Dana Steglich

Spoil the Classics: Considering the Differences between Reading and Rereading Literature

Even though the term "spoiler" is not used at all—most likely because it had not permeated mainstream popular culture in 1997—a brilliant illustration of the perils of literary spoilers is at the center of an episode of the TV Show Friends (US 1994–2004, Creator: David Crane and Marta Kauffman). In the episode, Rachel and Joey have recommended their favorite novels to each other. As a result, Rachel is now reading Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) and Joey is reading Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868). When Joey accidentally talks about the ending of *The Shining* in front of Rachel, she retaliates by telling him the outcome of the main love story in *Little Women*. For a moment, the two go back and forth, revealing spoilers to each other, but Rachel deals the knockout blow when she tells Joey that Beth (one of the sisters in *Little Women*) will eventually die. Joey's reaction says it all: disbelief, shock, and pain race over his features as he jumps off the couch and points an accusatory finger at Rachel. Joey is so distraught that he only calms down when two of the other friends convince Rachel to pretend that she was lying, that she made up Beth's death in order to hurt him. The implication is clear: by telling Joey of Beth's death, Rachel just "ruined the first book he ever loved that didn't star Jack Nicholson" (The One Where Monica and Richard Are Just Friends [US 1997, Director: Robby Benson]).

Although the dramatic dimensions are played up for comedic purposes, I would argue that many spoiler-defining elements are on display in this interaction. First, we see that spoilers are, at their core, pieces of information. Even more specifically, we see that Rachel and Joey both reveal narrative elements, specific plot points, dependent, one could argue, on the genre of their respective novel as well as their personal priorities when reading the text. While Joey reveals horror elements as well as the ending of *The Shining*—who lives, who dies—Rachel focuses on the relationships central to *Little Women*, the love story between Jo and Laurie (which she describes in vocabulary reminiscent of the soap operas she loves and Joey starred in) and the death of Jo's beloved sister Beth. Rachel does not mention that Jo goes on to write a novel or who she ends up marrying, which suggests that not all information is equally crucial when it comes to spoilers.

Still, in both cases, knowledge of the information comes with a certain power or control, insofar as the information regulates the spoiled person's reading experience. Because what the Friends scene highlights, first and foremost, is the fact that spoilers pose a threat to enjoyment. This simple fact underlies all spoiler discourse: from philosophical pondering about the morality of spoiling, to controversial newspaper headlines like "Man stabs colleague in Antarctica because of book spoilers." Just as in the Friends scene, spoilers affect emotions.

And finally, both Rachel and Joey are able to spoil each other's reading experience because the information they each receive from the other is about a part of the story they themselves have not yet experienced, which makes time—or timing—the final element of any spoiler.

Listing these elements—the nature of spoilers as (specific, genre- and audience-dependent) information; the power wielded through spoilers; the emotions at play (most evidently the enjoyment of a reading experience); and the timing of a spoiler—highlights various aspects of spoiler discourse we could be focusing on. And there are, of course, more to add, such as fan culture and community aspects.[1] But in comparing these findings to existing definitions of spoilers, one could make a case for *time* being, in fact, the key element. Henry Jenkins argues that, historically, the term and concept of spoiling "emerged from the mismatch between the temporalities and geographies of old and new media" (30). Benjamin Johnson and Judith Rosenbaum define spoilers as "premature and undesired information about how a narrative's arc will conclude" (1069). And Jonathan Gray emphasizes the same aspect of temporality when he says that "[s]poilers include any information about what will happen in an ongoing narrative that is provided before the narrative itself gets there" (147).

The emphasis on the temporal aspect of spoilers is unsurprising, but it does lead me to my central hypothesis: namely, that a spoiler affects what is generally classified as the 'first' reading experience. Having knowledge of a literary spoiler—Rachel knowing who survives *The Shining* or Joey knowing that Beth will die—creates a new reading experience, one that is different from the reading experience that did not happen and which is perceived as a loss by the victim of the spoiling. The contrast between the spoiled reading

1 The community aspect of spoilers, which Henry Jenkins's research emphasizes, or the context of fan culture, which Matt Hills focuses on, is also on display in the Friends episode, since both Joey and Rachel are introduced as fans of their respective novels, and Joey's fan-like excitement for *The Shining* is the reason why he cannot help but spoil the story for Rachel.

experience and this alternative first reading experience, the "what if the spoiler hadn't happened" timeline, is the focus of this article.

Spoiling Literature

To this day, both the concept of spoilers and the review culture surrounding them are much more apparent in film and television than in literature. On a practical level, the reason why books as a medium are less likely to be spoiled is simply because the time needed to read a book differs greatly from reader to reader and thus, simultaneity on the scale of international cinema or streaming releases is rarely achieved, except for singular literary events like the releases of the later *Harry Potter* novels. The fact that spoiling does not affect the literary medium in the same way it does film and television also has consequences for the amount of research conducted on spoilers in the field of literature. In Richard Greene's study on the philosophy of spoilers, for example, an overwhelming number of the examples used to illustrate his observations are taken from movies and TV series, while barely any are from literature.

When talking about literature, Greene argues that it is "not considered timely in the way that movies and television programs are. By design, a novel, if good, will be as enjoyable now as it was in the past and will be in the future" (135). This seems to suggest that spoilers do not affect literature at all. But in his contemplation of literary spoilers, Greene creates an interesting paradox. On the one hand, he tries to limit the time frame in which a book is 'spoilable' to "one year or the point at which it drops off the best-seller list, whichever is later" (135). But on the other hand, he bemoans that many novels that are way past this spoiler expiration date have been spoiled simply because their contents have long since become common knowledge. The texts he identifies as belonging to this category of "simply too 'out there'" (40n9) have all attained the status of classics.

In recent years, the concept of spoilers and the etiquette surrounding them has spread out from visual media and is no longer limited to film and television. Proof that spoiler culture has reached literary discourse is most visibly found in the current blogosphere and BookTube communities where spoiler-free book reviews are frequently advocated for, no doubt inspired by trends in film and TV criticism. At the same time, jokes about spoiler warnings are often closely connected to the idea of spoiling classic literary

works.[2] While it is considered possible to spoil Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope (US 1997, Director: George Lucas) or—to name a more highbrow example—The Godfather (US 1972, Director: Francis Ford Coppola), the idea that you could spoil *Hamlet* (1599/1601) or *Moby-Dick* (1851) is usually treated as a joke. This discrepancy, I would argue, is not simply tied to the different time frames the two types of media exist in but also to a difference in status. Books are still, to this day, considered a more intellectual medium. Less of an experience, less limited to one-time consumption.

So even though new audiences for classic texts are born with every generation, the reasons why the idea of spoiling something like *Hamlet* is generally considered laughable are threefold. First, because it was published over 400 years ago; second, because as a classic piece of literature, the plot of *Hamlet* has been deemed common knowledge; and third, because of the assumption that even if you had not known the ending of *Hamlet* before someone told you, the spoiler would not matter because there is so much more to *Hamlet* than its ending. We will dig further into what exactly the "so much more" assumes about classic literature later on. But first, let us consider the argument as a whole. Does this view of classic texts mean that the negative connotation of the term spoiler simply does not apply to literary spoilers? Can you, quite simply, not spoil books in the same way you can spoil movies?

What Do Spoilers Spoil?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the etymology of the word 'to spoil' relates to the forceful act of taking something valuable, be it goods, property, or territory, from a defeated or dead enemy. To spoil someone or something means to strip a person of something or to damage an object to such an extent as to render it useless. The 'spoiler' by the same logic is the one who pillages or plunders, the one who destroys.[3] So what, if anything, is destroyed by a literary spoiler? Answering this question was the main motivation behind one of the earliest studies on the effects of spoilers.

2 See, for instance, the popular cartoons by John Atkinson (wronghands1.com/).

3 In June 2007, the colloquial use of the word signifying the "description of a significant plot point or other aspect of a movie, book, etc., which if previously known may spoil a person's first experience of the work" is added, and in 2018, the term "spoiler alert" was included in the *OED* as well, defined as "an intervention used to warn a reader that an important detail of the story is about to be divulged or alluded to" ("Spoil, *V.* (1)", "Spoiler, *N.*").

In 2011, Jonathan Leavitt and Nicholas Christenfeld let participants read spoiled as well as unspoiled short stories and compared the readers' reported enjoyment. The surprising results of this study showed that subjects preferred spoiled over unspoiled stories. Leavitt and Christenfeld interpreted these results in the context of text comprehension and concluded that in "all these types of stories, spoilers may allow readers to organize developments, anticipate the implications of events, and resolve ambiguities that occur in the course of reading" (1153).[4]

On the surface, the results of this study seem to agree with the aforementioned assumption that the negative connotation of the term spoiler simply does not apply to literary spoilers. But, as Leavitt and Christenfeld concluded themselves, the students' "enjoyment" was not measured as excitement or joy when engaging with the stories. Instead, their enjoyment appeared to be measured solely on the level of text comprehension.[5]

The discrepancy between the judgement of spoilers from the perspective of comprehension theories versus the perspective of excitation transfer theory motivated Johnson and Rosenbaum to recreate Leavitt's and Christenfeld's study in 2015. With different parameters to specify "enjoyment," their study revealed the opposite result; namely: that unspoiled stories were deemed significantly more enjoyable than spoiled stories (Johnson and Rosenbaum 1082). In their follow-up study from 2016, Rosenbaum and Johnson offered an explanation for this contrast. Their second study showed that "depending on an individual's personality traits, a spoiler can have differential effects on enjoyment of, or even one's desire to read, a narrative" (Rosenbaum and Johnson 30), and specifically, that only "those low on need for cognition"

4 For an overview of empirical research on spoilers, see Judith Rosenbaum's chapter.

5 In 2013, Leavitt and Christenfeld expanded on this in a second study, in which they argued for three possible explanations for their previous findings: firstly, "that spoilers improve the experience of reading by making stories more fluent, with fluency defined as subjective ease of processing"; secondly, "that readers of spoiled stories draw greater enjoyment from aesthetic elements because they are less focused on guessing the outcome"; or, thirdly, "that readers take pleasure in stories concluding in the manner they expected, and this adds to the otherwise undiminished joy of reading a story" (Leavitt and Christenfeld 94). Thus, in their second study, Leavitt and Christenfeld specified the rather vague notion of "enjoyment" to be gained either from fluency in understanding (text comprehension), aesthetic elements of a text, or reader expectations being met. In the end, their study affirmed only the first as a possible explanation. The results of the experiment proved what had been only a hypothesis in the conclusion of their first study, namely, that increased fluency gained through spoilers improves reading experiences.

(273), which was defined as "the tendency for an individual to engage in and enjoy thinking" (275), "held a selective preference for spoiled stories" (273).

These studies show, first and foremost, how hard it is to quantify and thus correctly measure something as subjective as the enjoyment of a literary text. Additionally, the discrepancies between the studies also highlight the different functions and effects a spoiler can have. Spoilers can function as a processing aid, helping some readers to understand a complicated text during their first interaction with it, and thus heightening their enjoyment. At the same time, to a different reader, the same spoiler can function as a destructive element, for instance by giving away a twist before the reader has had a chance to speculate, and thus lessening their enjoyment.

These studies, together with research on why people seek out spoilers,[6] show that along with the complicated topic of "enjoyment," the perception of and reaction to spoilers is also highly dependent on who the reader is and why they are reading in the first place. The different ways of and reasons for reading a text are key factors in determining the concrete effect a spoiler has for the individual. But regardless of whether the spoiler is seen as helpful or highly destructive, its existence changes the interaction between reader and text. It exists somewhere between the text and its recipient, and it affects their relationship. This is why I like to think of spoilers—all spoilers, not just literary ones—as possessing a power similar to paratextual elements.

The Paratextual Power of Spoilers

Coming from a TV-centric background, Gray is the first one to call spoilers "viewer-created paratexts" (143). His reason for doing so seems obvious, since

6 Research in film and television studies has additionally paid attention to how spoilers are used as an instrument of control: not, however, as we have seen in the Friends episode, as an instrument of control over somebody else's reading experience, but as a way to enhance one's own viewing (or reading) experience. As Matt Hills argues, "spoilers centrally pose emotional questions of anxiety, trust, and control" (111). Especially for fans, "[t]hreats to diegetic narrative can […] be felt as threats to these fans' self-narratives" (114). Thus, for fans, spoilers are not about "spoiling their relationship to the text, but rather conserving and protecting their emotional attachments—guarding against disappointments, avoiding unpleasant shocks or surprises, and working-through possible threats to textual authenticity (and hence self-narrative)" (115). In agreement with Hills are the observations by Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell, who see spoilers as a way for fans to immunize themselves against potential future disappointments: "Spoiler fans aim to take control of their emotional responses and pleasures of anticipation, creating suspense on viewers' own terms rather than the creators'" (17).

paratextual elements can sometimes be spoilers themselves. Think of book covers, blurbs, the marketing surrounding the release of a new novel or—a paratextual element we will return to later—the dreaded introduction to a text. But this is not why Gray seeks to classify spoilers in general as paratexts. There are several parallels between spoilers and paratexts. Like any paratextual element, as Gérard Genette defines it, a spoiler stands on the threshold between text and non-text; it exists in the discourse surrounding a text. Secondly, just like paratexts, spoilers have considerable power to amplify, reduce, erase, or add meaning to a text, and thus change the readers' perception of a text or the way they read it. And thirdly, as for most paratextual elements, temporality plays a significant role for spoilers, since most spoilers lose their power if they occur after the reader has read the text in question.[7]

The only real difference between spoilers and paratextual elements lies in the fact that a spoiler is not officially author- or editor-intended material. This is why Gray calls spoilers specifically "viewer-created" paratexts. In his study on fandom, Hills discusses the difference between official and unofficial spoilers. In film and television, previews or sneak peeks that function as advertising for a movie are official spoilers, i.e.: spoilers given authority by the producers. Unofficial spoilers, on the other hand, are leaks: unauthorized set photographs, insider information, leaked scripts (Hills 108). Using this differentiation between official and unofficial spoilers, I would argue that, while official spoilers do fit into Genette's category of paratexts, unofficial spoilers do not. Which is why, rather than defining spoilers as paratexts, I prefer to focus on the paratextual power that lies in framing the way a text is read by an individual and claim the same—or at least a similar—power for spoilers. Thus, in addition to all the spoiler-defining elements listed in the introduction, I am defining spoilers as a subset of all the material that generates reading expectations.

7 An additional explanation Genette gives about the short lives of some paratextual elements applies to spoilers as well: "If, then, a paratextual element may appear at any time, it may also disappear, definitively or not, by authorial decision or outside intervention or by virtue of the eroding effect of time" (Genette 6). Spoilers are certainly able to "erode" over time, since they may lose their function and thus disappear from the discourse surrounding a text after a time. This is why Matt Hills considers spoilers "a form of currency in both the temporal and the axiological sense of that term: they represent information acquired as soon as is humanly possible […] and they have a fan-culture value, representing breaking news in the 24/7 rolling news informational economy of digital fandom" (110), thus deeming spoilers both information of intense value and information whose value decays rapidly when it becomes widely known.

"To read is to make guesses," Matei Calinescu writes, "based on expectations and assumptions and to modify them as the reading proceeds" (xiv). If we consider spoilers as a subset of all the material that generates reading expectations, just like book covers or blurbs or other forms of paratexts, spoilers are pieces of outside information—as in 'outside of the text'—given to the reader before the act of reading occurs or is concluded that affect the reader's expectations and thus their reading of the text. To be even more specific, I'd like to argue that the change brought about by the existence of a spoiler is best understood as the difference between a first reading and a subsequent rereading of the same text.

Hills himself argues that "spoilers might be akin to a sort of re-reading" (112). Emily Nussbaum makes a similar point in her article "The End of the Surprise Ending," in which she argues that people who enjoy watching shows whose endings have already been spoiled pay the price of never really getting to watch a show for the first time.

This change, from first reading to rereading, is what happens, at least in part, when we encounter a literary spoiler. Pre-empting an uninformed first reading, or combining it with a more analytical rereading, spoils some potential that the text held—be it suspense, or ambiguity, or surprise—for the reader. "Spoil" in this case does not mean that the experience is completely ruined, void of all enjoyment. On the contrary, I would argue that the reader will enjoy certain aspects of a text upon rereading that would have been harder to enjoy the first time. But while this subsequent reading can occur whether or not the text was spoiled, the first reading only exists for the unspoiled reader. Greene makes the same argument when he considers what he calls "The Multiple Engagement Paradox," observing that people might have several reasons to return to a text: "The Multiple Engagement Paradox rests on a mistaken assumption, namely, the assumption that spoiling something entails ruining it completely or beyond enjoyment [...]. This is not the case: spoiling something just ruins a part of our experience of the work" (161). The "part of our experience" that is ruined by spoilers is our first interaction with the text, the first-time reading experience with all that it entails. Thus, in order to understand what change a spoiler causes, we need to understand the difference between reading and rereading.

Reading vs Rereading

There are, as Calinescu argues in *Rereading*, "three basic ways of rereading stories. [...] partial rereading (or back-tracking) [...] simple (unreflective)

rereading or the repeating of a game of make-believe for the sheer pleasure of repeating it […]; and reflective rereading, a meditative or critically inquisitive revisiting of a text one has already read." (277) Most, if not all, studies of rereading focus on reflective rereading. The main characteristics attributed to this mode are non-linearity, reflection, and interpretation. Thus, rereading stands in contrast to a linear, "curious, end-oriented" (3) first reading.

The idea of a virginal first reading, one that is "naive"—a pure experience without reflection and without other experiences or intertextual contexts framing the reader's interaction with the text—is, of course, a purely theoretical construct. As if, using the same irony as Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (16), there were a beginning of reading, as if everything had not already been read. Still, certain elements of this hypothetical first reading cannot be attributed to a subsequent rereading. In addition to linearity, a way of reading that could be repeated in subsequent readings, Calinescu defines the first reading as "continuous, fresh, curious, and sensitive to surprising turns or unpredictable developments (which include unpredictable intertextual associations)" (7).

When talking about reading, curiosity and surprise or unpredictability are all linked to the plot. Any rereading will focus less on plot than on structural elements. Studies about rereading place further emphasis on this difference. As Verlyn Klinkenborg writes in *The Observer*, "[p]art of the fun of re-reading is that you are no longer bothered by the business of finding out what happens." Patricia Meyer Spacks comments in her autobiographical study that "the energy of plot and characters" (12) may overwhelm a reader the first time around, and that rereading books changed her view on them: "I admired it more than I had originally, principally, I think, because I didn't need to rush to find how things turn out, and I had time to savor the author's narrative skill" (134). And in *The Triumph of the Novel,* Albert Guerard associates "suspense, […] exciting plot, [...] dizzying ambiguity, […] the pleasures of incessant surprise" with a hypothetical first reading, while claiming "unity and a satisfying relation of the parts to the whole, […] subtle reflexive reference, […] foreshadowings" for subsequent rereadings (20). Thus, the most obvious difference between the first and any future readings of a text is foreknowledge about the plot, which is also what most spoilers focus on and most definitions of spoilers are tied to. Calinescu himself warns that "the sharpened attention […] [rereading] demands may *spoil* the more naïve pleasures associated with a first, linear, curious, engrossing reading" (19). Gray and Mittell agree with Hills in seeing spoilers as "a short cut to the second reading, getting the plot out of the way so as to concentrate on other issues and pleasures" (18). And Meyer Spacks sums up many comparisons between

plot-focused first readings and the accretion process of rereading, concluding that "knowledge of what is to come changes speculation about outcomes to speculation about meanings—a deeper form of excitement" (137).

This idea of a "deeper" form of excitement, of suspense,[8] or even a deeper form of enjoyment is associated with subsequent readings in all aforementioned studies on rereading. And much like Meyer Spacks, Leavitt and Christenfeld speculate about the possibility that "spoilers enhance enjoyment by actually increasing tension. Knowing the ending of *Oedipus Rex* may heighten the pleasurable tension caused by the disparity in knowledge between the omniscient reader and the character marching to his doom" (Leavitt and Christenfeld 1153). Here, once again, a literary classic is used as an example to illustrate how little damage a literary spoiler supposedly does, or can do. Spoiling the ending of *Oedipus Rex* to a first-time reader, Leavitt and Christenfeld argue, is going to enhance that person's enjoyment of the play.[9] Once again, the idea that this first-time reader might value not knowing the ending beforehand is disregarded. And once again, the simple fact that they could have the heightened enjoyment of a spoiled ending the next time they read the play is ignored.

This is where the notion of "unspoilable" classics comes in. This is where the idea of a naive first reading turns into condescension.

Literary Criticism

One aspect that all the articles and books on rereading have in common is a tendency to rank the second reading, the one in which the plot is already known, higher than the idea of an uninformed first reading. Rereading, they all seem to say, is more pleasurable than reading. Additionally, rereading is linked to something even more important or valuable than pleasure: if

8 Additionally, the second key aspect associated with first-time reading, the experience of suspense, is tied closely to the reader being uninformed about the plot as well. In talking about suspense this way, I am, of course, focusing on what Eric Rabkin calls "plot-suspense," not "subliminal suspense," which would be associated with rereadings as well (see Rabkin 69). Roland Barthes attributes the illusion that a naive first reading is even possible largely to operators of suspense (16). And Thomas Anz links literary techniques for creating suspense to the uninformedness of characters as well as readers (157). As Patricia Meyer Spacks argues: "What suspense the plot offers of course vanishes in a second reading: I know from the outset how everything will turn out" (132). On suspense, see also the chapters by Simon Spiegel and Albrecht Koschorke.

9 On *Oedipus Rex,* see also Simon Spiegel's chapter.

we believe Calinescu's reflection on the origins of the dichotomy between intensive (repeated or highly focused reading) and extensive reading (reading various texts), the true quality of rereading has historically always been linked to "condemnations of reading for pleasure or entertainment" (88–89). While reading is purely pleasure-focused, rereading "represents […] dedication, sustained attention, and sophisticated absorption" (90). In the context of this distinction, Calinescu identifies the differing practices of reading and rereading with the dichotomy between two types of literature: popular literature is thus classified as "'purely readable' literature," while high literature is deemed "'rereadable' literature" (77–78). Throughout, Calinescu maintains this divide, even when he argues for the rereadability of popular literature, which "is in no way precluded from developing its own forms of rereadability and, on occasion, from reaching the status of full classic rereadability outlined above" (77–78). Thus, even when considering the rereadability of popular literature, Calinescu assigns a specific quality to 'high' literature, which distinguishes it from mass or popular literature, namely its innate rereadability.[10]

In this, Calinescu is far from alone. Meyer Spacks starts her analysis with the results of a British survey on rereading. Her comments largely illustrate her own surprise at the high number of children's books and fantasy novels that hold the top spots over classics like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Great Expectations* (5–6). And as a prominent writer of both children's and fantasy fiction, C. S. Lewis himself suggests using rereadability as a criterion for judging the quality of literature, since rereading a text will reveal whether the enjoyment (or tension) was produced merely by the unpredictability of the plot (90–105).[11]

---

10 Calinescu focuses his discussion of suspense largely on the genre of mystery or detective fiction, which he calls a "genre of literature that prizes pure readability" (208). The readability, not rereadability, of the mystery genre lies precisely in the importance of revelations and endings as structural features that organize the reader's experience: "Detective fiction privileges the first-reading perspective as a generic requirement. A mystery story is always primarily constructed, and all its main effects calculated, with the first-time reader in mind; that is, the implied reader it constructs in the process of constructing itself gets acquainted with the unfamiliar text progressively and in a strict sequential manner culminating in the ending" (210). In this context, Calinescu also voices how "revealing the ending of a detective story to someone who plans to read it ranks among the least forgivable offenses in the informal deontology of detective fiction fans" (207).

11 "The nearest we can come to a test is by asking whether he often *re-reads* the same story. […] For excitement, […] [defined as the alternate tension and appeasement of imagined anxiety], is just what must disappear from a second reading.[…] The re-reader is looking not for actual surprises (which can come only once) but for a certain ideal surprisingness. […] It is

Often disregarded in this context is the fact that rereading might not be motivated by the implied quality of a certain text, or that it might not even be motivated by the text at all. The autobiographical experiment in Meyer Spacks's book is based entirely on the premise that, while the text does not change, its reader does: the idea being that rereading can become "a way to evoke memories (not only of the text but of one's life and of past selves)" (2). The change in a reader's subjectivity might only be located on a wider temporal scale than the one that marks the difference between a first and a subsequent reading, but it can still serve as an argument as to why a rereader could continue to find new meanings in a text, regardless of whether that text is considered high or popular literature. In fact, the reading tastes of her younger self are precisely what Meyer Spacks analyses: "I sound more like a moralizer than a literary critic. Rereading seems to bring out that side of me when it causes me to see myself as I was in the distant past: a vision that stimulates self-judgment as well as judgment of the characters with whom I once imaginatively identified" (98). By disregarding this self-reflective motivation for rereading, most of the studies on the subject place the literary quality of the text at the forefront of their inquiry.

The idea of rereading as superior to reading and, consequently, rereadability as a marker of literary quality, is also at the heart of the few articles and studies that focus specifically on literary spoilers. Jonathan Russell Clark argues in an article on *LitHub* that "the best stories, the great ones, are spoiler-proof." The same claim lies at the heart of Leavitt and Christenfeld's as well as Gray's comments on *Oedipus Rex* (Gray 149). In a similar vein, Gray and Mittell conclude their study on spoiler culture surrounding the TV show Lost (US 2004–2010, Creator: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof) by referring to Laura Carroll's thoughts on "literature professors [who] have long 'spoiled' texts in their classes without concern for actually ruining the text, precisely because a text is about more than just surprises and plot-twists" (Gray and Mittell 16–17).

This connection between spoilers and merely entertaining literature is drawn most often and most contemptuously in the features sections of our newspapers. Here, the differentiation between two kinds of readers and two kinds of literature concludes almost every discussion of spoiler warnings. In this context, one of the four aforementioned studies on the enjoyment of spoilers has received special attention: it is, of course, the first study by

---

the *quality* of unexpectedness, not the *fact* that delights us. It is even better the second time" (Lewis 90–105).

Leavitt and Christenfeld, which concluded that readers prefer spoiled texts. *The Guardian* discussed this study in an article about paratexts and authors spoiling their own stories (Armitstead). Literary theorist Stanley Fish used it to defend himself after spoiling the end of *The Hunger Games* in a newspaper review, stating that "[i]f suspense is taken away by certainty, certainty offers other compensations, and those compensations, rather than being undermined by a spoiler, require one" (Fish). In the same *New York Times* article outlining his defense, Fish again provoked readers' ire by claiming that "works which deliver to the reader or viewer suspense and only suspense [lose their pull] when the cat has been let out of the bag and there may not be much point to re-experiencing them." Alison Flood of *The Guardian*, in turn, commented on this and doubled down on Fish's criticism: "I tend to agree with him, and anyway I can't feel too sorry for all his *Hunger Games* spoilees. Over here, people: Harry Potter lives, Bella chooses Edward, Susan doesn't get to go to heaven. Now go and find some grown-up books to read, and stop whining" (Flood). As a final example, a senior features editor for the German newspaper *Die Welt* offers a similar argument in an article on prolepsis, moving even faster from passive-aggressive to simply aggressive: "There must have been a considerable loss of level in the reception of artistic creations if today even educated people permanently sound the 'spoiler alarm'. […] Great literature has always spoiled. Because with good writers, it's not so much the material (the what) that matters, but the form (the how). […] However, this presupposes the advanced reader who does not feed intellectually only on television series" (Krause).[12]

It is clear that we have reached the well-known battlegrounds of literary assessment, where high literature and popular fiction fight endlessly, where readers are divided into highbrow rereaders and naive first-timers, where suspense is, as Thomas Anz quips, "a second-rate phenomenon in first-rate literature, and only in second-rate literature is it considered a first-rate phenomenon" (152).

Articles like the ones mentioned above are quick to point to the tradition of "the great novelists of the 19th and 20th centuries, […] the narrators of medieval epics" (Krause), or "the history of heroic fiction" (Ambrose) dating back to ancient Greece. They see spoilers as "a declaration of authorial mastery" (Ambrose) and again and again argue that "[i]t is not *what* is said that matters, but *how* it is said, and ultimately, by whom" (Clark): because

12 Translations from German by the author.

a good author, a good piece of literature transcends plot (Ambrose). Since 'good' literature is rereadable, it is not affected by spoilers: this is the argument nearly all articles on (literary) spoilers boil down to.

But even though Calinescu's arguments steer in a similar direction, "rereadability" for him does not simply mean that a text has something to offer to the returning reader. It also means that a text of high quality cannot simply be read, it *must be reread*—even the first time around (280). Italo Calvino tests the same argument in his first, and possibly most intuitive, attempt at defining what the classics are in his introduction to *Why Read the Classics*: "The classics are those books about which you usually hear people say: 'I'm rereading …', never 'I'm reading …'" (3). Later in his introduction, Calvino explains that when it comes to classics, reading and rereading become interchangeable: "A classic is a book which with each rereading offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first reading. […] A classic is a book which even when we read it for the first time gives the sense of rereading something we have read before" (5). Calinescu also comments on this paradoxical status of the classics:

> there is a sense in which great novelistic classics like *War and Peace* seem to urge us to reverse Nabokov's paradox ("One cannot read a book; one can only reread it") and to say: One cannot reread *War and Peace*; one can only read it for the first time. With great literature, we may justifiably say, each time is the first time. (43)

Thus, engaging with a classic means, according to both Calvino and Calinescu, simultaneous reading and rereading. Classics are texts that make every reading feels like the first, while they are at the same time texts that have accumulated so much cultural connectivity[13] that they can only be reread, even the first time around.

Engaging with (Spoiled) Classics

In my introduction, I argued that on a practical level, books as a medium are less likely to be spoiled because the time needed to read a book differs greatly from reader to reader. On another level, as we have seen, a common argument on spoilers in literature is that only 'bad' or lowbrow texts can be ruined by what is commonly understood as a spoiler, whereas 'good' literature—which includes any canonized text—cannot be spoiled, because it is not defined by

13 "The classics are those books which come to us bearing the aura of previous interpretations, and trailing behind them the traces they have left in the culture or cultures (or just in the languages and customs) through which they have passed" (Calvino 5).

plot but rather by its structure, style, or language. This disregard, not only of plot, but of the virtues only a first reading holds, has consequences for the way readers supposedly or actually engage with the classics. The flaw in making rereading the default manner of engaging with canonical texts, as Thomas Anz explains, lies in the fact that it "excludes the temporal sequence of reading, the process in which the reader extracts partial information from the text, constantly checks and modifies his or her assumptions about the course and meaning of the text" (161).

The consequences of disregarding the temporal sequence of reading are especially visible in academic editions of canonized literature. While literary scholars who regularly engage with these editions will likely be aware of the spoiling practices surrounding them, new students often have their first interactions not only with the text in question but with academic editions of classic works in general. As such, they will likely not be aware of the spoiler minefield that is the introduction to a classic text.

"The main disadvantage of a preface," as Genette writes,

> is that it constitutes an unbalanced and even shaky situation of communication: its author is offering the reader an advance commentary on a text the reader has not yet become familiar with. Consequently many readers apparently prefer to read the preface after the text, when they will know "what it's all about." (237)

Genette explains the fact that prefaces are still more common than afterwords by pointing to the pragmatic function of any preface to:

> Hold [...] the reader's interest and guid[e] him [sic] by explaining why and how he should read the text. If the first function is not fulfilled, the reader will perhaps never have an opportunity to reach a possible postface; if the second function is not fulfilled, it will perhaps be too late for the author to rectify in extremis a bad reading that has already been completed. (238–39)

Here, Genette considers both the fact that most introductions might be better placed after the text, so as not to spoil the first reading, and the idea that an introduction is placed before the text precisely because it wants to guide the reader toward the "correct" reading.

If we look at how some of the best-known editions of classic texts navigate the minefield of the introduction, we can categorize publishers' approaches into two main groups. On the one hand, we have critical editions of, for example, *Oxford's World Classics* or *Penguin Modern Classics*, which both start

with an introduction that might contain spoilers on different levels.[14] On the other hand, some *Penguin Classics* editions include a publisher's note directly under the Introduction header, which warns new readers "that this Introduction makes details of the plot explicit" (Knowles xiii). The most consistent publisher when it comes to spoiler warnings is *Wordsworth Classics*. In 1999, editor Keith Carabine joined the *Wordsworth* staff and began to include a general introduction to the books he was assigned.[15] These are printed above the specific introductions and read:

> Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction. (Jansson vii)

When Calinescu warns that "the sharpened attention […] [rereading] demands may *spoil* the more naïve pleasures associated with a first, linear, curious, engrossing reading," he additionally remarks that such pleasures are kept "in store [by certain fictional texts] for the happy 'ordinary' reader," meaning those who do not reread but simply read (19). Looking at the practices of engagement with and the assessment of literary classics through the lens of spoiler discourse has shown how undervalued the idea of an uninformed first reading is. The fact that most editions of classic literature contain introductions that give away major plot points, or rather, take the knowledge of those plot points for granted, illustrates how even on a paratextual level, the practices of engagement are different for canonized texts. Contrary to the voices heard in literary criticism, though, there seems to be an awareness in publishing that just because something is considered a classic, that does not mean it cannot be read by a first-time reader. And for these readers, the proverbial Joey or Rachel, the experience of reading can still be spoiled. The

---

14 For example, the introduction to the *Oxford World's Classics* edition of Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* starts by quoting a review that called it "the most hopelessly evil story" (Lustig vii) and goes on to discuss the role ghosts play in the story, and the *Oxford World's Classics* introduction of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* opens with a detailed description of an important scene and literally starts by saying: "One of the memorable moments of *Hard Times* occurs …" (Schlicke vii).

15 An unofficial inquiry into this practice was answered by one of the editors at *Wordsworth* who responded: "I have always thought that the word 'Introduction' was misleading as it does imply it should be read first, so Keith's warning is a prudent one. Despite this, I do still receive the occasional complaint about 'spoilers'."

presence of spoiler warnings in classic editions proves that attitudes towards spoilers largely depend on who the imagined readership of the edition is. *Wordsworth* sees itself addressing a different readership than *Oxford*, but neither seems to agree entirely with the notion that classics are per se unspoilable. So, no, do not spoil the classics.

Filmography

Friends. Creator: David Crane and Marta Kauffman. US 1994–2004.

Friends. S04E13: The One Where Monica and Richard Are Just Friends. Director: Robby Benson. US 1997.

The Godfather. Director: Francis Ford Coppola. US 1972.

Lost. Creator: Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof. US 2004–2010.

Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope. Director: George Lucas. US 1977.

Works Cited

Ambrose, E. C. "Another Word: Spoiler Alert!" *Clarkesworld,* no. 76, 2013, clarkesworldmagazine.com/another_word_01_13.

Anz, Thomas. *Literatur und Lust. Glück und Unglück beim Lesen.* C. H. Beck, 1998.

Armitstead, Claire. "Do Spoilers for Books Actually Improve Them?" *The Guardian,* 20 Mar. 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/mar/20/spoilers-books-improve-them-reviewers-karen-joy-fowler.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z.* Blackwell, 2002.

Calvino, Italo. *Why Read the Classics?* Translated by Martin McLaughlin, Penguin Classics, 2009.

Calinescu, Matei. *Rereading.* Yale UP, 1993.

Clark, Jonathan Russell. "Spoiler Alerts: Any Story Worth Telling Doesn't Need Them, On Misguided Spoiler Panic and Why We Should All Calm Down." *LitHub,* 6 Sept. 2016, lithub.com/spoiler-alerts-any-story-worth-telling-doesnt-need-them.

Fish, Stanley. "What Do Spoilers Spoil?" *The New York Times,* 21 May 2012, opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/21/what-do-spoilers-spoil.

Flood, Alison. "Do Literary Spoilers Matter?" *The Guardian,* 28 May 2012, www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2012/may/28/hunger-games-spoiler-stanley-fish.

Genette, Gérard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation.* Translated by Janet E. Lewin, Cambridge UP, 2009.

Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts.* New York UP, 2010.

Gray, Jonathan, and Jason Mittell. "Speculation on Spoilers: Lost Fandom, Narrative Consumption, and Rethinking Textuality" *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies,* vol. 4, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1–28.

Greene, Richard. *Spoiler Alert! (It's a Book About the Philosophy of Spoilers)*. Open Court, 2019.

Guerard, Albert J. *The Triumph of the Novel. Dickens, Dostoevsky, Faulkner*. Oxford UP, 1976.

Hills, Matt. "Psychoanalysis and Digital Fandom. Theorizing Spoilers and Fans' Self-narratives." *Produsing Theory in a Digital World. The Intersection of Audiences and Production in Contemporary Theory,* edited by Rebecca Ann Lind, Peter Lang, 2012, pp. 105–22.

Jansson, Siv. "Introduction." *Frankenstein,* by Mary Shelley. Wordsworth, 1999, pp. vii–xx.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York UP, 2006.

Johnson, Benjamin K., and Judith E. Rosenbaum. "Spoiler Alert. Consequences of Narrative Spoilers for Dimensions of Enjoyment, Appreciation, and Transportation." *Communication Research*, vol. 42, no. 8, 2015, pp. 1068–88. DOI:10.1177/0093650214564051.

Klinkenborg, Verlyn. "Some Thoughts on the Pleasures of Being a Re-Reader." *The New York Times,* 29 May 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/05/30/opinion/30sat4.html.

Knowles, Owen. "Introduction." *Heart of Darkness,* by Joseph Conrad. Penguin Classics, 2007, pp. xiii–xxxiii.

Krause, Tilman. "Kultur Abendland für Angeber – Was Sie über den Spoiler wissen müssen." *Die Welt,* 23. Dec. 2017, www.welt.de/kultur/article171876801/Abendland-fuer-Angeber-Was-Sie-ueber-den-Spoiler-wissen-muessen.html.

Leavitt, Jonathan D., and Nicholas J. S. Christenfeld. "The Fluency of Spoilers: Why Giving away Endings Improves Stories." *Scientific Study of Literature,* vol. 3, no.1, 2013, pp. 93–104. DOI:10.1075/ssol.3.1.09lea.

---. "Story Spoilers Don't Spoil Stories." *Psychological Science,* vol. 22, no. 9, 2011, pp. 1152–54. DOI:10.1177/0956797611417007.

Lewis, C. S. *On Stories.* Oxford UP, 1947.

Lustig, T. J. "Introduction." *The Turn of the Screw and Other Stories,* by Henry James. Oxford UP, 2008, pp. vii–xxv.

"Man Stabs Colleague in Antarctica Because of Book Spoilers." *The Irish Times*, 31 Oct. 2018, www.irishtimes.com/news/world/man-stabs-colleague-in-antarctica-because-of-book-spoilers-1.3681419.

Meyer Spacks, Patricia. *On Rereading.* Harvard UP, 2011.

Nussbaum, Emily. "The End of the Surprise Ending." *The New York Times*, 9 May 2004, pp. AR1–AR2. www.nytimes.com/2004/05/09/arts/television-the-end-of-the-surprise-ending.html.

Rabkin, Eric S. *Narrative Suspense.* The U of Michigan P, 1973.

Rosenbaum, Judith E., and Benjamin K. Johnson. "Who's Afraid of Spoilers: Need for Cognition, Need for Affect, and Narrative Selection and Enjoyment." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture,* vol. 5, no. 3, 2016, pp. 273–89. DOI:10.1037/ppm0000076.

Schlicke, Paul. "Introduction." *Hard Times,* by Charles Dickens. Oxford UP, 2008, pp. vii–xx.

"Spoil, *V*. (1)." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, Dec. 2024, DOI:10.1093/OED/2223031890.

"Spoiler, *N*." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, June 2024, DOI:10.1093/OED/8388456790.