Both Tracks and Into the Wild explore the idea of a quest. Discuss.

In Robyn Davidson’s autobiographical work Tracks and Sean Penn’s movie Into The Wild, both respective protagonists Robyn and Chris McCandless have chosen to undertake a solo trek that poses the elements of a ‘quest’ to be completed. Each of them set out on a journey to discover deeper meanings of life in an attempt to flee from the ties of society and family, in which individual freedom is the ultimate goal. Whereas Robyn’s adventure across the Australian desert is realized and completed with careful preparations, Chris’ attempt to survive in the wild proved to be unsuccessful due to his own recklessness. Despite one’s death and the other’s survival, both characters have fulfilled a ‘hidden’ quest that leads to self-discovery, that is, the realization of the importance of human relationships.

For Robyn and Chris, the original purpose of undertaking their respective quests are closely connected with their dissatisfaction towards society as well as their own troubled pasts. Davidson describes that the Robyn of that time had been “vaguely bored with [her] life and its repetition” and so set off on a journey which she did not deem as “something to be proved”. Despite her claim that she wants to start the journey out of love for the desert’s purity and vastness, Robyn often shows distastes towards the expectations put on her as a white, well-educated middle class woman and usually compares European cultures with Indigenous Australian culture, preferring simplicity over “prettiness” and disguises.

Robyn’s mother’s death also has a significant effect on her relationship with other family members, binding them with a desire to protect each other from further grief. All expectations fade away nevertheless as Robyn embarks on her quest, with “no more loved ones to care about, no more ties, no more duties”. In Into the Wild, Chris’ desire to be in the Alaskan wilderness primarily stemmed from his anger towards Walt and Billie, his parents. The image of a happy family shatters in Chris’ mind as he finds out about his father’s previous marriage, “a murder of everyday’s truth” that he cannot forgive.

The adults’ constant quarrels made Chris indifferent to the fact that he and Carine might have to choose between one of them to live with in the future, unknowingly reinforcing his desire to run away to pursue a subjective ‘truth’. The ongoing strains of Walt and Billie’s relationship which are based on material success and personal dignities have also led Chris to despise society’s emphasis on fame and fortune. As he engraves into a piece of wood on the magic bus: “no longer poisoned by the civilization he flees”; Alaska is his final destination to “conclude the spiritual primiledge” and free himself from a world so full of toxic.

Although slightly different in motives, both Robyn and Chris’ dissatisfaction towards society and familial relationships unknowingly urged the two protagonists to undertake the quest of self-discovery.

As Robyn and Chris turns their plan into reality, preparations are needed to ensure that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to progress with their quest. In Robyn’s case, the “camouflaged violence” of Alice Springs slowly shatters her original intention of camping out with the Indigenous Australians and quickly embark on her journey. With only “a dog, six dollars and a small suitcase full of inappropriate clothes” at first and after multiple failed attempts to get any information about camel handling, Robyn realizes the difficult situation she has put herself in but tries hard nevertheless to progress on her quest. Eventually, she gains the required practical knowledge to make her own saddles and equipments, care for her camels, defend herself against wild bulls after a year of hardships and
mental struggles. Robyn has changed from a person who is not mentally nor physically prepared for any kind of adventure to someone who is thoroughly equipped and psychologically ready for the challenges ahead, even if that mental strength lasted for a brief moment. In contrast, Chris thinks of himself as having stocked “all necessary comforts to live off the land for a few months” but is nowhere near equipped in reality. Throughout the film, the protagonist is shown wandering around with close to zero personal belongings and just a vague, general idea of which direction to travel. He starts the journey carrying a few novels as well as a book about local Alaskan flora and fauna under the name Alexander Supertramp, an idealized persona who will successfully escape and become one with nature, free from all “20th century invention” and toxicity. Without the help of Jan and Rainey who he luckily encountered, Chris would not have any food, shelter or people to care for his wellbeings. Penn also emphasizes Chris’ lack of preparations in the sense that later in the film, despite Chris’s refusal to take any tools or equipment from anyone except for Ron Franz, the protagonist still sees the appearance of the abandoned bus as magical and largely depends on it for shelter, warmth and food preparation. Whereas Tracks highlights the importance of preparations on the outcome of Robyn’s journey, Into the Wild shows Chris’s failure to be physically equipped that eventually lead to his future demise.

Although both Robyn and Chris set out on their respective journey in an attempt to flee from certain elements of their lives, each has learned a much more profound lesson as they complete their quest. While Robyn initially disliked the idea of human companionship and preferred to be by herself, this mindset changes as she reflects on her journey at the finish line. Never knowing that she “had been lonely”, Robyn soon discovers that people have always helped her tighten her grip on reality as well as provided her with support in times of hardships. Her journey was only made possible since Diggity had “taken the place of people” to become the mental support that she so desperately needed. At the journey’s end, Robyn also realizes that “the most difficult part of any endeavour is taking the first step, making the first decision”. The journey itself has only a few moments of threats and danger, and even though there are times that Robyn questions the purpose of what she has started, she has found the time spent planning, backtracking and continuing valuable and vital to the success of her quest. Even if the memories of her trek would eventually fade away, the lesson that Robyn learned has led to a significant revelation that is the ultimate reward of her quest. On the other hand, Chris’s final moment inside the magic bus has dawned upon him a lesson that he has always refusing. His complicated relationship with his parents, the commitments with Jan, Rainey, Tracey and Ron all seemed like a burden to Chris as he did not want to lose focus of his goal to be in the Alaskan wilderness. He often refuses their help and distances himself or walking away when he feels like the relationship is going too far, believing that one “[does not] need human relationships to be happy”. However, facing death has made Chris realizes the importance of having others around him. He could have continued living and returned to his family had he “learn[ed] to forgive” and to “love”. In that moment, Alexander Supertramp has been replaced by a Chris McCandless who finally understood that “happiness [is] only real when shared” and wrote that he had “lived a happy life”. The two protagonist from Tracks and Into the Wild has ultimately succeeded in completing the physical challenges that leads to the conclusion of their spiritual journey, a conclusion to their quest for independence.
Both Robyn and Chris’s journeys contain elements of a quest such that they have been formed under a few reasons, that preparations are needed to ensure its success and the journeys’ ultimate rewards are for them to understand themselves as human beings. Although somewhat similar in their motives, Robyn are more prepared and well-equipped than Chris which helped her survive while the other suffered a painful death. While they both want to flee from society and human relationships, Chris and Robyn realize that freedom is just an unobtainable illusion and to be happy, one must interact and form bounds with those around them.