

## Signiconic Aspect in Selected Novels by Mark Z. Danielewski

<sup>a</sup>Lect. Dijla Gattan Shannan

College of Education / University of Al-Qadisiyah, Email:  
[dijla.shannan@qu.edu.iq](mailto:dijla.shannan@qu.edu.iq)

<sup>b</sup>Assist. Lect. Marwa Ali Al-Shara

The General Directorate of Education in Al-Qadisiyah Province/ Ministry of  
Education/ Iraq Email: [marwaalialshara@gmail.com](mailto:marwaalialshara@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Mark Z. Danielewski is an American author whose contribution to English literature is remarkable. Between the postmodernism and its revolutions in the world of literature on one hand, and modern digital technologies on the other, this writer achieves to deconstruct the traditional form of the novel and reconstruct its new form. This research is going to trace the sing iconic occasions in two of Danielewski's writings, they are; *Only Revolutions* (2006) and *The Fifty Year Sword* (2012). The aim behind this is to manipulate the artistic employment of such a mixture between words and images.

**Key Words:** Danielewski, Signiconic, *Only Revolutions*, *The Fifty Year Sword*.

البُعد السيمي-الأيقوني في روايات مختارة لمارك ز. دانييلفسكي

م. دجلة كطان شنان

كلية التربية / جامعة القادسية البريد الإلكتروني: [dijla.shannan@qu.edu.iq](mailto:dijla.shannan@qu.edu.iq)

م.م. مروة علي الشرع

المديرية العامة لتربية محافظة القادسية/ وزارة التربية/ العراق البريد الإلكتروني :

[marwaalialshara@gmail.com](mailto:marwaalialshara@gmail.com)

### الملخص

يُعدّ مارك ز. دانييلفسكي كاتبًا أمريكيًا قدّم إسهامًا بارزًا في الأدب الإنكليزي. ففي المساحة الواقعة بين ما بعد الحداثة وتحولاتها في عالم الأدب من جهة، والتقنيات الرقمية الحديثة من جهة أخرى، ينجح هذا الكاتب في تفكيك الشكل التقليدي للرواية وإعادة بناء شكلٍ جديدٍ لها. يسعى هذا البحث إلى تتبّع التجليات السيمي-الأيقونية في عمليتين من أعمال دانييلفسكي، وهما: محضُ ثورات (2006) و السيف ذو الخمسين عامًا (2012). يهدف البحث إلى تحليل التوظيف الفني والجمالي لهذا المزج بين الكلمات والصور، والكشف عن آلياته ودلالاته في تشكيل المعنى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دانييلفسكي، السيمي-الأيقوني، محضُ ثورات، السيف ذو الخمسين عامًا.

### Introduction

Danielewski coins what is called 'signiconic', it is an approach by which the reader read and evaluate the literary work. "Signiconic = sign + icon. Rather than engage those textual faculties of the mind remediating the pictorial or those

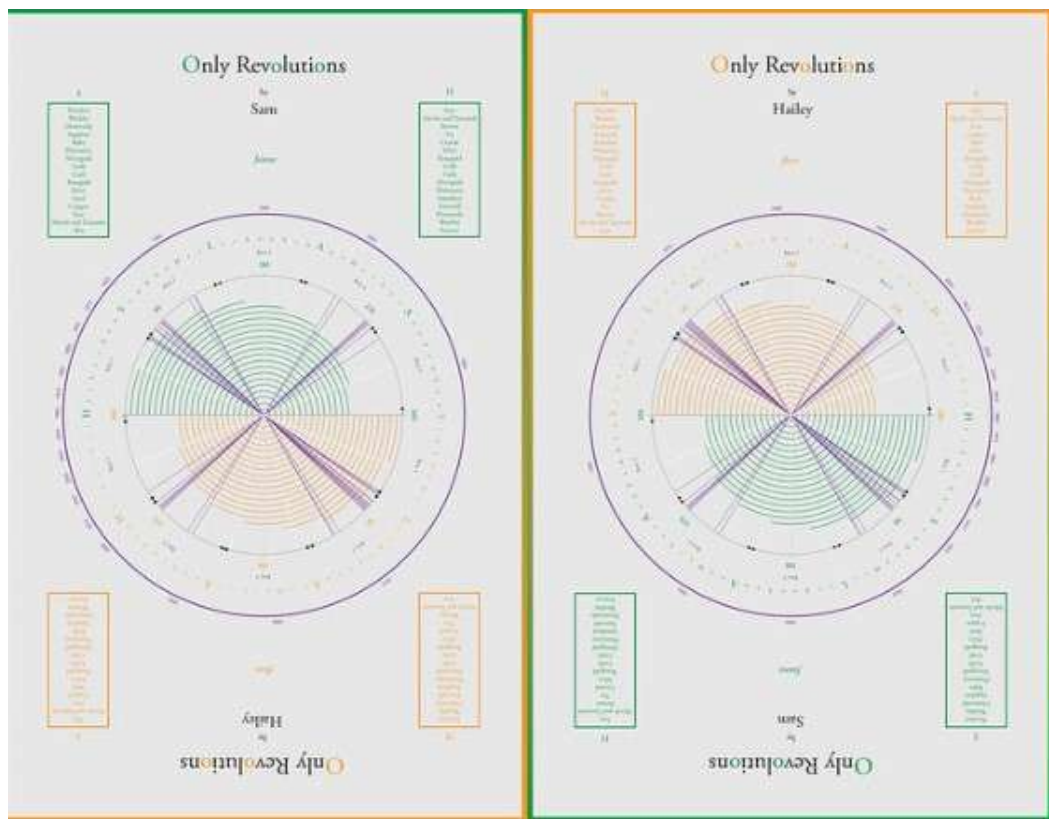


visual faculties remediating language, the signiconic simultaneously engages both in order to lessen the significance of both and therefore achieve a third perception...”. It means how writing and drawing work hand by hand to perform the message in the literary works. (qtd. in Tyler Hueffmeier 2).

**Only Revolutions (2006)**

*Only Revolutions* (2006) centers on the love between teenage couple (Sam and Hailey) and its span time between 1863 to 2063. Besides, it builds upon series of un related historical events mention in the margins of the pages, in addition to random situations that the reader already met them in *House of Leaves* (2000) by Danielewski. Despite the couple are young but they overcome whatever difficulty they face through their journey passing different places (it is considered as a trip novel). Only one thing stops their love, that is the death (in Sam's version death is the girl's share while in Hailey's version death is the boy's share) (Kulkarni and Kallur 1, 2)

One of the major sign icon the reader gets is related to the novel's narration. Each page horizontally is divided into two halves, one is related to Sam's narration and the other is related foe Hailey. Sam starts his narrative and stops at page 360. Then, the reader should turn the text upside down and in order to start with Hailey's narration. Each one narrates the same story from different angel. Here, Danielewski employs the experimentalism on the level of form and content (Kulkarni and Kallur 2).



The parallel structure of this novel leads to a chiasmic space or mirrored space. Jean-François Lyotard states the importance of chiasm:

introduces in the course of the text a depth that is not of pure signification, but that conceals and signals a kind of excess of meaning. The figure of the chiasm gives to this meaning – situated on the side of explicit signification, and which exceeds it – the form of the mirror, and therefore inspires a feeling of reflection, the same set of elements repeated, but reversed. (Lyotard 1–7).

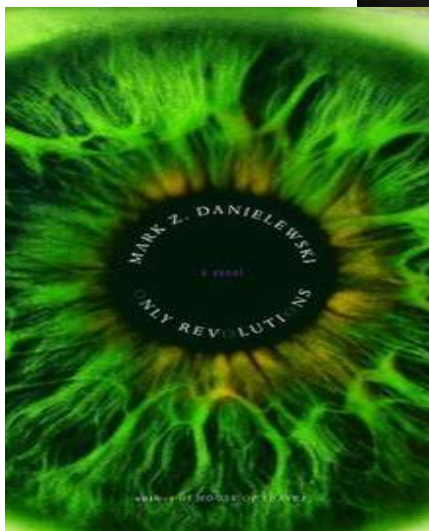
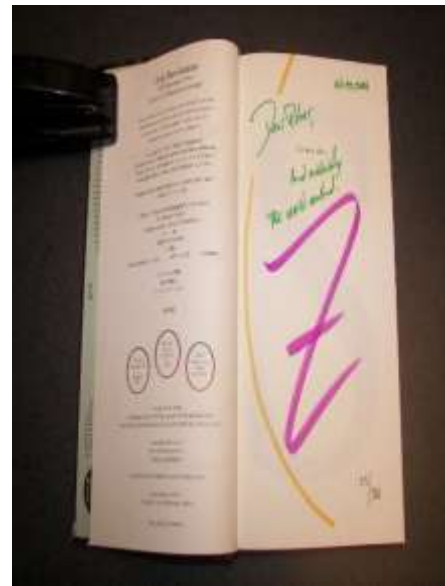
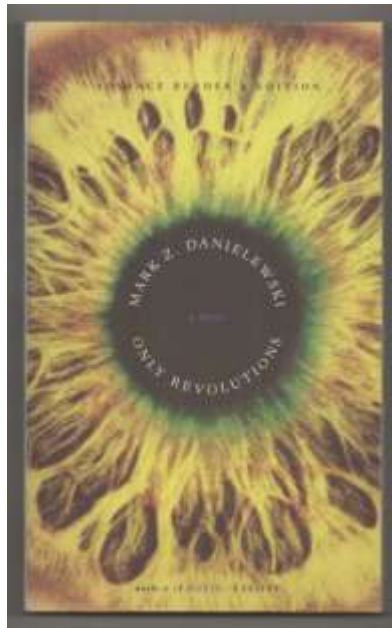
Resulting from the structure of the chiasm, the visual space of *Only Revolutions* is a three-dimensional space. Following Sam and Hailey, the reader navigates through the book and across its pages, experiencing every little bend and turn in the road, which is the text. The reader navigates the text haptically (Wurth et al. 8).

Concerning the employment of history, it covers many information of different fields like natural phenomena, wars, sport, politics, inventions and diseases. All the historical events are arranged randomly without any coherence and they are totally unrelated to the course of this novel. This illogicality besides the narrative's format add more complexity for the plot and more chaos for the reader. Danielewski adds a sort of CNN-style text crawl down the gutters of each page, detailing events in history, many supplied by readers via his website (Kulkarni and Kallur 2); (Kleffel 3).

Adapting such kind of images and format in presenting the narratives in *Only Revolutions* Danielewski gives his readers freedom in their reading. The reader could decide which half may he start with, consequently this is going to reshape their perception to the novel itself. Moreover, reading historical footer is optional one, depending on the reader himself whether he has an interest in this piece of historical information or not as long as it doesn't affect Sam's and Hailey's narratives (Kulkarni and Kallur 2).

Another signicon in this novel is that Danielewski provides hints to his reader, as a kind of instruction, how the reader may read this novel. One of these hints that he divides his novel into sections and using capitalized titles for each section (SAM AND HAILEY and HAILEY AND SAM) as a guide for reading the novel according to its sections. Another instruction is that the reader read 8 pages and then turns the book upside down and read another 8 pages. And give the reader freedom to decide which side he may read first. There are two ways to get rid of this dilemma; first is to read and finish Sam's narrative then move to Hailey's narrative, after that the reader may read the historical narrative. The second way to understand this novel is to make summary of the three narratives

with getting help from internet concerning these fragmented historical information (Kulkarni and Kallur 4).



The real Revolution in this novel one might observe is the extensive use of colors and hand writings. Each cover of the novel has particular image. One is with image of green eye (Sam's eye), the other is with image of golden eye (Hailey's eye). As if it is another instruction for the reader but graphical images and symbols confuse the reader instead of guiding him. This novel consists a lot of color-coded. In Sam's narrative, each letter "o" is printed in green, this reflects Sam's eyes. While in Hailey's part, all "O" is golden due to her eye's color. Moreover, the employments of such format and images sheds light upon the novel's themes such as love, sex, work and overall the life of two narrators, ecological destruction, and war-fare. While concerning the novel's grammar and typography there is another revolution. There is synchronization of font, different font size and type with misspelling or neologism. "Allways canicular" (Words beginning with "al-" are spelled "all-", a kind of etymological archaeology which lends dreadful force at last to the poems' thematic word "allone"). Sometimes the sentences are short and uncompleted another times the quotations are uncompleted (Kulkarni and Kallur 4); (Poole 2).

The eye (of characters and of reader) has a central role in interpretation of the novel. It has an essential semantic and formal trope in the text. As we meet in color coding of the eye, each color represents to the character and his personality. On the other hand, the eye and the hand of the reader also have influential role in shaping the meaning. So, using such metafictional-postmodern strategies makes the novel has an auratic effect where the reader might meet the writer, the past, the present, and the future (Wurth et al. 6).

Furthermore, the novel contains generic hybridization and metafictional techniques. The story is partially love story and partially historical one. And the writer presents prose story in poetic language. And always there is a reference to the reader - *You were there* (Kulkarni and Kallur 4).

*Only Revolutions* totally shifts the process of reading. Reading automatism depends on the mobility of the eye but before getting signification; the sensual is purified. All the revolutions in this novel is for one purpose, it is to read the unreadable (Wurth et al. 7).

The reader has neglected perspectives since the novel explore visual-verbal act. He supposes to put in his consideration the critical positions of his body during the course of reading. That is why *Only Revolutions* is considered as a mixture between book of art and hybrid novel. In book of art (which not always in need for reading) the reader focuses on the sign icons of this novel and how they develop the narratives of the text (Wurth et al. 10).

Danielewski writes two versions of *Only Revolutions*. The first is handwriting, as he mentions 'book that cannot exist online' (Rich 19) that is why its first appearance is in a handwriting form. Then, it is reproduced in with

highly digital decorations. So, the result is a hybrid novel where the writer brings together the tactile and the visual (Wurth et al. 7).

Mixing of words with images leads *Only Revolutions* to be a living organism. That it makes the reader part of its constituents, invites the reader's hand and eye to be part of its structure (Wurth et al. 8).

Danielewski exploits various resources and presents them in unified form, and the result was *Only Revolutions*. He blossoms the text by many typographical formats such as the pronoun "US" always is capitalized (may be it is a reference to the importance of the couple as a union or may be to glorify the united states), the villain's name "THE CREEP" always is capitalized with purple color. "WIDOW" who gives a vandal love advice. And the "TAXI DRIVER" also this name is capitalized. In addition to that there are a frequent employments of poems through the course of narratives. All these resources guide the reader to reach to the hidden messages in this novel (Poole 3).

Moreover, the zines of this novel is considered as a sign icon. According to Dictionary of the English Language zine is "an inexpensively produced, self-published, underground publication, an individualistic, small-circulation magazine typically produced cheaply by a single nonprofessional enthusiast." Cut-and-paste, singular (or at least apparently so), and hand-made, they form textual artefacts that can communicate bodily experiences which may be impossible to express in words alone. To that extent, zines are autographic. The reader find himself an important element in this novel (in printed copy). Since there is an eye in this novel which returns the reader's gaze and touch, as if it were a responsive organism. So, the process of reading of *Only Revolutions* is visual and verbal act. Mixing word with image acts as a map to guide the reader (Wurth 16-17).

### ***The Fifty Year Sword (2012)***

*The Fifty Year Sword* (2012) centers around Thai woman (Chintana) and her divorce affair from her husband. At party in East Texas appeared a stranger – ambiguous person who describes himself as "a bad man with a very black / heart" and has a box marked T50YS starts the story in front of five orphan listeners via five different narrators. Those orphans are Tarff, Ezade, Iniedia, Sithiss and 'ittle Micit. This novel is a gothic one since the place the narrator refers to are isolated and remote such as The Valley of Salt, The Forest of Falling Notes and the Mountain of Manyone Paths to beg a weapon from the Man With No Arms, who has made swords that can kill seasons, countries and even ideas. This novel as a book has a Medieval superstition where its sinister side is the left side which the story is placed. While on the right side lie some of sign icons, there are some illustrations, blank pages, mountains of thread that crumble and shift, abstract embroidered creations and vague impressions. All this contributes to the genre of this novel as a gothic one (Crispin 2); (Kelly 3).



The sign icons in this novel starts early with its publication stages. since its writer wants his readers to enhance e-books. Despite this involves a lots of barriers. Concerning the writer, this kind of production required more financial support, and concerning the reader, this novel can be read only on iPad. In addition, such kind of novels undergoes with marketing, due to different formats for the same novel and different platforms for presenting this text. But the matter is different with *The Fifty Year Sword* as it is stated by Lillian Sullam (a technical programmer who works together with the author to interweave and present *The Fifty Year Sword* as an e-book), “We didn’t want anything to feel

forced,... Because it's fiction, it needed to be integrated into the overall reading experience without pulling you out of it unnecessarily." So, this novel is an enhanced e-book which means mixing electronic version of the text with audio and video. *The Fifty Year Sword* is a mixture of digital format with extra accessories (Connor 7).

There are two editions of *The Fifty Year Sword*. The first is the deluxe limited edition, with Nepalese binding in a handsome box. And the second is a beautiful object in its own right.\* Pantheon—an imprint of the design-conscious publisher Alfred A. Knopf—demonstrated a similar commitment to craftsmanship with the enhanced e-book edition of *The Fifty Year Sword*, a key project in the division's strategic development plan and a category changer in the realm of digitized adult fiction (Connor 7).

Kim Connor talks about the sign icons in this novel in his article "The Ghost in the Machine"(2012). First, in this novel the reader is going to listen to a music of Christopher O'Riley (American classical pianist):

The enhanced e-book's spooky animated text teases out the movement that's latent in Danielewski's language on the printed page and emphasizes fragility, violence, and other emotional textures in the work. In a section that describes a place called "The Valley of Salt," smears of black slowly come into focus. The words are decipherable for only an instant before they retreat into oblivion. A few pages later, in "The Forest of Falling Notes," letters begin to drop from the page almost as quickly as you can read. These technical feats come across as deceptively simple. "You can read it in under an hour," Danielewski said. "But it also has a lot of rewards if you're willing to look more closely." The enhanced e-book's Easter eggs actively encourage close reading in a medium where readers rarely linger before swiping their fingers across the screen. " (Connor 7-8).

The publishing of this novel transfers through different stages. At the beginning it published as a printed book in English and in Dutch. Then, it is acted as a "live shadow show" once a year on Halloween night. At the end comes Pantheon's edition which includes "newly stitched illustrations and autumnal quotation marks"—these are the work of Atelier Z, a design group founded by Danielewski himself (Parker 3).

The clear sign icons in this novel appears in its typography or Colophon. There are "autumnal quotation marks", each one is with different color and each one represents to different narrator. In the title page, illustrations appear of these colorful quotation marks, they replace the writer's name, all this is to add more suspense to the text. The autumnal quotation functions more effectively as a decorative scheme imbuing each page with a splash of russet, eggplant, and lemon yellow than they function as an experimental device. This is to stitch different narratives into linear one (Parker 4).

Hal Parker in his review of this novel (2012) talks about the employment of Mallarmé-esque fashion:

Mr. Danielewski enjoys more success elsewhere. The text of the narrative, splayed by design across each page in a Mallarmé-esque fashion, intermingles with the stitched illustrations: the page is transformed from a mere container for text into a pictorial or graphical space in its own right. Furthermore, the very abundance of blank pages works to align the temporality of the narrative with that of its reading: the de facto “waits” of the blank pages give rise to a phenomenology of suspenseful reading. Finally, the blank pages, in their immaculate eggshell whiteness, often form a pleasant contrast with the riot of color facing them (Parker 5).

These signs act as a metaphor that reflects so many things like cosmic showdown between the seething, destructive energies of violence and the reparative, connective power of stitching, to memory, trauma, and revenge *The Fifty Year Sword's* interwoven drawings, which are typically more abstract than mimetic, are arguably its most intriguing feature. Like the terrible ganglia of some evil intelligence, they trespass upon the page. They even occasionally overpower the text itself, replacing it with several of multipage, vibrantly colored, enthusiastic graphical sequences. However, their sheer beauty could jeopardize the piece by putting the articulate richness of language in danger of becoming a silent object of art (Parker 6).

Through all this novel, there are a mixture between art and language, sometimes it serves the genre of this novel to create a horror atmosphere another time this mixture is exhilarating. Being the protagonist is a seamstress, so stitching is expected to appeared through the novels' pages. The art interrelates beautifully: a string cuts across two lines to make "the / weapons", then beneath, "he made were s / words". The names of the orphans themselves are sign icons. If the reader collects initial letter of each orphan the result is "times" or "smite", the terminal letters as "feats" or "fates"; the Greek Fates spun the lives of humans, with Atropos, the oldest of the Fates, cutting the thread – and Atropos means "without turn", so the opposite of "only revolutions" (Kelly 4).

The fact that *Fifty Year Sword* is going for a kind of Greek chorus, following the flow of storytelling, isn't an accident. *Fifty Year Sword* is a clear inheritor of that tradition, with sewing and thread decorating the page. Spacing and layout is as much a part of the story as the words themselves, as are the pictures told in thread and fabric. The work is interdisciplinary, a collage of mediums. So, the fundamental message of Danielewski's astonishing work is to be read as ghoulish campfire tale (Knode 4).

## Conclusion

According to this study, the meaning of the literary text or at least of Danielewski's writings is determined via three criteria; the writer, the reader and the formats of the text itself. Concerning the writer, he is the first who states the meaning of his text, either placing the meaning directly or commenting about it in a review or in interview, this is going to highlight the meaning. The reader on the other hand, can impose the meaning on any piece of literature and according to many factors such as the reader's previous readings experience, his social-psychological context, his age and gender ... etc.

The formats of the literary text have an important role in establishing the meaning, and Danielewski succeeds in giving it a lion share in his novels which is the focus of this study. In this regard, Danielewski melting the traditional conventions of the novel with new ones. He is similar to an immigrant who has no idea about the rules and traditions of the new land where he settled. Yet, he initiates his own rules and they are new and acceptable at the same time. In his writing, Danielewski is mixing images, music and words.

*Only Revolutions* is a real revolution towards everything (towards traditional conventions, modern deviation, and postmodern innovation). In this novel, the revolution in the format embodies major character's different reactions in different situations in the life of those characters as they grow up. So the formats are too much informative. By doing this, the application of experimental- digital strategies transforms a simple story to a complicated one. In the core the novel is just about love between a couple of teenagers. But with the reading process, the reader will be snatched away to other paths and he is directed or distracted towards the signiconic aspect in this novel. In *Only Revolutions* the reader is similar to a driver, he should turn the page as a steering wheel to get the message. Besides, the eye colour as an image on the page reflects major characters' awareness and consciousness. It embodies the major character's inner world and their ability to perceive and comprehend the external environment.

While in the second novel in this study (*Fifty Year Sword*), Danielewski manipulates the audio effect of the signicon. When the reader starts his reading journey, a music (a horror music) starts which indicates the genre of the story and covers the story with a gothic atmosphere. Moreover, in this novel, Danielewski employs the colour code more than before reflecting the major character's job in this novel as a Seamstress. So, colour codes for Danielewski and for Chintana are more informative and purposeful than other people, that is why this employment could be read as a clear signicon.

Finally, on a personal level, Danielewski's father is a musician and movie producer, his mother is an actress, and his sister is a musician too. Normally his writings are filled with signicons and the result is mixing what is visual with what is audio, his novels are a composition of writing (letters, numbers and symbols) with painting (colours and images) and music.

## Works Cited

Connor, Kim. "The Ghost in the Machine" *Slate*, Dec 03, 2012:33 AM., <file:///C:/Users/Al-Noor%20Center/Desktop/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s/the%20fifty/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s%20The%20Fifty%20Year%20Sword%20enhanced%20e-book%20will%20change%20Kindle%20and%20iPad%20reading..html>.

Crispin, Jessa. Interview. "A Conversation With Mark Z. Danielewski". *Kirkus Reviews*. 2012. <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/news-and-features/articles/conversation-mark-z-danielewski/>.

Hueffmeier, Tyler. "Is the Novel About to Evolve?: Danielewski's Redefinition of the Novel" *Medium* Dec 29, 2019, <https://medium.com/@tdjhue/is-the-novel-about-to-evolve-7911acc9e183>.

Kelly, Stuart. "The Fifty Year Sword by Mark Z Danielewski – review" *The Guardian*, Fri 9 May 2014, <file:///C:/Users/Al-Noor%20Center/Desktop/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s/the%20fifty/The%20Fifty%20Year%20Sword%20by%20Mark%20Z%20Danielewski%20%E2%80%93%20review%20%20Books%20%20The%20Guardian.html>.

Kleffel, Rick. "Only Revolutions by Mark Z. Danielewski" *The Agony Column*, 2006, [file:///C:/Users/Al-Noor%20Center/Desktop/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s/Only%20Revolutions%20\(2006\)/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%20Only%20Revolutions%20Reviewed%20by%20Rick%20Kleffel.html](file:///C:/Users/Al-Noor%20Center/Desktop/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s/Only%20Revolutions%20(2006)/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%20Only%20Revolutions%20Reviewed%20by%20Rick%20Kleffel.html).

Knode, Mordicai. "The Tricks of This Tale Work. Mark Z. Danielewski's Marvelous *The Fifty Year Sword*" *Reactor*, January 3, 2013, <file:///C:/Users/Al-Noor%20Center/Desktop/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s/the%20fifty/The%20Tricks%20of%20This%20Tale%20Work.%20Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski's%20Marvelous%20The%20Fifty%20Year%20Sword%20-%20Reactor.html>.

Kulkarni, Digambar S. and N. H. Kallur. "Simple Story, Complicated Plot: A Postmodernist Reading of Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions*" *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, Vol.9. Issue 4. 2021, <http://www.rjelal.com/9.4.21/250-253%20DIGAMBAR%20S.%20KULKARNI.pdf>.

Lytard, Jean-François. *Discourse, Figure*. Trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P. 2010.

Parker, Hal. "Review: Mark Z. Danielewski's 'The Fifty Year Sword'" *The American Reader*, 16 October 2012, <file:///C:/Users/Al-Noor%20Center/Desktop/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s/the%20fi>



[fty/Review%20Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s%20The%20Fifty%20Year%20Sword%20-%20The%20American%20Reader.html.](#)

Poole, Steven. "O how clever" *The Guardian*, Sat 30 Sep 2006, [file:///C:/Users/Al-Noor%20Center/Desktop/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s/Only%20Revolutions%20\(2006\)/O%20how%20clever%20-%20Books%20-%20The%20Guardian.html](file:///C:/Users/Al-Noor%20Center/Desktop/Mark%20Z.%20Danielewski%E2%80%99s/Only%20Revolutions%20(2006)/O%20how%20clever%20-%20Books%20-%20The%20Guardian.html).

Rich, Motoko. 'Digital Publishing is Scrambling the Industry's Rules.' *The New York Times*, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/05/books/05digi.html4>.

"The Fifty Year Sword Enhanced E-Book in Action" YouTube uploaded by Slate, 18 Jun 2018, <https://youtu.be/aYMuV9Oo34A>.

Wurth, Kiene Brillenburg, et al. "Visual Text and Media Divergence: Analogue literary writing in a digital age" *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2013>.

"zine." American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition. 2011. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company 6 Aug. 2024 <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/zine>.