

Spoilers are for Sports Cars

by

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SPOILER ALERT!

This message at the beginning of a story generally means the author will reveal the details, and perhaps the ending, of a film, television program or book. In this article, it's a much stronger warning. If you spoil a show for me, be alerted that I will be forced to take aggressive action.

You'd best prepare yourself for, at a minimum, a series of painful noogies, followed by a whirly. A whirly, as you may know, is when someone hangs you upside down, plunges your head into the toilet, and flushes. If you think that only bullies in 1978 after-school specials give whirlies, try ruining a movie for me some time.

Why am I such a jerk about it?

For one thing, I'm a writer. The entire profession is based on weaving an entertaining, engaging tale that spurs the viewer on to the next scene, keeping them captivated until that beautiful, final, satisfying plot twist or conclusion. Spoilers destroy that satisfaction.

SPOILER ALERT! (For real, this time.) To illustrate my point I'm going to reveal information about "The Sixth Sense." If you haven't seen it, for goodness' sake, go mow the lawn and come back next month. I'd tell you how this article ends, but...well, you know.

I shall now warn you again, in plenty of time, that I'm about to spoil "The Sixth Sense." [Now this is some Grade A alerting.] If you're still with me, you have already seen the film, or you don't have a lawn and weren't sure what else to do. You've been forewarned. Technically, two-warned, but four warnings certainly wouldn't be a record for me.

The "reveal" moment of "The Sixth Sense" was one of the greatest moments of my life. Before you get out the straight jacket – yes, it comes behind my wedding, the birth of my children, that blonde tennis player in college and a few other key milestones. But somewhere around Number 38 on the Best Moments of Zam's Life list, you'll find the point in time when author M. Night Shyamalan pulled back the curtain to let us know that the Bruce Willis character was in fact, himself, dead people.

I still remember turning my head slowly, mouth agape, to meet the gaze of my wife, who was turning her head slowly, mouth agape, the synapses of both our brains firing madly as we processed the surprise information. I remember thinking at that moment that this was why I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to be able to create that kind of intense emotion in total strangers...to make them laugh and cry, feel anger, experience pure elation.

My friend James Douglas spoiled "The Sixth Sense" for a mutual friend of ours by telling her "He's dead the whole time." Consequently, instead of Number 38 on the Best Moments of Mutual Friend's Life list, the movie doesn't even chart. She doesn't appreciate what she missed, just as James doesn't appreciate what he took away.

When I challenged James on this despicable lapse of judgment, he protested that he "didn't even say which male character."

What?! Did he think Mutual Friend would have naturally assumed Kid #7 from the birthday party scene? Inexcusable. James is a repeat offender. And since he's a little heavy for a whirly, I'll have

to settle for publicly outing him as a serial spoiler. If you're dating James, you might as well break it off now before "X-Men 3" comes out.

Whereas James is a Don't-Care Spoiler, there's a more dangerous kind out there: the Don't-Know Spoiler. These folks think it's okay to tell you that one of the main characters dies, as long as they don't tell you which one, or when. They'll discuss last night's episode of "Lost," loudly, in a public forum, with no regard to those surrounding them. I don't even watch "Lost," but one day I might like to rent the DVDs. Wouldn't it be nice not to know what happened when I do?

If the general public doesn't get you, the media will. Between magazines, radio, the Internet and news crawls at the bottom of the TV screen, it's almost impossible to get through the minefield of advance information.

"The Sopranos" is in its sixth and final season. I watch the DVDs, which are usually released with about a one-season lag. As a result, the last five years of my life have been spent on an alert level somewhere between yellow and orange, peaking around the season finale each year. Despite my psychotic avoidance, I still learned about the deaths of two major characters before I saw the episodes.

In fact, "The Sopranos" is a special case because I can't even look at the box cover. Why? Anybody missing from last season's cover may have been whacked; I can't take the chance of finding that out. During a recent trip to New York City, I was angling to give my son a good view of the Empire State Building when I got whacked myself – by a 50-foot high billboard of Tony, Carmela and...and I don't know who else because I whisked him to the next block as soon as I caught sight of it.

The show is so popular that I cannot even listen to sports radio without keeping one hand free from the wheel, ready to change the channel when they discuss an episode without warning. Sometimes I have to plug both ears and wriggle my fingers in the traditional La-La-I-Can't-Hear-You pose popularized by generations of children. I think it's safe to logically conclude that the majority of car accidents in the United States are caused by movie spoilers.

Earlier this week I almost caused one leaping from my brother-in-law's SUV. He has HBO, and began to ask what I thought about Tony Soprano's latest escapades. Luckily, my wife was able to silence him before I could get my seat belt off for a jump-and-roll. I've survived high-speed leaps for pivotal baseball playoff games and "NYPD Blue" season finales I had taped. Airplane flights can be more difficult. Don't even get me started on the time the couple in front of me started discussing "Kill Bill, Volume 2" on the way to Florida. Do you know how long airport security can detain you for opening an emergency hatch mid-flight?

Here's where the naysayers usually attack me. "Why don't you get HBO? *Everybody's* read 'The Da Vinci Code' by now. Why don't you watch a movie right when it comes out?"

Easy answers: I can't afford HBO, I'm too tired from work to read, and I have kids too little for the theater. Think about this last part for a minute, and indulge me one more SPOILER ALERT!: the Star Wars films.

"Star Wars" came out when I was six. "Revenge of the Sith" came out when my son was six. Before the release, I watched all five previous films with him, thrilled to see him enjoy characters I had worshiped at the same age. At the climactic moment of "The Empire Strikes Back," when Darth Vader reveals his mind-blowing secret, I turned to my son. Gushing with anticipation, I waited for the mouth-agape look. It never came. I asked him if he understood what just happened.

"Yeah, I got it," he said, casually. "Everybody knows Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father."

This might seem ludicrous, but not everybody has seen “Star Wars.” Not everybody is your age. So no matter how popular the film, no matter how much a part of public consciousness, please – if you don’t do it for me [shed tears here], do it for the children.

Frankly, I don’t want you to tell me whether Clark Gable does or does not give a damn. If you know who Norman Bates’ mother is, don’t be a psycho and spoil it. And if you see me getting on the Titanic, just take my ticket and smile. If I’m going to experience a sinking feeling, I’d like to do it on my own.

