

## A CONVERSATION WITH CARY J. GRIFFITH

### What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

I was writing an article for the *MN Conservation Volunteer* (in 2003, I believe), and I interviewed John Ackerman at his Spring Valley caverns cave farm as part of my research. He told me about his near-death experience trying to find the Odessa Spring cave, and I wondered about the type of person who would do this kind of exploration. Then, in April 2004, five kids entered the man-made caves in Saint Paul and only two came out alive. I wanted to know more about that story—because it was tragic, but it also explored an area of interest: what can happen when people without the proper background and perspective explore wilderness.

### What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing *Opening Goliath*?

The most interesting challenge was navigating the politics of the Minnesota caving community. John Ackerman is a particularly controversial character. Some people in the Minnesota caving community (and in the wider caving community)

hate him. And when they heard I was writing a book that featured some of his exploits, they were immediately turned off. And I don't mean just a little; some key figures refused to even speak with me—because they'd heard I was writing a book that was pro-Ackerman, which of course was not the case. But it was the kind of irrationality I faced from some in Minnesota's caving community.

### What do you like most about the book?

Actually—and this is the truth—the fact that it won a Minnesota Book Award. While the book hasn't sold as well as I'd have liked, or been reviewed as widely as my first book, I think it's a well-written book. It opens the door to a part of wild Minnesota about which few people know. And it explores the characters who explore those regions. My publisher and I knew we put together a good book, but it wasn't until this award that we received some outside vindication for our efforts.

### What was your journey to becoming a published author?

I was 18. When I was young, I lived a Huck Finn existence. I spent practically my entire summer exploring, fishing, trapping and wandering

Indian Creek and the rich wild wood of eastern Iowa. I entered college as a biology major, intent on doing some sort of work in forestry or something similar. But during my second year I took a required course—Introduction to Literature—and one evening, for an assignment, I read Hemingway's *Big Two-Hearted River*. I was transfixed, transported and broken open like an egg. I didn't have a lot of background in reading and writing, but I thought, "Now, here's something to which you could apply your life that would have particular meaning." I've been writing ever since.

### How does being a Minnesotan inform your writing?

This is a wonderful community for writers and for the wild. Both are extremely important for my kind of work. Oh, and it's also full of readers, which of course are ultimately the most important people in the world for a writer.



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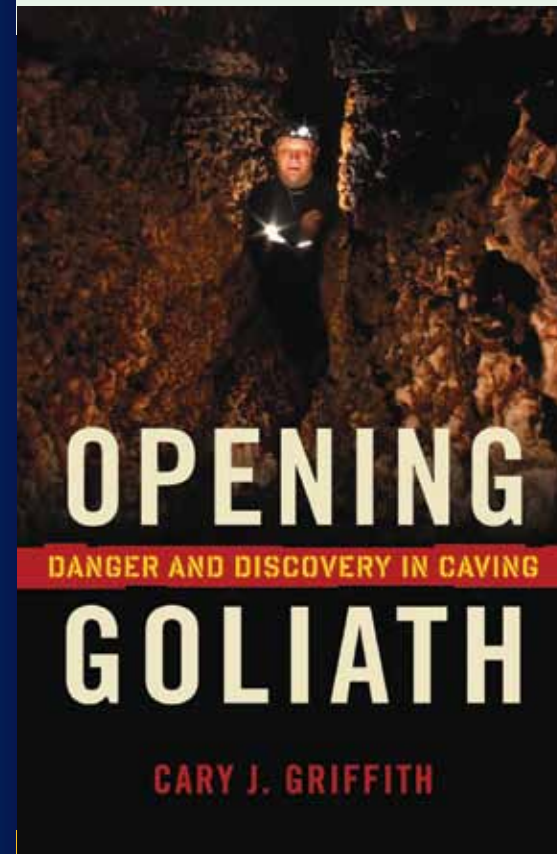
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MINNESOTA  
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**Opening Goliath:  
Danger and Discovery in Caving**

by Cary J. Griffith

BOREALIS BOOKS/MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESS

# Opening Goliath

## SUMMARY:

*Opening Goliath* introduces readers to the challenges, rewards, and dangers of caving. Cary Griffith accomplishes this by recounting riveting and life-threatening tales of exploration in the limestone caves of southeastern Minnesota and the man-made caves of Saint Paul. With a mix of adventure, suspense, politics, science, discovery and wonder, the book takes readers to a subterranean wilderness where exploration and preservation sometimes coexist—and sometimes collide.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. What did you learn about caving and Minnesota caves that was most surprising?
3. Are you interested in doing cave exploration? Did *Opening Goliath* make you more or less interested in the activity of caving, and why?
4. Some reviewers and readers have described the book as being a page-turning thriller. Do you agree with this description? How well does the author's writing style work for you in providing both an enjoyable and educational reading experience?
5. To what degree should state and federal government be allowed to control access to wild places? Should individuals be allowed to own natural caves?
6. In the controversy over the proper way to manage the exploration of Goliath's Cave, did you find yourself siding more with the cavers or the state officials? To what extent do you believe the cavers and government officials share a goal of conservation and/or other goals?
7. What words best describe John Ackerman? Are there particular qualities that you admire about him, and do you disagree with any of his actions described in the book?
8. Is there always value in humans going into previously unexplored wilderness, such as cave regions in southeastern Minnesota? When, if ever, do you believe it is better for humans to stay out of unexplored areas?
9. What is the most life-threatening thing you have chosen to do? What rewards and/or lessons did the experience provide?
10. If you wrote a nonfiction book about a Minnesota topic, what subject would you choose?

## ABOUT CARY J. GRIFFITH

*Cary J. Griffith is a freelance writer who specializes in writing about the outdoors. His previous book, Lost in the Wild: Danger and Survival in the North Woods, was published in 2006.*



Visit [www.caryjgriffith.com](http://www.caryjgriffith.com) to learn more about the author's work and to view video taken in Goliath's Cave.