

It's no surprise when reviews and promos tell too much

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WARNING: This story contains SPOILERS that disclose crucial plot developments in the movies "The Sixth Sense" and "Cast Away" and in previously aired episodes of the TV series "24," "The West Wing," "ER," "The Sopranos" and "Six Feet Under."

If you have yet to catch up with any of the preceding and still want to be surprised by plot twists, you've now been put on notice not to read any farther.

Often, those of us who crave a little shiver of suspense aren't so lucky. Thanks to detailed movie previews and reviews, blabby book blurbs, teasing TV promos and fan sites that deliver entire scripts, that shiver can be hard to deliver.

The current hit "Runaway Jury," for instance, gets much of its kick from a hair-pin turn in the movie's first hour. Inevitably, however, some reviews have pointed to this curve with all the subtlety of a neon arrow.

In 1999's "The Sixth Sense," the gasp was supposed to come at the end. If you managed to see this much-buzzed-about film before someone or something gave away the surprise ending, congratulations. And if you're still planning to catch up with it on DVD, VHS or cable _ well, good luck to you.

With television, spoilers are more often an inside job, a byproduct of the network's scramble to get a series noticed in a viewing universe that seems to have exploded.

Take a pair of recent developments on two Emmy-nominated dramas, four-time winner "The West Wing," on NBC, and distinguished also-ran "24," on Fox.

The NBC show, having lost fictitious U.S. Vice President John Hoynes (Tim Matheson) to scandal in the spring, aired an episode last month in which the front-runner for the position was a politician played by guest star William Devane.

Over the summer, however, the network had announced with some fanfare that another actor, Gary Cole, had won the job. So despite the fact that Cole's Rep. Bob Russell was the darkest of dark horses when the episode opened, few fans worthy of the name could be surprised by the denouement.

In another Oval Office twist, "24" ended its second season in May with a breathtaking scene that sent President David Palmer (Dennis Haysbert) falling to the ground unconscious, perhaps even dead.

Would Palmer, a prime player in the show's first two years, return for a third? Good question. But by late summer, long before last week's season premiere, Haysbert began showing up in Fox's aggressive promotional campaign, erasing any trace of suspense.

Last season, television columnist Amy Amatangelo went too far with a "24" spoiler of her own.

Amatangelo, of Newton, Mass., writes the "TV Gal" column of news and opinion for the entertainment Web site www.zap2it.com. One regular feature of the column, "To the TV Gal Belong the Spoils," carries the warning: "You know the rules: Don't read if you don't want to know."

Last season, under that spoiler alert, Amatangelo _ whose sources in the TV business are often quite chatty _ let on that one of the show's villains was about to kill his wife, who would show up in the trunk of a car.

"It was too much to give away, even with a warning," a repentant Amatangelo admits. "I learned my lesson."

She was better about keeping a lid on last spring's much-anticipated ending to UPN's "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer," even though "I think I knew every single detail of the finale." And she won't give away an "Everwood" plot development planned for this month _ "a big one" _ that her WB network sources have asked her to keep secret.

Dave Weich of www.powells.com also prides himself on his ability to keep certain things to himself.

Weich, who reviews books and writes features for the Oregon-based bookseller's site, came up against a bump recently when interviewing novelist Charles Baxter about his latest work, "Saul and Patsy."

Weich knew he couldn't intelligently discuss the book without asking Baxter about an early twist that Weich himself found "pretty shocking."

But he also hated to spoil the story for future readers. In fact, so circumspect is Weich about this that, after learning that I was a Baxter fan who hadn't yet read

the new book, he avoided revealing the twist in our conversation.

His solution in writing the Baxter feature, which is posted on the Powells site, was to introduce the information with a spoiler alert.

"In a feature story, it's simple enough to do," Weich says. But in a review, he notes, it's often not that simple: "It makes a reviewer's job more difficult. You're writing, probably, for someone who hasn't yet read the book but may want to. How much can you say about the book without giving away something that may interfere with that reader's pleasure?"

Still, he was amazed by a review this year of Mark Haddon's unusual, widely praised first novel, "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time," that gave away a stunner. The act was as gratuitous as it was clumsy, says Weich, since the revelation comes near the end of the book.

As Weich notes, if a reviewer's job is tricky in this regard, a marketer's is trickier. How do you tempt the consumer without revealing what's inside? When does an intriguing peek become a spoiler?

Moviegoers routinely complain that trailers give away the best jokes, the sexiest scenes or the moments of highest impact.

Repeated exposure to the same previews _ whether in the theater, through TV commercials or via talk and entertainment-news shows _ can make viewers feel as if they've seen a movie before it's opened.

The outcry was particularly loud three years ago when the trailer for "Cast Away" revealed that Tom Hanks' character not only survived his desert island ordeal but was reunited with his former fiancée, played by Helen Hunt. The fact that Hunt and Hanks didn't walk off into the sunset together wasn't enough to quell the annoyance.

"I'd like to know the name of the doofus who decided that the trailer should do that," says filmgoer Curt Wiederhoeft.

Wiederhoeft, who grew up in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and now lives in Texas, runs a movie fan site,

www.moviepooper.com. But he's no party pooper: Those visiting his site know right up front that it reveals the endings to hundreds of movies.

Why do people want the endings? Sometimes, says Wiederhoeft, you want to know what everyone's talking about but don't want to spend \$8.50 for the privilege. Sometimes you're trying to recall how a black-and-white classic you saw six years ago turned out.

Spoilers are not the exception but the rule on network TV, where the proliferation of cable channels has made competition increasingly desperate.

ABC's "NYPD Blue" and NBC's "ER" rarely let an actor leave without a heavily promoted swan song lasting weeks or even months.

In contrast, with subscribers paying each month to tune in, premium cable channel HBO has less need to blab.

So in 2000, even after it seemed likely that Richie Aprile (David Proval) was too creepy to last long on "The Sopranos," it was still pleasurable to see girlfriend Janice Soprano (Aida Turturro), of all people, fire the bullets. Earlier this year, the producers of another HBO Emmy nominee, "Six Feet Under," kept viewers guessing for weeks about the fate of the vanished Lisa (Lili Taylor).

The freedom to surprise viewers, in fact, is a creative perk cable offers writers. For those who write for the networks, that freedom can become a bone of contention.

Then again, you can't spoil something for readers or viewers who want to know how the thing turns out long before they get there.

"My wife is that way," Wiederhoeft says. "Last season, she was dying to find out about the 'Buffy' finale."

Television columnist Amatangelo knows people like that, too. When she's got some really hot dish on a series, she'll give friends a choice: spill it or keep it to herself.

"It's interesting how many people really don't want to be surprised," she says.

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