

# An evening with Mark Z Danielewski

✘ BREAKING THE VESSEL – AN EVENING WITH MARK Z DANIELEWSKI

‘All writers are control freaks’

– or so says Mark Danielewski. He should know – last Hallowe’en he orchestrated a performance of his new novel *The 50 Year Sword*, with five actors not only reading the text but also completing one another’s sentences. Danielewski ‘musically stitched together their voices’, seeing himself as ‘Harry Potter in a different way’ and says that the read-through showed him just how the parts of the book fitted together.

On Monday, Danielewski was at Blackwell’s for the UK launch of this, his third novel. In conversation with Mark Buckland of publishers Cargo, Danielewski explained that each of his works is an attempt to ‘remediate’ a different subject. A previous book, *Only Revolutions*, looked at music, whilst his current work-in-progress will remediate the TV series. *The 50 Year Sword* takes as its subject the classic ghost story, the story told around the camp fire. Chintana, a Thai seamstress who is getting over a failed marriage comes across Belinda Kite – her husband’s mistress – at a party. She thinks of leaving but stays, and the consequences of her decision form the book’s story, one involving some orphans, a storyteller, and of course, a magic sword.

✘ Danielewski wants the book to be read straight through: with just a few words of text on each page, it should only take an hour. He thinks a great deal about how text will look on the page, and is much influenced by William Faulkner and Laurence Sterne, both of whom played with the colour and form of text. Danielewski sees himself as part of this experimental

tradition, and explores the effects on his characters of changing colours, fonts and even margins. For him, image and text become one, the shape and colour of a letter or word having as much influence as its meaning. He talks about 'breaking the vessel' (of traditional forms) to allow language and meaning to pour out. This can liberate meaning, freeing the words and allowing them to grow.

He sees language as 'oscillating on the page' – it is integral to our lives but also mystic, and he has come to realise that even language is small compared to the world around us, and only one of the tools we can apply to try to comprehend that world. One part of our minds processes text, another images, and for Danielewski the best way to understand the world is to look between the two. This, he says, leads to new experience.

☒ Danielewski is interested in the tradition of oral storytelling – one that is of course still strong in Scotland. Voices, he says, come together like ghosts within the speaker, so that sometimes a different story emerges. He seeks to show that different voices will tell different versions of the same story. We present ourselves as complete beings, but we are the product of many influences and experiences. The 50 Year Sword includes many images of a butterfly; these were sewn with thread onto paper, then scanned. The stitches were snipped out then re-sewn, to show how we cut our experiences apart and sew them together. We need to take things apart to create a new whole.

E-books initially appealed to Danielewski, allowing as they do the use of many colours and fonts, but he found that after initial enthusiasm, sales have flattened out – there is a resistance to them, a failure to deliver something that readers still get from a traditional book. He's also tried an animated version of The 50 Year Sword for i-Pad, but this has also had only limited success. The book is clearly here to stay, though Danielewski will continue to push the boundaries, to investigate its potential, and to explore that exhilarating

space between our senses.

The 50 Year Sword by Mark Danielewski is published by Cargo Publishing and available from Blackwell's, Edinburgh

Submitted by [Rosemary Kaye](#)

