

## Notes on Mark Danielewski, *The Fifty-Year Sword*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

### Deconstructing Danielewski's "Complexity"

Let's strip this book of its components, one by one.

1. The book was done in collaboration with three "stitchers," who sewed the sometimes very elaborate patterns that are reproduced throughout the book. The problem here is that the stitching only intermittently connects with the narrative. The key moment when a box with five latches is opened (p. 212 ff.) is illustrated with full-page, full-color photographs of stitched rectangles intended to illustrate the latches. But there is no connection between the zig-zag patterns on the latches and the scene evoked in the narrative. Why curvilinear decorations on the latches? The mismatch between the single lines of text--in which each child lifts a latch--and the labor expended on the sewing isn't itself explained or motivated. The sewing works best in the pages that illustrate the spooky storyteller's swords (p. 196 ff.), because the imaginary swords in the story are rendered as static pictures of swords: a nice contrast with the slicing horrors the storyteller is evoking. But most episodes are disconnected from their narratives. The "Forest of Falling" is illustrated by falling lines of punched-out holes, but they're randomly stitched in patterns that look more like confetti than leaves. And so forth. An MFA-level critique would have been helpful here, matching the form of the stitching to the images and shapes in the story.

2. So imagine the book without the illustrations. The principal typographic innovation in this book is differently-colored quotation marks, that stand for different speakers. But it is apparently nearly from the first page that it is not possible to read every yellow quotation, for example, in sequence; and it is apparent from somewhere around page 20 that the five characters, introduced in the author's preface and coded by color, will not in fact be introduced or described in the book. And from that point on, a reader just reads straight through the colored quotation marks. Occasionally a slightly different point of view, or a briefly fragmented narrative, will recall the color coding, but it doesn't help read the book. This is in contrast to any number of modern and postmodern experiments with unnamed and unnumbered interlocutors, from "Ulysses" to Derrida's "Truth in Painting," where it really is interesting to try to figure out who is speaking.

3. Imagining the book without its colored quotation marks or its graphics, there's still the arrangement of words on the page. Occasionally that makes sense, for example when one of the characters is slicing herself up with an imaginary sword, and the words scatter to evoke her cuts. But for the most part, these are not inventive or expressive arrangements. I agree with the reviewer in the "New York Times": sometimes the space around sentences just doesn't work to emphasize them; and in addition, there are almost no imaginative pictorial arrangements of words, despite a century of precedents, from Mallarmé to Apollinaire and Huidobro.

4. So now imagine the book is just printed, in the usual way, with no special typography, no colors, and no graphical arrangement of text. There is one final obstacle between a reader and the narrative itself and that is Danielewski's penchant for inventing portmanteau words. I found this

annoying and inept throughout. The modernist tradition of newly coined words, from "Finnegans Wake" through Matthiessen, Winterson, Burgess, and Bernstein, demands consistency: the author has to adopt a certain mode, a manner in relation to the voices she's imagining. What happens here is entirely different: Danielewski only occasionally invents word—one or two per page. As a result they are consistently distracting. Is it really a good idea to interrupt the climactic moment of the story, in which a woman is running to help another who is literally falling to pieces, by saying she was "racing forward, diretivating others"? "Diretivating" seems to be a portmanteau combination of "directing" and "dictating," with an echo of "dire." But all it does here is interrupt the narrative flow, bring the reader out of the scene, and compel her to solve a ridiculous little puzzle before continuing. There are man, many other examples—my copy is entirely marked up with them. Virtually none of them work with the narrative, the voice, the style, or any other component of the fiction: instead they forcibly compel a read to attend to Danielewski's show of skill. (Is that's what it is: I don't think portmanteau is especially difficult.)

What is left? A good, brief ghost story, suitable for children—except that it isn't suitable for any kind of children except the ones whose parents insist that they become sophisticated and literary.