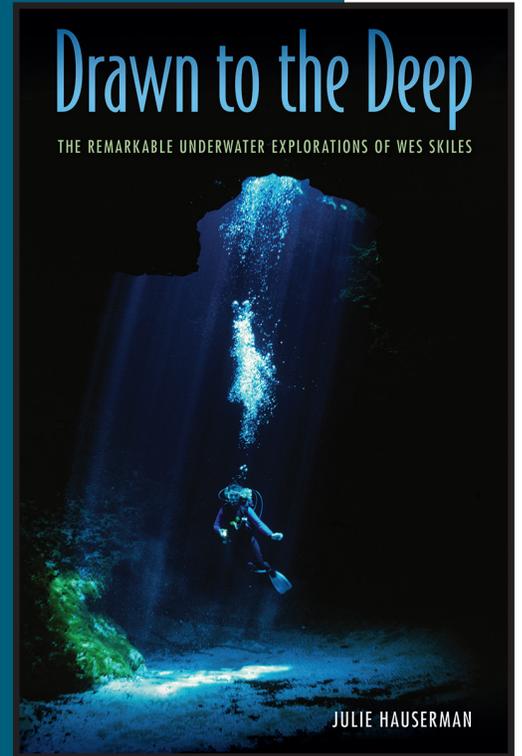


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## DRAWN TO THE DEEP

The Remarkable Underwater Explorations of Wes Skiles  
JULIE HAUSERMAN

978-0-8130-5698-2 • Hardcover \$24.95 • 256 pages, 6 x 9  
UNIVERSITY PRESS OF FLORIDA • SEPTEMBER 2018

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“Wes Skiles’s photos and films are an inspiration to all of those who love nature—especially Florida’s hidden watery world. People of his passion and determination are, and always have been, a rare breed. Hauserman has successfully captured the essence of Skiles in this long-awaited biography.”

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—Shannon Switzer Swanson, *National Geographic Explorer*

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# JULIE HAUSERMAN

is a longtime Florida writer who has written for many publications, including working as a Tallahassee bureau reporter for the *St. Petersburg Times*. She was a national commentator for National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition Sunday* and *The Splendid Table*. Her work has been featured in such magazines as *Family Circle*, *Hip Mama*, and *the Apalachee Review* and the essay collections *The Wild Heart of Florida*, *The Book of the Everglades*, *Between Two Rivers*, and *UnspOILed*. She is a freelance writer and consultant in Tallahassee.

## Julie Hauserman

is available for interviews and appearances



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# Q&A

with

**JULIE HAUSERMAN**

author of

*Drawn to the Deep*

## **What made you decide to write a biography on Wes Skiles?**

An editor at University Press of Florida reached out and asked me to write it. I met Wes when I was a capital bureau reporter with the *St. Petersburg Times* (now *Tampa Bay Times*) and I was writing about the pollution that huge agricultural operations—mostly dairies—were inflicting on Florida’s springs. Manure and fertilizer is pretty much the worst thing you can put on top of our incredibly valuable fresh water aquifer. Wes sounded the alarm about it in High Springs, and I was able to spread the story statewide. He was a great Floridian who explored the unknown reaches of our state, and when University Press reached out, I was eager to tell his amazing story.

## **How did Skiles first get involved with cave diving? Did photography and diving always go hand-in-hand for him?**

Wes fell in love with Ginnie Springs on the Santa Fe River, outside Gainesville, when he was a small boy. He and his brother went there to help test-drive a new personal sport submarine that his Jacksonville neighbor invented and got published in *Popular Mechanics*. As soon as Wes saw that spring, he wanted to go inside it. What’s amazing is that he became one of the top photographers in the world by working in a place with no light. You have to remember that

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this is before digital photography. You had a finite number of frames on a roll of film, and you didn't know what you captured until you got it developed later on. To make his earliest photographs of the underground spring caves, Wes tried his best to waterproof his camera and he used old-fashioned flash bulbs and flashlights wrapped in plastic. Later, when he had teams of people helping him, he used aircraft landing lights and positioned divers around the caves to light them. He was always inventing things.

### **What motivated Skiles to choose such a risky career?**

He was just wired that way. In the book, I get into the neuroscience of risk; it's dependent on certain chemical levels in the brain. But the bottom line is that we've always had these risk-takers who move humanity forward. We have the folks who set out to cross the oceans or climb mountain ranges or fly to the moon or, like Wes, swim inside the planet. Most cave divers are clannish and secretive because there's a certain prejudice about them. People say that they are crazy, and most people only hear about them when they die. What I try to show in the book is that these cave divers are explorers just like astronauts, and this notion that they are "crazy" for the most part isn't accurate. These missions are carefully planned and executed, just like a space mission. As a kid, Wes loved watching the *Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*. He was the *Star Trek* nerd who wanted to "boldly go where no man has gone before." And he did.

### **Skiles traveled all over the world to explore underwater caves. What was his favorite cave diving spot?**

I think that would be hard to say. He loved the springs country where he lived, in the area around Gainesville and High Springs and Tallahassee. That was his backyard playground and the territory of his group of diving buddies that were nicknamed the Mole Tribe. They would tromp through the woods and squeeze into these creepy looking holes in the limestone, hoping to find a cave system no one had explored yet. As a professional explorer, he dove under frigid icebergs in Antarctica, into underwater caves hidden in the Australian outback desert, through spindly-looking stalactites under the Bahamas, rappelled into truly terrifying deep caverns in Mexico—you name it. He loved the chase. I'd say Wes's favorite spot was the one he knew no one had ever explored before and the thrill of knowing he was the first to see it.

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## **As someone who traveled through Florida's springs, how aware was Skiles of the impacts pollution and commercialization had on it, and how did this change his photography style?**

Wes was appalled by what happened to our springs. I mean they were swimming-pool blue with white sandy bottoms when he started diving in them. While swimming inside the planet, he started seeing signs of pollution from above—algae and goo that covered the spring floors and cave walls. He was one of the few divers who climbed out of the caves and told people what was happening from the pollution.

## **Despite the many dangers he faced while cave diving, Skiles passed away during a routine ascent. How did the diving community react to his sudden passing?**

Everyone was shocked of course. His death in 2010 at age 52 remains controversial. Many people believe it was a problem with a rebreather, which is a piece of equipment that recycles a diver's own breath so they don't have to use air tanks. The coroner ruled his death as a drowning, which didn't explain much. I don't think we'll ever know what happened. But one thing is sure—he died doing what he loved. I like to believe he just passed out and never knew what was happening.

## **You had access to Skiles's diving journal; what insights into his personality did it give you?**

Wes's journals were really cool, filled with little hand-drawn maps of caves he was exploring and illustrations of his adventures through the decades all over the world. For a biographer, it was a treasure trove of insight. It's one thing to interview other people who were with Wes on expeditions, and another thing to read his personal recollections. It was challenging figuring out how to handle the material. I started this biography not long after his death, and his office in High Springs was still as he left it, with all the cameras and all of his papers and maps. Wes's wife, Terri, and I worked very closely on this project. To work with the material in Wes's journals, I sat in his empty office in High Springs by myself, reading the passages into a voice recorder and then later transcribing them. In some passages, he seems blasé about these death-defying adventures; other times he's unsure of himself and restless, and sometimes he's writing rough drafts of articles that will later be published in adventure magazines.

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It was a very intimate experience going through those pages. It made me wish he was still on the planet, exploring even more. I did find myself in tears more than once.

### **Have you ever gone cave diving before?**

No! I am not a person wired for risk. A lot of the cave divers I interviewed said they've always been comfortable in confined spaces. As kids they liked to climb into cabinets and whatnot. They feel embraced in the womb-like caves. I like to camp at the springs and snorkel and kayak and swim, but diving? No. I am your friendly above-ground observer. As I write in the book, "Face it: there is just a visceral difference between those of us who would swim down into a stony hole in the bottom of a dark river and those of us who would not."

### **What do you hope readers will take away from the book?**

I hope Wes's story will spark conversations and investigations into what's happening with our water supply. I know that's what Wes would have wanted. He spent his career trying to educate people—especially the younger generation who saw his *Water's Journey* films in their classrooms—about how to keep our fresh water clean. I hope to spread that message.

### **What are you working on next?**

I've recently gone back into journalism after 15 years of being a freelancer and political activist. I've been named editor-in-chief of a new progressive state-wide news operation called the *Florida Phoenix*. We are a non-profit that's part of a national effort—the State Newsroom Project—to fill the void caused by corporate news operations cutting their state capital bureaus to squeeze out more profits. So much of what affects people in their daily lives happens at the state level. There's a lot of shady influence peddling that goes on and needs to be exposed. It is much easier to get nefarious things done in state legislatures and agencies than in Congress, so we really need watchdog reporters on the scene. We've got some terrific reporters, and we'll be digging into news you need to know about Florida: How are your tax dollars being spent? Who is influencing the people who make decisions on your behalf? We want to report for everyone who believes we should have clean water and air, quality public education, affordable healthcare, human rights, equality, and a fair system of political representation. Our elected leaders should be responsive to the people who elect them and not to powerful corporations and monied interest groups who act in self-interest rather than for the public good.

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# 4

## Cave Booty

IN 1983, DURING A DIVE with a friend in a spectacular underground North Florida cave system called Peacock Slough, Tom Morris was swimming around picking up trash when a diver they didn't know whizzed past and crashed onto the spring floor nearby. The man looked like he was in deep trouble.

“He’s seizing there on the bottom, so I go over to him and he immediately rights himself and points at me and he mimes a belly laugh! He was faking the whole thing. He didn’t even know me, but he was pulling a prank on me. Then he points to the trash bag I had and he mouths: ‘Real good’! And then he swims off. Later, I was still around there when he came out of the spring after his dive, and we got to talking, and that’s how I met Wes.”

If Wes’s creepy prank had offended Tom Morris that day, he and Wes probably would never have become dive buddies. But Morris got a kick out of the stunt, and the two made plans to dive together shortly thereafter.

Morris was thirty-six at the time, a broad-shouldered Florida biologist who was intrigued by the specialized creatures that dwelled in rivers, lakes, and caves. Like Wes, he grew up in Jacksonville. Morris was eleven years older than Wes, and the two shared certain essential qualities for cave diving—athleticism, an adventurous spirit, fearlessness, and extreme skill. Like Wes, Morris had been diving Florida caves since he was a teenager, starting with rudimentary equipment. He admits that when first trying the sport, he

used a flashlight in a plastic bag to see what was inside the stony underwater caverns.

“So I’m lucky I’m alive, right?” Morris says, grinning, when I interview him at his Gainesville home, a place with diving equipment strewn about the backyard in various states of readiness for his next trip into dangerous caverns somewhere on the globe. “There were no pressure gauges back then. We were constantly guessing how much air there was. These old tanks had a little thing called a J-valve, and you pull a little rod and it gives you a couple extra minutes of air—that was your backup.”

Once he started diving with Wes, Morris says, he was amazed by Wes’s dive skills. He noticed that Wes didn’t get winded, even on particularly strenuous dives when they fought strong currents flowing from massive spring caves. Wes didn’t panic when equipment failed, or when a cave silted in, or when a tunnel to the next cave room looked too small to get through. He was an exceptional swimmer and was able to stay perfectly parallel in the water.

“His body style, his technique, his understanding, and his intellect allowed him to see water movement so much differently than all the other divers I was associated with,” says Jeffrey Haupt, a cave diver who would later work with Wes for many years on film projects. “He was so like a sailor who can see the wind.”

Wes also had a gift for seeing things spatially.

“I don’t think I knew anybody who could remember a cave better than Wes,” Morris says. “That son of a gun—I would never question him. When I did, I was always wrong. Wes had a steel trap memory for that stuff.”

BY THE TIME he met Morris, Wes was no longer commuting back and forth between Jacksonville and springs country. He had become a local. Wes was now working at Branford Dive Center, a dive shop in the tiny dot on the map called Branford, an old-timey rural town on the banks of the Suwannee River. Branford had little in the way of culture, but it had what Wes and his friends wanted: plenty of nearby rivers and a vast unexplored karst landscape.

There was another major change in Wes’s life—he was married. Wes had met Terri Ann Paulson in Jacksonville, where she was working in a camera shop.

“He had put a camera on layaway, and he wanted to pay it off,” Terri Skiles

says. “I sold him the camera. It was a Nikon FE. And then he asked me out on a date, and I told him no, because I thought he was weird. He seemed so full of himself—he had braggadocio.”

Once Wes saw Terri, he set his sights on her, and his persistence paid off. She was twenty-five, two years older than he was, a petite brunette with a kind, open nature, a sense of humor, and a beautiful smile. Like Wes, she was an artist. She studied Visual Communication at Florida State University.

“He just kept coming back to the shop,” Terri says. “And I finally realized that he wasn’t that weird and he was kind of exciting. And I went out on a date with him and that was it. A year and a couple of months later, we were married.”

Terri was the daughter of a naval officer (he later earned the rank of admiral), so they were married at the naval air station in Jacksonville on March 7, 1981, before a crowd of 150 friends and relatives. In Branford they rented a little wood-frame Florida “cracker” house for \$75 a month. Two hundred years old, it was made of the sturdy southern wood known as heart pine. The house had no central air conditioning to ease the sweltering summers and only a modest kerosene heater for the North Florida winters.

“It was cold, cold, cold in the winter. The water in the toilet froze!” Terri says. “But we really loved that house. We met so many people through that dive shop. They all became our friends through the years and stayed with us and camped in our yard. We were just the host of hundreds of people, I would say. We had good, fun, innocent times.”

“If you were part of the elite group of explorers, you knew where to go,” says cave diver Jeffrey Haupt, who would make a sixteen-hour round trip from his home in New Orleans to Branford some weekends. “We all used to camp out in the yard and eat breakfast together and go out and have adventures. We used to call it Skiles Campground.”

At night people would bring out instruments and tell stories while the sparks from the bonfire swirled into the star-packed sky. Wes and Terri’s place in the country had so little artificial light that you could clearly see the Milky Way splashed overhead. In the region’s deep woods, the stars reflected off the sinkholes and springs the divers had explored that day. Sometimes the divers loaded up their gear and headed out for night dives. When you are exploring underground, it doesn’t matter if you are doing it in daylight or darkness.

The cave divers were young, hungry, and full of energy. Terry was game to learn how to cave dive, so Wes trained her. But she wasn't diving nearly as much as he was. She worked alongside Wes at the dive shop and started her own business designing and hand-screening T-shirts.

"He told me when we first got married that I could not tell him he couldn't go cave diving, because it was just a part of who he was. So I accepted it from the beginning," Terri says. She worried some, but didn't dwell.

"He was just a very, very safe diver. He was an instructor. He was all about diving the *right* way. He constantly was stopping people at different diving places if he saw them doing something that was dangerous."

Wes was meeting the important people who would become his closest dive buddies, the Mole Tribe. A few years before he met Morris, Wes was working in the dive shop in 1980 when he met Woody Jasper. Jasper was a local character with a heavy southern drawl and a wicked sense of humor. Eleven years older than Wes, he had extensive experience finding caves to dive in the region's rivers, woods, and swamps.

"Wes tells me about this cool place to go diving that I hadn't been to," recalls Jasper, whose drawl remains even-toned no matter what hair-raising adventure he's describing. "It was the Lower Orange Grove Sink, which was an interesting place. He drew me a little map."

Lower Orange Grove Sink, when you see it in underwater videos, is simply terrifying. At first it looks okay, a pretty blue sinkhole, going down. Then it's just walls of craggy limestone boulders piled on top of each other with small gaps between the rocks—creepy gaps that cave divers squeeze through.

Jasper remembers that he thought it was unusual for a cave diver like Wes to be so forthcoming about recommending a place to dive. At that time, with so many unexplored caves, so few divers in the area, and trespassing laws being ignored left and right, people kept information to themselves.

"We were competitive," Wes's dive buddy Tom Morris says. "At any one time, there were generally about a dozen cave divers out looking for new places."

"We had leads going, lots more back then than now," Jasper says. "You are exploring a cave, and you keep it a secret because you don't want anybody else to know you're exploring that cave because they may go and pick up where you are and take your cave away from you."

Meaning that they would dive into the cave, find the previous line left by explorers before them, and when they reached the end of that line,

they'd tie their own line onto it and get the glory of exploring virgin passages. Cave booty.

"It's politically incorrect to do that," Jasper says. "People used to follow people to figure out where they're going diving. You show up at Branford Dive Shop with two or three of your buddies and a load of cave diving gear, and it wouldn't be unreasonable for somebody else to try to follow you without you knowing it, so they could figure out where you went so they could go explore the cave that you'd found. You might have found this cave by spending ten hours looking at topographical maps, hanging out in a bar for three days to befriend the locals, buying them beer, so they'll start telling you where the stuff is, which was one of my better tricks."

All the cave divers were hoping they'd be the first ever to see a place, just like wilderness and space explorers throughout time. Nowhere was that more possible than in the water-filled cave passages beneath Florida, where they were venturing farther than anyone had before in history. These were the days before GPS; the cave divers all carried crumpled rural road maps and had their diving gear ready to go in pickup beds and car trunks. Once underground, they drew their own maps of places once unknown.

"It's really fun to be in a cave with that reel of line in your hands," Morris says, "You're looking ahead, and nobody's ever been out there before. Cave diving is the ultimate 'What's around the next corner?' And to be the one that discovers what's around the next corner is the best. Once you've heard it from somebody else, it's not new anymore."

"You're exploring," Jasper says, "and you're in flowing water, then suddenly you don't have a flow. Oops, where did the flow go? If the visibility is not good, then it gets harder and harder, so you end up with these real wonderful route-finding challenges. Where the hell did it go? Let's see, if I was a cave what would I do? And suddenly, fifteen feet up this wall that you thought was just the side of the tunnel, is a fifteen-foot-shallower flow coming up from there that you've got to spend some time figuring out where it went."

After Jasper met Wes in the dive shop and Wes provided the lead to the Orange Grove sinkhole, Jasper asked Wes to go with him to an unknown cave system he'd been exploring by the Withlacoochee River, a wild waterway that flows from Georgia south into the Suwannee.

"We go down this little tunnel, and the line stops, and we keep on going," Jasper says.