

Spoilers can enhance thrills for some moviegoers

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For Stephen King fans worrying they might hear people talking about *IT*

Chapter Two before they see it, Judith Rosenbaum advises to keep in mind that spoilers aren't necessarily a bad thing.

People waiting for a scare they know is coming can make for an enjoyable moment, says the University of Maine assistant professor of media studies.

A spoiler, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is information about the plot of a motion picture or TV show that can ruin a viewer's sense of surprise or suspense.

The horror film genre is particularly relevant to examine because part of the thrill of watching is tied to not anticipating certain violent events and not knowing who the next victim will be.

In "Spoilers Go Bump in the Night: Impacts of Minor and Major Reveals on Horror Film Enjoyment" published in March 2019 in the "Journal of Psychology," Rosenbaum, lead author Benjamin Johnson and co-authors Angel Udvardi and Allison Eden found that horror film spoilers seem to enhance the thrill of anticipation of being frightened for people who like intense emotions.

That surprised them. While they expected to find that spoilers ruin people's [enjoyment](#) of [horror movies](#), instead they learned that small spoilers increased people's enjoyment.

Rosenbaum, who has co-authored four published studies about spoilers since 2015, started exploring the subject with Johnson because of Jonathan Leavitt and Nicholas Christenfeld's 2011 research that found story spoilers positively impacted enjoyment.

"We found those results so surprising that we had to replicate their study to see if we would find the same thing," says Rosenbaum. "Once we

completed our first study, we realized that there were so many other factors that played a role, that further studies were definitely warranted."

They've found varying, and sometimes conflicting, findings about spoiler effects. When a spoiler is introduced makes a difference. So, too, does whether it reveals the plot or the ending. The entertainment medium—book, TV program or movie—also plays a role.

A movie's genre matters, as well. Comedies are less enjoyable when spoiled, but the opposite applies to the fantasy thriller films.

In "(Don't) Tell Me How It Ends: Spoilers, Enjoyment, and Involvement in Television and Film," published in 2018 in *Media Psychology*, Johnson and Rosenbaum found because movies are generally highly anticipated, one-time experiences, spoilers are viewed as less desirable and more avoidable.

Introducing a spoiler decreases people's sense of having a choice, they say.

As a whole, the study illustrates that spoilers for television and film appear to have small, qualified effects on audience responses to them.

They advise "that future research is needed to shed light on when, why, and how telling someone how it ends matters."

Additional research also could examine what accounts for misperceptions about the severity of spoilers, say Johnson and Rosenbaum.

When it comes to the written word—Rosenbaum says, in general, readers find unspoiled short stories more fun, moving, suspenseful and enjoyable.

In "Spoiler Alert: Consequences of Narrative Spoilers for Dimensions of Enjoyment, Appreciation, and Transportation" published in 2015 in *Communication Research*, Johnson and Rosenbaum write that "although spoilers may not always 'spoil' as much as one is intuitively led to believe, they can certainly harm the audience's experience, or at least specific facets of their responses to the narrative."

Enjoyment is a complex idea, says Rosenbaum. While people tend to think of enjoyment as something fun or suspenseful, that's just the hedonic aspect of enjoyment.

"Enjoyment also has a more appreciative dimension, when it's about a moving and thought-provoking experience," she says. "In our 2015 piece, we found that spoilers impacted the dimensions of enjoyment differently. So one question to ask yourself is why you enjoy something. Is it for the fun or the suspense? Or because something is really moving?"

In another 2015 study, "Who's Afraid of Spoilers? Need for Cognition, Need for Affect, and Narrative Selection and Enjoyment," published in *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, Johnson and Rosenbaum say that people's personality traits interact with spoilers to impact experience.

People who frequently read fiction, for instance, like unspoiled more than spoiled stories. Readers with little motivation for cognitively complex tasks prefer spoiled stories, while those with a high need for emotion-inducing situations enjoy unspoiled stories more.

When readers are very concerned about what will happen to a certain character, Rosenbaum says they'll actively seek out spoilers as a way to protect themselves. So, in some cases, spoilers serve a positive function, she says.

Rosenbaum recently submitted a fifth article on spoilers with Morgan Ellithorpe of Michigan State University and Sarah Brookes of the State University of New York Geneseo. And she's currently collaborating with Johnson and Eden to examine what prompts people to actively seek out spoilers.

Overall, she says the impact of spoilers is somewhat individualized. They don't have a universally positive or negative impact on an audience's experience.

So, with regard to *IT Chapter Two*, most people don't have to freak out if they're accidentally exposed to spoilers. They can save freaking out for the movie.

More information: Benjamin K. Johnson et al. Spoiler Alert, *Communication Research* (2014). [DOI: 10.1177/0093650214564051](https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650214564051)

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