



theMystery.doc

Matthew McIntosh

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Funny, highly inventive, and deeply moving, *theMystery.doc* is a vast, shapeshifting literary novel that reads like a page-turner. It's a comedy, a tragedy, a big book about America. It's unlike anything you've read before.

Rooted in the western United States in the decade post-9/11, the book follows a young writer and his wife as he attempts to write the follow-up to his first novel, searching for a form that will express the world as it has become, even as it continually shifts all around him. Pop-up ads, search results, web chats, snippets of conversation, lines of code, and film and television stills mix with alchemical manuscripts, classical works of literature—and the story of a man who wakes up one morning without any memory of who he is, his only clue a single blank document on his computer called themystery.doc. From text messages to *The Divine Comedy*, first love to artificial intelligence, the book explores what makes us human—the stories we tell, the memories we hold on to, the memories we lose—and the relationships that give our lives meaning.

Part love story, part memoir, part documentary, part existential whodunit, *theMystery.doc* is a modern epic about the quest to find something lasting in a world where everything—and everyone—is in danger of slipping away.

theMystery.doc Details

Date : Published October 3rd 2017 by Grove Press

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Author : Matthew McIntosh

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Genre : Fiction, Mystery, Did Not Finish

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From Reader Review theMystery.doc for online ebook

Eddie Watkins says

Time and Space. And Memory. What? Are they? *theMystery.doc*: a document from the future, written in the pure flux of the full and empty present detailing the gap in time between conception and realization, which opens gaps here gaps there, and so on down the rabbit hole of the mystery of existence to a perennial awareness of the NOW, the present, the Castle, in an ever-expanding Space that includes all Time (I am Here! Where?), neither of which is what we think it is (so stop thinking! no don't! keep thinking through the emptiness... keep FEELING through the emptiness...). Dear Memories, who was I? Dear Book., who am I?

The book itself, and the reading of it, is as close an embodiment of this experience as possible (and willing to die trying (Saint!)); both melded into an experiential body, held in the hands, moving, via the eye the mind the heart, through the mysteries of Time and Space and Memory. Reading IS Experience.

Where was I? Where AM I? I am in the Castle, the heart of the mystery, falling, still Reading, and I (We) sill have a chance to survive the Fall...

Franco Santos says

Me gusta pensar el arte como la intervención de un vacío. Y en *theMystery.doc*, McIntosh interviene el vacío con un espejo. ¿A qué me refiero con esto? Con esto quiero decir que este libro reúne entre sus páginas una porción de lo que significa como seres humanos vivir el día a día en tiempos actuales. Publicidades, fotografías, chats, llamadas telefónicas, conversaciones mutiladas, indescifrables, extractos de Wikipedia y demás sitios de interés, tomas de películas y, entre todo este ruido, un hombre que se despierta una mañana sin recordar quién es, con su memoria completamente borrada de su mente.

Creo que no hace falta decir que *theMystery.doc* es de lo más extraño que he leído en mi vida. El libro tiene casi 1700 páginas pero se lee como uno de 400. La literatura experimental siempre me ha gustado, y creo que es bueno que se busquen diferentes formas de llegar al lector y de 'intervenir el vacío'. Sin embargo, siento que todo lo que este libro tiene para decir (la imposibilidad de conectar con otra persona, los abismos que existen entre nosotros, el constante bombardeo de información —mucha de ella publicitaria— contra nuestros hábitos cotidianos, etcétera) lo dice a través de su estructura y no a través de su contenido. No pude lograr una relación emocional o intelectual con *theMystery.doc*. Nada de lo que pudo decirme ha logrado conmoverme. El arte a través de una estructura es casi siempre innovador pero no siempre profundo.

Sin embargo, que no se me confunda: el libro lo considero bueno, y valoro mucho esta nueva forma de literatura, pero siento que no pasa lo suficiente de un intento desesperado de ser original sin tener mucho que decir. Además, hace un uso exagerado de la autorreferencia. Se nota claramente la tentativa de McIntosh de mostrarnos a nosotros, como una carta rota desde el presente, que detrás de la soledad del individuo hay vida. No obstante, el libro falla en el desarrollo del mensaje. *theMystery.doc* se redime con su significado pero cae muerto ante su falta de sustancia.

Lee says

The novel-est novel I've read in a while. Its formal fragmentation seemed to mirror the formal fragmentation

of life so often spent looking at phones, switching between apps, unexpected text-message incursions of images from friends or concerns from Mom, and then you look up and see something and fall into a dream before returning to a memory of being on the phone with tech support at work while reading an article about the inevitable end of the world or scrolling through endless tweets of doom. Formally, the quick, addictive, effortless, aerated movement through the box-like book (when it arrived at my office I wondered what it could be, what had I ordered that was so damn heavy?) becomes at best a sort of flip book, a shifting foundation for readerly associations. Readers who come to this with their Associative Intelligence (holy ghost in the sacred trinity of Emotional Intelligence and old-fashioned IQ) revved up as though reading a poem or watching an abstract film will be more than pleased since the novel presents a system of associations. There are pages throughout or sometimes only paragraphs of asterisks and colons that shift in significance from stars after being knocked out to digital code to radiation to a sense of oblivion after learning crushing news of a loved one's death to snow etc. My reading experience was novel, too, in that I read maybe half of this 1600+ page book in print on my phone thanks to the free download that comes with the book if you go to the book's site and enter a keyword related to sacrifice found in a footnote on a certain page. The ebook had 13K+ "locations" and the format isn't quite the same as in the print book, but when I read the ebook I sensed the physical print book somehow in my palm, invisible, extending down through my hand and to the floor of the subway or the concrete of the sidewalk below as I walked to work -- more fragmentation, more of a sense of verticality, an unseen tower of text like the fallen World Trade Center towers. The overall sense, the single lingering impression, is internal collapse, implosion, the way the Twin Towers fell straight down with their innards burned out instead of tipping over, a sort of anguish like that, straight down inside instead of falling over. For all the fragmentation and formal unconventionality, the effect toward the end, ultimately, is overwhelmingly emotional. On the ebook, soon after the author's father with cancer dies and then a premature infant dies, there are images of her burial and then old stills from a film of a woman in white diving into an open grave, and then single rows of asterisks and colons, with slight variations, across what felt like hundreds of ebook swipes to the right (like a very literary dating app on which books try to hook up with their ideal readers), creating a progression of downward flushing typography over a few minutes as I leaned against the subway doors on the way to my kid's daycare on a dark early November day a year and a day after Trump's election -- the effect approached catharsis when finally there appeared an image of a barn door cracked open letting in light. Funny that the first word of the summary is "funny," since I didn't really LOL once, although there was some humor, particularly with the website-greeter transcripts that may or may not have been human and/or based in Pakistan. Generally, though, "funny" doesn't really describe this and seems a semi-disservice in the official summary. I would also like to point out that this is another example of a writer who received an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop who doesn't write so-called Iowa Fiction. Not everyone who went there apes Yates and Cheever. Ahem. Anyway, I liked the meta-fictional and autobiographical/memoirish bits, but not as much as the urgent, excruciating emergency call transcript of the woman on the smoke-filled 86th floor of the WTC on 9/11, with pages of [deleted] and one stranger calling out to another interspersed with prayers and curses. Also loved the bit about the couple who drowned, the woman lost somewhere between the surface and the floor, like the cover image. It's not really a 1600-page book -- it's nowhere near as dense as the merely 1492-page *Joseph and His Brothers*, the longest book I'd previously read. The estimated overall word count probably doesn't exceed 100K, my guess. But none of that really matters when you're reading on your phone, swiping along, engaged, associative intelligence doing some light pleasurable lifting, even scrolling through Instagram and refreshing Twitter, feeling like what you see on the socials is intended to be part of it too (the best art charges perception so everything seen seems like art too), before returning to the proper massive print book to read 100+ pages in less than an hour in bed at home, coming away with a soulful sense of loss and anguish but also hope, presented in an almost sentimental, innocuous, non-fascist #MAGA way, although it seems initially composed during the comparatively rosy GWB years (the oughts). Read it during the major pre-taper weeks of marathon training and its length synched with the slow and somehow feasible 20-mile training runs. It also made me want to write, generally, and read a few more of the longer major novels I've so far missed (the highest accolade in a way). Anyway, highly recommended to readers who like to make connections and realize from the start that the solution to literary mystery is always mystery itself (a less potentially schmaltzy way of saying "the soul" or *geist* as the Germans say). Seekers of plot and

stubborn lovers of conventional narrative should still probably take a chance on this if only to flex and develop their atrophied muscles of associative intelligence.

An interesting interview with Michael Silverblatt about Quixote, the Bhagavad Gita, salvation through literature, and the book's reception:

<https://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/sho...>

Christopher says

My apologies to readers on here that I greatly respect, some of whom have written glowing reviews of this. You know who you are. I wanted to like this. It just didn't move me. And the prose, which often reads the way unremarkable people talk and type—there are tons of purposeful typos—is the culprit.

Now, to the positive: I certainly recognize that what's going on with form is impressively constructed and mostly new. You feel like you're scrolling through a typical day in some ways. The emergent effect of the collage technique is a multiplicity of voices and experiences collapsing into one. You end up reading super fast (which is by design) and that enables an associative reading experience, as opposed to a linear one, where, I'm assuming, the force of the book is supposed to come from.

But I couldn't help feeling that all the redacted material and walls of asterisks and colons were just gimmicky. The pictures made me want to read Sebald. The self-reference of a writer writing the book he's currently writing. Ok. Fine.

With the view of the history of being in mind, the contemporary moment is a massive shift: more lived time than ever before is spent staring at screens. The technological mode of being is frightening and alienating. This should be captured. McIntosh does this, I guess.

Which reminds me that I need to stop writing this review on my phone and start another stack of wood pulp and ink.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

"Hello...hello...hello...two sides to every story..." (PiL)

WATER ABOVE

How to Throw a Vision Board Party

Matthew McIntosh yearns *"to write mankind's next immortal masterpiece. The next 'Divine Comedy' or 'Aeneid' or 'Moby-Dick' or 'Thousand and One Nights.' "*

And he almost succeeds...This 1,666 page novel tops everything written by William T. Vollmann, William H. Gass, Jim Gauer and Joseph McElroy in the last two centuries.

And *"it's like reading a 300-page book."* (Steven Moore)

A Few Words on Masterpieces from Vladimir Nabokov

"That, for instance, [certain books] can be considered "masterpieces" or at least what journalists term "great books," is to me the [same] sort of absurd delusion as when a hypnotized person makes love to a chair."

Ambitious But Rubbish

Fans of white male North American post-modernism are content with both too little experimentalism and too much (view spoiler)

.

Apparently, Matthew McIntosh's publisher dared him to write a book this long in the hope that Steven Moore would review it in the Washington Post.

It also guaranteed that I would have to review it as a corrective service to the innocent!

The McDonaldization of White Male American Post-Modernism

Would you like fries with that? Why not? Upsize me all you like! I can take it. And while you're at it, I want a row of big fat books for the shelves in my McMansion:

"In suburban communities, McMansion is a pejorative term for a large 'mass-produced' dwelling, constructed with low-quality materials and craftsmanship, using a mishmash of architectural symbols to invoke connotations of wealth or taste, executed via poorly thought-out exterior and interior design."
(Wikipedia)

The Tallest Building in the World Syndrome

In response to critical demand, the *"is long, is good"* school of literature is currently engaged in a struggle to the death over the writing and publication of the longest English language novel in the world.

As futile as this quest is, I personally think there should be a level playing field, or at least some guidance about what constitutes a page for the purposes of the count.

The quest parallels the edifice complex that resulted in disputes over the tallest building in the world.

In 1969, the Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat was formed to announce the title of "The World's Tallest Building" and set the standards by which buildings are measured.

In 1996, the Council had to resolve a dispute between the Petronas Towers and the Sears Tower.

According to Wikipedia, in 1996, the council decided to list and rank buildings in four categories:

- * height to structural or architectural top;
- * height to floor of highest occupied floor;
- * height to top of roof (removed as category in November 2009); and
- * height to top of any part of the building.

Until then, the world's tallest building was defined by the height to the top of the tallest architectural element, including spires but not antennae.

Antenna Gain

This issue is relevant to the claims on behalf of *"theMystery.doc"*, because, in effect, it's a building which seeks to have its antenna considered.

What does this mean? Well, the question is whether blank pages should be considered in the page count. The novel contains numerous blank pages, including not ten, not a dozen, but 26 in a row (not to mention pages of asterisks) (presumably sophisticated metaphors for the nothingness or blandness of contemporary life, or digital life (as it is *"lived"* by its readers: *"Zero lines, zero words. Zero characters. Zero zero zero"*). Are 26 blank pages in a row just like sticking an antenna on a building that might not otherwise meet the size (height or length) requirement?

The Banality of the Quotidian

Of course, as has been pointed out by Paul Bryant in his superlative review of the novel, blank pages make for a rapid and pleasurable reading experience, especially when the alternative might have been tedious post-modern prose. So, ironically, Matthew McIntosh is seeking to have his cake and eat it too.

This antenna problem has been around literally since (at least) Joseph McElroy's massive, 1192 page long *"Women and Men"*. The author adds to this quasi-realistic tale about the relationships between women and men totally spurious, almost sci-fi interludes about radio signals or some other unmemorable hi-tech or alien shit that I've dutifully forgotten, but seems to appeal to fans of Heideggerian *"enframing"* and the concealment of truth (of which Heidegger was the avowed master). I can't be bothered counting for the purposes of this treatise, but let's say that McElroy's book might have been reduced to 700 pages if this excess had been omitted (and an essay devoted to its subject matter for research and self-abuse purposes).

So where does that leave the abundance of nothingness in *"theMystery.doc"*. Are the 26 blank pages just filler or, more precisely, emptier?

Leave the Reader Wanting Moore

When all is said and done at enormous length (if not height), deep down within this 1,666 page brick, there is a modest 300 page novel yearning to escape and make its way into (and within) the real world of literature.

I guess that means it's not such a tall building after all.

Delete Alt Control

A man walks into a room...full of fat books...

In late capitalism, everything that is fluid turns to stone or ossifies into excessivism.

Some pseudo-academic will make a career out of orchestrating the reception of this .doc:

Official: the next FAT hyped brick.

Defy convention...Try to read it in under two days. Paul did it in three. The challenge is on!

"To justify its existence," Charles Baudelaire said of criticism, it "should be partial, impassioned, and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view that opens up the widest horizons."

To defend charges of derivatism, clear your browsing history, back up and back off.

Forget amnesia. Do the unexpected. Forge the author's signature. Erase the entire document. Take a photo. Place the photo on your shelf. Tell your friends about it.

Insert Devastating Filler Below

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"It Was One of Those Plots Where You Wake Up and You Don't Know Who You Are."

"Or you think you're somewhere other than [where - sic] you are."

"The universe is a big puzzle and needs to be put back together again."

"Don't try to analyse it...just report it."

"It's Going to Be the Biggest Thing in the World." (p. 731)

"When the euphoria wore off, I felt I was missing something important. As if a joke had been told and the punchline not delivered, or a message had come for me in a language I did not understand. (p. 156)"

"Once You Called It a Post-Post-Neo-Modern Mystery Story"

"But I don't know if you were just feeding me more Corky."

"Perception of Reality, His Fantasy is Far from TRUTH" (p. 883)

"headache gets worse as the book progresses" (p. 883)

"Is There Something Wrong?"

"I promise you I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

What Would a Girl Like That Be Doing with a Book Like This?

"I suppose it really takes all kinds."

"That Was Finally Interesting!" (p. 1032)

"Much more so than my everyday non-quantum life, which I found crammed to the gills with gravity, guilt, and sorrow." (p. 1032)

Michele: Do You Have a Website?

Doesn't everyone?

<http://themysterybook.com/#about>

"There is no The Mystery! There's no book!"

#NoMoreMoore

WATER BELOW

SOUNDTRACK:

(view spoiler)

WATER FLOWING UNDERGROUND
SAME AS IT EVER WAS

Aiden Heavilin says

Hey kids! It's a CONNECT THE DOTS puzzle!

Matthew McIntosh's "theMystery.doc" is an astounding tour-de-force. Its goal is nothing less than to catalog, diagnose, and explore the fragmented chaos of modern life, and, with scraps of emails, chat logs, and family photos, do for the 21st century what "The Recognitions" did for the 20th: examine authenticity and anonymity, and moreover lay the cornerstone to what might become an entirely new genre. Just as Gaddis anticipated Pynchon and Wallace and DeLillo, so McIntosh may be remembered as the founder of the 21st century novel. (Don't take my word for it though, prophecy is a dangerous business). The critical reaction to this novel is an eerie twin of the reaction that greeted Gaddis's juggernaut: disappointment, confusion, accusations of self-indulgence... and a few who think they have found something new and original.

I don't mean to be pretentious. Those who dislike McIntosh's novel aren't wrong any more than any opinion can be wrong. However, I do think this novel is, like it or not, doing something that has never been done before. I think this is the first book I have read that really manages to deal with and examine the Internet in a natural manner. There's a certain feeling of pandering when most novels address the internet. Amongst the prose style that has served as standard for hundreds of years, intrusions of text messages and hyperlinks seem like the stiff, awkward spectacle of grandparents trying to act hip on social media. I don't know if traditional novels are capable of examining the internet. Traditional novels with their linear control of information, plots rising piece by piece in orderly fashion, do not capture the chaotic, fragmented world in which the Internet is situated. In order to deal with the Internet, McIntosh has to invent a new structure, a new form. Which of course he does with flying colors.

The best way to view "theMystery.doc" (aside from the metaphor McIntosh gives us: a castle), is to connect the dots, challenge, or maybe even the Rorschach Blot. McIntosh gives us fixed points: characters, events, ideas, meditations, photos. He leaves the task of connecting them to us. In a way, "theMystery.doc" might be viewed as a practice exercise -- or microcosm -- of modern life and the challenges it presents. As postmodern authors like Pynchon so deftly demonstrate, life today is composed of a dozen different worlds that we plunge in and out of, constantly: in addition to the drama-romance-suspense-action story of our lives, we move in and out of the worlds of complicated TV-shows whose cast and myriad subplots we have to memorize for discussion over the cafeteria with coworkers, required reading for school, we haven't even mentioned the biggie: social media and the Internet. One could be juggling a dozen worlds in their smartphone: the Twitter lynchmob, the perpetual Instagram beauty pageant, the Tumblr court of political correctness, the Facebook hive of endless chatter, etc. We cycle through possibly *dozens* of different worlds, each with their rules, their casts, their hidden codes. "theMystery.doc" dramatizes this by doing the same thing. McIntosh blasts us with movie stills, family photos, forgotten e-mails, redacted texts, multiple timelines, chat logs (more on those later), graphs, metafiction, meta-meta-fiction, threads and more threads, subplots built in subplots. I feel as though he took 10 novels, a book of poetry, a photograph selection, and the transcripts of every online interaction he'd had in the past 14 years, blew them up with a bazooka, then pieced together the fragments into this wild laboratory experiment.

And it works.

So far I've just discussed form: it's time to move to the content of the novel. My goodness, if you thought the form was good, you ain't seen nothin' yet...

My favorite part of the novel were the hilarious, dramatic, suspenseful and sad chat logs from WebsiteGreeter, a site offering to connect customers to experts in any field they want. McIntosh perfectly captures the bizarre dynamic of strained professionalism battling against a desire for friendship. For some reason, this tenuous connection to an unnamed person somewhere around the globe always has a strange emotional tinge to it, at least for me. These sections are absolutely hilarious at times, as the customer pokes and prods to discover if the agent is who he/she claims to be. All sorts of fun to be had.

I haven't mentioned the photographs yet. They are excellent, and when McIntosh occasionally contrasts raw

family photos to slick hollywood movie stills, the effects are devastating. One sequence, integrating stills from a silver-screen romantic dance with real photographs of an almost immobile elderly couple in a bright classroom, swaying to the music, was almost unbearably emotional. When McIntosh brings the emotion, its a walloping kick to the gut: but it always requires reader participation. He wants you to think, he wants to participate with you.

Whereas Gaddis wanted you to track down allusions as part of his "collaboration" with the reader, McIntosh wants you to be a detective. He invites you to solve THE MYSTERY: the mystery of how everything fits together. How do chat logs and meditations on science and stories about snails and baby talk and gunfights *fit*? Is there an Omega Point?

(Oh, I almost forgot to mention, this has all the regular stuff you guys want from novels as well. There's good writing. There's interesting characters. There's a plot, occasionally.)

McIntosh uses contrast to further his world. He's unafraid to cut from banal e-mails to transcripts from 9/11. He'll lull you for a period of time, then jolt you back awake, order you to pay attention. These scraps of dialogue and fragments of e-mails and text messages aren't filler, he says. We must *pay attention to all of them*. They could all be important.

Which is, by the way, the truth, not just a fun idea. Every message you receive, on Facebook, on goodreads, anywhere: could be critical. We must pay attention.

"theMystery.doc" might be long, it might be chock full of information, but it is incomplete. It almost feels too short. Maybe this is a fact of long novels. A short novel can provide an encompassing overview/summary of something, but a long novel must, having exhausted the summary, delve into the details, and in nearly every subject, the details are infinite. McIntosh's fragments are judged carefully to spur thought, to suggest more than they show. (When the details start to get overwhelming, don't worry, he'll probably redact them anyway).

Gaddis, Pynchon, and the rest of the gang pioneered the literature of exhaustion in the 20th century. Baroque literature that sought to find and catalog every possibility.

McIntosh is pioneering the literature of suggestion.

Nick says

oh tight its only 1660 pgs

Nancy says

Matthew McIntosh's novel theMystery.doc is not for every reader. It is unconventional and on the surface without form. But in the end, I found the experience strangely moving and haunting.

Writers today are pushing the limits of the Novel form, as they were a century ago with James Joyce and The Wasteland by T. S. Eliot. More recently, non-traditional, award-winning novels like Lincoln in the Bardo by George Saunders and The Luminaries by Eleanor Catton are often confusing or off-putting to the general reader.

I was caught by theMystery.doc, enjoying its crazy ride and trusting it would offer me something to grasp onto at the end.

In a series of story clips, we learn about the death of a father who was a pastor, and that of a newborn child. There is a man who has lost his memory, a writer with an unfinished book of eleven years toil, who is captured as a spy. There is a man trying to determine if a customer service helper on the phone is human or computer generated. There is a young couple at a lake. There are photograph clips from old movies. A phone discussion with someone trapped in a burning building on 9-11. The impressions build upon each other.

What I got out of the novel is this: The artist is a spy, observing other's lives, and turning what he sees into words, making symbols that--hopefully-- say something useful about life. The biggest mystery is death and if our lives have any meaning or are part of any higher order.

Kindle told me it would take me 9 hours to read this book, but there are so many photos, lines without words, and dead space that it the book read a lot faster.

I received a free book from the publisher through a direct email.

MJ Nicholls says

In his review, Steve Moore calls this stunning novel a “gigantic art installation”, which is the most accurate summation imaginable. You walk around this epic production with the turn of each page, pausing to reflect on the movie stills, home photographs, and puzzle the short fragments of text in their carefully honed typographical configurations. The novel is comfortable taking up room, wasting oodles of verso pages, creating mini-flipbook scenes from 1930s RKOs, and splashing its large-fonted text across the capacious white spaces, often consisting of one or two words per side. The titular ‘mystery’ is the book itself, with its recurring fragments including IM chats with a Website Greeter service, recordings with the author’s father (whose passing forms an emotional kernel of the book), and a plot of sorts featuring an amnesiac author struggling to dispose of a neighbour’s cat. The novel attempts to wed the personal (father’s passing) with the tumult of modern America (transcripts from 9/11 callers are the most harrowing inclusion here, as are the stills of the falling Twin Towers), and McIntosh’s cracked mosaic form allows for these two parallel tragedies to occupy the same space. The longer prose sections are perhaps the weakest—McIntosh triumphs more with his short lyrical fragments—although the rhythm of his sentences makes up for their unremarkable style. The intricacies of this novel are enormous, and *themystery.doc* should attain a fierce cult following for years to come.

Nate D says

It's an unusual book of which it may be said: "there were several two-or-three-hundred-page stretches that were great, but much of it didn't really work that well for me." I admire the ambition, the scope, the vision. I enjoyed the form and formatting, the way words and images moved on the page. I loved several stretches: Kansas is astounding, My Robot (Rebuilt) very good, each an effective act of interwoven polyphonic narrative, wherein the meaning that arises is more than the sum of its strands. This, I gather, was the goal of the work as a whole, of this maximal form. But much, sadly, to me, falls aside as mere generative technique: transcript, spurious narrative, pages of film stills or redactions that seem intended to create mood or pacing, and often do, but otherwise seem to point to nothing beyond the spaces they occupy. This ambitious novel of vast scope is intermittently impressive, but lacks, I fear, quite the touch needed to pull it all together into

something which would fully earn the shape it strives to fill. But the shape it strives to fill is immeasurable, filling even part of it makes for something worth a look. As one of the naysayers of this one, even if my rating really does denote "I Liked It", I should specify that this is not a difficult or impervious work. Rather it is open, enjoyable, readable, and the pages flip rapidly even where filled with text and not supporting apparatus. If it sounds like it would intrigue you, it probably will. It just leaves open much space still to be filled by other formal/conceptual innovators to follow.

Paul Bryant says

One of the good things about this monster novel is that you can read a 1660 page book in three days and really impress your impressionable friends. The more sceptical amongst them will flip through your copy and say Hey, wait a minute, half of this book is either blank pages or photographs or pages filled up with

for no damned apparent reason. (I really could never figure out why every so often Matthew McIntosh felt the need for five pages of asterisks. And the effect of printing many pages with all the text blacked out like this

is just to aggravate the reader. This reader anyhow.) Your sceptical friend will be quite correct to point out (haughtily) that what with all of that going on, this is really a 300 page book that's bigging itself up like a postmodern literary pufferfish.

What you get in *TheMystery.doc* is a collage of what appears to be mostly autobiographical material – a lot about the death of his father, a lot about a premature baby, and an OUTRAGEOUS lot of what seem to be transcribed real conversations all of which are of the vapid banal type filled with uh uhs and likes and very – very - little wit.

No this is fine...and uh – but this was, not inland, but on the coast – on th coast. And, uh, that whole area now is called La Costa Azul. The Blue Coast. And it's all full of tourist – tourism. We had gone for a looksee... driving around... and there was a uh.. it was a rock, that lay less than half a mile off the coast...Uh and she says, you know if I, if I I I had the ability, she says, I'd put steps, leadin' up to the top... and back. Oh, and I need some tissues... and thank you.

Then, you get the only teeny bit of narrative thread in the whole 1660 pages which is where the author Matthew McIntosh (or is he??) wakes up one morning with TOTAL AMNESIA and then tries to figure out who he is (can it be possible you have come across this idea before in a previous novel or film? It's possible.) This tiresome idea pops up here and there but never gets anywhere, because this is a giant book the point of which is that NOTHING ever gets ANYWHERE, all of human life is kind of vaguely pointless with agonising bits shoved in at random.

(The author quotes transcripts of phone calls from the twin towers on 9/11 here and there. This was a low point for me, I do not think this novel earns the right to use such wrenching material.)

What is good about *theMystery.doc*? Well, rattling through the pages at colossal speed is quite pleasant. It gives you an almost giddy feeling like that of a young horse galloping about in a field in the springtime of the year. Cloppety clop, clippety clop. It's all slightly interesting – you never know what the next page will be filled with – asterisks? (Yummy!) or a photo of the young Elizabeth Taylor from *A Place the Sun* (lovely!) or a fuzzy pic of a snail on a china saint (weird!).

But come on, QUITE PLEASANT and SLIGHTLY INTERESTING for 1660 PAGES? I think each and every one of you could have put together a better book than this one in **nine months** (Mr McIntosh famously took 11 years over this one). You would just need to exhume all your family photos, and your old diaries and emails, interview your family about any dramatic incidents, deaths, accidents, bereavements, transcribe all the tapes, throw in scattershot quotes from some romantic poets or any top calibre literary stuff, grab some screenshots from some obscure silent movies from google images and you're ALL SET.

This kind of novel-as-collage, as far as I know, was originated by John Dos Passos in his USA trilogy in 1930-36. So it's not a new idea. 25 consecutive blank pages and 5 pages of nothing but asterisks is, however, original to Mr McIntosh, as far as I know.

Just to put the boot in a little bit more, Mark Danielewski's design and typographical madness in *House of Leaves* and *The Familiar* knock the spots off *theMystery.doc* and you can make this comparison in any decent bookshop, lay them side by side. (I'm gonna get *The Familiar* vol 4 soon, just for the sheer beauty of the effervescent pages.)

At many times during the 11 years it took, Matthew McIntosh agonised over what the hell this massive book was all about, and he includes some of his musings, very helpful. Someone is talking to the author:

We've heard that ...You don't talk to your agent or publisher or anyone who knew you, and that you dropped out of society and ran off to the boonies to write mankind's next immortal masterpiece. The next Divine Comedy or Moby-Dick. (p711)

And later

I know you're working on some big book. Some big story that's gonna make sense of life and why we're here and answer all the mysteries of the universe.

This resulting almost-but-not-quite-complete turkey is, then, an elaborate sigh of disappointment. It's a chess player overturning the pieces on finding the problem to be too difficult. I don't blame the author for not being able to write a big book that would make sense of life. It was slightly interesting and vaguely pleasant to see his failure spread out so sumptuously before me.

2.5 stars.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Worth every single one of its 1664 pages. If you want to know what fiction can do and what fiction does in 2017 this is absolutely required reading. It doesn't matter if you read 1664 pages in two days or two months or whether you have to read it a dozen times, this is the kind of ballsy brutal human fiction the post-postmodernists and the new sincerities and the new sentimentalists all want. And in truth it is hysterical--in both Woods' and Freuds' sense....

What it's like to be a fucking human being.

Mark William says

Hmm... Not sure about this one. Smashed through it in two days. Enjoyable. Not frustrating. Evocative. All sorts of stuff laps over your mind and clearly aims to strike at a deeply emotional level.

I have no complaints whatsoever about the size or style of this book, which has inevitably consumed much prior discussion... I won't get into such things here.

The content raised a few questions for me.

Clear, pervasive theme of loss, at personal, historical, environmental and cultural levels. Painful, moving and compelling.

Question: Has anyone worked out if the content is autobiographical, factual or fictional? This question actually forms a specific dialogue in the book, which raises its complexity but I still think it would be good to know. (Or is it? Maybe I'm missing a more sophisticated point...)

Important because a lot of the content is extremely personal and harrowing and I wonder about the ethics of its inclusion if it's real, particularly the transcript of the 9/11 911 call.

I don't mind being moved but being moved in this way (if it's real) I feel is a bit cheap or easy or lazy or a whole bunch of other uncomfortable things... (Maybe this is it's point, which again, I might be missing)

Is this book entirely sincere or is there irony? In particular regarding the religious themes. I'm not religious so these parts lacked any resonance for me. Additionally, the dialogue which discusses America's greatness... Sincere or ironic? For a non-American, this is a bit too much (if it's sincere)...

It would be good to have the meaning of the Pop cult fleshed out a bit. Haven't seen too much discussion about that. The presence of a violent paranoid cult seems like an important and deliberate counter to the seemingly excessive religious and patriotic sentiment. And thus, perhaps undermines its apparent sincerity...

Hmm...

Chris Via says

Check out my review in this edition of *Rain Taxi Review of Books*: Volume 23, Number 2, Summer 2018 (#90).

Person113 says

A Big Book About America

They all want to write one. McIntosh wrote one. And he made sure it was something different. Much different

A Comedy

Don't be afraid to laugh along the ride this big bookish blessing takes us on. There is humor everywhere. Some of it is dark, some is quirky...there are witty exchanges and awkward encounters and descriptions of events and characters and places that are so damn absurd the only appropriate response is some mighty roar or mild hum of amusement.

A Tragedy

Almost every few pages you'll come across a passage or a picture that communicates to me some sort of "existentialist dread." Think and feel...and the tragedy will straighten you up and knock you down. I cried at the end of this book and I had good reason to. Some of the tragedy is found in the oddest of unresolved fictional situations, some of it is found in real life incidents such as, most infamously and prominently, the September 11th attacks.

A Masterpiece

What is this book about?

It's about Matthew McIntosh and post-9/11 America and innocence and distrust and technology and amnesia and romance and sex and true unbreakable love, but most most importantly it is about life and the way it flows and moves and bounces up, down, all around. It is about holding a baby in your arms and feeling the bony trembling fingers of your dying grampa all at once. It takes place over centuries, perhaps even millenniums to some strange extent. But it also may take place all in one day. It is the story of tons of characters, some who are totally disconnected from everyone else while also being connected to all who surround them, but it is also the story of one character. Who is that character? He, she, it, they may be you or me or her or he or McIntosh himself...
