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Spoiler Warnings: Negotiating Originality, Genre Expectation, and the Enjoyments of Repetition

Literary criticism tends to return again and again to a few central points of complicated negotiations and contentious debates: the role of the poet as originator or conduit; the emotional or edifying effects on the audience; and the role of art as reflecting or imagining reality. There is substantial value in the question of the *mirror* or the *lamp*, as M. H. Abrams shorthanded the contrast between the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth xvii) that dominated the Romantic poetic imagination as opposed to George Eliot's microscope metaphor for the close observation and reflection of Victorian realist fiction.[1] But even the most ardent supporters on each side clearly understood that both aspects were required and necessary. After all, William Wordsworth's poet composes in contemplation, relying on emotional memory, on "feelings recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth xvii). Even T. S. Eliot, who describes the poet as a mere catalyst, admits that "[t]here is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate" (Eliot 43). Throughout, however, the authorial text remains central. Aesthetic theory, in its attempts to understand the power and purpose of poetics, may veer towards positioning the agency in the poet (in his genial solitude) or in the influence of historical and cultural contexts, but rarely does any critical philosophical approach focus on the reader as anything more than a receptacle.

In fact, Anglo-American literary education through the latter half of the twentieth century has been dominated by the New Critics, who declare any focus on the reader's emotional responses as an affective fallacy. Poststructural critiques rejected this exclusion of the reader as part of the rhetorical model of reading, and both reception aesthetics and reader response theory began to study and theorize audiences. In the wake of Roland Barthes ("Death" and "From Work") and Michel Foucault, the author seemed to be pushed aside as the central arbiter of textual meaning. The reader who took center stage instead, however, was a stylized reader, by turns deemed competent, ideal, intended, or informed (Culler; Iser, *Implied Reader* and *Act of Reading*; Jauss;

1 For discussions of George Eliot's use of the microscope as a metaphor for writing, see Wormald.

Fish). Like contemporaneous psychoanalytic film theories, these models tended to ultimately be more about the text than the reader: they discussed readers as a function of the texts they studied and analyzed rather than looking at how people were actually reading.[2] By making readers a function of the text rather than acknowledging their specific personal, possibly quite idiosyncratic, agency, reader response criticism continued to privilege the text and, to a degree, the author. It is this focus on the author (or the text as its own entity with certain rights to integrity) at the expense of the reader that I discuss in this essay. Specifically, I focus on the concept of spoilers: of readers sharing specific parts of a text in order to prevent surprise revelations or unexpected emotional reactions. Discussions of spoilers play out against a complex background of differing convictions about the purpose of art, its relationship to reality, and its responsibility to its readers. In so doing, debates surrounding spoilers ultimately reveal a lot about competing models of reading.

Spoilers

Debates about spoilers tend to collapse aesthetic and ethical concerns; spoilers are often conceptualized as leading to an inferior, if not deficient, *aesthetic* experience. This gives substantial power to the authors/creators who envision a specific audience experience that can be marred by spoilers. But spoilers are also considered unacceptable in a more nebulous *ethical* sense, as if they were somehow harming readers. Looking up "to spoil" in the OED, we go back to the fourteenth century, with dozens of variations of violent encounters, in which the assailant may strip, plunder, ravish, and pillage. Contemporary use tends to be more metaphorical, but the damage remains substantial, offering synonyms such as destroy, ruin, and invalidate. We spoil/destroy a tasty dish when we add too much salt; we spoil/ruin a wedding by making an embarrassing scene; we spoil/invalidate a ballot by not filling it out properly. Those are some high stakes, and they place the person who spoils into the role of aggressor and position the act of spoiling as a morally suspect one—something one ought not to do! Furthermore, if the act of spoiling is aesthetically and ethically suspect, what does that say about a person who enjoys

2 While the rise of British Cultural Studies, especially Stuart Hall's model of the incorporation/resistance paradigm, helped to establish audience and fan studies (Hall), those theories tended to focus almost exclusively on popular cultural texts, such as youth magazines (McRobbie), romances (Modleski; Radway), fan fiction (Jenkins; Bacon-Smith), soap operas (Ang; Harrington and Bielby), or pornography (Williams; Kipnis).

spoiling and being spoiled? I am such a person. I love spoilers! I actively seek them out. I enjoy a text more when knowing key events. Nevertheless, far from trying to convince anyone of my position or preferences, I merely want to challenge the apparent truism that spoilers are *ipso facto* bad. Different ways of reading, watching, and listening are not inherently good or bad; no approach is aesthetically or ethically superior.

This essay explores negotiations between readers and writers and discusses the ethical and aesthetic values we attach to their expected (and actual) interactions. Discourses surrounding spoilers often rely on aesthetic values that privilege certain types of texts, namely those that value authenticity, originality, and genuine surprise. Moreover, the discourses surrounding spoilers often rely on a reading process that privileges the author/auteur in favor of the reader/viewer. Obviously, authors control *what* readers see, but continuing debates over interpretations indicate that there is a clear desire to also control *how* readers see. So, beyond my desire to speak up for readers who want familiarity, like rereading, enjoy genre tropes, and prefer accessing a text randomly and not necessarily linearly, I also suggest that there is a form of power struggle embedded in this conversation. Many contemporary readers want to control *if* and *when* and *how* they engage with a text. As such, I look at the ever-growing popularity of tags as metadata: serving as trigger and content warnings, but also as categorization and advertising tools.

In the following, using Gérard Genette's concept of paratexts, I regard paratextual material as forms of spoilers that need not ruin or destroy but instead may facilitate and enhance audience enjoyment. (1) I begin with a brief look at historical theories of authorship and their far-reaching philosophical, aesthetic, and legal influences. Ideas of authority and originality are particularly fraught in the context of generic tropes and repetition, and I suggest that such literary frameworks may not fully work in particular genres and traditions. (2) Genre and fan fiction are especially reliant on contextually shared awareness and knowledge, including a clear reader/writer contract that is often acknowledged in paratextual materials. (3) Fan fiction fans have been experimenting with paratextual content clues such as headers and tagging systems for decades, and their discussions, especially surrounding trigger warnings and content notes, address many of the concerns raised in spoiler discourses. (4) Ultimately, I suggest that desiring tags, warnings, or spoilers are all means through which readers control their reading experience. And if taking control comes at the expense of a surprise twist or shocking moment, I, for one, find that trade well worthwhile.

Originalgenie

Let me start with a brief overview of how the role of the author was established and reified over the past two centuries, and how this development was far from disinterested.[3] In fact, the invention of the author as an aesthetic, economic, and legal category was deeply tied in with shifting perceptions of personhood, patronage, and notions of originality and authenticity. While not all writing before the eighteenth century was collective or anonymous, the relationship between an author and their work underwent substantial changes during that time: a different understanding of the artist caused and necessitated different models of ownership, which, in turn, required new aesthetic and legal understandings of creative works. In the previous world of patronage, artists received financial support to create works for their patrons, and the notion of art was mostly understood as a craft, often collective, and divinely inspired (Pease; Bennett; Minnis). In contrast, eighteenth-century artists began to be positioned as engaging with the world in particular ways which, in turn, allowed them to elevate their work from mere craftsmanship into art.

With changing market economies and a rapidly rising middle-class readership, the eighteenth-century writers increasingly started living off their works—and thus demanded legal protection and economic reimbursement. This new understanding of artistic production was most eloquently (and far from objectively) articulated by British Romantic and Poet Laureate William Wordsworth in his aesthetic theory of imagination and originality. Wordsworth acknowledges external stimuli and inspiration, yet according to his model, the poet is vital in creating and shaping the artistic work: the poetic genius is "the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe" ("Essay" 104). Wordsworth clearly privileges thinking and writing that is radically new and different, that is original rather than transformative of older ideas. This thinking represents the zeitgeist: Germany's *Sturm und Drang* period likewise elevated the concept of the *Originalgenie* as the paradigm of creativity. Viewing authors as original, autonomous, and rebellious is strikingly self-serving: the artwork becomes an abstract object that, according to these changing aesthetic theories, possesses its own aesthetic value and ideal interpretation, as well as entailing its proper form of reception and ideal audience.

3 For an expanded version of this argument, see Busse, "Return of the Author."

Moreover, these aesthetic theories cause and require shifts in legal and economic approaches to art as well. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno juxtaposes Romantic ideology and Enlightenment philosophy with earlier artistic practices where material was easily repurposed. He connects the historical concept of originality and its socio-economic impacts, describing originality as "enmeshed in historical injustice, in the predominance of bourgeois commodities that must touch up the ever-same as the ever-new in order to win customers" (226). In other words, for authors to earn a livelihood from their artistic works, they needed an aesthetic theory that would assign originality to their ideas. In an age, *pace* Walter Benjamin, that increasingly afforded artists the ability of mechanical reproduction, it became incumbent on artists, especially authors, to safeguard their livelihood by creating legal protections in the form of copyright laws (Woodmansee; Biagioli et al.; Dobranski). Copyright offers authors a way to establish ownership over their words and, with artistic works becoming a commodity that can be owned and sold, a means to a livelihood. In an era that foregrounds the individual and their rights and abilities, the concepts of original genius and intellectual copyright are clearly enticing and mutually supportive. To theoretically justify ownership of their literary creations, authors become the sole creators and owners of their words and the law of author's rights is established as a natural law. Not incidentally, Wordsworth was a central proponent of copyright in Great Britain (Rose; Swartz 192), thus illuminating the close connections between the *legal* notion of copyright, the *economic* notion of the ownership of ideas, and the *artistic* notion of the original genius.

Repetition

Different periods of literary and philosophical thought place different emphases on the respective roles of originality and repetition, yet modern aesthetics continue to privilege the artistic genius. This obsession with originality as a prime attribute of artistic excellence casts a long shadow: we remain in an aesthetic landscape that all but dismisses types of creativity that do not rely on originality, instead favoring repetition and transformation. In that vein, complexity of plots and characters are often regarded as functions of quality and, in turn, familiarity and repetition tend to be relegated to mythology, folktales, or fairy tales, and or often dismissed as generic and clichéd. And yet, repetition is central to creative works on the linguistic and narrative level:

> Complete originality, with all familiar and recognizable narrative conventions removed, may engender a narrative so incomprehensible that the reader cannot understand, let alone aesthetically appreciate it; in contrast, stories that employ familiar themes and narratives establish a groundwork of comprehension within which they then can challenge or subvert these shared paradigms. (Busse, *Framing* 133)

I contend that all these components are closely intertwined and ultimately affect the way we think of spoilers: modern conceptions of authorship; aesthetic value judgments that privilege originality; and the dismissal of popular literatures and genre writing.

Focusing on genre and tropes rather than surprises and plot twists requires a very different way of looking at the act of reading. In fact, it is not incidental that the scholars who have most forcefully pushed the study of readers and viewers are primarily concerned with popular and mass culture. Genre literature lends itself to more holistic approaches that trace similarities among a larger set of texts, most importantly explored in structuralist approaches.[4] Examining shared character types, successful plot lines and popular settings is a useful tool for audience studies. Audience studies often focus on large-scale reception in lieu of specific close readings of a particular text, and thus encourage the study of genres and their related tropes. This is important for identifying characteristics of popular works, thus creating models that can be explored and analyzed but also disrupted, challenged, and subverted. In other words, if we do not know which tropes are being questioned, a text's original engagement remains somewhat invisible. Or, to put it more bluntly: only through the repetition of words, phrases, images, and tropes does a text's originality become meaningful.

One large and fertile subfield of audience studies focuses on fan fiction communities. Fan fiction produces transformative works, primarily based on popular audiovisual texts and published mostly for a dedicated community of fellow fans. Such communities offer a large number of writers and readers who create works that enhance, criticize, and transform popular culture texts while sidestepping most financial restraints that plague other published art.[5]

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4 For structuralist approaches to folktales and genre texts, see Propp; Cawelti; Todorov; Altman.

5 Before the age of digital self-publication, fanzines were among the few outlets of artistic expression not curtailed by capitalist market forces. For the role of fanzines in the development of media fandom, see Jenkins; Bacon-Smith; Verba. For the role of economics in fan culture, see Stanfill and Condis; Busse "Feminism and Fandom"; DeKosnik; Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom*.

Within literary studies, fan fiction stories, just like genre fiction, are less seen as literary texts in their own right and more as cultural artifacts that tell us something about the communities that write, share, and read the stories. A genre approach to fan fiction with a focus on tropes and elements of repetition offers various directions for studying audiences. For one, it showcases the role of interpretive communities and offers models through which specific ideas or interpretations of the source texts are disseminated. Moreover, it illustrates the role of feedback and shared creation of artistic artifacts. Finally, and for this essay most importantly, it challenges many of our traditional ideas of originality.

The fan experience is all about repetition. Fans re-watch favorite shows to get to all the nuances, but they also re-watch simply because they enjoy reviewing certain scenes and spending time with favorite characters. Fan fiction celebrates repetition on all levels: its *raison d'être* is a repeat engagement with the worlds and characters. For Francesca Coppa, the repeated retelling of the same story, ever so slightly different, situates fan fiction closer to drama than fiction: "in literary terms, fan fiction's repetition is strange; in theatre, stories are retold all the time" ("Writing Bodies" 229). Like in theater, the script is only the starting point; like in theater, the actual performance, the specific implementation and reimagining, matters. We are happy to see Hamlet as a US college student and Faust in the twenty-first century. Likewise, a Marvel fan may enjoy Thor working as a barista or Bucky Barnes as an Iraq war veteran.[6]

In their interpretive and analytic encounters, fans will return to a particular moment in the source, telling the story over and over again, playing out every possible minor variation, feeling, and response. For fans, there can never be just one story; instead, fans want the same moment explored in many different ways. Fan fiction means variations on a theme, repetition with a difference. It means an ever-widening body of works, which continuously interact with and comment on the source text and its copious fannish engagements. Abigail Derecho encompasses all these qualities in her description of fan fiction as "archontic," "a term [she borrows] from Jacques Derrida's definition of archives as ever expanding and never completely closed" ("Archontic Literature" 61).

This constantly evolving self-reflexive corpus of fan creations likewise requires a revision of the concept of genre as it relates to fan fiction. Rather than

6 On re-reading, see also Dana Steglich's chapter.

thinking of genre as a fixed taxonomical system inherent in a text, more recent approaches understand genre as a constructed and ever-shifting category created in the interplay between producers, audiences, and cultural contexts.[7] What that means is that interpretations of texts shift with context and with readers, that personal and cultural context as well as industry marketing and circulation may indeed shape generic expectations. Fandom, of course, complicates the producer paratext/audience reception dichotomy, because roles and modes of engagement shift constantly in fandom: most fans are creators, readers, and critics in turn, and fan works are assigned to genres, tropes, categories by all the participants. Thus, generic categorization occurs via a folksonomy with fans as creators, recommenders, feedbackers, and readers.

Header and Tags

Where paratextual material offers the reader a host of information before even beginning a story, generic tropes create expectations throughout the text that the reader assumes will be fulfilled, at least to an extent. Genre categories offer readers and viewers directions in several ways: they give us clues for how to understand the text; they guide reader expectation; they offer pleasure in familiarity and fulfilled expectations; and they enable us to anticipate plot and characterization, whether by fulfilling or defying genre categories. This is a difficult concept to grasp for literary scholars, who often approach genre writing as formulaic and tropes as clichés. In fan fiction, however, generic tropes are a feature, not a bug. Genre and generic tropes are one of the central building blocks of fan fiction and fannish discourses. Accordingly, fan communities were early adapters and adopters (if not actual inventors) of robust paratextual tagging conventions that have recently spilled over into parts of professional fiction. In fact, many of the conversations we are now seeing on book sites and in academic contexts are debates that roiled fan communities a decade or more ago. Historically, fan fiction started formalizing certain shared conventions during the zine days of the 1970s and 1980s, a process that became more uniform in the 1990s, when fan fiction moved online.

Fandom tags have always functioned as both warning and advertisement. In Star Trek fan fiction fandom, fans hotly debated whether Kirk and Spock were friends or lovers. In response, fans used a virgule between Kirk/Spock,

7 For examples from film and television studies using this approach to genre, see Naremore; Mittell; Stein. For a more complex genre approach to literature, see Wilkins et al.

and the term *slash* became shorthand for homosexual pairings.[8] In her essay on trigger warnings, Alexis Lothian describes how

> warnings functioned as an author-led system of identification, flagging sexually explicit content with keep-out signs allowing the uninterested to avoid the uncomfortable, while also marking the entryway to secret worlds of erotic kinship. (745–46)

Fan writers and publishers clearly identified their zines not only with fandom and central characters or pairings, but also declared whether the content was adult or not and whether it was hetero- or homosexual. In so doing, they allowed readers to make an informed decision. Fans who enjoyed the gay sexual content and wanted to read the Kirk/Spock slash stories created their own subcultural communities.[9] At the same time, others could easily avoid material they preferred not to read. When fandom moved online in the late 1980s and early 1990s, fannish conventions and early internet conventions for Usenet *alt.sex* communities cross-connected to establish fairly standardized fan fiction headers. In her study of early internet fan fiction communities, Abigail Derecho points out "how significant this first group was in terms of setting up templates and rules and precedents that other online groups followed" (*Illegitimate Media* 146–47).

By the turn of the millennium, headers had become standardized across large swaths of online fan fiction fandom, featuring fandom, title, author, rating, and, most importantly, additional content notes. The Star Trek fan fiction site *Trekiverse.org*, for example, suggested optional content codes, including *angst*, *bd* (bondage), *ds* (dominance and submission), *nc* (noncon-sensual), and *viol* (violence). For every reader who wants to avoid non-con stories (or stories featuring torture or character deaths), there is another reader who searches specifically for such stories. Early archives allowed simple sorting by publication date or author names, but by the late 1990s, fans had created search engines that would allow readers to find stories more easily. The vocabulary was fixed, but it allowed a site-wide search with genre categories and content warnings to include and exclude. During the 2000s the rise of blogs and bookmarking sites increased the popularity of freeform tags:

8 For the role of Star Trek in the development of fan fiction fandom, see Coppa "Brief History." For early extended discussions of Star Trek fan fiction, see Jenkins; Bacon-Smith.

9 Those zines were sold under the table at conventions and required proof of age from buyers. The con panels discussing these stories were put on late in the evening only, and not all slash zines made it through customs when they were shipped internationally.

while a limited vocabulary provided potential tags and facilitated searches, freeform tags allowed creators to make up any tag, however idiosyncratic.

When a group of fans came together in 2007 to create the multi-fannish fan works archive *An Archive of Our Own* (*AO3*),[10] they agreed on a complex tagging system with a robust inclusion/exclusion search function that uses both standardized mandatory and freeform voluntary tags. The archive requires mandatory tags, comparable to the traditional story header: fandom, pairing, characters, rating, warnings. Additionally, however, users can add modifiers as user-generated freeform tags. Where fixed taxonomies limit users to pre-established categories, folksonomies suffer from a lack of consensus, which makes them difficult to organize. In order to maintain a shared, fixed base vocabulary while also permitting user creativity in tags, *AO3* uses a curated folksonomy that mixes user-defined and controlled vocabulary (Johnson; Fiesler et al; Bullard). Volunteers organize the tags into existing structures: tags with the same meaning are internally connected and sorted into hierarchical structures. Writers thus have all the freedom of a folksonomy while the system nevertheless retains some of the hierarchical structures and search abilities of a proper taxonomy.

This dual system allows readers to micromanage their reading preferences by including and excluding desired categories and tags. In fact, fandom often organizes itself through tags (Busse, "Fan Fiction Tropes"). Different interpretive communities may choose specific tags to indicate their interpretive framework. In Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) fandom, *shrinkyclinks* is a fannish shorthand tag for Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes that specifically pairs a pre-super-serum Steve with the Winter Soldier. Likewise, content tags can function as a conceptual framework that guides reading and understanding. For example, the tag *they live in avenger's tower and everything is happy and good* tends to suggest a particular dynamic among the Avengers, where they all cohabitate in Stark Tower. To an MCU fan fiction reader, this tag indicates not just a particular moment in the canon, it also suggests a specific tone and general approach to the characters. Seeing this tag, I would expect no major character death, no rape/dubcon, no extreme violence, but possibly some

10 *AO3* is part of the nonprofit Organization for Transformative Works (OTW), whose other projects include a legal, academic, and historical framework to study and preserve fan cultures. *AO3* is the result of a conscious effort to create a platform that could not be censored or deleted by commercial entities and that was free of advertising and its potential influence. In late 2025, *AO3* hosts about 15 million works about 75K fandoms with more than 8.5 million registered users. For the early days of *AO3*, see Coppa, "An Archive."

fannishly shared characterizations, such as a Pop-Tart-eating Thor. That is to say, tags carry specific connotations that are often used to indicate particular interpretive communities with a network of intersecting interpretations.

Trigger Warnings

When we look at actual fan fiction headers on *AO3*, we see a number of mandatory tags that every fan work must fill in before publication: fandom, rating, characters, and relationships, if applicable, which are all pre-established categories. It is in the additional tags, however, where content and trigger warnings become important. It's also clear how a tag may serve both as ad and warning: many tags may simultaneously draw in or repel different readers (or even the same reader depending on their moods). Even though the format of header conventions has not changed much in the past two decades, the same cannot be said for their functions. Whereas warning labels used to be understood as a polite way to signal to readers potentially fraught topics, they are now seen as a mandatory accessibility requirement enabling readers to avoid potential triggers.[11] Drawing from PTSD terminology, the conversation has moved from issues of preference and readerly comfort to mental health concerns: if a story does not list clear triggers, then the writer consciously refuses to create a safe space and thus endangers traumatized readers. Not incidentally, the *AO3* archive, which was designed and coded around the time of these changing tagging conventions, mandates certain warnings, such as underage and non-con but also allows a general "Choose Not to Warn" tag as a sort of compromise for fan writers who want to avoid tagging.[12] It is this tag genealogy that connects tags in fan fiction fandom to trigger warning debates in classrooms and various other online spaces. Ali Vingiano describes how "[t]he phrase [trigger warning] evolved from clinical psychiatry, moved from

11 This shift occurred as part of a more general change within online fannish spaces toward increased awareness of various implicit biases, especially racism, and the responsibilities of fans individually and collectively. Most notably, the 2009 Trigger Warning Debate created extensive meta discussions, in which dozens of fans debated these issues throughout multiple Livejournal posts; see fanlore.org/wiki/Trigger_Warning_Debate_(2009). The discussion pitted the autonomy and rights of the author against the rights of readers, especially those with PTSD triggers.

12 Indeed, writers may quite purposely yield inherent power through their specific header choices as they "manipulate the readers with faulty or obfuscating headers, or by withholding information" (Busse, *Framing* 204).

LiveJournal fan fiction to Tumblr to mainstream media, and eventually ended up on college syllabi."

I find it most useful to think of warning tags as a paratextual way to negotiate the reader/writer contract. Fan fiction fandom has historically been understood as a feminist space, and it is within this context that warning discourses make sense. I mostly draw from the_drifter's discussion, which conceptualizes warning as a request for consent:

> By continuing past cut-tags, headers, and preliminary pages, the reader implicitly consents to what may follow.…As readers, we are responsible for knowing our own limits, our own boundaries, and crossing those limits with forethought and care.

Following this framing of tags as a form of negotiated consent, we can think of the reader-writer contract as risk-aware consensual kink:

> The writer promises that these are the features that the story will contain, and furthermore that it does not contain others that collectively are considered noteworthy. In turn, the reader takes responsibility for her own reading experience when opening the story. (Busse, *Framing*, 208)

As such, most fan fiction that requires warnings tends to be consciously and conscientiously framed: within the story, but also in its paratextual material via tags, content notes, or trigger warnings. What these conversations suggest is that readers may want to spoil a story themselves or come to a book with no knowledge or expectations, but that it is never the author's right to control any of the reader's behavior or reading processes. There clearly are readers and viewers who love spoilers, and offering spaces for them makes them neither wrong nor challenged: it merely indicates different tastes and different approaches to reading, viewing, and enjoyment.

Author-Reader Power Struggle

In the past few years, the complex tagging system of fan fiction has spilled over into formally published fiction due to a variety of changes. More and more published authors come from fan fiction communities and are familiar with the debates surrounding content warnings and headers. The rise of self-publishing forces many authors to create their own PR, often putting them in more direct contact with readers and their desires and demands. Finally, reader-focused websites often offer an external recommendation system that adds tags even when the books themselves do not offer them. Unsurprisingly, many who participate in tagging discussions are authors and readers of genre

fiction, notably young adult (YA) and romance but also science fiction & fantasy (SFF) and mysteries. Romance, especially with its recent expansion into queer love stories, shares a large reader pool with fanfic readers, and recent trends in YA literature have focused intensely on paranormal romance, with many of the best-known authors being current or former fan fiction writers. The same is true in SFF fandom, clearly illustrated by the recent winners of the genre's most prestigious writing awards, such as the Hugo Award (World Science Fiction Convention) and the Nebula Award (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America).[13] The overlap between reading and writing communities and the lessening impact of established publishing companies explain how fannish norms and expectations have moved into these genre fiction spaces.

Meanwhile, many authors do not want to tag their fiction. As with the debates within fan fiction communities a decade earlier, once trigger warnings came to the attention of professional writers, many decried them as destroying their artistic integrity. Colleen Hoover, a beloved writer of often traumatic plotlines in seemingly straightforward romances, wrote a blog post in 2016 empathetically declaring that she does not use trigger warnings and never will. She explains it as follows: "I prefer my readers to go in blind. I write my books in such a way that I feel the majority of people benefit from the reading experience more if they go in blind." In a response blog, fellow author Porter Anderson doubles down in a facetious post where he and most of the commenters mock readers who prefer content warnings, declaring unspoiled readings "good storytelling," "rightful operation of […] authors," more "educated," "art" rather than "entertainment," and allowing for "growth" in the reader. In turn, the desire for content warnings is described as "populist fondness for a safety-netted existence," as "censorship," and repeatedly as childlike, if not childish: "Too many people seem intent on child-proofing the world rather than world-proofing the child (or themselves)." These two posts are basically exemplary of the general sentiments that were ever-present during the mid-2010s when trigger warnings expanded out from feminist and fannish

13 Media fandom tends to describe the primarily female fan communities that develop beginning in the late 1960s in response to Star Trek: The Original Series (US 1966–1969, Creator: Gene Roddenberry). Using knowledge and skills acquired in science fiction fandom, these offshoot fan groups defined themselves as primarily media rather than *book* fans. When the *Archive of Our Own* won the 2019 Hugo Award for Best Related Work, it closed this gap opened fifty years earlier, clearly indicating that the two communities are not entirely separate.

spaces into general academia, journalism, and publishing.[14] In all of those debates, the underlying arguments tended to focus on readers: the questions usually addressed the way tags, spoilers, and trigger warnings would prevent the proper experiences of literary texts including exposure to uncomfortable ideas. There are a range of arguments for the worth of a text—educational value, aesthetic appreciation, intellectual challenge—but pleasure, enjoyment, and comfort are rarely considered worthwhile literary goals.

As the brief quotations above indicate, many opponents of warnings are quick to posit an ethically charged dichotomy between literature, classics, maturity, and learning, on the one hand, and entertainment, safe spaces, pleasure, and ignorance, on the other. Learning, we are told repeatedly, requires exposure to unpleasant and painful ideas; not wanting to be exposed to such depictions without warning, the argument goes, prevents this emotional and intellectual reckoning. Except that this is far from self-evident. After all, to focus briefly on the academic side of the debate, academia thrives on and often requires spoilers. They are our *raison d'être* in many courses, such as introductory or survey classes. We often teach metonymically, picking a representative poem, short story, or excerpt to give a general sense of an author, movement, or literary period.[15] Case in point: I teach Classical Mythology, and I spend a substantial part of my class time spoiling texts for my students! When we start the *Iliad*, they not only need to know the main characters and their interpersonal strife but also the complicated reasons why the gods favor or loathe specific characters or sides. After all, the complex background mythologies would be well-known to those hearing or reading the epic throughout antiquity and beyond. Familiarity with the source material will indeed deepen the enjoyment rather than detract from it, with allusions, characters, or references effectively providing Easter eggs for those in the know. Myth and genre texts share specific reader expectations and a well-defined author-reader contract.

The exaggerated defense of spoiler-free texts is not, in fact, in the service of the reader as much as it is in the service of the author. This is supported in discussions surrounding the *GoodReads* alternative *Storygraph*. This reader-focused website allows readers to track their readings, write reviews, and

14 For some of the conversations surrounding trigger warnings in academia, journalism, and feminist online spaces, see Vigniano; Neutill; Lothian; Knox.

15 Another argument against trigger warnings is their actual feasibility. Triggers can be very specific, if not idiosyncratic, and thus hard to enumerate. This is a problem for those who must decide which potential triggers to list, especially when the absence of a given trigger suggests that a text might be harmless when, in fact, it is not.

collectively tag the books they read. The more users mark a specific warning, the more likely it may indeed be relevant to a potential new reader. For example, Diana Gabaldon's historical time-traveling romance *Outlander* (1991) has over two hundred readers tagging it for rape, but only one reader tagging it for xenophobia. Like any open site, accidents and deliberate mistakes can happen, and some authors have been quite vocal in their dislike of giving readers that much power. Silvia Moreno-Garcia, author of *Mexican Gothic* (2020), points out that reader tags may be "wildly inaccurate. I had someone content warn one of my works for poverty. Another one for animal death (the dog lives)." She adds that trigger warnings are often weaponized against minority writers: "At this point I've written I think *three* threads about how TWs can be weaponized and used against POC by taking works out of context." All of these are valid and important objections, but misrepresented plot points or bad character interpretations are not necessarily a function of tags or trigger warnings as much as they are part and parcel of differing reading skills.

I would like to distinguish between two types of misinterpretations. A *bad* reading is one where the reader fundamentally misunderstands the text—whether they did not read carefully and thus missed obvious context clues, or whether they purposefully misread and misinterpreted the text. In contentious fandom spaces, reactionary and toxic fan readings are intentionally bad readings that ignore content and context to create a shadow straw text, all the easier to destroy and dismiss (Stanfill, "Introduction" and *Fandom is Ugly*). In contrast, a *poor* (or maybe, more accurately, *impoverished*) reading is one where the text itself is lacking. Such a text, which does not afford the reader sufficient information, is ultimately a function of the author, not the reader. It may mean that the text contains layers the author is not aware of or that the author's world building or characterization is not effectively shared in the published text. This is where I want to return to the contentious reader-author relationship. When authors want to control the content of book review sites, they overstep their role. Far from just demanding the book be *read* correctly (i.e., unspoiled, in linear order, not skimming, and with full attention and focus), some authors now demand that it be *interpreted* and *reviewed* correctly as well. Moreover, it is a question of audience: review sites are ultimately by and for readers, and readers do not want to be told when, where, and how to read a book. And yet, it is not coincidental that the largest book review site is owned by the largest bookseller. While most of this essay has been concerned with the relationship between readers and authors, with questions of ethics and aesthetics, we should not forget the intricate interdependency between aesthetic, economic, and legal issues with which I began. The function of

tags within professional fiction may be neither in the hands of readers nor of authors but instead under the control of publishing houses and book sellers. Paratextual material has traditionally been under the purview of publishers, and the future role of that material will be more dependent on sales numbers and income streams than on the aesthetic arguments I have made in this essay.

Filmography

Star Trek: The Original Series. Creator: Gene Roddenberry. US 1966–1969.

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