Spoilers in English Class [1]

October 19, 2015 Teaching [2]
Children's Lit [3]

Theme Essay by Jason J. Griffith

Why Outing the Plot Doesn't Really Matter

"Spoiler! You *totally* ruined it!" Once the charge is levied, it's echoed again and again by my students. "Don't you dare!" they cry at each other. "I haven't read it yet!"



Discussing literature with adolescents is an interesting challenge. Having taught eighth- and tenth-grade English for twelve years, I've seen students quickly recognize plot and character patterns. I've heard them make deeply personal connections and analyze texts with wisdom beyond their years. But many hit a wall as soon as the story is done. Once they find out what happens, the text has served its apparent purpose. And when a classmate leans over and surreptitiously outs the plot, they'll wail, "There's no point in reading the rest of this!"

First, I get it. Spoilers are frustrating, and I have (half) jokingly threatened (mild) physical violence with former students

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who even think about ruining *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *A Separate Peace* for a fresh crop of readers.

But I also know that spoilers are irrelevant when it comes to great literature. In order to really connect with and "get" a text, readers have to move beyond the simple discovery of what happened. They need to then ask, "So what?"

Adults who love literature don't fret about knowing the plot beforehand of, say, *The Great Gatsby*. Yet, spoilers can generate the wrong kind of energy in a high school English classroom, lending them a subversive thrill. Out of curiosity, I reached out to a red-handed senior by email for his take on why he revealed a plot twist to younger students. He wrote back:

> In 'spoiling' something, you really get to discover what you loved about that story. It's never the minute details that get spoiled, but the overarching plot twist or the most exciting point in the story that really made you just go, 'Wow, didn't see that coming.' In my case in particular, I must have just let it slip out in a moment of forgetfulness.

There's a kernel of honesty here, but I don't buy his innocence. I read his response to students in my study hall last semester, and two of them essentially burst out, "Ugh! I hate it when people do that!" So, I posed the question: Why do people spoil?

The first student suggested that people who spoil something get to take credit for an author's plot twist. This prompted the second to follow up with, "You get to see their face mimic your emotion. You cause the reaction in others that the author caused for you." Just as some children revel in outing Santa Claus to younger ones, some readers take pleasure in bursting literary bubbles. A third student told me, "This might sound sick, but spoilers give you an element of control over another person. There's the power of 'I know something you don't know.'"

So, the insecure use the literary spoiler as a power play over unsuspecting and innocent readers? Makes sense, but if it's really a good book, it doesn't matter if you know the plot.

Let me clarify. Spoil last night's episode of *The Walking Dead* or a newly released novel at your own risk, but there has to be a statute of limitations. *The Fault in Our Stars* is only three years old, so it's on the bubble. I don't feel good about revealing its plot twist (though I don't think it's a deal breaker if someone else does). However, it's been a decade since Severus Snape murdered Albus Dumbledore. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Boo Radley emerged from the shadows to rescue Jem and Scout 55 years ago. A year before that, Gene first jounced Finny out of the tree in *A Separate Peace*. As another student said, "If it's been out as long as *Harry Potter*, it's fair game."

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There are no hard-and-fast rules about the ethics of spoilers, only the social consequences of being judged as uncouth. Still, knowing what happens is not the same as experiencing it through literature. Even if you know something will happen, you don't know *how* it will happen. You haven't felt it happen—and even if you have, you can feel it again and perhaps differently than before.

Sometimes, knowing what's coming can actually add intrigue. A few summers ago, during a family trip to the beach, my mom rattled off a play-by-play of her new hardback copy of *Gone Girl*. My frustrated wife lamented, "I might have wanted to read that!," but I felt the opposite. When my mom first described the premise, it sounded like a run-of-the-mill episode of *Criminal Minds*. As her updates continued, however, I got a sense of well-crafted plot and characters. Without knowing what happens, I might never have added the book to my "to-read" list.

Plot twists are only one small element of quality literature. Why do we watch our favorite movies again and again, even after we can quote the dialogue verbatim and predict every surprise? True literature accrues in emotional value. Some books get better when you re-read them. You start to see the nuances—the build-ups and foreshadowing that were invisible to virgin eyes. You realize that Atticus knew all along that there was no way to get Tom Robinson off the hook, but he couldn't tell that to Scout. He had to let her experience the heartbreaking injustice for herself. Spoilers help to reveal aspects of meaning we didn't notice before.

When I taught eighth grade, I walked my students to a nearby courthouse to read the courtroom scenes of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Students acted out the character parts in dialogue, but I read the exposition. It didn't matter how many times I'd done it before—each time I read Tom's verdict aloud and listened to "guilty, guilty, guilty" reverberate off the old walls, I got a little more choked up. Each time, I wished it didn't turn out that way.

Atticus loses the case in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and many students are disappointed and even shocked at first. But in class, we can then discuss why he lost. Why did he take the case? What does that say about him as a character? Are the forces at work against Atticus still at work in today's society? What clues does Harper Lee give that Atticus knew about the outcome in advance?

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With *Harry Potter*, the main plot spoiler that seems to rile kids is Dumbledore dying at Snape's hands. Once this has been established, though, they can examine how skillfully J.K. Rowling develops her characters through plot, especially in the way she manipulates the emotional reactions of readers to Snape in the last two books. A generally unlikable character is vaulted at the very end into being (arguably) one of the most heroic of the series. But in order to delve into any of these discussions—and in my classroom, they've been passionate debates—the plot has to be "ruined."

Last year, I went to see *Of Mice and Men's* revival on Broadway. I'd read it a half dozen times before and knew that Lennie would die by George's hand. But still, I laughed at Lennie's simple musings about rabbits. I grew hopeful thinking about George and Lennie's dream to own their own place. I felt nervous when Lennie had to flee the angry mob after he accidentally killed Curley's wife. Although I knew George would pull the trigger, when he finally did, I hoped the curtain calls would last long enough for me to shake off the tears on my cheeks.

Ultimately, deeper literary conversations can only start when the book is finished. Once the main events have been revealed, even if unfairly through spoilers, the real work begins. What does this mean to me? How does it connect to my life and to the world at large? Does the work ring true for its time and now? Does it generate controversy and objection? Digging into questions like these can be frustrating to young adults, who just want to leap into the next thing. But in my experience, such conversations make all the difference.

Art Information

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Jason notes that no matter how many times he's read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he's sure Tom Robinson will finally be acquitted.

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