Had The Blair Witch Project been a book instead of a film, and had it been written by, say, Nabokov at his most playful, revised by Stephen King at his most cerebral, and typeset by the futurist editors of Blast at their most avant-garde, the result might have been something like House of Leaves. Mark Z. Danielewski’s first novel has a lot going on: notably the discovery of a pseudoacademic monograph called The Navidson Record, written by a blind man named Zampanò, about a nonexistent documentary film—which itself is about a photojournalist who finds a house that has supernatural, surreal qualities. (The inner dimensions, for example, are measurably larger than the outer ones.) In addition to this Russian-doll layering of narrators, Danielewski packs in poems, scientific lists, collages, Polaroids, appendices of fake correspondence and various quotes, single lines of prose placed any which way on the page, crossed-out passages, and so on. Now that we’ve reached the post-postmodern era, presumably there’s nobody left who needs liberating from the strictures of conventional fiction. So apart from its narrative high jinks, what does House of Leaves have to offer? According to Johnny Truant, the tattoo-shop apprentice who discovers Zampanò’s work, once you read The Navidson Record, 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. Well have to take his word for it, however. As its presented here, the description of the spooky film isn’t continuous enough to have much scare power. Instead, were pulled back into Johnny Truant’s world through his footnotes, which he uses to discharge everything in his head, including the discovery of the manuscript, his encounters with people who knew Zampanò, and his own battles with drugs, sex, ennui, and a vague evil force. If The Navidson Record is a mad professor lecturing on the supernatural with rational-seeming conviction, Truant’s footnotes are the manic student in the back of the auditorium, wigged out and furiously scribbling whoa-dude notes about life. Despite his flaws, Truant is an
appealingly earnest amateur editor—finding translators, tracking down sources, pointing out incongruities. Danielewski takes an academics—or ex-academics—glee in footnotes (the similarity to David Foster Wallace is almost too obvious to mention), as well as other bogus ivory-tower trappings such as interviews with celebrity scholars like Camille Paglia and Harold Bloom. And he stuffs highbrow and pop-culture references (and parodies) into the novel with the enthusiasm of an anarchist filling a pipe bomb with bits of junk metal. House of Leaves may not be the prettiest or most coherent collection, but if you're trying to blow stuff up, who cares?—John Ponyicsanyi

My Personal Review:
In the apartment of a dead man, Johnny Truant discovers a manuscript by Zampanò, an academic study of a documentary called The Navidson Record in which journalist Navidson finds an impossible endless hallway within his house. Interweaving the events of the documentary with Zampanò and Truants interjections, with copious footnotes, an unusual layout, and lengthy appendices, House of Leaves is self-referential post-modern Lovecraftian horror which is as intriguing as it is pretentious. This novel must be read to believed, and its a long journey not without faults, but I recommend it enthusiastically.

There are three stories here: Truants life and past, the lingering hints of Zampanòs life, and Navidsons long journey into the endless bowels of his house. If that weren't enough, the text lies in columns and narrow blocks that mimic the houses hallways, words and passages appear in odd colors, and the footnotes have footnotes and reference books which don't exist. In short, House of Leaves has a lot going on, and it is an odd and a bold book from the first page. Reading it can be a labor—but it is a labor of love, because it offers so much.

In the vein of Lovecraft, House of Leaves is not the horror of ghosts or scary images, but rather the horror of the endless and terrifying unknown. Via some wonderful storytelling and the unusual layout Truant and the reader are dragged along through Navidsons explorations, and are frightened and threatened in turn. Books never scare me, but this one did—and for that alone I would recommend it. But House of Leaves offers more than just terror. The journey into the house is also a journey into the self, and it pushes explorers to their limits. As such, the book has a surprisingly strong human element—one which is a bit too present at the end, where the horror is exchanged for a resolution between Navidson and his wife. This was my least favorite part, and makes for a slow conclusion. Still, on the whole, the book is a careful combination of atmospheric Lovecraftian horror and delicate human exploration, and it succeeds at both.

Be willing to wade through footnotes, to flip to the appendix, to turn the book upside down and on edge; enjoy and find humor in the self-aware pretentious post-modernism; be fascinated the horror of the endless, incomprehensible unknown—and you will love this book. I did, nearly every
word of it, and so I cannot recommend it highly enough. It may not be the book for everyone and it is not without fault, but it is undeniably brave and I only wish we saw more books like it. The endless dark inspires wonder and awe and fear, and when we look into it we will never escape the memory of what we see. At least, I hope not. I hope (and expect) that this book will stay with me forever.

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