

Spoiler Alert: Stories Are Not Spoiled by ‘Spoilers’

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Many of us go to extraordinary lengths to avoid learning the endings of stories we have yet to read or see – plugging our ears, for example, and loudly repeating “la-la-la-la,” when discussion threatens to reveal the outcome. Of book and movie critics, we demand they not give away any plot twists or, at least, oblige with a clearly labeled “spoiler alert.” We get angry with friends who slip up and spill a fictional secret.

But we’re wrong and wasting our time, suggests a new experimental study from the University of California, San Diego. People who flip to the last page of a book before starting it have the better intuition. Spoilers don’t spoil stories. Contrary to popular wisdom, they actually seem to enhance enjoyment.

Even ironic-twist and mystery stories – which you’d be forgiven for assuming absolutely depend on suspense or surprise for success – aren’t spoiled by spoilers, according to a study by Nicholas Christenfeld and Jonathan Leavitt of UC San Diego’s psychology department, to be published in a forthcoming issue of [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Christenfeld and Leavitt ran three experiments with a total of 12 short stories. Three types of stories were studied: ironic-twist, mystery and literary. Each story – classics by the likes of John Updike, Roald Dahl, Anton Chekhov, Agatha Christie and Raymond Carver – was presented as-is (without a spoiler), with a prefatory spoiler paragraph or with that same paragraph incorporated into the story as though it were a part of it. Each version of each story was read by at least 30 subjects. Data from subjects who had read the stories previously were excluded.

Subjects significantly preferred the spoiled versions of ironic-twist stories, where, for example, it was revealed before reading that a condemned man’s daring escape is all a fantasy before the noose snaps tight around his neck.

The same held true for mysteries. Knowing ahead of time that Poirot will discover that the apparent target of attempted murder is, in fact, the perpetrator not only didn’t hurt enjoyment of the story but actually improved it.

Subjects liked the literary, evocative stories least overall, but still preferred the spoiled versions over the unspoiled ones.

Why? The answers go beyond the scope of the study, but one possibility is perhaps the simplest one: that plot is overrated.

“Plots are just excuses for great writing. What the plot is is (almost) irrelevant. The pleasure is in the writing,” said Christenfeld, a UC San Diego professor of social psychology.

“Monet’s paintings aren’t really about water lilies,” he said.

It’s also possible that it’s “easier” to read a spoiled story. Other psychological studies have shown that people have an aesthetic preference for objects that are perceptually easy to process.

“So it could be,” said Leavitt, a psychology doctoral student at UC San Diego, “that once you know how it turns out, it’s cognitively easier – you’re more comfortable processing the information – and can focus on a deeper understanding of the story.”

But the researchers are careful to note that they do not have a new recipe for writers to follow. After all, spoilers helped only when presented in advance, outside of the piece. When the researchers inserted a spoiler directly into a story, it didn’t go over quite as well.

The overall findings are consistent with the experience most of us have had: A favorite tale can be re-read multiple times with undiminished pleasure. A beloved movie can be watched again and again.

“Stories are a universal element of human culture, the backbone of the billion-dollar entertainment industry, and the medium through which religion and societal values are transmitted,” the researchers write. In other words, narratives are incredibly important. But their success doesn’t seem to hinge on simple suspense.

Christenfeld and Leavitt conclude the paper by saying that perhaps some of our “other intuitions about suspense may be similarly wrong.”

“Perhaps,” they write, “birthday presents are better when wrapped in cellophane, and engagement rings are better when not concealed in chocolate mousse.”

We might be also well-advised to reconsider surprise parties, Christenfeld said. Meanwhile, he and Leavitt continue to investigate what makes stories work – or not. Numerous recent scandals about fictionalized memoirs have inspired them to explore why it matters that a story be true. “Why does it matter,” Christenfeld said, “whether something happened to one person in five billion or to no one? If the story is still a good story, why do we care?”