The Amazing Design Experience of JJ Abrams' "S."

By Zachary Petit | December 16, 2013

At first, the quote at the top of the press release for the book S. might seem a little too good to be true. However, it's actually the exact quote from J.J. Abrams himself. A little misleading, I suppose.

It's as if Abrams had been reading my mind, as I've been writing about this book for the past few weeks. I'm amazed it was even possible to get him to sign off on this project at all—J.J. Abrams! Blacks out aren't even rare anymore, so getting his name is a bigger deal than getting a book deal from your local coffee shop. I think he was just bored one day.

It really is a great book, and if you haven't read it yet, you should. It's not just about the mystery and the story, but the design and the packaging as well. Abrams has always seemed to be more of a visual storyteller than a writer, and this book is no different. He's done a fantastic job of creating a world that you can inhabit, even if you're not a fan of the story itself.

The book itself is a work of art. The pages are thick and heavy, the paper is high quality, and the images are stunning. The design is all about creating a sense of mystery and intrigue, and Abrams has done that perfectly. The text is also beautifully formatted, with different fonts and sizes used to create a sense of movement and excitement.

But the real magic happens when you open the book. There are secret compartments, hidden messages, and even a decoder wheel. It's like you're sitting in the audience at the movie theater, watching the movie, but now you're in control. You get to decide what happens next.

And then, of course, there's the Hondoraisin margin notes, which can easily be misinterpreted as handwriting. As PaperSpecs documented, the authors sent the manuscript over to Melcher Media as a Word file, with the Thursday's text and margin notes concurrently. As it turns out, that's the point.

Abrams came up with the idea for S. when he found an abandoned novel at the airport. It had a note inside informing the reader that the book was not to be opened. The idea was to create a sense of mystery and intrigue, and it worked perfectly. The book is filled with library stamps, the pages are aged and each uniquely smell correct. The fact that there's no instruction manual seems to likely become a part of it all as the third reader. Everything becomes a reading experience within a reading experience (which the slipcase packaging brilliantly emulates).

The plot might be summarized this way: the main character, Theseus, is a student who's shanghaied into a sea adventure. Meanwhile, the margin notes reveal a conversation between two students passing the book back and forth, while the book itself is a page of a campus newspaper, hastily folded. Postcards of heavy, appropriate stock. Glossy photographs. A greeting card holding an aging die-cut newspaper clipping that convincingly mimics a scissor cut. A coffeehouse napkin with a map on it. A decoder wheel.

S. is unlike anything you've ever seen. And it is indeed amazing. It seems like a cheap trick—until you hold a copy of S. in your hands. You can feel the weight of it, the texture of the pages, the smell of the ink. It really is unlike anything you've ever seen. And it is indeed amazing.
About Zachary Petit
Zachary Petit (@zacharypetit on Twitter) is a freelance journalist, the editor-in-chief of Design Matters Media, and the former editor-in-chief of PRINT.


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Alongside the thousands of articles he has penned as a staff writer and editor, his words have appeared in National Geographic magazine, National Geographic Kids, Melissa Rossi’s What Every American Should Know book series, McSweeney’s Internet Tendency and many other outlets.

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