

Scholarly Parody: Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

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Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000) has enjoyed a cult following since its initial release. The novel (as well as several of his other novels) has a very active Facebook reading group, House of Leaves Book Club, with over 6,500 members worldwide as of this article's publication. The group is moderated in part by the author himself; Danielewski posts in the group as well, providing glimpses into side projects from the novel, including the development of a script for a television pilot that he shared as a file for members to access. House of Leaves Book Club has created a renewed interest in the novel, and the group has stayed active even after completing the scheduled reading, discussing similar experimental novels as well as other works by Danielewski. New members continue to join the group, and guidance is provided as to best methods of approaching the dense text as well as numerous threads sharing theories and ideas about the characters and plot of the novel.

Much has been written about *House of Leaves* in terms of its structure as a labyrinth,¹ but the structure of the novel can be read in other ways as well. As *House of Leaves* moves back into the broader popular culture consciousness, it is important to consider the ways in which the novel functions as a parody of the traditional scholarly edition of a text. An earlier novel that works in this format is Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, an intricate look at how a scholarly text is constructed, as well as the problems inherent in critical interpretations of texts. It has also been suggested that *Pale Fire* is "perhaps less about the interpretation of a text than about the textuality of interpretation: the way a reading rewrites the text and meaning is produced in the encounter-collision between text and audience" (Packman 77).

¹ One such article is Natalie Hamilton's "The A-Mazing House."

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Danielewski's *House of Leaves* works in the same way.² By engaging the reader with the idea that the text cannot necessarily be trusted as accurate, the reader of *House of Leaves* must discover where the truth may be found, if it can be found at all, in this parody of the scholarly text.

Postmodernism and Scholarly Parodies

In the traditional scholarly edition of a text, the reader is presented with an expert or editor/editors that guide them through the text being read. These editions often use a combination of devices, including a foreword, afterword, footnotes, endnotes, index, or appendices. The expert/scholar could be considered another author of the text in many ways, filling in gaps for the reader or providing an interpretation of the text through their own thinking and vision of the text. I will refer to this as "scholarly textuality," where the commentary becomes an embedded part of the original text. In most instances, the text can be read with or separate from the scholarly critique and still provide the reader with the experience of having read the original text, consulting the scholarly analysis when or if desired without removing anything from the original poem or novel.

Postmodern novels have often used parody to great effect. Linda Hutcheon notes that parody in postmodernism "is not nostalgic; it is always critical" (88). Scholarly textuality is parodied in this vein in *House of Leaves*. Danielewski's novel uses a multiplicity of narrators each offering a text of their own opinions and information with varying levels of applicability to one another. When encountering these texts, the reader is left wondering not only which narrator to believe, if any, but even which text is the most important to understanding the novel in question. In the second edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth defines a narrator as unreliable when they do not act "in accordance with the norms of the work" (158). The format in question here is that of the scholarly text, and the norms of scholarly textuality are that the commentator or scholar analyzing the text will act in good faith, providing valid critical interpretation and commentary on the original text. As *House of Leaves* is a parody of scholarly textuality, the norms of the form are upended. Unreliable narrators reinforce the parody being performed, forcing the reader to question the critical "analysis" being performed. While in a "real"

² For additional information on *Pale Fire*, Brian Boyd's *Nabokov's Pale Fire: The Magic of Artistic Discovery* (1999) is an excellent critical analysis of the novel.

scholarly text the reader can choose to disregard the commentary and not lose the ability to interpret the original text, this is not the case in these parodies of scholarly textuality. By framing the various commentators as unreliable narrator characters in the fiction being created, the reader is heartily encouraged to read the commentary along with the “text” being analyzed by the unreliable narrators. The form, in these cases, reinforces the parody being performed.

Additionally, scholarly texts are centered around the idea of useful and learned criticism provided by an expert on the text in question, typically possessing an advanced degree that qualifies them as an expert. In this parody of scholarly textuality, none of the narrators in the story can be considered “experts” in the traditional sense. *House of Leaves* takes the connection between unreliable narrators and parody to extremes. While Danielewski self-deprecatingly cites influences both literary and cinematic for his formal inventiveness, including among them Laurence Sterne, it cannot be denied that his first novel is, indeed, a bold development in the experimental novel, and an excellent parody of the scholarly text (McCaffrey and Gregory 106).

The Unreliable Scholar-Narrator

The novel presents an essay by an old man known only as Zampanò. Upon his death, two friends, Lude and Johnny Truant, find an essay in his apartment, a detailed analysis of a documentary film called *The Navidson Record* about a house that grows progressively larger on the inside while maintaining the same size and boundaries on the outside. The text the reader is given has supposedly been prepared by a group of editors, and holds Zampanò’s essay and footnotes, Johnny Truant’s footnotes to the essay, and appendices provided by Zampanò and, at the editors’ request, Johnny Truant. In Johnny’s appendix are a series of letters written to Truant by his mother, Pelafina, from The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute, a mental institution. The main narrators of the novel are Zampanò and Johnny Truant; following the footnotes of each, however, leads the reader inevitably to begin consulting the appendices, switching the narrator at times to the unnamed editors of the text or Truant’s institutionalized mother. Through the layering of the narrators in this novel, as well as its at times bizarre typography and layout in the text, the reliability of the narrators, posed as textual experts, must be called into question.

In Johnny Truant's introduction, the reader is told that he is a chronic insomniac who suffers from nightmares: "In fact I get them so often I should be used to them by now. I'm not. No one ever really gets used to nightmares" (Danielewski xi). He has tried a long list of drugs to try to "curb the fear" he gets that causes his insomnia, but nothing can help (xi). Before the death of Zampanò, Truant describes enjoying sleep, alcohol, the bar scene, and his "mind numbing routine as an apprentice at a tattoo shop" (xii). Truant regrets responding to Lude's 3:00 a.m. phone call that brings him to Lude's building and, ultimately, into Zampanò's apartment: "Ever see yourself doing something in the past and no matter how many times you remember it you still want to scream stop, somehow redirect the action, reorder the present? I feel that way now, watching myself tugged stupidly along by inertia" (xiv). In the apartment, Lude points out Zampanò's manuscript:

As I discovered, there were reams and reams of it. Endless snarls of words, sometimes twisting into meaning, sometimes into nothing at all, frequently breaking apart, always branching off into other pieces I'd come across later—on old napkins, the tattered edges of an envelope, one even on the back of a postage stamp; everything and anything but empty; each fragment completely covered with the creep of years and years of ink pronouncements. (xvii)

As he reads Zampanò's manuscript on *The Navidson Record*, Johnny Truant begins to lose touch with reality. He shuts himself up in his apartment, nails the windows shut, buys several locks for his door, removes interior doors, and buys "a dozen measuring tapes, nailing all those straight to the floor and walls" (Danielewski xviii). As he reads about the house that grows inexplicably on the inside and its destructive presence, Truant wants "a closed, inviolate and most of all immutable space" (xix). In a note Zampanò wrote the day before he died, he asks that if the manuscript is ever published he be given credit for its authorship but warns that "truth stands the test of time. I can think of no greater comfort than knowing this document failed such a test" (xix). In this section, Johnny Truant begins to analyze Zampanò's text obsessively. His analysis of the text begins to drive him into madness. He seems to be intent on searching for the "truth" Zampanò says does not exist in his manuscript and finding there to be some level of truth in it based on his reaction of needing to assure himself that his apartment is not the same as the house in the text he has been analyzing. In his introduction to Zampanò's text, Truant

provides the reader with his own experience as the scholarly reader of the main text, giving an example of what a more analytical reading of the text has done to his own mental state, providing something akin to a warning to coming readers.

After revealing the contents of Zampanò's note that he hopes his manuscript fails a "truth test," Truant informs us that the study is a fraud: "Zampanò's entire project is about a film which doesn't even exist. You can look, I have, but no matter how long you search you will never find *The Navidson Record* in theaters or video stores. Furthermore, most of what's said by famous people has been made up" (xix-xx). The footnotes and source materials cited by Zampanò are also, mostly, false, though a few extant texts do creep in from time to time. The final blow is dealt with another shocking revelation: "all this language of light, film and photography, and he hadn't seen a thing since the mid-fifties. He was blind as a bat" (xxi). Zampanò becomes the first of the unreliable narrators in this multi-layered story, but as the footnotes provided by Truant unfold, added to his admitted break with reality in his Introduction, the reader is faced with two unreliable narrators. The reader additionally discovers through the text that Zampanò also had assistants to help with his writing due to his blindness. He, in other words, is any number of multiple narrators as well; it can be assumed that he dictated his writing to these assistants, but the level to which this allows for human error in the transcription adds another level to the unreliability of Zampanò's narrative voice in the text. Zampanò, then, becomes a perfect example of an unreliable "scholar" in Danielewski's novel.

If the reader knows that Zampanò is lying by the end of the introduction, why continue to read? Why would editors of a text that is a total fabrication, as well as notes from a commentator on this fabrication that plays into the lie, allow for its publication? The reason lies in the effect the text has on those who read it, according to Truant:

This much I'm certain of: it doesn't happen immediately. You'll finish and that will be that, until a moment will come, maybe in a month, maybe a year, maybe even several years. You'll be sick or feeling troubled or deeply in love or quietly uncertain or even content for the first time in your life. It won't matter. Out of the blue, beyond any cause you can trace, you'll suddenly realize things are not how you perceived them to be at all. For some reason, you will no longer be the person you believed you once were. You'll detect slow and subtle shifts going on all around you, more importantly shifts in you. Worse, you'll realize it's always been shifting,

like a shimmer of sorts, a vast shimmer, only dark like a room. But you won't understand why or how. You'll have forgotten what granted you this awareness in the first place. (xxii-iii)

Once this "awareness" sets in, obviously provided as a result of reading Zampanò's essay, "the nightmares will begin" (xxiii). The introduction was completed on Oct. 31, 1998, according to the date at the end. The reader is then left to decide if Truant's introduction to an entirely fictitious piece of "scholarship" has made that false document worth reading.

Further, the reader is left with the decision as to whether to believe anything Truant has told us. By his own admission, Johnny Truant lost his grip on reality during his scholarship on a text that has been ruled an out-and-out lie. The reader of *House of Leaves* is left wondering very early in the novel what can be trusted in a book with two admittedly unreliable narrators. This is an interesting gloss on the idea that the reading of a text changes a reader. Truant's statement leads to the reader questioning whether this text should be read, being cautioned of potential dangers that exist in reading the text. This is an interesting tactic for a commentator to take in a scholarly text, and it leads back into the function of parody quite well. When considering the dedication of the novel, "This is not for you," Truant's warning to the reader is thrown into starker contrast [ix]. The scholarly text in this parody is actively discouraging the reader from engaging with it, going as far as to suggest that little to no meaning can be gathered or made. Ironically, this is the very way that the reader is brought into the broader world of the novel and echoes the famous quotation from Dante provided as a footnote later in the first chapter of *House of Leaves*: "Abandon every hope, ye who enter here" (4). Additionally, as noted earlier, the publication of the supposed scholarly text presented by this novel is problematic in itself; Truant has told the reader that Zampanò's essay is a fiction, yet he still manages to find a publisher and a group of editors to bring the text to the public eye. Danielewski sets the stage for the reader of his novel to question the form of scholarly textuality beginning in the dedication and reinforces it in the introduction presented by the "scholars" Zampanò and Johnny Truant.

The presence of a supposed group of editors, then, would seem to give the reader a sense of "truth" as represented in the text, and it is exactly this sense of editorial process that keeps this parody of a scholarly text in line with a reader's expectations of the genre being parodied. But these unnamed editors, perhaps for showing Truant's descent into madness, leave all his digressive footnotes in the

text, regardless of their value to the text upon which Truant is commenting. Instead of clarifying matters for the reader, the editors of this text do the exact opposite, leaving in place the narrative of Johnny Truant's life as another thread to follow in the novel. This multi-layered set of narrative voices, including an odd and occasional group of editors, provides a set of interesting circumstances, leaving the reader with many decisions about whom to trust even by the end of the Introduction. In *House of Leaves*, the multitude of narrators compete from the very start, and there are no fewer than three that float through the main text, as well as additional voices using footnotes and appendices. As Martin Brick notes, while the "plot" of *House of Leaves* "is about a house that grows infinitely on the inside, his [Danielewski's] book is clearly about the reading process and a metaphor for interpretation of books themselves" (1).

Still another layer of complication in the text is that Johnny Truant, the editors, and those who surround Johnny Truant are put forward as telling the truth. They stand in contrast to Zampanò's lies, in that they are the ones who are given the task of sorting out and investigating the truthfulness of Zampanò's claims. Truant has done this task, and it would seem that he is believable; he is very forthright in the introduction, detailing his descent into madness as he completes the task of studying the manuscript. This honesty would seem to make him reliable, but the fact that his grip on reality is tenuous at best provides the reader with a reason to question whether Truant can, in fact, be relied upon. The editors admit in a footnote in Chapter I that "we have never actually met Mr. Truant. All matters regarding the publication were addressed in letters or in rare instances over the phone" (Danielewski 4). Still, because the information is supplied by a group of editors, and this is a parody of scholarly textuality, the assumption is to be made by the reader that Johnny Truant is real, because the editors said that he is real. Even if the reader accepts his existence, Truant's footnotes to the text provide another reason to question his reliability as a narrator or scholarly authority qualified to explicate a text.

Johnny Truant is often more interested in discussing his own life in his notes to Zampanò's essay. The use of footnotes rather than endnotes in this text is a crucial choice in format; the reader is given the footnotes of Zampanò himself, appearing right beneath the rest of the text on the page, citing the sources for his essay—sources that are often fictitious—as well as Johnny Truant's notes interwoven with the original footnotes. While the choice to follow the footnotes or not is given to the reader, their presence on the page along with the text being commented upon

gives the reader a greater feeling of intermingled voices, though they are not always working in concert. As well as these two narrators, the text's editors occasionally inserted a footnote, adding a third voice to the main body of Zampanò's essay on *The Navidson Record*.

The footnotes for Chapter I are relatively standard for an academic text, giving publication data for research, as well as notes from Truant providing some information germane to the subject at hand in Zampanò's text. By the second chapter of Zampanò's text, however, Truant begins using these footnotes to also comment upon his day-to-day life. The first lengthy story related is of Truant and Lude trying to pick up on some girls. To do this, Johnny begins making up a story about "some insane adventure I supposedly had when I was a Pit Boxer. Mind you I'd never heard that term before nor had Lude. Lude just made it up and I went with it" (Danielewski 12). As the story unfolds, it becomes more and more elaborate, taking on a life of its own: "By now even Lude was hooked. They all were. The girls all engrossed and smiling and still shimmying closer, as if maybe by touching me they could find out for sure if I was for real. Lude knew it was pure crap but he had no clue where I was heading. To tell you the truth neither did I. So I took my best shot" (14). After telling the story, Johnny admits in the footnote that the event he just described "doesn't sit right with me" because of "how fake it is" (15). This footnote, all to a line of dialogue in *The Navidson Record* about "last night" unfolds over the course of four pages (12). Johnny begins here to insert his own life into Zampanò's text, and the first instance is to reveal himself as an extraordinarily creative liar. This forces the reader again to question his reliability as a narrator, as well as his fitness to comment upon the text. Additionally, this storytelling is an excellent way of posing Truant in relation to Zampanò as a gifted storyteller, considering that *The Navidson Record* is a creation of Zampanò.

Another display of Johnny Truant's unreliability as a narrator is seen in Chapter XXI. The chapter occurs entirely in the font indicated by the editors as that used for Truant's commentary and is laid out as a journal. The section begins five days before the given date of completion in the introduction of October 25, 1998. The first entry consists of two simple words: "Lude's dead" (Danielewski 491). The chapter then moves chronologically for a bit, detailing Truant's attack of two people, Gdansk Man and Kyrie. Johnny blames Gdansk Man for Lude's death because of a beating he gave to Lude, based on a lie Kyrie told. After Johnny's revenge is narrated, the chapter moves back chronologically to May 1, 1998, while Truant is beginning to piece together the lies in Zampanò's text. As this section

continues, Johnny steadily begins to lose touch with reality, until the entries for September, when he goes to stay “with an old friend” who gets him into counseling (Danielewski 507).

In several of these journal entries, Johnny Truant details his improvement, only to write in the September 29, 1998 entry, “Are you fucking kidding me? Did you really think any of that was true? September 2 thru September 28? I just made all that up. Right out of thin air. Wrote it in two hours” (Danielewski 509). The idea that a commentator explicating a text would just invent information “right out of thin air” is another way that the scholarly text is clearly being parodied. Truant then returns to the entry on Lude’s death and follows chronologically until a flashback to the night when the introduction was completed. This scattered chronology is indicative of the scattered state of Truant’s mind, after the effects of Zampanò’s essay on his psyche. He is delusional, and his tendency to lie, shown in his footnote in Chapter II, is exaggerated in his journal. Truant’s reliability as a narrator is tenuous at best, but this is all to the broader purpose of the novel. Giving the reader a commentator who is an admitted liar, who is (as seen in the above quotation) at times boastful about his prowess at fabrication, is a perfect way to parody the “authority” with which someone performing textual analysis is supposed to behave. After revealing so blatant a lie, the reader of *House of Leaves* must question if Johnny Truant has been at all honest in any of his notes to the text, combining the parody of the academic explicator and the unreliable narrator perfectly.

Parodying Scholarly Writing

Danielewski’s novel is set up as a traditional academic text, using appendices, plates, and other markers of scholarly textuality. One such appendix, Appendix E., is a collection of letters written to Johnny from his mother, Pelafina. This appendix adds yet another narrative voice to the text, as well as providing some details about Johnny’s childhood. One problem with the narrative presented in these letters, however, is that they’re being sent from a mental institution where Pelafina is a patient. Placing her character in an institution gives the reader a reason to question her reliability as a narrator. This is reinforced by the first sentence of the first letter: “Your mother is here, not altogether here, but here nonetheless” (Danielewski 587). However, the most important function of this appendix is that it asks the reader to become an additional scholar of the text. In the letter dated April 27, 1987, Pelafina details that her next letter will use a code to tell him how she is being abused at the

facility, saying that he should “use the first letter of each word to build subsequent words and phrases: your exquisite intuition will help you sort out the spaces” (619). It is also important to note that Johnny would have been 15 years old when he received this letter. When the first sentences of the letter are decoded, it reads: “They have found a way to break me. Rape a fifty-six-year old bag of bones” (Danielewski 620). She then goes on detailing the mistreatment she is receiving at the hands of the attendants in the facility. An additional coded phrase exists in the letter, using capital letters inside of words where they should not be: “A face in a cloud no trace in the crowd” (Danielewski 621-2). By having the reader decode the letters to fully understand the appendix, Danielewski is drawing the reader into the novel further and making them part of the scholarly textual analysis.

After this letter, the typography becomes scattered across the page in odd ways, and finally a letter details the reason Pelafina is institutionalized; when Johnny was small, she tried to kill him. His father intervened, and she was sent to the asylum. Eventually her letters become lucid, and she admits that her earlier letters and grasp of reality are “hopelessly unreliable” (Danielewski 636). The letter the reader decoded, then, was a fraud; it is highly unlikely that she was being raped or abused at all but was instead suffering from delusions. The reader is then forced to accept that decoding the letter was, essentially, decoding a lie. It may not have been done entirely in vain, as the letter is useful to understanding the depths of Pelafina’s delusions, but it still proves frustrating. In this way, the reader is directly placed in the position of scholar/expert, forced after the confession of unreliability to then weigh what they’ve read and decide which parts of it are truly important. The reader becomes part of the group interpreting the text and has to make the same decisions as the fictional Editors of the novel regarding the reliability and usefulness of the information being presented.

In addition to the use of appendices like the one detailed above, the novel uses varied font sizes and colors, as well as struck passages, indicative of different commentators and additions and deletions, as is often found in facsimile editions of famous novels or poems. The novel also at times is laid out strangely on the page, with passages written in reverse as mirror images of the facing page, words set in concentric circles and spirals, as well as written in diagonal areas on corners of pages.³ This strange typography is indicative of Zampanò’s disturbed mental state,

³ In *Writing Machines*, N. Katherine Hayles argues persuasively that many of these footnotes, particularly footnote 144, a small box repeated at the top corner of twenty-five pages of the novel,

and hearkens back to Truant's assertion that the man scribbled on anything he could find at any time; the novel's typography also could indicate an effort of the editors to type-set the text as it has been provided by its commentator. Above all is the search for truth, for meaning, for an explanation for the continually referred to darkness felt by Truant after reading the manuscript, as manifested in Zampanò's text through the mutability and malice of a house in which people get lost and vanish, never to be seen again.

Though the primary narrators are unreliable, the theme of the search for truth among lies works so well for parody in *House of Leaves*. Truant searches for truth in Zampanò's manuscript and is driven mad; the reader of Danielewski's novel must then sift through the madness of both narrators to discern where the truth, if any, lies in the novel, or if the text is presented by these supposed editors as a cautionary tale: In searching for truth, one must be careful about how far one is willing to go and whom one chooses to believe. The parody in *House of Leaves*, then, functions "critically," as the quotation by Linda Hutcheon earlier indicates. The two primary narrators of the novel, Johnny Truant and Zampanò, are exposed nearly from the start as liars, but the reader continues. As the novel progresses, the lies become more elaborate, the sources of information more fabricated, and the narrators even less reliable than was originally thought possible. When reading a scholarly text, readers have an expectation of confusion being clarified, even if not searching for an ultimately "true" interpretation of a novel or poem. Instead, what Danielewski gives is a text built on an invention interpreted by a liar, calling into question the whole system of scholarly textuality.

Conclusion

Caroline Hagood states that "[b]ecause Danielewski examines the attempt at meaning making rather than meaning itself, he places his reader in an intermediary space, right between any structure or text and how it is interpreted, between signifier and signified" (88). The reader of *House of Leaves* is encouraged, if not forced, to become an interpreter and scholar of the text along with the other scholars provided for their guidance, shown most explicitly in the decoding of the Appendix

which mirrors itself on front and back pages, serves to act as a window in the text itself, made of "its own material" to provide a metaphorical view into the house in the novel (123).

E. letter, looking for any kind of truth as the novel is read. What is interpreted, however, are lies; the search for “truth” comes to a dead end.

In using a supposedly scholarly narrator that is unreliable, or whose reliability the reader should question, Danielewski forces the reader to ask questions about the reliability of all scholarly texts that follow this format. The reader is given the main text, supplied with a commentary from an outside party, and is left to sift through the details to arrive at their own conclusions. *House of Leaves* makes use of the trust that is typically placed in the explicator of a scholarly text to force the reader to encounter the text in a new way. Danielewski draws on the use of multiple unreliable narrators, bringing to light competing narratives as the narrators slide into madness, in addition to the voice of the editors, supposedly there to maintain order—though the text slides quickly away from any sort of order that readers of traditional scholarly texts would recognize. Danielewski’s novel takes the idea of a scholarly text to new levels, making the reader a scholar as well. In struggling with *House of Leaves* as a parody of scholarly textuality, the reader is forced to question the idea of what it means to be an expert, a scholar, or even a passive reader of a text.

In an era of “fake news” articles on social media and YouTube tutorials on everything from make-up techniques to auto repair, one must become even more careful about the sources chosen to provide expertise on anything. A healthy skepticism of the media we consume is quickly becoming the advised default position for engagement in many instances. Scholarly textuality, as parodied here, is treated no differently. The characters given authoritative voice in the novel are shown to be spinning elaborate lies, and the reader becomes complicit in decoding and interpreting them as well as passively reading the text. When read in the context of today’s social media popular culture, where anti-intellectualism and articles questioning the veracity of established science on issues such as the safety of vaccinations runs wild, Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* becomes an engaging critique on the very meaning of expertise, as well as an indictment of our own abilities to choose what texts we can or should trust as reliable.

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