



# Going to Extremes

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## Going to Extremes Joe McGinniss

This is the fourth edition of a work that always has been controversial in Alaska. Yet, it is an important and highly readable classic work that captures a portrait frozen in time of a raw state in turmoil during the oil boom. McGinnis went north to find out if there was anything left of the "last frontier." He found "mind-bending contradictions," as a previous publisher put it--greed, waste, addictions, and racism, among other things, that contrasted with an awesome untamed natural beauty and an honest, open, and independent spirit of the people.

## Going to Extremes Details

Date : Published September 30th 1989 by Plume (first published 1980)

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Author : Joe McGinniss

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# From Reader Review Going to Extremes for online ebook

## Lisa says

This is some very good Alaskan airchair travel. I've been really disappointed in this winter's snow output (much like last year), and so I've been reading books about Alaska (much like last year). I want to wake up and not be able to open the door b/c of all the snow. Wouldn't that be cool??? I loved reading Joe McGinniss's version of Alsaka, circa 1980, with the fresh pipeline and all the money rolling around and no place to go. My favorite chapters were Barrow (of course--sun sets on Nov.18 and rises again on Jan. 23. You bet this would make for some pretty severely drunken antidotes), The Village (Olive Cook), and Bettles (what? where? exactly.). Joe even covers Wasilla, but luckily Sarah was only a pregnant high school girl when he wrote this, so we don't have to hear about her any. I hear we're supposed to get 10-18 inches Wednesday. Here's hoping.

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## Aarin Wright says

A friend lent me this book while I was abroad, and I read it on my morning commutes from home to class. While it took me a little bit to get into it, I overall loved reading about the harshness and beauty of Alaska, a place I never thought I would have the desire to visit. But I don't know, after this book, my interest is piqued. The writing was very straightforward, but the depictions of scenery were incredible. I recommend it to anyone who's interested in stepping into some non-fiction reading.

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## D says

I found this book to be a worthy companion to John McPhee's Coming into the Country. Some overlap, but between the two, you get a pretty rounded idea of Alaska at the time. McGinniss isn't as good a writer, and gets a little repetitive on occasion, but overall, I liked the tone of the book. Wild stories, funny stories. He isn't as PC as some might hope, nor does he over-romanticize, mostly he just lets people speak for themselves, which is all it really takes. The book doesn't give off an overly positive vibe, but mostly he just puts himself in the backseat and goes where the stories are. The chapters are arranged into the towns he visited, with several off the highway system, and also a longer chapter about a wilderness trip in the Brooks Range. Definitely recommended.

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## Doug says

This book is based on McGinnis's experiences in Alaska right when the pipeline opened, so its picture of Alaskans and the towns may be somewhat dated or historical (though, one imagines, aspects of what he describes lead up to today). McGinnis is stronger in describing people -- the book in part seems like a series of interviews or personality features -- than the landscape or experience of nature. He meets a lot of colorful people -- but also cranks, recluses, etc. Ultimately, the cultures of Alaska do not come off so well. McGinnis is a conversational and accessible writer, entertaining, if occasionally given to over-dramatizing just a bit.

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## **Dirk says**

This book was cheap and confused.

It was cheap because McGuinness writes so deprecatingly about so many of his subjects. He belittles them not for the sake of an argument, but rather to make the reader believe that they are in on some secret, or to show his own cleverness. He has a nose for scandal without any idea of the weight of his judgement--only the thrill of reading a torrid anecdote matters in his tale.

The story is confused because no coherent idea ties the book together. McGuinness flies to Alaska and writes a book in order to justify and/or finance his trip. The story begins with a ship's journey, the continues on to the towns, to the villages, to the pipeline, and finally the wilderness. The story is not a personal journey, but neither is it the story of a place. It is a hashed-together group of story from his time on the road.

I read this book because it was a gift. If I had known what it was I would have saved my time.

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## **Adrian says**

Plucked from my shelves because I was waiting for a library book I bought this in 1989. It's the author's experiences travelling in Alaska. He covers much territory including all the major cities, glaciers and mountains. He experiences frigid winters and terrific summers. The state attracts an independent caste of people not all lovable and the debate between those favouring development vs. those who are naturists is in full swing. McGinniss spends four days alone in a cabin in the wilderness to test himself and it's not a great experience but the book finishes with a hike he takes through the Brooks range where halfway up the Cockedhat Mountain the group stumbles upon a meadow on a plateau- which is.

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## **Nick says**

Reading this non-fiction from decades ago, I wonder what has changed, what I'd find if I went on a similar trip now. While the "story" of this book wasn't really much (I went here, then I went here, then I went here), McGinniss provides vivid and detailed descriptions that make this book very easy and exciting to read. The Alaskan wilderness, of course, sounds beyond everything I know about the outdoors (hopefully this is still the case!). This book was set in a time when oil pipeline development was ramping up and the culture of Alaska was changing dramatically, and largely not, apparently, for the better. From the sounds of things, everybody in Alaska is an alcoholic.

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## **Carly says**

The stories were interesting I was surprised at how outdated some of the language is - no mention of Inuits; I don't even know who he was referring to when discussing Eskimos versus Indians. I found myself daydreaming about my trip to Alaska when I was a teenager, and thinking about a firmer student that took a

job in Anchorage. This did not make me want to go back to the freezingness that is Alaska, but did remind me of the glory of the beauty and the wonders of hiking.

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### **Lisa Vegan says**

For some reason, I remember liking this book more than all the others I read in preparation for a trip to Alaska that I took in 1983. It really got me in the mood and gave me a good sense of the the place, even though I was going to only a small corner of the state.

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### **Bob Rehfeld says**

McGinnis does his best to describe all the worst of Alaska. After awhile it becomes irrelevant.

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### **Helen says**

The mysterious wild land of Alaska and its potential transformation as a result of the new Trans Alaska Pipeline drew two accomplished journalist/explorers in the mid-1970s to experience as much of it as they could. John McPhee, New Jersey native, gave us “Coming into the Country,” published in 1977, and Joe McGinniss, Massachusetts man, wrote “Going to Extremes,” after touring Alaska in 1975, though the book wasn’t published until 1980. I’m writing one review to cover both of them.

Coming into the Country is by far the more serious work, more thoroughly researched and considerably longer (438 pages versus 285.) Going to Extremes is more entertaining—the random adventures of a free spirit who went off to see what he could see. It feels more like somebody you know telling you a series of funny stories about his trip.

Both men took camping trips in the Brooks Range, pretty much the most remote wilderness area in Alaska. McPhee and his party took kayaks and a canoe, walking when the water got too shallow, while McGinniss hiked. They all saw grizzly bears, but nobody was eaten. If you’re interested in wilderness and camping, you’d probably like both accounts.

More than half of McPhee’s book consists of stories of Alaskans he met, including a great many devoted to a subsistence lifestyle, hunting and trapping to feed themselves. Let’s just say that Alaska has a whole lot of people who came to Alaska to get away from government and regulations and think it’s their God-given right to build a cabin wherever they see fit. These stories are mostly quite interesting, though there are so many that they get repetitive. McPhee also devotes a section of his book to the politics surrounding the proposal to move the state capital out of Juneau, which is the only U.S. capital that cannot be reached by road. This part gets a bit boring, especially since you know that the capital did not get moved.

McGinniss tells some great stories, especially about life in the grim confines of Barrow and Nome. It’s no wonder that Alaska’s remote areas have high rates of alcoholism, suicide and domestic violence.

Both books offer lots of information about the conflicts that still shape Alaska—notably who has the rights to Alaska’s natural resources, how much wilderness should be preserved and how much should be developed.

They also do a good job of conveying Alaska's vastness. Even today, the state has a population of only about 738,000 (by comparison, the Tampa Bay area has 4.3-million people), spread over an area more than twice the size of Texas. Obviously some things have changed in the last 40 years, notably in communications. Even in the wilderness, you can have an emergency beacon. And I surely hope the houses in Barrow have indoor plumbing by now.

McPhee is now 85 while McGinniss died in 2014 at the age of 71.

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### **Matthew Martens says**

A breezy tour--and then be chilly breezes, boy--of mid-seventies Alaska, as lived and reported by Joe McGinniss, a young-ish, wicked curious denizen of Western Mass, still flush from his surprise bestseller about Nixon's election and issued a blank check from his publisher to follow his nose, or his bliss. His year or so among the human wreckage--whether mainlanders fleeing or natives reeling--and the natural splendor (which he struggles but gradually develops a fine facility to describe) makes for engaging travel journalism, filled with deft characterizations of many shades of eccentric, and a tart, still timely snapshot (can a snapshot be tart?) of a pivotal, tumultuous moment in our recent history, particularly with respect to the oil economy, the environment, and indigenous peoples. 3.5.

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### **Steven Z. says**

Recently I was in a bookstore in Anchorage, Alaska and came across a book by Joe McGinniss entitled, GOING TO EXTREMES. Having read his THE SELLING OF THE PRESIDENT 1968 about the attempt to repackage Richard Nixon for the 1968 presidential campaign, and CRUEL DOUBT which centers on a society murder in a small North Carolina town in 1988, I was intrigued. After reading the introduction to the new edition written in 2010, as the original was published in 1981, I learned that McGinniss had thanked Sarah Palin for the inspiration to revisit Alaska after the 2008 Republican Convention and how the state had impacted him in the mid-1970s. The book itself is part memoir, geographical guide, and history of the 49th state that was admitted to the United States sixteen years before what McGinniss describes in his own thought provoking and humorous style as the transformation of Alaska due to the domination of "big oil."

A few weeks ago while standing below a section of the Alaska pipeline outside Fairbanks I learned that 85% of the state's revenue is a result of oil and that each Alaskan resident receives a check for \$2-3,000 a year as a tax rebate depending on the whims of politicians and oil production. The money pays college tuition and numerous other costs for Alaska's citizens and one cannot imagine where Alaska would be today without the money stream from "big oil." McGinniss' main motivation in visiting Alaska in 1975 was to experience the awesome beauty of its primal wilderness and mountains, for what he feared might be the last days of the last frontier America would ever have.

McGinniss would spend a year traveling and living among the native Eskimos and local citizens trying to get to the core of what it meant to be an Alaskan native, and those characters who settled in Alaska by choice for many diverse and unusual reasons. The book describes a state that in many parts seems to be a world where things remain just as they had been forty or four hundred years before. However, with the political and economic pressures fostered by the Alaskan pipeline they were about to change radically as I witnessed on my recent visit a few weeks ago.

The reader accompanies the author as he crosses the state from an amazing trek through the Brooks Range as he describes the Oolah Pass, part of the Continental Divide not between east and west, but the Arctic Divide. Below this point water flowed south, emptying into the Pacific Ocean. Beyond the Pass it drained into the Arctic Ocean! We meet many fascinating characters who lived in the wilderness, towns, villages, and cities, from the state capitol in Juneau which cannot be reached by road, to Barrow which lies 330 miles above the Arctic Circle in the north, Seward in the south, and Denali\* in the center. Alaska's topography make it a necessity for people to have pilot's license if they are to survive the state's rugged terrain, and in fact one out of every six residents do. The need for air transport also serves as a time machine as you fly from Anchorage to Fairbanks to the north and on to coastal areas that seem fifty years behind.

McGinniss spends a great deal of time exploring the impact of western technology and the coming of the white culture. It has had a particularly devastating effect on younger Eskimos who were not set in the ways of the older generation. What emerges is that Eskimo culture is being destroyed as they confront the Americanization of Alaska brought on by the wealth produced by the oil pipeline. They are migrating to cities in great number seeking welfare aid, taking jobs on the pipeline earning money that they have no clue on how to deal with, or trying to survive in their villages.

In his trek throughout state, McGinniss meets a cavalcade of individuals unique in character and possess outlandish life stories that seem to culminate in Alaska. World War II veterans abound, Grateful "Deadheads," policemen from Denver, former businessmen and educators, writers, bureaucrats, and many who are recently divorced and trying to put their lives back together. Others are seeking freedom, adventure, or just to get rich quick from the oil boom. We meet people who arrive from Seattle on a barge in what appears to be a "hippie coup" of a small village as they take over the radio station, newspaper, and school library. The descriptions and stories abound like Duncan Pyle, a former bestselling Canadian author who for a time was the Chairman of the Language Department at the Inupiat University of the Arctic, a university housed in a shack. As Olive Cook who grew up in Bethel which is located at the confluence of the Bering Sea and the Yukon River who left for a job in Washington, D.C., but she could never reconcile her Eskimo culture and white technological society. We also meet Eddie the Basque, a pipefitter from Idaho who hoped to make enough money from the pipeline to retire, however, by the time he arrived the pipeline was almost completed.

It seems that everyone that the author meets left the lower forty eight states for Alaska without any knowledge of what they were getting themselves into. A case in point is Tom and Marie Brennan who left newspaper jobs in Worcester, MA and set out in their International Harvester Travel All pulling a houseboat on wheels. After traveling 5000 miles they eventually reached Anchorage where they got jobs on the Anchorage Times and witness the spectacular growth of Alaska's largest city, and Tom, who escaped Massachusetts, would soon become the Public relations Head for Atlantic Richfield and the oil pipeline!

McGinniss' description of Fairbanks is as if it did not exist on earth, "but on a distant planet; a planet that was much farther from the sun." In fact, many of the author's descriptions have that out of the earth's universe feel to it as Alaska is not like any other area in our union, particularly the winters. Many stark descriptions of the landscape are offered, but despite these comments, the sheer beauty of Alaska's bareness comes through, from the Kahiltna Glacier 7200 feet above sea level which is the staging area for hikers to climb Denali or the Yukon River that flows from the Bering Sea all the way across Alaska into Canada.

GOING TO EXTREMES is a unique look at our 49th state, a view that is hard to accept for many natives because of the way their lives have changed. However, for the Alaska novice like myself in conjunction with my recent visit it was eye opening what the oil boom has done to the state and its people. Whether you are a conservationist, an individual who believes in the development of Alaska's natural resources, or someone

who wishes that the government would just leave Alaskans alone there is something worthwhile to be taken from McGinniss' narrative.

\*The name of the highest mountain in North America became a subject of dispute in 1975, when the Alaska Legislature asked the U.S. federal government to officially change its name from Mount McKinley to Denali. The mountain had been unofficially named Mount McKinley in 1896 by a gold prospector, and officially by the United States government in 1917 to commemorate William McKinley, who was president of the United States from 1897 until his assassination in 1901. (Wikipedia)

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## **Greg says**

Part travel diary, history, environmentalism, and current events in Alaska. Focuses a lot on the natural beauty and his adventures from almost every region of the state (even made it up to Barrow). It is more like an anthropological study of "Alaskans." McGinniss obviously does have a slant against the oil companies and what he sees as the development and environmental destruction of Alaska, which in part is true. But again he fails to mention his own complicity in this "destruction" (or our own for that matter) which is what I was looking for. Really just grazes the tip of the iceberg, he could have done a lot more.

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## **Cheryl says**

I found this book through a GoodReads recommendation request looking for books to read while on a recent cruise through Alaska's inside passage (which was sadly cut short due to family illness), and it was great read. Going to Extremes was published in 1980, but as many reviewers here and elsewhere have pointed out, the book holds up well. I can't speak for its accuracy since I barely saw much of Alaska, but the book and its vivid descriptions of people and places there, and its perspective of the ongoing conflict between development versus preserving wilderness made me feel more connected to Alaska in a way I'm sure I would not have without this book. I read John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* years ago and loved it, these two books are good companion readers about Alaska. Also, I just realized that Joe McGuiness is the author of the upcoming book on Sarah Palin, which is getting great reviews, I can't wait to read that and plan to check out all of Joe McGuiness's books.

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