

So, Does Harry Potter Live?

Giving away the secret at the end of the last book in Rowling's series—whether downloaded or bought legally—betrays both author and audience

by [Bruce Weinstein, PhD](#)

Harry Potter dies.

Harry Potter lives. Lord Voldemort dies.

Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort die.

Both hero and *villain live*.

Which one is it?

Whatever the case may be, a number of people are going to try to tell you and your kids the ending of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (HPDH)* before you find out on your own.

Shame on the spoilers!

Why Spoiling Is Just Plain Wrong

It's not inconsiderate to reveal secrets. It's unethical. That's right. Spoiling the ending of the Harry Potter book (and other creative works) isn't rude. It's wrong. And by wrong, I mean immoral.

Here's why. First, the fans of Harry Potter have invested a lot of time, money, and passion in the first six volumes in the series. They have read and reread hundreds of pages over ten years, and they are entitled to discover Harry's fate on their own.

Second, author J.K. Rowling has a right to have her intellectual property respected. This right is fundamentally an ethical one, whether or not it is codified by law. That is, even if you aren't

breaking the law by spilling the beans, you still shouldn't do so. Rowling has worked diligently over the years to tell the tale the way she wants to tell it, according to the schedule she has set, and it is unfair to disrespect her wishes. The fact that she is one of the most commercially successful authors of all time doesn't mean that she gives up her right to be treated with respect; our duty to honor the integrity of her creation would apply even if her publisher hadn't sold a quarter of a billion books (so far).

Third, society has a compact with artists. They entertain us, and we support and protect their right to do so. If either party reneges, the deal is off. For example, if we hire a magician to come to our child's birthday party and he makes inappropriate comments to the kids, we'll fire him with good reason. On the other hand, if the magician does his best to make the occasion a joyful and spirited one, but the kids act up and make it difficult or impossible for him to perform, the performer may reasonably tell us, ...Sorry, but I can't do this,... and end the act early.

Spoilers, Hackers, and Yackers

A spoiler intentionally or negligently subverts the compact between artist and audience by throwing up an obstacle to the artist and giving him or her a reason to cease their creative activities. After all, why would a writer want to spend years spinning a tale as elaborate as *Harry Potter* if some blowhard is going to come along and ruin the surprise?

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, one hacker claims to have obtained the manuscript of *HPDH* by breaking into a computer of the book's British publisher, [Bloomsbury Publishing](#), and this wrong-doer has identified the two characters who will die by the novel's end. On July 18, *The New York Times* reported that several Web sites have published photos of every page of what appears to be a copy of the actual book. These are extreme examples of spoiling the finale of the *Potter* saga.

But the problem of spoiling isn't restricted to a few individuals who brazenly flout the law. Also to blame will be those who buy *HPDH* right away and blurt out the ending as soon as they can (and you can bet this will happen at bookstores around the world after the stroke of midnight on July 20, when the book goes on sale). The high-tech and low-tech thieves, along with the bigmouths, are acting willfully, intentionally, and yes, unethically.

Other spoilers will be merely insensitive or negligent. They'll read the book early or learn what happens from those who have and blab about it at the water cooler at work, on a plane or bus, or into their cell phones while waiting for their tall decaf skim mocha. These folks aren't purposely spoiling the surprise, but by failing to be sensitive to those around them, they too are acting unethically. Granted, it's not on the same level as revealing military secrets and jeopardizing national security, but it's still wrong.

First, Do No Harm

The advent of the Internet has exacerbated the problem of spoiling. We want what we want when we want it, and when we want it is now. Too many of us are driven by the technological imperative: ...If we can do it, we ought to do it.... This line of reasoning and the desire to be the first to accomplish a goal will make a few bad sports trumpet the ending of a story they know other people are eager to learn on their own. Some people say that, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." But another value at least as important as winning is the ethical principle, "[Do No Harm](#)". Revealing the ending of *HPDH*, either purposely or negligently, harms both Rowling, who has worked hard to create a masterful narrative, and her legion of fans.

Of course, the Harry Potter series isn't the first artifact of popular culture to attract spoilers. Neil Jordan's 1992 film *The Crying Game* had a jaw-dropping plot twist in the middle of the story that changed the entire dynamic between the central characters, and distributors Harvey and Bob Weinstein (no relation to me) went so far as to make the sensitive nature of this twist a central feature of their marketing campaign. Curiosity about the secret doubtless drew many people to the theater, and those who learned about it in advance from gossipers were deprived of the joy or excitement of discovery.

When *The Shining* came out in 1980, a review of the film in a major newsweekly gave away many of the major plot developments and one darkly humorous line of dialogue uttered by Jack Nicholson. This is why I now wait until after I've seen a film to read what the critics have to say. I'll never know how surprising it was to discover that the Nicholson character...whoops...almost gave it away.

If you want to protect yourself from the *HPDH* spoilers, I recommend that you read the book as quickly as you can...and then keep the secret to yourself, unless you're in a group made up wholly of people who also have read the book.

Taking others into account in all that we do, even when it comes to something as benign as reading a book, isn't just a social grace. It's a responsibility.

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