

The Many Storeys of the [House](#) of Leaves

The first thing you read in [House](#) of Leaves is a warning. Actually, that isn't entirely true; several other things come first as part of a preamble that is markedly different from 'normal' novels – but that only becomes apparent later on. The first time you read it, the first steps you take into this enigmatic [house](#), you only notice the warning: *This is not for you.*

It's a pretty audacious beginning to what is in fact a very audacious novel. Mark Z. Danielewski's first, and ten years in the making, it disregards everything the reader expects from a novel and drops them into new and uncharted territory. The warning acts in the same way as the cartographers' *hic sunt dracones*¹ of old; quite simply, beyond this point it is dangerous to go.

The plot, ostensibly, centres on the character of Will Navidson, a Pulitzer prize winning photographer² who moves to the Virginia countryside with his partner Karen and their two young children. Navidson affixes camcorders to the walls of most rooms in the [house](#) with the goal of making a simple film about family life – a home movie on the scale you might expect from such a renowned visual artist. His project takes a turn for the sinister upon the perturbing discovery that the dimensions of his new [house](#) are larger on the interior than the exterior, a fact which is clearly 'impossible'.³

The discrepancy is initially only a quarter of an inch, but it soon becomes much more, as a yawning black hallway appears in Navidson's [house](#). He invites his brother Tom, and friend Billy Reston to help him investigate. Together, and later with the addition of three other men, they

¹ If Wikipedia can be trusted, this is 'Here Be Dragons' which is of course identical to 'This is not for you.'

² Appendix I.

³ Danielewski, Mark Z., [House](#) of Leaves, (London: Doubleday, 2001) p.30.

discover that this impossible hallway leads into a vast structure; a labyrinth of such enormous proportions that when it is at one point measured it is found to be greater in dimension than the very Earth itself⁴.

The most obviously audacious aspect of the novel is the manner in which Danielewski chooses to relate the story: as a pseudo-documentary film called *The Navidson Record*, described in great detail in the form of an essay written by a character known only as Zampanò. Furthermore, Zampanò himself is dead, leaving the duty of relating the story to a *third* character by the name of Johnny Truant. In short: it is not a standard piece of prose. The question thus is, *why?*

Why has Danielewski risked complicating his story with these additional characters? It is clear from a cursory glance at the text⁵ that multiple entwined narratives are not the only apparently-unnecessary aspects of the book. The typography is dauntingly elaborate, with maze-like footnotes as well as strange symbols and colours permeating the text. So again, *why?*

This brief essay will attempt to answer these questions. I will study each of these unusual aspects of [House of Leaves](#) in turn to reveal how they combine to create an awesomely complex and multi-layered novel; how Danielewski masterfully re-defines the concept of what a novel is and can be. How these bold decisions allow the book to affect the reader in ways traditional stories rarely can. How Danielewski is able to take *you* inside the [House](#) of Leaves.

⁴ Danielewski, 305.

⁵ Appendix II.

As previously mentioned, *House of Leaves* is broken into three separate narratives; Navidson's, Zampanò's and Johnny Truant's. Each narrative is related to the other in a linear fashion – Zampanò writes about *The Navidson Record*, and it is through his writing that Johnny Truant experiences the story. This idea can be expanded by the inclusion of the 'editors' who footnote Truant's version of Zampanò's book and make various corrections as well as elaborating on confusing sections of the book – even if only to shrug their shoulders and say, 'don't look at us.' It could even be possible to suggest that a fifth narrative exists in the form of the finished novel as it is on your bookshelf / in your hand.

So many narratives cause many effects, but the most prominent is the distinct lack of trust the reader develops for the accuracy or 'truth' of the story. Each character is entirely unreliable – Navidson's film is released as popular entertainment and thus, much like *The Blair Witch Project*, may be entirely fictional yet presented in a realistic manner for artistic reasons. This possibility is dwarfed by the fact that *The Navidson Record* does not exist⁶ – neither in our world nor that of Johnny Truant. Whatever Zampanò believes (or thinks he believes) about the existence of the film is rendered irrelevant by the fact that he is blind and thus incapable of actually watching it.

Truant himself admits to poly-drug use as well as intentionally altering lines within Zampanò's text:

Is it just coincidence that this cold water predicament of mine also appears in this chapter?

Not at all. Zampanò only wrote "heater."
The word "water" back there – I added that.

Now there's an admission, eh?

⁶ Oh, that small fact.

Hey, not fair, you cry.
Hey, hey, fuck you, I say.⁷

This clearly represents a wanton disregard for the sanctity of the original text. Furthermore Truant's mental state clearly deteriorates over the course of the novel, a fact which is bolstered by the revelation in the accompanying *Whalestoe Letters* that Truant's mother Pelafina is confined to a mental institution. When we take into account the complete anonymity of the 'editors' we are left with very little to trust at all.⁸

This is a skilful technique. Without a distinct 'voice of truth' upon whom to rely, the reader is left disorientated and unable to anticipate exactly where they are and where they are headed. The fear of the unknown is already beginning to take effect.

Danielewski also does something else by intertwining these narratives – or more specifically, by intertwining them in the form of an essay with footnotes. As we follow one narrative through the book, another vies for our attention. We are then faced with a difficult decision; continue with the first narrative and return to the second later, or halt our progress with the former and investigate the latter immediately. The decisions the reader are forced to make are identical to those that the characters in *The Navidson Record* have to make – in both cases avenues of pursuit are presented in the form of a forked road within the labyrinth, and the sense of disorientation that is pervading their mind makes it extremely difficult to know which of these roads is the 'correct' one to take. In this way the reader is reduced to a basic motor

⁷ Danielewski, 16.

⁸ The implication being that it's ever possible to trust something written by a stranger, who may or may not be in hospital, prison, the nude or any combination of the above. It sounds like he's missed the obvious: when you get a book from the fiction section, you don't need 'trust' to know that it didn't really happen.

survival level: instinct takes over, and the brain is placed into a primal 'fight or flight' mode of high alert, and paranoia⁹.

Multiple narrators are also a way of giving different and interrelated stories built around a central premise: the [House](#) of Leaves – whether it be Zampanò's book or Navidson's actual [house](#). In her article 'What Has Made Me? Locating Mother in the Textual Labyrinth of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*' Katharine Cox asserts the argument that by building these relationships around the theme of a [house](#), the book is inherently about familial relationships. This flawed but well presented case offers an interesting perspective; Cox's belief that 'Will and Karen confront the secret at the heart of their relationship and at the heart of the labyrinth'¹⁰ is mirrored by Truant's relationship with his mother holds some water. As Cox puts it;

The fragmentation and later reconciliation within the family unit offered by the Navidsons act as an analogy for the tortured and mysterious story of Truant and Pelafina; they too mask a secret that is confronted and finally resolved in the space of the labyrinth.¹¹

The idea that personal relationships define the nature of what the labyrinth is – a physical representation of the unrepresentational metaphysical¹² – is an interesting one. How does one navigate the unmappable and ever-changing landscape of social interactions? Danielewski would therefore be claiming that within the labyrinth of the family, everyone finds their own routes, and some are more successful than others. It's a novel

⁹ What? You would have to be on a high dose of the best acid available to actually find yourself in a heightened state of reality simply by encountering a footnote in an essay. Which is appropriate because he stole that bit about 'basic motor survival' from Hunter S. Thompson anyway.

¹⁰ Cox, Katharine, 'What Has Made Me? Locating Mother in the Textual Labyrinth of Mark Z. Danielewski's [House](#) of Leaves', *Critical Survey*, 18 (2006) p. 5.

¹¹ Cox, p. 6.

¹² Huh?

suggestion, and perhaps another dimension to this already heavily-layered work.

Moving on; the typography of [House of Leaves](#) is at first sight utterly bizarre in places, and approaching the unfathomable in others. Here is a novel punctuated with footnotes – footnotes which often have footnotes *themselves*. There are hidden codes within the text; the word [house](#) is, as it is here, represented in blue. The struck out passages are coloured red (appearing ~~thus~~) and so is the word ‘[minotaur](#)’. In one edition of the book the colour purple¹³ is also used. This is not to mention of course the textual formation upon the page itself, where passages occupy small corners of the rectangle, or words are crammed into small shapes or distributed, sometimes in complex patterns and at other times haphazardly.

These different techniques may at first appear to be arbitrary; whimsy on the part of Danielewski, but they are in fact an extremely clever method of converting the fictitious events of *The Navidson Record* into a genuine experience for the reader. This works most obviously with the footnotes, as already mentioned above – but when the typography is taken into account as well, the effect is markedly more distinct. This is most apparent in chapter IX of [House of Leaves](#), commonly referred to as ‘The Labyrinth’. Between page 107 and 152, footnotes weave forwards and backwards creating paths through the maze; sometimes leading to dead ends that force the reader to retrace their steps and sometimes taking them back to places they have been

¹³ Another book-within-a-book, I suppose?

before. For example, footnote 139¹⁴ is itself footnoted to footnote 135¹⁵, which *itself* is footnoted to footnote 129¹⁶. Of course as the main body of the text refers to footnotes 135 and 129 as well we begin to get an extremely confusing system of circular references, bamboozling the reader and causing them to turn the pages backwards and forwards in an attempt to find a way out.

As if this wasn't enough, Danielewski throws in quotations that are at face-value related to Zampanò's text, but on closer inspection are related to the *reader*. For example, the aforementioned footnote 139 includes the phrase: 'This is what happens when you hurry through a maze: the faster you go, the worse you are entangled' – ostensibly referring to the reader who dismisses the actual number of the footnote in the assumption that it must at all times lead forwards in the narrative instead of reverse. The frustrating reality for that reader upon the realisation that the footnotes are now leading off in both directions is the distressing possibility that it could have been this way all along, and important paths through the labyrinth have thus been overlooked.

Furthermore, the citations within the footnotes are an uneven mixture of genuine pieces of literature and entirely non-existent texts¹⁷. Sometimes the authors are real and sometimes they are not, but once again a palpable sensation of distrust is created. On top of this it is an additional layer to the depth of Danielewski's 'mirroring' effect; it represents another potential path

¹⁴ Danielewski, p. 115.

¹⁵ *Ibid* p. 114.

¹⁶ *Ibid* p. 111.

¹⁷ For a list of fictional works cited in *House of Leaves*, please refer to this list:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fictional_books#Works_invented_by_Mark_Z._Danielewski

through the labyrinth – those who follow the pursuit of these books to the library or bookshop will sometimes be successful, and other times meet a dead end.

The layout of the words upon the page works in a far more visual sense – the reader is confused, and along with the lack of premonition such innovations create, scared. This is an unexpected structure – it should not be this way and we cannot comprehend it. This of course *is* the labyrinth. When the characters are racing through it, so are we, turning pages every few seconds to keep up with the action as it speeds by, one word at a time¹⁸. When the characters enter confined rooms the letters themselves squeeze into confined spaces on the page. It is no coincidence that we refer to individual letters as ‘characters’ – the words have become the very thing they are describing, and in doing so the reader is thrust into the experience alongside them.

At this point it would be understandable if some readers, particularly those who do not like their preconceptions of what books are ‘allowed’ to do to be challenged, closed the book and exited the [house](#). So of course this technique is not without its detractors. Emancipate Slaf vehemently asserts that the use of footnotes in [House of Leaves](#) is not only lazy writing, but an embarrassing failure:

Der Versuch, Fußnoten im *Das Haus* als Instrument zur Wirkung psychologischer Reaktionen in Der Leser ist sehr roh. Danielewski meidet Subtilität, um seine Kraft Unsere Kehlen: 'SIE SIND IN A KATAKOMBE!' Es ist, trotz alles andere, faul.¹⁹

¹⁸ For example see chapter X (The Rescue (Part 1)) (pp. 153-245) – in particular pages 194-238.

¹⁹ Slaf, Emancipate, 'Den Falschen Weg: Lügen, Zitaten und Bibliographien'²⁰, *Entschuldigungen*, 13 (2002) 145-169 (p.145.)²¹

²⁰ 'The False Path: Lies, Citations and Bibliographies'

He writes a passionate case but his conclusions do not merit a repeat here. Slaf is not the only critic of Danielewski's techniques of course, but that is not to say he is without admirers too. In the more balanced article 'Return to the Beginning', Sudha Shastri praises the use of footnotes in [House of Leaves](#) as a method to 'dispel a comfortable belief in one single beginning.'²² The (correct) argument being that, without a tangible sense of a 'start' the novel is breaking down expectations (and thus creating fear) before it has 'begun'.

The use of colour is perhaps the most confusing aspect of [House of Leaves](#). The fact that it is so extraordinarily oblique, contrasting even with the concept of 'text mirroring plot' (in so far as Navidson's [house](#) is colourless, yet the symbol representing it is one of the few words in the novel that isn't) makes this Danielewski's most exciting code of all.

It is certainly one of the few aspects of the book that hasn't been properly explained by the author or figured out definitively by scholars. Danielewski has said that it relates to the blue-screen technique used in the film industry²³, but other than that theories are pretty thin on the ground. In his piece 'The Digital Topography of [House of Leaves](#)' Mark B. N. Hansen suggests that Danielewski is making a 'pseudoserious reference to the blue

²¹ Something along the lines of, 'Danielewski abandons subtlety to ram his point home: 'YOU ARE IN A MAZE!''

²² Shastri, Sudha, 'Return to the Beginning: [House of Leaves](#) by Mark Danielewski', *Atenea*, 26 (2006) 81-94 (p. 85.)

²³ This is incredibly vague. 'Danielewski has said' - where has he said? It comes across like he's trying to make it sound as though he went and asked Danielewski himself. The only reference I can find to the author mentioning blue-screen is here:
<http://www.flakmag.com/books/house.html> - which is a review of the book, and even here he only says 'something to do with how blue is used in film.' In fact there's no evidence that Danielewski even said that, and it's the author of the review who makes the connection to blue-screen.

highlighting of hyperlinks on Web pages²⁴ – that this ‘transforms this keyword into something like a portal to information located elsewhere, both within and beyond the novel’s frame.’²⁵

These two things are, for all intents and purposes, identical. Before the advent of so-called ‘Web 2.0’ the standard HTML formatting made all hyperlinks appear blue and underlined. Seeing a blue word amongst the sea of black on a webpage would act as a marker; *here is a pathway*. By clicking on the hyperlink you would open another avenue to explore – essentially, to travel further into the maze. The choice to take this path is entirely optional, although depending on your requirements it could be a necessary choice. Once taken, this path can lead to a wealth of further information (and a multitude of additional corridors to explore) or conversely it can lead to a dead end, either by taking you to irrelevant information or indeed a page that has changed in the time between the creation of the hyperlink and the action of clicking it. In this regard in particular it is identical to the [house](#), where a doorway that leads to a particular room on one day will not lead there again in the future due to the ever-changing nature of the labyrinth. Another possibility is a *literal* dead-end in the form of a ‘404’ page – a placeholder indicating that the desired location does not exist.

Blue-screen is a relatively common cinematic tool whereby the physical action is filmed against the blue-screen and the resulting footage is treated in post-production to erase the blue elements and replace them with another image. This can be used for reasons as simple as making it appear that an actor is standing in an exotic (and cost-prohibitive) location when he is

²⁴ Hansen, Mark B.N., ‘The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski’s [House of Leaves](#)’, *Contemporary Literature*, 45 (2004) 597-636 (p. 598.)

²⁵ *Ibid.*

actually in a studio, or as complicated as placing Elijah Wood on the borders of the non-existent land of Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*. Either way the physical blue-screen acts as a symbol for something that is there in a virtual sense and absent in the physical sense. In this way it is the same as a blue hyperlink – to look at it, it appears as a door, an indication that there is something behind it; when this door is opened by the special effects team we see what is behind it projected onto the cinema screen²⁶.

And so it is that the word [house](#), in blue, becomes a symbol²⁷. It represents something that is more than the sum of its parts, something that is larger on the inside than can be expressed on the outside. Like Navidson we are looking at a [house](#) (literally) and seeing something that is not supposed to be. Our understanding of what a novel is does not prepare us for this bright colouration, in the same way that Navidson's understanding of the laws of physics cannot prepare him for the fact that there is a labyrinth inside his [house](#).

We have come back to this point again: Danielewski has transgressed the self-imposed limitations we have placed upon the form of the novel. He has

²⁶ Really clutching at straws here. Bluescreen and hyperlinks being the same thing? And there was me thinking it was just a coincidence that they were both blue. Anyway don't they use greenscreen just as much as bluescreen? Leaves are green I suppose. Actual leaves I mean, not Danielewski's 'leaves'.

Although you can buy green paper too.

²⁷ Danielewski's colouration has been maintained throughout this essay as removing it would strip the word of its metaphoric power. In blue, '[house](#)' represents more than could ever be written about it in pieces such as this.²⁸

²⁸ Huh? It sounds to me as though this is a feeble attempt to hijack whatever vague sense of meaning Danielewski managed to inject into the word by giving it a colour. 'Represents more than could ever be written about it' - then why write about it at all? Cop-out.

not done this out of spite for the form, but because he wants to show it for all it is capable of being:

[B]ooks don't have to be so limited. They can intensify informational content and experience. Multiple stories can lie side by side on the page... Passages may be found, studied, revisited, or even skimmed. And that's just the beginning. Words can also be colored and those colors can have meaning. How quickly pages are turned or not turned can be addressed. Hell pages can be tilted, turned upside down, even read backwards... But here's the joke. Books have had this capability all along... Books are remarkable constructions with enormous possibilities... And you can carry this magical creation with you, write in it, and never need to hunt down conversion software to find out what you wrote and read years ago. But somehow the analogue powers of these wonderful bundles of paper have been forgotten. Somewhere along the way, all its possibilities were denied.²⁹

This attitude – the approach of redefining structure and looking at what a novel actually *is* – is one of the most daring aspects of [House of Leaves](#). Essentially we still read novels moving from left-to-right and down the page as we go; from page 1 to the end, but through the lens of postmodernity Danielewski is able to transgress these mores. We are thus reading a novel that is *more* than a novel. Yet at the same time it is, more than any other book, just words on a page³⁰. Even when it *isn't* just words on a page (such as page 310) it still manages to say more than most books ever can.³²

Danielewski plays with the reader too – the novel is entirely untrustworthy. The reliability of the narrators are further weakened by the fact

²⁹ Cottrell, Sophie, "A Conversation with Mark Danielewski", <Boldtype>, April 2000 <<http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0400/danielewski/interview.html>> [accessed 11 November 2007]

³⁰ How can any book be said to be more 'words on a page'-y than another?? If he's going to take that stance I might as well claim that this sentence is the most outstanding combination of vowels and consonants since Shakespeare wrote "'Tis better to be brief than tedious.'³¹ And that's only better than what I said because it's so remarkably apt.

³¹ Richard III Act I Scene 4.

³² No shit. It's a blank fucking page. I put it to you that Danielewski says precisely nothing on this page.

that we are receiving this story at the end of an elaborate line. As such, outside of the 'real' truth that Danielewski wrote it all himself, there is also the possibility that Johnny Truant is making it up himself – that he fabricated Zampanò and perhaps even all of his own experiences. Zampanò is an entirely unseen character, yet he is an integral part of Danielewski's game. The author's full name is of course Mark Z. Danielewski, his unrevealed middle name tantalisingly close to the other author of *House of Leaves*.

In fact there seem to be several iterations of the book – from Zampanò's version to Truant's, to Danielewski's. Are they indeed the same book? There is a moment in *House of Leaves* where Navidson, within the *house* at the time, begins to read a book³³. Its title? *House of Leaves*. And when Johnny is searching for Navidson's *house* towards the end of the book he encounters a band who show him their own home-printed copy of – *House of Leaves*³⁴. That brings the total number of versions of the book to five – not including the one that is available to buy in shops.

It was suggested by Steven Poole that at its most simple, *House of Leaves* is a satire of academic criticism³⁵. If that is true then perhaps it is foolish for anyone to be writing academic criticism *about* the book. Are we falling into a trap set up Danielewski? Has he created an endless number of corridors for us academics to wander down, looking for answers? And faced with that black emptiness, finding them where there are none purely because it is easier to do so than to accept that they don't exist? Danielewski never explains what the *house* is, yet it is his creation. He has given us questions

³³ Danielewski, 465.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 513.

³⁵ Poole, Steven, "Gothic Scholar", Guardian Unlimited, 15 July 2000
<<http://books.guardian.co.uk/critics/reviews/0,5917,343421,00.html>> [accessed 3 November 2007]

instead of answers, and thus we feel an urge to answer those questions ourselves. This is his trap, and we all fall into it. But as Navidson himself says, if we do not try, ‘then what do we have?’³⁶

The repeating series of *House of Leaves* within *House of Leaves* acts like a sort of fractal; to everyone who encounters this story these three words are the only common denominator. Suddenly the ‘truth’ of your purchased version is called into question – you look at the preamble to the book, with the date and place of publication and version history, and think of Danielewski’s efforts to warp our perceptions of what a book is. Where does it begin? What can I trust?

And then we see again that distant warning at the start of the book, and this time we wonder if we should have heeded it. Those five simple words, written by Danielewski, or Johnny Truant, trying desperately to tell you that beyond this point things are not as they should be. That the things on the other side of this door are unlike the things inside any other [House](#) of Leaves you may have entered. And once you go in, there’s no coming back.

And then, the nightmares will begin.

3682 words

³⁶ I can’t find that damn quote anywhere. Maybe it’s just me, I’m tired and it’s a long book. Or maybe it doesn’t exist. At least not in my version of *House of Leaves*... whichever one that is.

Appendix I



Navidson's 'Delial' – the real life photo of a child in Sudan, taken by Kevin Carter. He later committed suicide.

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