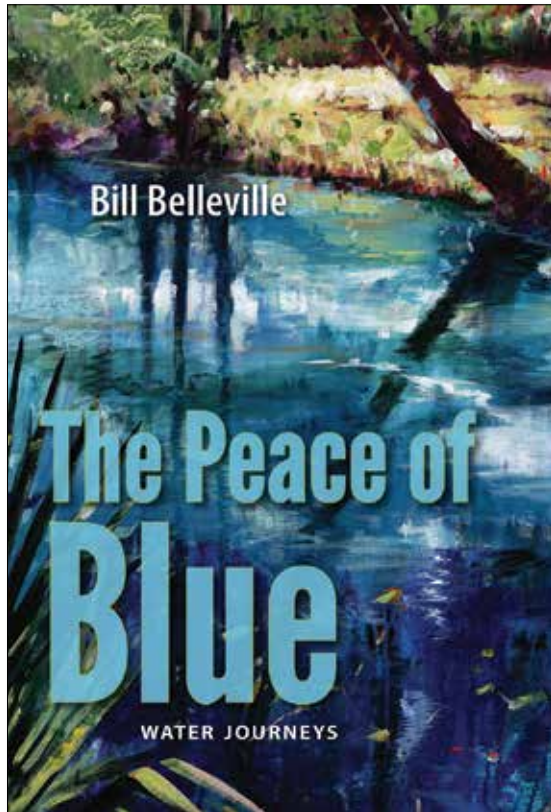


# WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING



“Away from the strip malls and the sprawl, the theme parks and the resorts, the waters of Florida are a secret blue world of wonders. Bill Belleville’s beautiful new book takes you with him on (and sometimes under) the rivers and springs, lakes and marshes and seas of this most liquid of states.”

—**DIANE ROBERTS**, author of *Dream State: Eight Generations of Swamp Lawyers, Conquistadors, Confederate Daughters, Banana Republicans, and Other Florida Wildlife*

“Eloquent. Belleville’s passion and curiosity invigorate us and challenge us to rediscover the world as if for the first time.”

—**ANN FISHER-WIRTH**, coeditor of *The Eco-poetry Anthology*

“Belleville reminds us of the fragile nature of our springs, rivers, lakes, beaches, and shorelines while always celebrating their beauty. This book, combining the best of Henry David Thoreau and Rachel Carson, should be a necessary addition to every bookshelf.”

—**STEVEN NOLL**, author of *Ditch of Dreams*

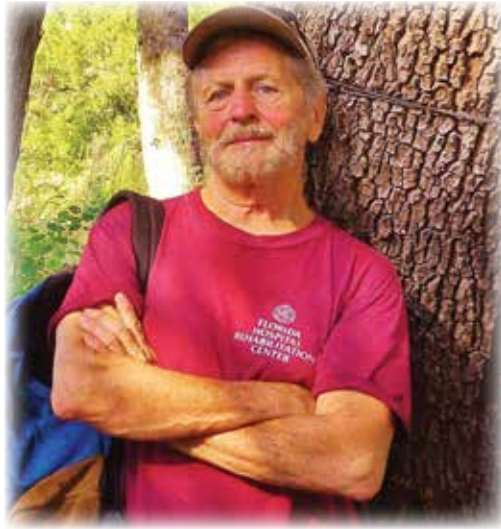


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**THE PEACE OF BLUE**  
*Water Journeys*  
BILL BELLEVILLE

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Hardcover \$24.95  
240 pp., 30 b/w photos, map  
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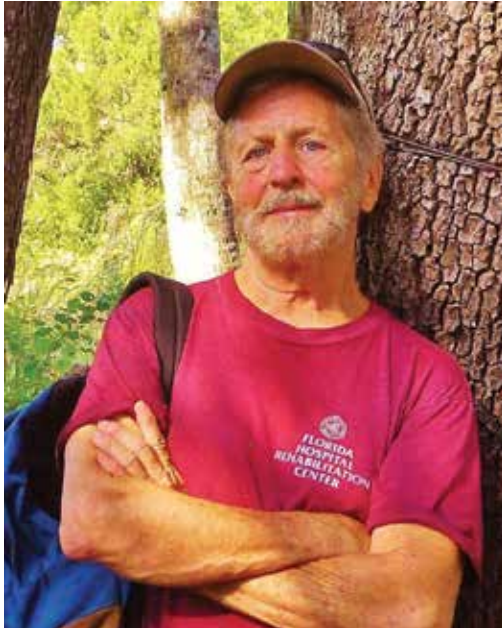


**BILL BELLEVILLE** is an award-winning author specializing in nature, conservation, and helping to define “sense of place.” *The Peace of Blue* is his seventh book of creative non-fiction. His earlier title *Losing it All to Sprawl* was named “One of the Best Books of the Year” by the Library Journal, while his last essay collection *Salvaging the Real Florida* won top honors from the National Outdoor Book Awards in the category of “Natural History Literature.” Judges described him as a “mature and accomplished author” who is “an absolute pleasure to read.” He has scripted and produced films for PBS and radio documentaries for NPR, and has written over 1,000 articles and essays with by-lines in “Oxford American,” “Islands Publications,” and many more.

**BILL BELLEVILLE**  
is available for interviews and appearances.



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## Q & A with

**BILL BELLEVILLE**

author of

**The Peace of Blue**

*Water Journeys*

### **How did nature come to be such an important part of your life?**

I grew up in the country, so “nature” was our single largest source of entertainment. I’d walk for miles, often with a friend my own age, just to see what we might discover. It was only later in my life that I began to understand natural history, and the way all those places were linked together via something called “ecology.”

### **How did waterscapes come to be the focus of this collection?**

As a boy, I lived on a peninsula surrounded by water, veined with rivers and dotted with lakes. Florida, where I’ve spent most of my adult life, was a larger, subtropical version of my boyhood peninsula. I’ve always been enthralled with the many ways in which water so fully shapes life here—as well as in the extended “bioregion” of the Antilles.

### **What is your favorite way to spend time outdoors in Florida?**

It’s a toss-up between paddling on rivers, hiking near them, or snorkeling and diving under the surface of any water body.

**Tell us one of your favorite memories about water from your childhood.**

Fishing with my dad on the shores of a tidal river and—right before sunset—catching the largest striped bass of my young life. I was particularly proud when my mom cleaned and broiled it, and served it to us for dinner!

**How is your day structured when you write? What's your writing routine?**

I write best in the morning, so I try to structure my day to allow for that. By mid-afternoon, I turn to the left-brained “adult” part of writing—editing, fielding queries about presentations, planning new editorial projects, and so on.

**What do you hope readers will enjoy the most about your book?**

These are all little stories about my experiences. So, I'm hoping the energy of a “story” helps take the reader to that particular place in time. In this way, they get to feel these water-driven experiences—but they also are exposed to diverse—maybe even sublime—ways of “seeing.”

**People who really liked *Salvaging the Real Florida* and *River of Lakes* should enjoy this book.**

**What are you currently reading?**

I am re-reading Barry Lopez's classic *Crossing Open Ground*.

**Who are your favorite authors, and how have they influenced or informed your own work?**

Beyond Mr. Lopez, I've always been very impressed and moved by the work of Peter Matthiessen, as well as nature-themed poetry by Wendell Berry, Alison Deming, and others. The timeless, narrative engagement of a “story” becomes more realized for me, as does the ways in which words can express a feeling, a mood, a dream.

**What are you working on next?**

In addition to a couple of nature-themed essays, I am scripting and helping to produce a PBS film on the values—and challenges—of our Florida springs.

**Do you have one sentence of advice for new authors?**

Write what you honestly see and feel—and then make sure it's coherent enough to be understood by others.





# The Peace of Blue

WATER JOURNEYS

Bill Belleville

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## 24 Sacred Caves That Hold Fast to Their Secrets

### *Diving with the Gods*

Hundreds of years ago, the native people known as the Taino came here in great numbers to the sacred cenote of La Aleta in a dry tropical forest on a peninsula off southeastern Hispaniola. They did so to honor their ancestors, to keep their *zemis* apprised of their worship of them, to drink freshwater, and to share in the fellowship of it all.



*A member of our expedition to La Aleta during a visit to one of the dry caves of the area in the East National Park of the Dominican Republic. For the pre-Columbian Taino, caves—wet and dry—were portals to the underworld where the gods dwelled.*

The Tainos were an elegant, gentle people, and I imagine they will be grateful that someone cares enough about the shards of their life to wish them into existence again. In this case, the “someone” is an archaeological expedition that has been plumbing the depths of the massive cenote over the last several weeks.

Whatever La Aleta was, it has become the wealthiest repository of Taino artifacts in the entire Caribbean basin. The Taino were a people who migrated through and into the Caribbean, island by island, up through the Lesser Antilles, from the northern rim of South America a few millennia ago. Because the language they spoke was Arawak, they are often described with that term.

Here, like the animals and plants of the islands, they speciated from what they had once been, isolated from their brethren back on the mainland. In the Antilles, they became something else, a new civilization created by the distinct island biogeography that shaped other life forms in the Caribbean. They invented flat griddles called *burens* to cook cassava bread over fire, hammocks to sleep and dream in, canoes to fish from and travel by. We know because we are recovering parts of all of these things—save the hammocks, which we have brought ourselves—from inside the cenote.

Yesterday, a diving archaeologist pulled a three-foot-long wooden pestle from the depths of the deep, water-filled limestone hole. It had a finely tapered handle and hammer-like head to squash the root of the *guyaba* into the mash from which cassava could be made. It was carefully carved and shaped from stone tools, and as I looked closely at it, it seemed as if the craftsman had just yesterday chipped the magnificently intact tool from the trunk of a reddish tropical hardwood.

When I first dived into La Aleta a few days ago, I went there as the others did—by strapping on a harness and being lowered into a seven-story-deep hole through a gaping “eye” in the limestone floor of the jungle. At the bottom of the hole was a great vat of water, and atop that clear water, a small Zodiac raft with scuba gear. Climbing in the raft to join other divers, I suited up with tanks and mask and then made the slow descent on a line that led to the 110-foot top of an earthen mound below.

There, all was dark, with the scant illumination coming only from the dive light I’d brought along. As I watched, divers encircled the soft mound, stopping to hover next to it and then periodically plunging their arms inside

to see what they could find by *feel*. This is the reason that I have come to think of this particular work as archaeology by Braille.

Sometimes they would pull out whole clay pots so wonderfully complete they looked as though they might have just been molded and fired. At other times, wooden *duhos*—a chair of honor for a *cacique*—were recovered, as was finely woven basketry. Gourds that would have rotted up in the tropical heat a thousand years ago were recovered intact, incised with words and images from the Taino long ago. The darkness and mud and lack of oxygen have been very good to the residual clues of the pre-Columbian culture that remain here.

I am here to do the sort of unconventional work I have chosen to make a living. As a writer who dives and who is incessantly curious about the enchantment of the unknown, I am here on behalf of a large documentary network and a magazine. When I'm not diving or writing or poking about in the surrounding jungle, I closely examine the shards of everything that has been recovered that day. Sometimes I painstakingly translate Spanish abstracts that describe the history of the Taino and of this place. Other times I look on as the few terrestrial archaeologists sift through the earth atop the ceremonial lime-rock plazas that once extended outward from La Aleta.

By night, we all gather around a campfire and eat freeze-dried swill and, sometimes, sip a bit of dark Dominican rum. The archaeologists talk about what they'd found that day, and what might be discovered the next, and what it might all mean. Archaeology has long fascinated me, and when it's practiced underwater, it has a very special allure. Part of that, certainly, is in the adventure of being underwater while the relics of another time are being recovered. But relics inundated by both fresh- and salt water—and especially those covered with a moist organic “blanket” of soil—are often in far better shape than those on dry land. Indeed, once hidden away in situ for centuries, organic materials like wood and reed basketry that wouldn't last more than a few years on the surface sometimes seem to be freshly carved, woven, imagined.



I am dropping directly below the surface of the earth today, snug in my cable-rigged harness, watching the reflected sunlight from the assorted

“eyes” of La Aleta bounce off the clear cenote water onto the white limestone walls, dancing a merengue of pre-Columbian celebration.

As for the world I leave behind, there may be no more perfectly colored cerulean sky than the one seen through the crevices of a cenote, from inside looking out. It is a vibrant Kodachrome spectacle, one that diminishes as I fall away from it, until finally it seems like something viewed from the wrong end of a telescope. As eager as I am to dive in this sacred well, there is surely something in the genetic memory of surface mammals that makes a part of us mourn the loss of light—especially when we are traveling toward a giant vat of dark water at a good clip.

I continue to drop toward the surface of the water below, and as I do, I suddenly hear something splash under me. I look down and see it is a wooden bucket dropped from the surface at the end of a long rope by one of the Dominican rangers. This site is, after all, inside a national park, and a small team of rangers live here nearly year-round. This one is gathering drinking water from the cenote, just as the Tainos once did, and as I continue to descend to the raft, the bucket passes me on the way up, two contrasting worlds—one sloshing with ether-clear water, the other breathing heavily. Surely the Tainos, who appreciated the duality of life, would have gotten a kick out this.

After I reach the surface, I trade my harness for some dive gear and begin my slow descent down into the depths of the cenote. The archaeologist who is to be my dive partner splashes in a few minutes after I do, keeping his distance so we do not collide. Despite the clarity of the water, I click on my underwater light within yards of the surface, as the surrounding walls and ceiling of limestone have blocked most of the bright tropical surface light. At a water depth of twenty feet, where the clear water ends and a strange chemo-cline of mineralized silt begins, it seems as if I’m forsaking the boundaries of the crisply focused, tangible world for one that is not nearly so. Once I emerge from the bottom of this odd clime, even the scant ambient light from the surface has vanished.

I continue to descend slowly to the top of the earthen pinnacle below; as I do, two divers pass me, heading up the line. They are returning from a deeper penetration—nearly 180 feet—and one is carrying a spectacularly intact Taino pot in his arms. Unlike other pots, this one is squarish, leaving the scientists to figure how it fits into the cultural timeline.

By the time I reach the top of the pinnacle, my dive partner and I are the only ones left in the cenote. Our lights seem meager in the overwhelming darkness, emitting just enough illumination to keep us from being absorbed by it all. I adjust my buoyancy and hover atop the center of the mud-limestone peak, while the other diver slowly sinks deeper next to it, looking for clues. As I have done before, I say a silent but heartfelt prayer asking permission from the *zemis* of the Taino to be here, explaining to them once more that I will do no harm to the sacraments or to their sacred memory. And, as before, my anxiety level drops dramatically, and I seem to become part of the cenote and all the memories and dreams it has held over time. I said far more in my little prayer and—because of the extraordinary nature of the experience—I would ordinarily remember it all. But my mind doesn't retain nearly as much when nitrogen is leaking into it at the rate it is now.

There is one thing I will always remember about this place, though. I have heard other divers characterize this sinkhole cave as mystical, intense, powerful. Long before the Spanish arrived and begin massacring the Tainos on the island of Hispaniola, La Aleta was a vital force in the life of the people who lived here. Sitting around the campfire just yards away from the cenote a few nights ago, Dr. Geoff Conrad, a Harvard-educated anthropologist who has studied the Indians of Peru and Mesoamerica, casually mentioned that this was the most sacred site of all to the Taino. After all, it is a place where the sky met the water, a foyer between the powerful supernatural magic of the underworld where the gods dwelled and all the rest of life above.

Squarely back into my cenote moment now, I see my dive partner fanning the sediment in the earthen cone below, watch him as he pulls up a large pot shard with ornate incisions. After bringing it over to show me, he puts it back. There have been some one dozen whole pots already recovered here, and pot shards—even those five centuries and more old—are to be left behind at this point.

My air pressure gauge edges slowly toward the red, and we head up, stopping in shallower water to blow off nitrogen before we break the surface. Our bottom time is slight enough to allow us to bypass the tank of oxygen tied to the line there. Instead, we fin curiously about the edges of the limestone chamber, shining our lights under ledges and rocky shelves. I slip back under one such overhang that juts out nearly horizontally, scraping my tanks as I go.