

## RETURN TO THE BEGINNING: *HOUSE OF LEAVES* BY MARK DANIELEWSKI

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In his classic book on endings, Frank Kermode defends his choice of topic by declaring it as “infallibly interesting, and especially at a moment in history when it may be harder than ever to accept the precedents of sense-making” (Kermode 3). Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* encourages a similar view of the notion of beginnings. Enacting several beginnings in the course of its narrative, whether by resisting a movement onwards, or through interruptions from new texts, this book spanning over 709 pages, elaborates without explaining its initial situation. The mystery looming large at the beginning of *House of Leaves* intensifies further, only to get denser and darker, and the novel’s token ending leads to new beginnings without having adequately ‘made sense of’ the story it began to tell. If one of the significant conceptual implications of a beginning is a sequence, the experience of reading *House of Leaves* is such as to belie this expectation.

*House of Leaves* was published at the beginning of the new millennium, the year 2000. A remarkable book on several counts, one of the various issues that dominate its experimental spaces is that of the beginning. Along with the stories it keeps beginning to tell, *House of Leaves* simultaneously raises questions about how we understand the beginning of a narrative, what assumptions work in our definitions of the beginning, what expectations we take to it, and how we demarcate it from the middle and the end. These questions make their presence sufficiently felt so as to carry the reader away from the beguiling world of the story into the non-mimetic realm of plot or discourse, a point I shall look at in some detail in a later section of this essay.

Of the stories that *House of Leaves* presents, the most significant is the central story of the film-maker Will Navidson’s mysterious, even uncanny experiences in his house, and the film he makes of them. In

fact he makes more than one film, the longest and most intelligible of them being *The Navidson Record*. *House of Leaves* is the account of these films and their making, by Zampanò, who is dead when *House of Leaves* begins, and it also has exhaustive notes provided by Truant. The authority and reliability of many of the footnotes and explanations are however open to dispute, and proved to have no validity in terms of either text or author beyond the claims of *House of Leaves*.<sup>1</sup>

The precursors of the film entitled *The Navidson Record* are painstakingly described for us right in the beginning. The first of them, “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway,” is dismissed as “a five and a half minute optical illusion barely exceeding the abilities of any NYU film school graduate” (Danielewski 4). It is incomplete: abstract-fashion, it carries the bare minimum of the detail that was to amplify itself so largely and broodingly over *The Navidson Record*. In “The Five and a Half minute Hallway,” Navidson shows a bizarre space, about ten feet in length, extending into a wall of his house, without occupying a corresponding portion of space while viewed from the outside. When the camera moves to the outer wall, all the viewer sees is Navidson’s backyard.

The next film is called “Exploration #4” and is eight minutes long. This film, unlike the earlier, does not begin at the beginning. It seems reasonable to assume that “Exploration #4” would make better sense to a viewer who has already seen “The Five and a Half minute Hallway.” To excerpt from *House of Leaves*, “The structure of ‘Exploration #4’ is highly discontinuous, jarring... [T]he first shot catches Navidson mid-phrase” (Danielewski 5). It is three years after the last film that *The Navidson Record* appears; unlike its previous versions which enjoy a limited circulation, this film is screened nationwide and creates an impact amongst its audiences. In effect then, *The Navidson Record* has existed in earlier versions, so that this third version is in fact a third beginning of the same narrative. There is even a fourth version; an illicit lovers’ scene, featuring Navidson’s wife Karen and Wax, is edited into the film a few months after *The Navidson Record* is first released.

As the above recapitulation of *House of Leaves* would show, the novel’s concern in presenting the story of the missing hallway, a story fraught with suspense, takes up considerable space in its be-

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from the tentativeness with which some of the notes present themselves, a good number of the texts cited in the footnotes are also spurious. See <http://www.invisiblelibrary.com/libtitle3.htm> for an eight-page list of the books that Danielewski cites in the form of footnotes in *House of Leaves*. None of them exist outside his imagination.

ginning—or beginnings, as the case may be. These beginnings are also beginnings of the narrations of the story itself. With the account of each film, the reader is returned to the beginning of the representation/recounting of the unaccounted space in the house. Thus the reader experiences a near self-reflexive focus on the beginning since her attention is drawn to the *representation* of a story.

As “The Five and a Half minute Hallway” and “Exploration #4” are replaced by the relatively more complete *The Navidson Record*, the notion of beginning itself becomes foregrounded as a concern for the narrator. This narrative concern with beginnings is reinforced in the various parallel texts that the novel throws up, so that *House of Leaves* holds a range of texts whose beginnings cut into the main text, mainly in the form of footnotes. Among other things, *House of Leaves* uses the beginning as a counter-intuitive<sup>2</sup> mode of effecting digressions, and it is the frequency of its use that alerts the reader to the discursive layer of this book.

Right at the outset, when we readers are seeking the space to orient ourselves into the narrative, we are confronted with a series of interruptions achieved at intervals of the main text, *The Navidson Record*. A possible outcome is that the narrative can lose the reader’s attention through frequent interruptions. Risk-taking indeed occupies a large part of the narrative strategies of *House of Leaves*.

What elements, then, are characteristic of a (safe) beginning?

Beginnings are built on expectations brought to the text by readers, and these expectations are born of both convention and reading experience. While beginnings are relatively less determined than endings, they are still conditioned by expectations which are guided by genre and modes of representation. The author has the choice, especially after postmodernism, to caricature, deliberately subvert or outright reject these conventions.

Beginnings make sense best when seen in the light of the endings they lead to; however the endings need not be, and are not usually, directly predictable from their beginnings. As Kermode says, “unless we are extremely naïve...we do not ask that they progress towards that end precisely as we have been given to believe” (Kermode 23-24).

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<sup>2</sup> Intuitively, beginnings imply progression towards resolutions. *House of Leaves* thwarts such progression by introducing several texts all of which begin but do not lead very much further. A footnote is a good example of such a text because in itself it is a highlight—which makes it ‘less’ than a beginning, were such a thing possible—of a text which the reader is advised to begin reading to understand a point made here.

So the freedom that a beginning enjoys by being less determined is perhaps offset by the fact that it has to ensure that along the way to its end, it destroys some of its own premises and revives some others, taking care to balance suspense, surprise and credibility among other factors. This pattern of evolution would hold most unambiguously for the detective novel, which is one of the master-narratives that direct the reading of *House of Leaves*, and shape reader-expectations accordingly. I will discuss this in detail in the course of my essay.

### Where does it begin?

Before its publication, *House of Leaves* appeared on the net for several months when it had a fairly sizeable reader-following. Its hypertextual history creates an added dimension to the debate concerning beginnings, the internet being a space that problematises beginnings and endings.

Consider Roland Barthes' statement on the ideal text which shares similarities with the hypertext: "this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one;" (Barthes *S/Z*, qtd. in Landow). Even in its published version, *House of Leaves* gives a fair idea of what the net version must have looked like. For one, the multiple-entry structure of the hypertext is replicated in the book, *House of Leaves*, through the use of paratexts like the Foreword, the Introduction, the innumerable footnotes, the Appendices and the Index. Some of these, like the footnotes and the Index are particularly suited to challenge a linear reading experience, akin to a hypertext.

Already therefore, the book *House of Leaves* has a 'previous' version. And it is a version such as to problematise the idea of a beginning. After having begun the inside book which follows the Introduction, viz. *The Navidson Record*, the reader is continually distracted from proceeding in a straight line by insistent footnotes, some of which even lead to other, previous footnotes. Let me take the following example on Page 4. Footnote number 4—for the sentence concluding "... 'Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace/And rest can never dwell, hope never comes/That comes to all' thus echoing the words copied down by hell's most famous tourist: *Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create/ Se non etterne, e io etterna duro./ Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*<sup>4</sup>" reads thus:

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<sup>4</sup>That first bit comes from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book I, lines 65-67. The second from Dante's *In-*

*ferno*, Canto III lines 7–9. In 1939, some guy named John D. Sinclair from the Oxford University Press translated the Italian as follows: “Before me nothing was created but eternal things and I endure eternally. Abandon every hope, ye that enter.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>In an effort to limit confusion, Mr. Truant’s footnotes will appear in courier font while Zampanò’s will appear in Times. We also wish to note here that we have never actually met Mr. Truant. All matters regarding the publication were addressed in letters or in rare instances over the phone. – The Editors

(Danielewski 4)

Footnote 5, as we see, is a note to Footnote 4, not the main text. These footnotes also have variable sources, from Zampanò to Truant to the Editors, thereby indicating the different entry points that each of these authors has to the text.

Or consider Footnote 168, which has two inset passages, one recounting the voyage of Magellan in 1519, and the other of Hudson in 1610. Footnotes 169, 171, 180 and 170—in this order—are appended to these two accounts which are part of Footnote 168, thus producing multiple embedded footnotes. Thus *House of Leaves* variously shows how footnotes in themselves constitute a text that conceptually thwarts chronology and linear sequencing.

Moreover, when the question of ‘the beginning’ is located within the context of such a textual network as this, footnotes are seen to draw the reader back earlier in time from that in which she is reading, as they refer to prior texts. This is arguably one of the most obvious ways in which paratexts disperse linear sequencing, and with it, the idea of a concrete, decipherable beginning. Similarly embedded texts such as transcripts in *House of Leaves* produce new beginnings which dispel a comfortable belief in one single beginning.

The intertextual identity of *House of Leaves* having been established,<sup>3</sup> I argue that one of the implications of intertextuality is

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<sup>3</sup> Apart from footnotes, epigraphs are strewn generously over *House of Leaves*. As intertextual devices, epigraphs encourage reverse-reading. An epigraph that is prefixed to a chapter or a book withholds its complete meaning (even when it is familiar to the reader) with respect to the chapter/book, until the reader has read the chapter/book to the end. Ideally, reading the text enables the reader to make better sense of the epigraph, so that she returns to the epigraph once again, expecting it to yield greater and richer meaning. Recurrence—another way of going back to the beginning—is thus ensured through the use of epigraphs. The chapter epigraphs in *House of Leaves* range from quotations from The Beatles, Mary Shelley, R.K. Narayan, to the Oxford English Dictionary, Borges, Virgil and Einstein, to cite a sample. Some chapters have more than one epigraph, suggesting that they ‘begin’ from more than one

that beginnings are not as distinct as one would think. A premise of intertextuality is that the purported and physical beginning of one text is in fact an echo, thread or trace of the beginning, middle or end of another text, since all writers and readers bring to the texts they write and read the memory and experience of other texts that they have read before. References to other texts within a particular text can happen either directly (the quoted word) or in a more subtle fashion, and they can carry attitude, producing parody or burlesque in certain instances.

Intertextual cross-referencing happens in an unfettered fashion in the novel, more than in any other genre perhaps. In the words of Mikhail Bakhtin, “Under conditions of the novel every direct word—epic, lyric, strictly dramatic—is to a greater or lesser degree made into an object, the word itself becomes a bounded...image...” (Bakhtin 111-112). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to recapitulate the main tenets of Bakhtin’s study of the novel, suffice it to say that his understanding of the novel as principally “indirect discourse” (112)<sup>4</sup> endorses my premise here that the novel is an apt vehicle for intertextuality, a faculty that *House of Leaves* exploits to its best advantage.

Intertextual references are vehicles for self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity is also created by rendering visible to the reader the twin narrative levels of story and discourse, which, by moving in mutually opposite directions, designate two beginnings, one of the story and another of the plot/discourse. *House of Leaves*, by presenting a story as well as presenting its presentation, as it were, draws the reader’s eye to the two levels of the narrative it enshrines, the story-level and the discursal level.

*House of Leaves* raises the issue of the beginning on the two counts of intertextuality as well as the story-discourse double-entendre, as I hope to show in the rest of my paper.

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perspective. Chapter IX has in fact three epigraphs, positioned in the form of a triangle, a line in Latin each from Virgil, Ascensius and Nicholas Trevet.

<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin describes indirect discourse as the “representation of another’s word, another’s language in intonational quotation marks” (112). This definition accommodates self-reflexivity as a feature of novelistic discourse.

## Story and Discourse

*House of Leaves* offers an interesting selection of beginnings: a Foreword (vii) followed by the discouraging one-liner “This is not for you” (ix) and an Introduction (xi), before *The Navidson Record* begins on page 3 and ends on Page 528. It continues thereafter to include Six Exhibits (529-535), three Appendices (537-662), an Index (663-705), Credits (707-708) and Yggdrasil (709). The inter-mixing of story and discursal features that runs through *House of Leaves* is thus prefigured at the outset with the Foreword and the Introduction standing apart from the main story, as it were, and yet not quite in the reader’s world. Tucked within several independent frames, *The Navidson Record* is a description of the mysterious experiences of Will Navidson and his family edited by Zampanò, in turn edited by Truant, and both together edited by “The Editors” who sign the Foreword.

The incipit of *House of Leaves* is a complex issue to address. If we look at *House of Leaves* as a whole, then there are at least three distinctive openings into the novel: the Foreword, the Introduction, and *The Navidson Record*. Each new text opens to disrupt the sense of continuity established by the previous. Truant’s introduction to *House of Leaves* is brooding and pessimistic in tone, and it dwells largely on Zampanò’s compilations that go to form the novel *The Navidson Record*. Within *The Navidson Record* itself, the linear sequencing of the story is halting and fitful, as narrative continuity is arrested either by paratexts like footnotes, or by intra-textual—and therefore less easily visible—comments and musings by the author that impede the progress of the story. The footnotes run into pages sometimes, pursuing the life story of Truant in his own words. Truant may begin with a note to *The Navidson Record* only to recollect some analogous experience in his own life, which would take him away from his editorial role and into the role of a protagonist. His footnotes almost compete for attention with *The Navidson Record*.

*The Navidson Record* begins obliquely:

While enthusiasts and detractors will continue to empty entire dictionaries attempting to describe or deride it, ‘authenticity’ still remains the word most likely to stir a debate. In fact, this leading—to validate or invalidate the reels and tapes—invariably brings up a collateral and more general concern: whether or not, with the advent of digital technology, image has forsaken its once unimpeachable hold on the truth<sup>1</sup> (Danielewski 3).

What we have here is a comment on the nature of the story we are going to read, a story-internal comment. Note too, that the first footnote is appended to the very first sentence. This is followed by a paragraph

which debates the nature of *The Navidson Record* (is it “a hoax of exceptional quality?”) (Danielewski 3) followed by musings on the nature of hell, with quotations from Milton and Dante.

It takes a while for the ruminative passage to give way to the section that provides actual, factual information about *The Navidson Record*: that it “did not first appear as it does today. Nearly seven years ago what surfaced was ‘The Five and a Half Minute Hallway’—a five and a half minute optical illusion barely exceeding the abilities of any NYU film school graduate” (Danielewski 4).

With self-reflexivity and repetition combining to defer the actual beginning of the story, *The Navidson Record* remains, in spirit, at the start-line. *House of Leaves* generously enhances and prolongs the beginning, and across several pages deliberately sets the ambience of mystery. The danger of suspense being removed by such a procedure is, curiously enough, handled head-on by *House of Leaves* which takes 500-something pages to construct the mystery without explaining it. In short, the end is different from the beginning only in so far as that it has amplified and drawn on the beginning to affirm that the beginning is all there is to *House of Leaves*.<sup>5</sup> The tendency of *The Navidson Record* to reflect and find parallels with other similar situations is so entrenched as to keep narrative progression at bay, and stay in exposition-mode. Indeed, discussion and reflection are the two main brakes that work against the narrative momentum.

In fact, in the light of what *The Navidson Record* does to the promise contained in the Introduction, replacing elucidation and unravelling with exhaustive description and debate, it is possible to

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<sup>5</sup> The mystery of the expanding and contracting hallway is never resolved unequivocally. Besides, the menace and the hidden horrors of the house affect Truant, spilling into his personal life, and he takes a holiday to recover. In the course of his holiday he goes to a bar, and buys the musicians a drink. They chat, and within minutes Truant finds that they have a “big brick of tattered paper” (Danielewski 513) whose title pages reads

House of Leaves

By Zampanò

with introduction and  
notes by Johnny Truant

Circle Round A Stone Publication

First Edition

This is probably the only clear instance of *House of Leaves* bringing us right back to the beginning, or is it even prior to the book we have been reading? (The book we have in our hands is a second edition.)



argue that the Introduction constitutes an abstract of *The Davidson Record* itself.

Hence, one way of understanding the beginning of *House of Leaves* is to see it as a novel that keeps going back to the beginning, its own beginnings.<sup>6</sup> The beginning is replete with questions raised by the mystery. By refusing to answer these questions in a categorical manner, *House of Leaves* ensures that the spirit with which it began never quite leaves the novel, and the partial answers we are left with at the end, fail to keep the questions themselves from coming back to us repeatedly.

This begs the question: how far can a narrative be poised at the beginning? The various thresholds at which different readers will balk, recognise that the narrative has not really progressed much beyond the beginning, and repose to this knowledge, is of course a matter of individual temperament. But then again, *House of Leaves* is a postmodern novel and risk-taking, as I have earlier observed, is natural to its mode of being.

### **Story and Discourse: The Prototype of the Detective Novel**

As pointed out earlier, expectations typical of a mystery novel are laid out at the beginning of *House of Leaves*, and indeed define its status in the beginning segment. There is a mystery, its mysteriousness is reinforced; it is uncanny, it is unique, and to all purposes inexplicable. We as readers warm to the initial situation from our experience of reading other similar novels, which also tells us that however inexplicable the mystery seems at the beginning, it is the duty of the novel to unravel it believably for us. In the process of disclosing the answer, the mystery novel helps us re-cognise the beginning and understand it anew. Elements that in the beginning seemed to lead in a certain direction are generally proved to have led elsewhere, so that the reader's cleverest conjectures that arise from the beginning are still not as good as the novel's resolution of the mystery. In an interesting paradox, the reader expects the narrative to stay ahead of her.

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<sup>6</sup> Take Chapter V of *House of Leaves* which begins with an elaboration of echoes. The passage drives towards making the point that echoic repetition is not lifeless but meaningful; however my attention here is on the notion of recurrence, which is also suggested, in passing, as a function of echo. Recurrence and repetition, as I have argued, are strategies employed by *House of Leaves* to keep the beginning continually in view.

The beginning of *House of Leaves*, however, misleads. It fails to take advantage of what Kermode calls “a kind of forward memory... the mind working on an expected future” which is “an essential tool of narrative fiction” (Kermode 53), especially of mystery novels like detective fiction, wherein the beginning adroitly presents an idea in such a way as to make it very difficult for the reader to understand its full significance until way into the narrative.<sup>7</sup>

The plot of the prototypical detective novel is designed to begin after at least one murder has taken place. This involves a discursual re-ordering of the story, with the result that the narrative begins *in medias res*. The circumstances under which the murder has been committed are explained much later, towards the end, by the detective. The chronological beginning of the story is thus presented to the reader at the end; and a re-ordering of the sequence of beginning, middle and end is accomplished through an *in medias res* opening. An awareness of the twin layer of story and plot is crucial to enable a critical reading of the detective novel.

Mystery is built elaborately into the beginning of *House of Leaves*: in the death of Luke, the strange disappearance of most of the cats and the suggested violent deaths of the rest, the inexplicable gouges in the floor of Luke’s apartment. Together they point to a story which, the reader expects, would enlarge the mystery and eventually explain it. Having established that the initial set of propositions raised in the exposition of *House of Leaves* invite comparison to that of a detective novel, I shall devote this section of my essay to a discussion of how *House of Leaves* reads from—or away from—the blueprint of prototypical detective fiction.

Since an elaborate analysis of the form of detective fiction will take my argument away from the main thread, let me look only at the most fundamental expectations generated by this genre. One of the main conventions by which the genre is recognized is through an ending that fills in all the missing bits of the story without partaking of the supernatural. Since no ‘natural’ or phenomenological explanation is

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<sup>7</sup> A remarkable instance of such an opening is that of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: “Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (11). The anticipation of a critical event in the narrative appears to ruin the suspense that a reader could have delighted in, but the reader is still in for a surprise, because it transpires that the Colonel does not die in the encounter, and the highlight given in the opening sentence is in fact a hoax. As an opening sentence, it is a perfect combination of irony, anticipation, and suspense.

ever satisfactorily offered to the reader about the events surrounding *The Navidson Record*; since in fact the explanations tentatively provided do partake of the supernatural, it is only so far as its beginning goes that it is possible to see it as having the potential to become a detective novel. A more important deviation lies in the fact that where in the detective novel it is the ending that forms the crux of the narrative, in *House of Leaves* the ending is tame, the ending is just a notional one with Navidson, Karen and the children surviving the space in the house. The bizarre death of Tom is never explained.

In his comprehensive essay entitled “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” Todorov reduces the basic structural elements of a whodunit (classic detective fiction) to a duality. The whodunit “contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” (Todorov 139). Furthermore,

The first story, that of the crime, ends before the second begins. But what happens in the second? Not much. The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn. Nothing can happen to them. A rule of the genre postulates the detective’s immunity. (Todorov 139)

This pattern underlies *House of Leaves* in various layers: it is possible to see Truant as the detective working on Zampanò’s story, just as it is possible to see Zampanò as the detective—one layer inside, embedded—working on *The Navidson Record*. The Chinese-box structure does not end here. Navidson himself is a detective vis-à-vis the events happening in his life, and he co-opts his friends, and even his brother as detectives on the job. By this time we have reached the domain of the first story. But none of the detectives has escaped with impunity, let alone immunity. Zampanò is dead, Truant has been deeply, possibly permanently affected, and Navidson who emerges from the ordeal of the strange house is never the same again. *House of Leaves* achieves a notable variation on the format of the whodunit.

Todorov also describes the two stories of the whodunit by stating, “the first—the story of the crime—tells ‘what really happened’, whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains ‘how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it’” (Todorov 140). *House of Leaves* keeps us mystified till the end of the novel, and the reader never knows unambiguously *what* has “really happened,” or *how* she has come to know about what really happened.

## Promise Withheld

Thus it is the second story that looms large over the beginning of *House of Leaves*, but its hallmark, which is that of investigation, presents itself primarily in the form of reflections and conjecture. These reflections and speculations persist mostly in a tangential fashion, and in the footnotes in the second story and as I have mentioned, their authority is open to question.

The first story, which can be said to begin in Chapter II, is synonymous with the film itself, *The Navidson Record*. Typical second-story sentences such as “In many ways, the opening of *The Navidson Record*, shot back in April of 1990, remains one of the more disturbing sequences because it so effectively denies itself even the slightest premonition about what will soon take place on Ash Tree Lane” (Danielewski 8), or “Not once during those initial minutes does Navidson indicate he knows anything about the impending nightmare he and his family are about to face” (Danielewski 8) have an intrusive role, and carry the trademark tone of hindsight and of being wiser after the event. Yet these are never developed to a conclusive resolution, and remain at the level of ruminations and considerations of possibilities. *House of Leaves* offers no explanation for whatever has happened and instead presents us with the horrific and incredible details of what happens in the house. In lieu of categorical explanations there are conflicting views, and these remain unresolved, thereby belying *House of Leaves*’s promise of being a whodunit. An alternative way of making sense of this phenomenon is to call it a position of perpetual beginning.

To wit: such views as “He [Navidson] is wholly innocent, and the nature of the house, at least for a little while, lies beyond his imagination let alone his suspicions” are followed at once by “Of course not everyone remains in accordance with this assessment. Dr. Isaiah Rosen believes, ‘Navidson’s a fraud from frame one...’” (Danielewski 8), and such recurring oscillations resist a clear denouement. 335 pages down the book, and 181 pages before the end of *The Navidson Record* the progression of the narrative is still recorded in such debates: “After Navidson had vanished down the Spiral Staircase, Karen found herself trapped between two thresholds: one leading *into* the house, the other leading *out* of it” followed shortly by “The pharmacotherapy study Karen participated in never mentions any history of sexual abuse (see footnote 69). However it does not seem unreasonable to consider a traumatic adolescent experience, whether a fantasy or real, as a possible source for Karen’s fears. Unfortunately when asked by various reporters to confirm her sister’s claim Karen

refused to comment” (Danielewski 347). Karen’s sister had claimed that their stepfather had sexually abused them. These debates are characterised not just by contradiction but also by progressive vagueness and the difficulty of establishing an incontrovertible truth.

Most pertinent to the analysis of *House of Leaves* from the perspective of a whodunit is the following observation made by Todorov about the two stories: “It is no accident that it [the second story] is often told by a friend of the detective, who explicitly acknowledges that he is writing a book; the second story consists, in fact, in explaining how this very book came to be written” (Todorov 140). Although neither is Truant Zampanò’s friend (they have never met, even) nor Zampanò (nor Truant) Navidson’s friend, both Zampanò and Truant are writing books of the ‘second story-type’, but books that parody Todorov’s definition of the second story, by refusing rather than providing an adequate explanation of the first story: adequate with respect to the expectations the first story raises in the mind of the reader, that is.

Todorov’s insightful analysis of the first story as the story of an absence is ironically fulfilled in *House of Leaves*. According to him, the absent first story has to be represented through the second story to the reader. The second story exists only in order to reflect the first story. *House of Leaves* uses this story-structure to undermine it, by refusing to illuminate the absence of the first story, which is literally an absent space. And the second story with which *House of Leaves* appears to begin shades imperceptibly into the first story, as even Truant begins to succumb to the menace present in Navidson’s house. The metaphorical absence that Todorov talks of thus becomes a literal absence, a house with a space that cannot be measured, contained, or even entered except experientially. Logic and the laws of Physics fail to accommodate it.

## **Threshold**

To work towards a resolution is to go against the grain of the spirit of this novel. But my paper has to end, and I choose to conclude by evoking the trope of the threshold, of the boundary that space inevitably suggests. Beginnings and endings also constitute thresholds, and it is one of the main effects of *House of Leaves* to train our eyes to thresholds, whether literally in the way the margins of the pages expand and contract and rotate; the way the book’s outer cover is shorter than the inner cover, prefiguring the architecture of Navidson’s house; or the way beginnings lead to other beginnings instead of

an end. In addition, the counter-intuitive use of the present tense in *House of Leaves* (consider: in a narrative which is being recapitulated twice, since Zampanò's version is re-presented to us by Truant)—possibly because it narrates a film—retains the reader at the starting-line. In this way, *House of Leaves* presents the paradox of the beginning being both an all-extending feature of the narrative as well as a threshold: covering space, as well as constituting a boundary.

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