolf, Incest Avoidance and the Incest Taboos*;* Wolf and Durham, Inbreeding, Incest and the Incest Taboo.
28. Isaacs, "Sibling Rivalry"; Schachter, "Sibling Deidentification and Split-Parent Identification"; Vivona, "Sibling Differentiation, Identity Development, and the Lateral Dimension of Psychic Life"; Wellendorf, "Sibling Rivalry."
29. See note 24 above, 254.
30. Mitchell, "Sibling Trauma," 162; Mitchell, "Siblings and the Psychosocial," 8.
31. White and Hughes. Why Siblings Matter, 22.
32. Mitchell, "Sibling Trauma," 164.
33. Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," 120.
34. Perlman, "A Note on Sibling," 148–9.
35. See note 25 above, 6.
36. Gillies and Lucey, "It's a Connection You Can't Get Away From','' 485.
37. Yucel and Yuan, "Do Siblings Matter?," 673.
38. See note 37 above, 14.
39. Sanders, Sibling Relationships, 1.
40. Silverstone, "Siblings, " 225.
41. See note 4 above.
42. See note 60 above.
43. See note 54 above.
44. Middle English Compendium, "Bisib."
45. See note 54 above, 148.
46. Oxford English Dictionary, "Gossip."
47. See note 54 above, 148.

48. Olds, "I Go Back to May 1937."
49. See note 4 above.
50. Treffers et al., "The Systematic Collection of Patient Data," 745.
51. Hindle and Sherwin-White, Sibling Matters, 3.
52. See note 54 above, 149.
53. See note 4 above, 99.
54. Lewin, "The Idealization of the Twin Relationship," 175.
55. See note 60 above, 243.
56. Bank and Kahn, "Intense Sibling Loyalties," 252.
57. See note 4 above.
58. Ibid.
59. Kearney and Murray, Mothers as Keepers and Tellers of Origin Stories.
60. Harrigan, "Exploring the Narrative Process," 31–6.
61. Dellios, "Memory and Family and Australian Refugee Histories."
62. Merrill and Fivush. "Intergenerational Narratives and Identity Across Development," 86.
63. Pollack, "The Childhood We Have Lost," 31.
64. See note 29 above, 34.
65. See note 1 above, 75.
66. Kokkola and Valovirta. "The Disgust That Fascinates," 131.
67. See note 54 above.
68. Leslie and Morgan, "Soulmates, Compatibility and Intimacy," 11.
69. Ibid., 14.
70. Ibid.
71. See note 4 above.
72. Bloomstein, The Soulmate Experience.
73. See note 4 above, 19.
74. Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.*
75. See note 4 above, 20.
76. Maciejewska-Sobczak et al., Siblings, xxii.
77. Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," 121.
78. DiPlacidi, Gothic Incest, 86.
79. Vedder, "Guaranteed."
80. See note 100 above.
81. Ibid.
82. Cohen, "Q&A: Penn, Vedder Go Where the 'Wild' Things Are."
83. See note 4 above.
84. Ibid.
85. See note 60 above, 244.
86. See note 4 above.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid., 262.
89. See note 19 above.
90. See note 1 above.
91. See note 4 above.

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