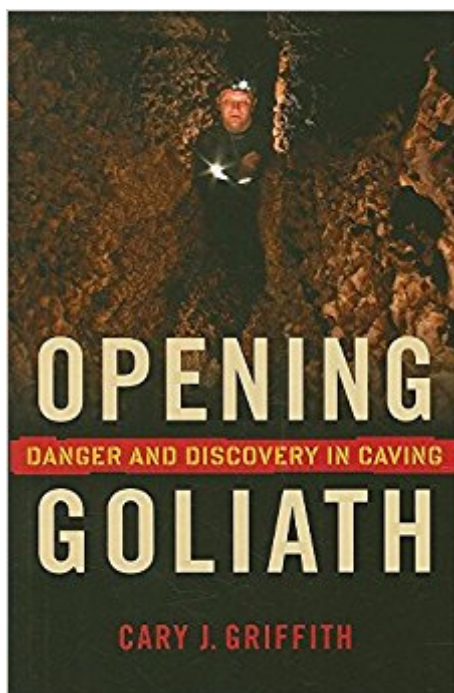


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# Opening Goliath: Danger And Discovery In Caving



## Synopsis

"Writing in a style that reads like fiction, Griffith takes readers into heart-stopping action alongside caver John Ackerman, who found unexplored Goliath Cave in southeastern Minnesota." St. Paul Pioneer Press  
Narrow passages, twisting upward or dropping precipitously. Huge vaults filled with fantastic shapes. Tunnels twined in tangled mazes. Over centuries, underground rivers can carve holes and rooms in solid rock; drips of water build walls of stone. Natural caves shape another world beneath our feet. Dangerous and beautiful, these places remain unknown—until someone decides to investigate. In 2004, businessman and caver John Ackerman drilled an entryway into Goliath Cave, a huge and unexplored complex in the karst region of southeastern Minnesota. Squeezing through tiny openings, scuba diving through silt-filled waters, scaling walls, and traversing crevasses, he and his fellow cavers painstakingly mapped ever-further reaches of the complex in an exploration that continues to this day. But man-made caves that do not breathe can be even more dangerous than their natural cousins. In St. Paul, also in 2004, five teenagers entered an area where intermittent fires robbed the air of oxygen. Only two emerged alive.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Writing in a style that reads like fiction, Griffith takes readers into heart-stopping action alongside caver John Ackerman, who found unexplored Goliath Cave in southeastern Minnesota." St. Paul Pioneer Press  
"For the great silent majority who prefer to cheat death by staying aboveground--in other words, for those who don't suffer from that peculiar mental affliction called caving--Griffith provides a safe and sane way of exploring the underground

realm."Natural History Magazine

“In nonfiction that reads like a fast-paced thriller, Cary J. Griffith explores the incredible beauty and danger of Minnesota’s caves, along with the personalities of those driven to enter the unknown, whatever the risks. But beyond the drama of exploration, Griffith presents the very human conflict that results when a newfound cave system becomes a public trust and a political football, bounced between bureaucracies, well-meaning experts, and the recreational cavers who discovered the labyrinthine passages, all of whom claim to know the best way to protect fragile underground wilderness. A great read and an insightful look at the politics of conservation, *Opening Goliath* is destined to become a classic among cavers and noncavers alike.

• Michael Ray Taylor, author of *Cave Passages: Roaming the Underground Wilderness* and *Caves: Exploring Hidden Realms*

“In *Opening Goliath*, Cary Griffith throws light on the hitherto dark world of Minnesota caving and the politics behind it. This fascinating story features danger, adventure, and an intriguing glimpse at the conflicts and personalities involved in discovering the big caves of Minnesota.

• Gregory Brick, author of *Subterranean Twin Cities*

“As captivating as it is informative, *Opening Goliath* leads the reader to and through a largely unknown world just beneath our feet, illuminating not only crawlways through the rock but a very human drama created by our reactions to the forces of geology.

• Jeffrey A. Dorale, Assistant Professor, Department of Geoscience, University of Iowa

Cary J. Griffith, a freelance writer who specializes in writing about the outdoors, is the author of *Lost in the Wild: Danger and Survival in the North Woods*. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

This book is well written and also well researched. It keeps you interested, even if you are not a cave enthusiast. Griffiths does a good job, as he did in *Lost in the Wild*, of putting you right in the character’s shoes, feeling the same emotions and seeing the surroundings. Both books could be made into series (hint, hint!), because there are more stories to be told. Only reasons I gave it 4 a and not 5 were the disappointing tease at the end (don’t end with a hint of an even more titillating story!), and the subject matter might not interest all readers ( though I encourage everyone to read it, you’ll likely surprise yourself like I did). I look forward to more great non-fiction from Cary Griffiths!

I bought this book in order to learn a little about caving in MN. The author is experienced and has written many articles about similar subjects. My only concern is that he did seem to side with private caving fans against the Minnesota state officials in charge of closing or opening caves to

exploration.

Great read I really enjoyed this book having done some caving in my past great book. Very informative about the inherent dangers of caving a must read.

A little dry at times, but very informative. Wish there was a more in depth book about each of the 3 sections.

As a long time caver, I'm always interested in books about caving. I was unaware that there were any extensive caves in this part of the country. Cary Griffiths does a great job. I look forward to reading more books by him.

"Opening Goliath: Danger and Discovery in Caving." Cary J. Griffith. Borealis Books, St. Paul, Minnesota; 2009. ISBN 978-0-87351-649-5. 5.5 by 8 inches, 294 pages, hardbound. \$27.95. Following some short subjects, especially misadventures by teenagers in St. Paul's abandoned sandstone mines, this book describes the history of Goliath's Cave in southern Minnesota. The natural entrance is in a small wooded plot and is sumped much of the time. While cavers were attempting to dig a new entrance, the landowner, who had previously been friendly, became concerned about liability and closed the cave. The owner then applied for permission to open a limestone quarry there, which was never going to happen, and the cavers encouraged the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to add the wooded area, which contains other karst features in addition to the cave entrance, to its system of Scientific and Natural Areas. It did, and promptly refused to allow cavers entry into the cave. (Will cavers ever learn?) A rich and controversial caver, whom we had met earlier in the book when he made a fool and almost a corpse of himself attempting a zero-visibility sump dive when the ink on his open-water scuba certification was barely dry, persuaded the ninety-one-year-old owner of two acres across the road from the preserve to sell him the land, and he has a large shaft drilled into the cave, reopening it to caving through David's Entrance. Much bitterness all around. Griffith writes as though all this is the discovery of another Carlsbad Cavern, with lots of "incredible formations" and "astounding beauty." True, Goliath's is the third-longest cave in Minnesota, but cavers will recognize that as faint praise. There are other indications that, while he has obviously done a lot of research into the particular events he describes, Griffith knows very little about caves and caving in general. He wrote most of the book in the historical present tense, which he hasn't quite mastered. With his gee-whiz and

juvenile writing style, he has written a children's book without meaning to.--Bill Mixon

Like caves themselves, this book is a tangential exploration of the world of Minnesota caves and managing the danger of exploring them. It starts with an account of what must be the most dangerous and frightening situation imaginable, caver John Ackerman diving blind in a narrow, silted-up, twisted underwater cave passage deep underground with zero visibility, getting tangled and immobilized in a net-like snarl of dive line, with air hose coming loose, far from help of any kind and with precious little air remaining. This harrowing scene is not for the claustrophobic, even in their imagination! After such a foretaste of danger to an experienced caver, the book shows us what can happen when inexperienced individuals plumb the depths of a wild cave, through a chronicle of a group of young people discovering a large abandoned cache of WWII-era munitions buried in St. Paul's caves. The abandoned cache, sitting quietly unknown in areas where teens and vagrants regularly smoke, have campfires, etc. is capable of creating an Oklahoma City-size blast until the authorities are notified and it is removed. Then we see the tragic story of the deaths of three teens (and near-death of two others) in Fandell's Cave in St. Paul in 2004, as the exploring teens (who walk right by a sign warning of the deaths of two teens there in 1992) are overcome by undetectable carbon monoxide buildup, and firefighters must risk their own lives to search the maze-like passages to rescue and recover them. Stories like these set the stage for an overall theme of conflict between the fascination of amateur cave exploration and the inherent danger that results in liability for landowners and the government. This results in an ongoing tension between those interested in caves and the government agencies that seek to stop, restrict or control access to caves. This dynamic reaches epic proportion with the discovery and exploration of Goliath's Cave (so named for a large flowstone formation within), a cave near Spring Valley in SE MN which may be one of the largest unexplored caves in the state. As it is explored and mapped by various cavers, the private landowners become increasingly worried about liability. Sections of the cave are accessed by traversing "sumps" or "water traps" (like the gooseneck section of pipe under a sink) that require going through an underwater passage to get to the further cave beyond. As water levels rise from underwater rivers in various seasons, these sumps can become impassable. Impatient with the need to wait for drier times, a group of experienced cavers develop a plan to pump out the sump water with a gas-powered pump. Their preparations miscalculate the dispersion of the carbon monoxide buildup, resulting in the near-deaths of two of the cavers and a desperate midnight rescue and a medical airlift flight to the Mayo Clinic. This incident exacerbates the landowner's concerns about liability and causes them to restrict all access to the cave, cutting off the cave's tantalizing

depths from those pioneering explorers who are the only ones who have set foot in it, and know it best. As though with a rising sump of legal red tape, Goliath's Cave becomes blocked from further exploration through civic and legal machinations. The owners, denied a permit for a rock quarry, eventually decide to sell the land to the state, and the natural entrance to the cave becomes an SNA (state scientific and natural area). The state bars the entrance to the cave, and a bureaucratic quarantine descends as the cave now may only be explored for "research" purposes, all "recreational" caving (even by experienced National Speleological Society cavers) is prohibited. The depths of the cave become inaccessible for all practical purposes, as in the name of "preserving for future generations" the current generation is denied access except under near-impossible regulation. Meanwhile, maverick caver John Ackerman, fascinated with the promise of Goliath's Cave to reveal hitherto unseen depths, decides to take matters into his own hands by purchasing adjacent land and drilling his own access (called "David's Entry" for the Biblical foe of Goliath) down into a section of the cave. This reopens the cave to the cavers who initially explored and mapped it, and exploration begins again. This action also helps to dislodge the state's bureaucratic inertia, and "research" activity mapping the cave's natural entrance also commences. The book concludes with John Ackerman overcoming his dread of blind underwater entanglement in narrow cave passages, as he penetrates through another constricting shaft (with the help of a professional cave diver) and discovers another 1500 feet and new formations in Goliath's Cave. This is the latest chapter in an ongoing story of discovery and exploration, and a tenuous minuet between private and public access to one of the final frontiers in Minnesota. This is a very enjoyable, fast-paced book, filled with fascinating cave maps and photographs. Highly recommended (unless, of course, you are claustrophobic!), which also gives a balanced overview of the concerns of danger, liability, and cave preservation.

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