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Book Review: Endless Caverns: An Underground Journey into the Show Caves of Appalachia

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Endless Caverns: An Underground Journey into the Show Caves of Appalachia by Douglas Reichert Powell (University of North Carolina Press, 2018: ISBN 9781469669434, \$29.00)

If you are looking for a guidebook that provides directions, hours of operation, and entrance fees, this is not the book for you. Instead, you will find author Douglas Reichert Powell (a self-identified “cultural speleologist”) using past and present commercial caves as investigations into the culture, history, biography, and geology of the Appalachians. Weaving personal narrative with biographical sketches, history lessons, and insightful questions about the nature of being human, each chapter uses particular caves as means of exploring themes like illusion and reality, transformation of space, cultural change, the struggle to control meaning, and the tension between darkness and light.

The author explores 36 caves, ranging from popular attractions like Ruby Falls and Luray Caverns to abandoned, “feral” caves like Manitou Cave and Mystic Caverns. This contrast between success and dereliction forms counterpoints in his wide-ranging discussions: there can be no light without darkness; there can be no illusion without reality. We cannot understand change without an understanding of what impact that change can cause.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the show cave as place and to the traits that define it. Grand Caverns in Virginia forms the basis of chapter two, in which Powell “tells the story of space.” Illusion and reality are investigated in chapter three, which dives into the geological formations of Forbidden Caverns and their mimicry of objects in reality. Gap Cave in Cumberland

Gap National Historical Park makes up the fourth chapter, which explores Appalachia in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Chapters five and six explore the theme of darkness, and it is here that the author shines. Encounters with the total darkness of a cave (a common tour guide trick during all show cave

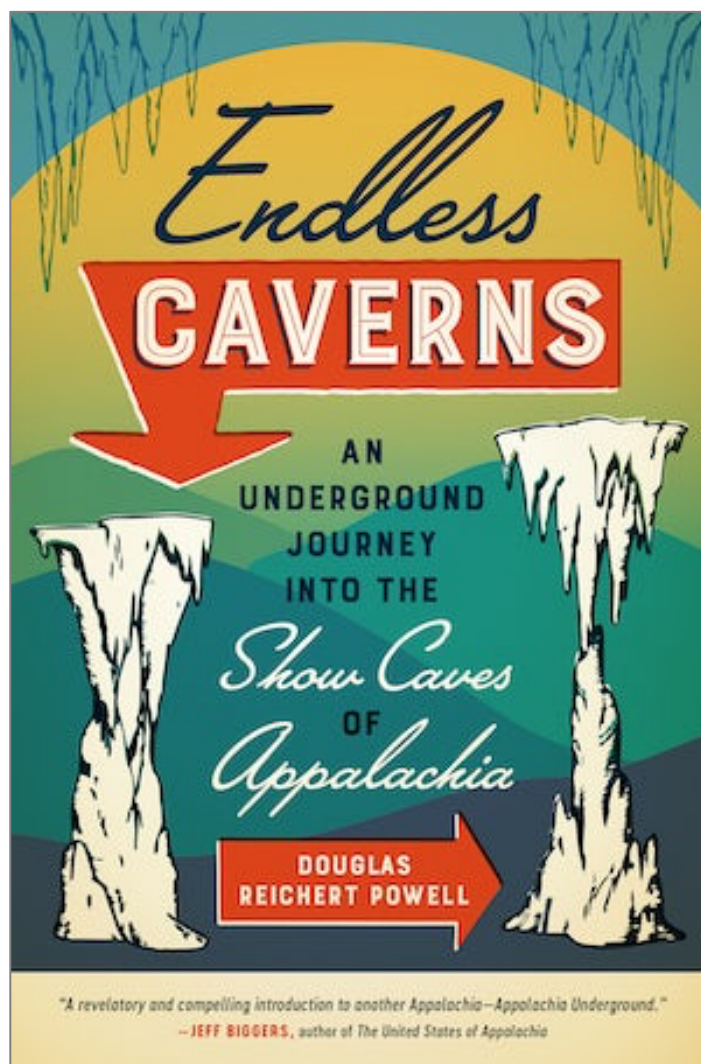


Image courtesy of the publisher

tours) bring to mind danger, despair, and the potential for evil. The personal story of the author's near-disastrous exploration of undeveloped Saltpeter Cave and his subsequent contemplation of human nature is a highlight of the book.

We are introduced to the reclusive National Cave Association and to Luray Caverns in chapter seven, as the curtain is pulled back briefly on what kind of personality it takes to actually own and operate a show cave. Chapter eight highlights the book's title cave, Endless Caverns, and its rise and fall from show cave to NASCAR theme park. Woven throughout are reflections on meaning and change, on the need of "cavers" to preserve the natural state of a cave, and on

the desire of "spelunkers" to transform a cave to meet the needs of the present culture. The book closes with chapter nine's exploration of now-defunct caves, where nature reasserts its dominance but is unable to completely erase the impact of culture.

This book will inspire readers to visit a few show caves and, as the tour guide turns off the lights, reflect on how human nature, history, culture, and the physical world we inhabit are so closely tied together. This book is recommended for general readers interested in the geology of caves, Appalachian culture, and human history.

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