

House of Leaves

Mark Z. Danielewski

(a brief analysis)

Summarizing this remarkable book in two pages seems to be a futile effort as soon as I begin to type. So instead of trying to achieve such a lofty goal, which is better attained by reading online book reviews and commentary, I shall use this chance to explain my experience with [House](#) of Leaves and my relationship with the text. [House](#) of Leaves has had a profound effect on me, even in the short time that has elapsed since I began reading it, and even given the little time for reflection that I have found since that first page. I have formed a personal relationship with the physical artifact itself - by that I mean my paperback copy of the 2nd edition of the [House](#) of Leaves.

The outside cover is a deep ash black, with a glimmer of mysterious patterns inscribed on it, and the inside cover is a wonderful explosion of color - a complex menagerie of assorted objects, odd-ends, buttons, pills, bits of paper. This seemingly arbitrary yet tasteful design takes on special meaning as soon as one progresses a few chapters into the book, but the meaning is not of great interest here. In the short time that I have had to explore the text, I have come to appreciate its value as something of a work of art - with its complex textual topologies, interweaving and occasionally circular narrative; interspersed with poetry, symbols, mathematics, fictitious people and literary sources, not to mention great intrigue and mystery with a promise of horror.

I have become quite attached to my copy of the book. I carry it with me to class, I show it to my friends, and I occasionally let go of it for someone else to look at. My mind seems to ascribe some value to this literary artifact - even though millions of identical copies just like mine have already been printed. I will not dwell on this point further, except to note that few texts have achieved such a status of 'art' in my mind. How is it that I became so drawn to Danielewski's work? To the [house](#)?

Being a computer nerd, I enjoy puzzles. Not of the mundane kind that you find printed in newspapers and magazines, but the kind that require some exploration by the imagination rather than number crunching or looking up words in a dictionary. The [House](#) of Leaves is a puzzle, many puzzles, riddles, scraps of information, begging to be traced out and explored by an inquisitive mind. Without knowing it, I was quickly drawn into the quirks and eccentricities of the text, and it began to be more important for me to figure out the little riddles in the printed words than simply reading the text as it first appears to the closed mind. I began to dwell on the footnotes, the authenticity of the authors, the symbols and special characters placed strategically in the main body of the story or sometimes hidden in the frames of the pages.

I still cannot claim to have solved any one of the riddles. They require further exploration, and an investment of time to piece together the twisted trail of clues that will surely bring greater understanding when decoded. This is my task. I am completely fascinated by the challenge that this text has presented me with. Danielewski's work is so multi-layered, that it requires us to constantly revisit previous pages, looking for clues to explain what we just read, hints of future outcomes, and to provide additional background on the characters. This 'experimental novel' has something for everyone.

For the linguist, there's a remarkable exploration of language and grammar in the book. Many quotes and text fragments are printed in other languages - everything from German to Ancient Greek to Latin to Hebrew. Sentences range from the absurdly short to the monstrously long; grammatical constructions spanning the full spectrum from the elementary to the extraordinary. For the mathematician or physicist, there are matrices, patterns of numbers, and the occasional equation (mostly fictional). For the musician, there are even some bars of music printed on select pages, and for any curious mind that revels in the mysterious, the book is a veritable candy store of delights.

To explain this in a little more detail, I will first describe the novel's structure - as I have experienced it thus far. This last comment is quite deliberate, because it is clear the book has many possible structures, each of which is open to interpretation, exploration, reconstruction and possibly even denial by the reader. However, the structure that the individual reader finds in the book, and the way that they choose to read [House](#) of Leaves, is a reflection of their own personal decisions, and will be different for every reader.

The main story, concerning a fictional documentary called *The Navidson Report*, is intertwined with a running commentary by a character who calls himself Johnny Truant. It is unclear whether Truant is fictitious or not, though most suppose he is. The original 'author' of the main story - a man called Zampanò - we are told is fictional. Truant's commentary at first is merely in the form of sidenotes, minor and peripheral observations, but later his 'footnotes' become pages long, and it is apparent that there is a struggle for supremacy between the Zampanò text and Truant's own writing, which is clearly demarcated from the former by its distinct Courier font.

As the experimental novel progresses, and the mystery and horror of *The Navidson Report* deepens, so the [House](#) of Leaves begins to lose its thread of sanity. The rules of editing, coherent presentation and standard printing practices slowly cease to apply. Soon we are faced with crossed-out pages, blank pages, pages with single words on them, patterns of words, fragmented poems, pages of names, diagonal, vertical and overlapping print, as well as bizarre characters and imagery. Surely the products of a failing grip on reality, and a proliferation of madness? In this way the text attracts our attention to its haunting properties, the design of it conjuring up associations with the occult, and with black magic.

The main appeal of the novel to me is its amazingly intricate design and multi-layered properties, something I do not normally associate with pieces of literature, but rather with computer systems and creations of clearly discernable complexity, recursion and hierarchy. The novel draws the reader in by way of its precision, its specific design to elicit curiosity and exploration, despite the misleading opening line '*this is not for you*'. The implication is, in fact, that the book is *for you, for you personally*. The novel can be your own personal playground, your own series of interconnecting mazes and dreams. The reader is encouraged to explore quoted sources, read side-notes, footnotes, appendixes, and follow the many varied and winding paths of fleeting continuity through the narrative.

In this way the book requires more interaction on the part of the reader, much like a hypertext or a video game, even though these are not particularly good analogies. In

fact, the Talmud is a good point of comparison to the Danielewski text. They both share the form of a commentary, following a central story line, with extensive footnotes, annotations, quotations and curious symbols and textual topographies. Interaction is spurred by the need to engage the mind in the disentanglement of the text, and the exploration of all its digressions, unless one is simply to find satisfaction in grasping only a superficial understanding of its true meaning. [House](#) of Leaves requires a willingness to abandon one's initial perceptions and rational hunger for reason, combined with a trusting patience that the greater design of the text will eventually present itself following sufficiently inquisitive wanderings through its occasionally murky depths.