Dear ‘Game of Thrones’ and ‘Walking Dead,’ Stop Lying to Us About TV Deaths

Avoiding spoilers is one thing—flat-out lying to your audience is another. After Jon Snow and Glenn Rhee, we must figure out a better way.

Jon Snow’s resurrection came quietly. Inside a lonely room in Castle Black, after the last non-believer filed out, the former Lord Commander opened his eyes and gasped for breath in the last seconds of Sunday night’s Game of Thrones episode, “Home.”

He didn’t become a White Walker. No warging involved (as far as we know). It was our friendly neighborhood priestess Melisandre who channeled the Lord of Light’s power to bring our hero back to life. Just as so many suspected she would.

It was the very opposite of a “twist.” It was predictable, but only because it was payoff for a story seasons in the making. Without the circus of external factors yanking the Jon Snow narrative this way then that, it could have worked. It should have.

But 10 months of misdirection and flat-out lies from the show’s cast and creators did the scene a disservice in the end: It made it feel anticlimactic. All that talk of Jon’s death subverting fantasy tropes in which Chosen Ones always live to fulfill their mission was just that: empty talk, purposely fed to click-hungry outlets to prolong the ruse.

The effect, at least for some of us, was that seconds after the gleeful, I-can’t-believe-they-just-did-that rush of seeing Jon take a breath, another nagging thought took hold: That was it? The show’s top brass spent months convincing everyone that the thing that just happened onscreen would never. We’re just supposed to forget all that now?

It’s like guessing the punchline to a knock-knock joke, having the punchline delayed 10 months, being told that your guess is wrong and, after all that, being expected to clap once the joke-teller “reveals” the same dumb pun you blind-guessed a year ago. It’s not an outrage, but it is obnoxious—and it certainly distracts from the joke itself.

On its own, Jon Snow’s scene actually works. It’s understated and mournful and important in different ways to every character in the room. The resurrection is also plausible in retrospect: The Season 6 premiere told us Melisandre is more powerful—and ancient—than she’s led on. And like Thoros of Myr was when he first revived Beric Dondarrion (the closest blueprint we have for resurrections like this), the Red Priestess was in a crisis of faith. That may be a key ingredient.

The problem isn’t with the trope of resurrection itself either. Main characters have been dying then springing back to life on TV—especially genre TV—for decades, from twisty soap operas (Bobby Ewing on Dallas? It was all a dream!) about to Supernatural and Penny Dreadful. When written and executed well, life after death can work to underwrite characters’ unique burdens, explore feelings like grief, denial, and helplessness, test faith, illustrate trauma, the list goes on.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer did all of the above in a single season after resurrecting its title heroine for a second time. (She saved the world. A lot.) No verbal visualization of the afterlife—and the after-afterlife back on earth—ever stuck with me like hers: “Wherever I was, I was happy. At peace. I knew that everyone I cared about was all right. Time didn’t mean anything, nothing had form. But I was still me, you know? And I was warm and I was loved… and I was finished. Complete.”

Being brought back to life by her good-intentioned friends becomes an act of monstrous proportions: “I was torn out of there. Everything here is bright and hard and violent,” Buffy says. “Everything I feel, everything I touch. This is hell.”

All of this is to say that death fake-outs don’t have to go badly. The Walking Dead and its increasingly manipulative ideas of “cliffhangers” notwithstanding, fictional resurrections offer boundless creative opportunities. Whether it was a good idea to bring back this Thrones main character—arguably undoing the work the show did in decapitating then-protagonist Ned Stark—will be determined by the story that unfolds in the coming weeks.

But hey, know what is a bad idea? Underestimating—or worse, lying to—your audience.

It’s not hard to guess where the need for such elaborate (and unconvincing) lies came from. After-show talk shows like Talking Dead and After the Thrones now compete with an Internet’s worth of post-mortem interviews and recaps (guilty) for eyeballs, shares, discussion and speculation. Shows like Game of Thrones and The Walking Dead command attention—and scrutiny—in these spaces the way few other shows still do.

Which makes passing off a cleverly shot fall from a Dumpster as a tragic death a fool’s errand. Glenn Rhee’s absence from Talking Dead’s “in memoriam” reel, compounded with GIFs of his supposed demise, reports from on set, and curiously evasive interviews, gave away Glenn’s escape long before the show did. In the four weeks between his “death” and return, every scene in every episode that had nothing to do with Glenn became ripe for fast-forwarding. The story outside the story became a distraction.

The thing is, the creators of these shows know they hold our rapt attention. They count on fans to stoke anticipation and speculation with theories and debates that help drive attention back to the show. Given this attention, why would a showrunner assume audiences wouldn’t figure out that Glenn crawled under a Dumpster? Or that Melisandre, already at Castle Black, would revive Jon Snow? Why would anyone in that position double down on lies for nearly a year?

We get it: You don’t want your cool thing spoiled and it was easier to prevent that before the Internet. Deal with it. Work around it. Think about timing: If Jon Snow was always going to be brought back in exactly the way we all knew he was, 10 months is probably too long a wait for the big reveal. And if Glenn was always going to crawl his way under a Dumpster… actually, just don’t do that. It undermines every principle your show was built on.

But mostly, for the love of God, stop lying to everyone. Head creatives lying about a bold move on a show, then getting cast members (people whose paychecks partially depend on said creatives) to lie, then disseminating the lie to TV journalists who then publish the quotes for thousands to read—I mean, that is some dystopian, f\*cked-up shit! Don’t do it. You’ll look bad, you’ll probably regret it. Just ask J.J. Abrams.

More urgently, lies like this color the way viewers react to the preciously guarded scene in question. They distract. They add unnecessary baggage. They make fans feel cheated.

TV critic Sam Adams called TV’s recent rash of death fake-outs an “epidemic,” arguing that it’s gotten so bad “that unless viewers actually see a character draw their last breath, they won’t believe they’re dead—and in the case of Jon Snow, even that’s not enough.” After being deliberately manipulated for the sake of artificial off-screen drama, who could blame viewers for being skeptical? It’s Jon Snow who knows nothing—not us.