

“Death Is the Real Spoiler.” A Conversation with Adam Roberts

In the world of science fiction, Adam Roberts is something of a jack-of-all-trades. Not only is he a very productive writer of fiction, ranging from genre parodies (*The Soddit* [2003], *Star Warped* [2005]) to science fiction to murder mysteries like *Jack Glass* (2012), and what might best be described as philosophical science fiction, such as *The Thing Itself* (2015) and *The This* (2022)—based respectively on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He is also one of the genre’s preeminent critics and has, among other things, written a massive history of science fiction (*History* [2006]) and an intellectual biography of H. G. Wells (*H G Wells* [2019]). In addition, he is a prolific reviewer and blogger, writing about all kinds of speculative fiction for both mainstream newspapers and genre-specific outlets. In other words, Roberts has an intimate knowledge of the science fiction genre as a writer, reviewer, and academic, and is therefore uniquely qualified to talk about how the field deals with spoilers.

Let’s start with Adam Roberts, the author of fiction. As a writer, do you consider spoilers a problem? Do you get upset when a review of one of your books contains spoilers?

I suppose my answer is no. I don’t consider it a problem. I’m trying to think how I would feel if I read a review of a science fiction whodunit that I wrote, and the review said who the murderer was. Would that upset me? I don’t think so.

And how is it with Adam Roberts, the book reviewer?

It’s not that different. I don’t consider spoilers to be a problem *per se* in a review. But as a reviewer, I also have to consider the reactions of my readers—and of the author. For example, I reviewed Lavie Tidhar’s *A Man Lies Dreaming* (2014) for the *Guardian*, and Lavie, who is a friend of mine, messaged me to complain. It’s a great novel and my review was very positive, but Lavie thought that I gave too much away. Half of the book is set in a concentration camp and half in an alternate reality where Adolf Hitler, instead of becoming the leader of Germany, works as a private eye in a kind of noir 1930s Britain. There is sort of a twist in the novel that I mention in the review. I didn’t think it was an issue because it’s only halfway through, but Lavie was

pretty upset. He told me that I've spoiled his book for people who've read the review.

Obviously not everyone agrees with that. But when I review a novel or a film, I have to be able to say *something* about it, and there's such sensitivity to the issue. For example, I recently reviewed Geoff Ryman's *HIM* (2023). It's a novel about Christ set in first-century Judea. Its basic conceit is that Christ is biologically born a woman but becomes a trans man. You could probably call that a twist, but when I reviewed it, I couldn't *not* mention it, because if I don't, nothing else I might say about the book makes sense. If you can't discuss that, there is no review. But once I've mentioned it in the review, you might think I kind of spoiled the book. But then again, I don't consider this to be a problem. There might be no surprise anymore, but it's still a powerfully written novel.

My impression is that something has fundamentally changed when it comes to spoilers. Is this also your impression?

There has certainly been a shift with the advent of streaming. Now people all over the world can access a show at the same time. And that leads to different time frames. Some people have seen the new show and want to talk about it, others haven't and don't want it to be spoiled. And they are all on social media.

There was a British TV comedy show called *WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE LIKELY LADS?* (UK 1973–1974, Creator: James Gilbert and Bernard Thompson) about these two Northern men. And in one of the episodes—*NO HIDING PLACE* (S01E07, UK 1973, Director: James Gilbert)—they're going to watch a football match on TV later that night. It's already over, but they don't want to know the score. But everyone else has seen the game and is talking about it. So they're constantly trying to avoid it. They go to a pub, and then people start talking about football, which means they have to run out of the pub. This becomes a kind of comic routine in its own right, but they can avoid it because they can leave. It's all physical spaces. It's much harder to do that when you're in an online environment.

Has this development influenced your own work? Do you write reviews differently than fifteen or twenty years ago? Or do editors tell you not to spoil anything?

I don't think so. I am part of the science fiction fandom, and most of the reviews I do are of science fiction books and films. And I don't think much

has changed in the science fiction community. There has always been a sense among science fiction fans that spoilers are a bad thing and are frowned upon.

What about your teaching? Do your students complain about spoilers?

I mostly teach nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, especially Romanticism and Victorianism. For me, the problem isn't with spoilers, but with students actually reading the books. When they haven't read the whole book yet, they can be uncomfortable about the fact that we discuss the whole novel, and it will spoil the ending for them. But they're probably a bit compromised because they know that they should have finished the novel.

But then again, if we're reading Jane Austen, there's not much to spoil, really. The six novels she wrote all end the same way. Does anyone wonder when reading *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) if the couple will get together? You know that they will. That's the point of a Jane Austen novel.

You said that the fear of spoilers has a long tradition in science fiction fandom. And this is confirmed by research showing that the spoiler discourse first emerged in science fiction fandom in the late 1970s. Why do you think that is?

I am not sure. There are whodunits, like Agatha Christie novels, and I would say that they do not provide the same pleasure in rereading as a Jane Austen or Charles Dickens novel. Because here, everything depends upon the puzzle. It's sort of like a crossword. No one does the same crossword puzzle twice. Once you've solved the clue, that's the pleasure. I've worked that out! But it would of course undo your pleasure in the puzzle if there was somebody leaning over your shoulder telling you the answers before you have a chance to work them out yourself. Is that what a 'spoiler' is, in its purest form? Still, most literature is more than just a puzzle to be solved.

Science fiction, on the other hand, depends on a novelty, a surprise, what science fiction scholar Darko Suvin calls a *novum*. And working through that surprise is kind of integral to what science fiction does. So you could argue that there is a structural similarity between the classic crime novel and science fiction, which would explain why many science fiction fans consider spoiling a problem. But I don't really believe that. I would actually say that the genres are fundamentally different.

In what way?

Linda Hutcheon makes the argument that the crime novel is an epistemological form. It is about knowledge and about finding things out. Science fiction, on the other hand, is an ontological idiom: you are creating a world that's

different from our world. And these two modes, the epistemological and the ontological, aren't really compatible. It's no coincidence that there isn't a long tradition of science fiction whodunits. Isaac Asimov famously wrote some—*The Caves of Steel* (1954), *The Naked Sun* (1957)—and some of my own novels also fall in this space, but these examples do not belong to the core of the genre.

What you're trying to give the reader in a whodunit is that they are going to test themselves on your puzzle. They want to know who the murderer is. There are half a dozen people, it could be any of them, and the reader wonders if they can put the clues together. If they can guess who the murderer is, then you've failed, because you've made it too easy. But if it's too hard, if they couldn't possibly guess it, that's also frustrating. So what you're aiming for is somewhere in the middle. Where you reveal who the murderer is, and the reader goes "Ah, I see, that makes sense." A very particular textual strategy is required to get to that point. You tell a story, and you have to hint at things so that the reader can start to piece together a story behind the story. But that's actually a misdirection, and there has to be another story behind the misdirected story. It is like a conjuring trick.

I have written a number of science fiction whodunits, including one called *Jack Glass*. In this novel, I say at the beginning that the murderer is Jack Glass. It's in three parts with three separate murders, and each time the murderer is the same person, but it's a surprise each time you find out. That was a particular kind of trick I was trying to pull off, a sort of extended structural exercise in misdirection. It's not something that could be spoiled, because I tell the reader at the beginning who the murderer is. But in another sense, it is something that could be spoiled, because there is a different way in which the reveal of the murderer's identity is a surprise each time.

So, would you say that science fiction normally does not use this kind of misdirection?

When I teach science fiction, I sometimes use Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy to explain the genre's specific quality. Metonymy is horizontal, it is a connective process. You go from A to B, from B to C, from C to D. That's the logic of narrative: it connects things. And this is, I suppose, relevant to spoiler culture, because one of the things that we don't want spoiled is what happens next in the story. We do want to find that out ourselves.

While the metonymic is about horizontal connections, metaphor, according to Jakobson, is vertical: it's the action of a simile. The moment where

something changes into something else. And I find that this is key to science fiction: it is what makes the genre so wonderful. Jakobson describes it as a poetic gesture. I have written about that moment in *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* (UK/US 1968, Director: Stanley Kubrick,), when the ape man throws the bone into the sky, the camera pans up with its ascent and then, just at its apogee, the film match-cuts to a spaceship in orbit around the Earth (**fig. 1a-b**). To me, this is one of the essential science fiction moments. I find that very beautiful and affecting. But it is a kind of poetic image. It is a way of bringing something unexpected, something novel into the world.

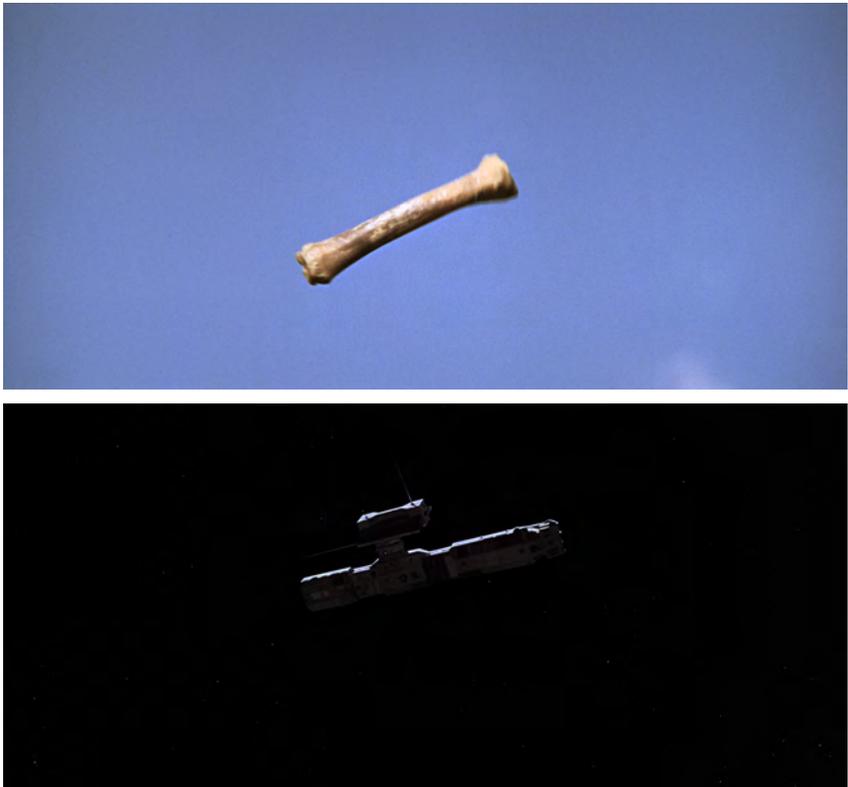


Fig. 1a-b: The famous match cut in *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY*

In *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649), Descartes praises surprise as the highest pleasure of the soul: “l’admiration est une subite surprise de l’âme, qui fait qu’elle se porte à considérer avec attention les objets qui lui semblent rares et

extraordinaires” (41). Admiration: *Wunder*, “wonder,” the miraculous novelty. Yet the discourse around spoilers suggests that it is also extraordinarily fragile, that even a hint of compromising this unexpectedness will collapse it.

But I don’t know if I agree with him. Science fiction’s ‘sense of wonder’ is something I prize highly, but it does not depend upon unexpectedness and is not harmed by spoilers. The ‘wonder’ I feel when I contemplate a night-time sky resplendent with stars, when I think of the sheer scale of the cosmos—this is not a surprise to me. I know it already; that doesn’t prevent me from experiencing it, in its fullness.

If science fiction is essentially a poetic mode, wouldn’t that mean that it is more or less immune to spoiling? After all, you can’t really spoil a poem.

I guess that’s right. It’s the structure of the metaphor which is not about *knowing* things.

So I am not really sure why spoilers are so important to science fiction fans. Maybe—and I am generalizing here without any empirical evidence—it has more to do with the fans than with the actual texts. This is a community that loves science fiction and engages with its texts in a way that I find very interesting. There are many things about fans that also mark out a scholar. Many fans manifest impressive levels of expertise about their favorite books, films, or shows. I know DOCTOR WHO (UK 1963– , Creator: Sydney Newman, C. E. Webber and Donald Wilson) fans who know everything about the show, every single episode, all the stories and cast, the making-of. And in some fandom engagements with science fiction there is a particular focus on consistency and world building. Everything has to fit together, and inconsistencies have to be explained away.

DOCTOR WHO is interesting in this regard, because the main character can go anywhere in space and time in his magic blue box. So the premise is non-sequential. You can pop back into the history, go into the future, you can go anywhere you want. But the *storytelling* is still sequential and relies upon suspense. A recent story arc (2008–13), running through episodes including the Tenth Doctor (played by David Tennant), the Eleventh (Matt Smith), and the Twelfth (Peter Capaldi), involved a character called River Song (played by Alex Kingstone). She first appears to Tennant’s Doctor, and he doesn’t know who she is. The idea is that she has travelled from the Doctor’s future back in time. Which means she knows stuff that is going to happen to him that he doesn’t know. And whenever he asks her about what’s going to happen in the future, or for some explanation of what’s going on, she says “No spoilers.” That’s the phrase she uses. In effect, she says: “I can’t tell you that. You have

to live your life like a sort of story. You can't have it spoiled.” Obviously, this is a nod to the whole spoiler discussion in science fiction fandom, but given the nature of the DOCTOR WHO universe, it is radically incoherent. Because there can *be* no surprise anyway if you can travel everywhere through time and space. The very premise of DOCTOR WHO is non-linear.

But maybe that is a much more metonymic way of approaching the text, so to speak, which would at least partly explain why spoilers become a problem again.

There is also the fact that not all fans have the same attitude toward spoilers. While many fans try to avoid them at all costs, some actively seek them out. They don't want anything unexpected to happen, but rather try to soften the shock. They want to be prepared when Luke Skywalker dies.

That's fascinating, isn't it? It leads to the question of why and under what conditions suspense or shock and surprise are pleasurable. I suppose they are not universally pleasurable. Indeed, I suppose for some people they are rather anxiety-producing. It can be distressing not to know what is going to happen. I can relate to that to some extent. For example, I consider *rereading* a greater pleasure than reading something for the first time. I have to read so much new stuff, to review, to judge literary prizes, to keep up with what's happening, that it squeezes the time I have to reread stuff. But really, I prefer the latter.

Rereading is, of course, the essential fan activity. The first time you read a novel, or watch a show, you don't know that you're a fan. That only comes when you are familiar with the text, the work. And a true fan will reread. If you're a Tolkien fan, you reread *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) or rewatch the Peter Jackson movies many times.

There is also the point that many texts are predictable anyway. We know that in ninety percent of all Hollywood movies, the good guys will win, the hero will save the day, the lovers will get together.

I am currently finishing a first draft of a history of the fantasy genre, which means I've been reading lots of fantasy. I have reread many books, but I have also been reading a lot of commercially-produced fantasy. There was a huge boom in the 1980s and 1990s; lots of imitations, books that are basically plagiarizing or rewriting Tolkien. There are long series of fantasy books in which each installment is just another turn of the same wheel. For example, the *Dragonlance* novels. There are hundreds of them, and they're all essentially the same novel, with only superficial differences; the same structure, similar characters, similar kinds of adventures. Here, the satisfaction is obviously not surprise. This is about knowing what you like and wanting the same thing

again. There is also an argument about commodification in there, I suppose. You could make a sort of Adorno-Horkheimer argument about the malign side to that. But I think there is also something psychological in it. It is pleasurable to do things over and over again.

Like telling a child the same story over and over again.

Exactly. Children want to hear the same bedtime story again and again. And if you change even a word, they'll complain bitterly.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud talks about the “*fort/da*” game. He was observing his grandchild in his cot, alone (the child did not know he was being observed), playing a game he had invented. It involved a little spindle on a thread. The child would throw the spindle away, out of his cot, and shout “*fort*”—“gone”—and then pull it back, hug it to himself and shout “*da*,”—“there.” And Freud notes that it’s not just the spindle that was gone, but the boy’s mother. The child is anxious because she’s gone, and the game is replaying this separation anxiety in symbolic form, so that the child has, as it were, psychic control over the circumstance. Throwing the spindle away is surprising, a kind of novelty, an adventure, but the greater satisfaction was when the kid pulls the spindle back and hugs it to himself; “*da*”, there, back. That’s the real satisfaction. It’s not the surprise, not the unexpected thing. It’s the return.

And this game is then played over and over and over again, which is what we’re talking about. It’s the kind of repetitiveness of the movies Hollywood produces. The way that it’s just the same movie over and over again. We all know it’s gonna come back. And the real satisfaction is that it’s there: *da*.

Isn't that the opposite of what you originally said? You started with the argument that there's nothing that can be spoiled because we know what's going to happen. But now it's the other way around: it can only be spoiled because it's always the same.

It’s a two-part thing, isn’t it? The *fort/da* structure is there and back again. Children’s literature is full of it. The subtitle of *The Hobbit* (1937) is “There and Back Again.” I can see in a sort of Freudian way: you want to go out on an adventure, but you also want to come home again. You want the satisfaction of *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), where Max, the boy, goes to far lands and sees exciting monsters, but ultimately, he wants to come home (**fig. 2a–b**). He wants his mother to love him again. It’s not a spoiler to say that the “*da*” is part of the “*fort/da*” game.



Fig. 2a–b: *Where the Wild Things Are*

I sometimes wonder ... The child plays the game over and over again, because he's both excited and anxious about being separated from the mother, about being cast out into the world—this is growing up, in the largest sense. And he's kind of symbolically controlling that and bringing it back. But he has to do it again and again, because he's *reassuring* himself. Because, fundamentally, we *don't* come back from the final cast of the spindle over the side of the cot. That's not the nature of our mortal reality.

So, the fear of spoilers is basically us grappling with our own mortality?

I'm being a bit morbid now, aren't I? But it's true. I may not know what's going to happen next week or next month, but I know that I will die eventually, that I'm mortal. We all are aware of that. And our mortality is horrifying in its inevitability, but it's also something that we're always trying to distract ourselves from. You couldn't live your life constantly dwelling on the fact that we're all going to die.

I wonder if *that's* the real spoiler. That's the affront the spoiler represents, the thing people object to: being reminded of their own mortality. There is something tragic about that. We don't want to die; we want to carry on. So Sherlock Holmes falls off the Reichenbach Falls, but then he has to come back: *fort, da*. Or characters die in a STAR WARS movie and then come back; everything is recycled and reborn.

Isn't this also a question of an entertainment industry that, as you mentioned before, prefers to recycle the same stories over and over again?

There is that as well. It's really fascinating that we become more and more locked into a commodified culture of absolute repetition. But at the same time, we say that we want surprise and novelty, and we object to the idea that it will be taken away from us by a spoiler.

It's interesting that mass entertainment has not always worked this way. There is an afterword in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), Charles Dickens's last completed novel. The novel is based on a mystery. A man who is supposed to have drowned is actually not dead, but has just assumed another identity. The drowned body belongs to someone else. This is revealed about two thirds of the way through the novel. In the afterword, Dickens says that it occurred to him that his readers might think he was trying to conceal what seemed obvious to him from the very beginning—that this character is not dead. In the afterword he says:

When I devised this story, I foresaw the likelihood that a class of readers and commentators would suppose that I was at great pains to conceal exactly what I was

at great pains to suggest: namely, that Mr John Harmon was not slain, and that Mr John Rokesmith was he. Pleasing myself with the idea that the supposition might in part arise out of some ingenuity in the story, and thinking it worth while, in the interests of art, to hint to an audience that an artist (of whatever denomination) may perhaps be trusted to know what he is about in his vocation, if they will concede him a little patience, I was not alarmed by the anticipation. (776)

We can see that Dickens was not interested in the puzzle or conjuring-trick element that later became the core of the whodunit. He is interested in mystery, but here he’s saying the kind of mystery he is writing is immune to the spoiler.

There’s also the famous example of *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), an early novel by Dickens. The main character is a pure, innocent girl called Little Nell, and toward the end of the book, there’s the question of whether she will live or die. The book was originally released as a serial, and people were so eager to find out what was going to happen, that when the packet ships came across from Britain carrying the latest installments of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, readers gathered on the pier at New York and shouted to the ships “Does she live?” They *wanted to find out*. And that’s a natural human thing: you want to find out what happens next. Does that suggest spoilers weren’t an issue back then? The tension of not knowing what will happen to Little Nell is pleasurable, in the sense that it keeps us reading the story to find out. But there clearly came a point at which that tension became so great as to become unpleasurable, painful. These readers are no longer looking to the text itself; they just want to know. They *want* the story spoiled.

The dislike of spoilers, if extrapolated, suggests a dislike of consummation as such. I think of W. S. Jevons—to stay in the Victorian era—and his analysis of pleasure in his *Theory of Political Economy*:

Benthani has stated, that one of the main elements in estimating the force of a pleasure or pain is its propinquity or remoteness. It is certain that a very large part of what we experience in life depends not on the actual circumstances of the moment, so much as on the anticipation of future events. As Mr. Bain says, “the foretaste of pleasure is pleasure begun: every actual delight casts before it a corresponding ideal.” Everyone must have felt that the enjoyment actually experienced at any moment is but limited in amount, and usually fails to answer to the great anticipations which have been formed. “Man never is but always to be blest” is a correct description of our ordinary state of mind; and there is little doubt that, in minds of much intelligence and foresight, the greatest force of feeling and motive is what arises from the anticipation of the future. (33–34)

But this becomes paradoxical. If anticipation of a pleasure is more pleasurable than the pleasure, then why would we read anything? Why spoil your anticipation by engaging in the pleasure at all? Keats had it right: we must “burst

joy's grape against our palate fine" to experience joy. It can't be forever in the offering.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung. (127)

Filmography

DOCTOR WHO. Creator: Sydney Newman, C. E. Webber and Donald Wilson. UK 1963– .
WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE LIKELY LADS? Creator: James Gilbert and Bernard Thompson. UK 1973–1974.
WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE LIKELY LADS? S01E07: NO HIDING PLACE. Director: James Gilbert. UK 1973.

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