

HARRY POTTER AFTER 2020

with LORRIE KIM and JC

Transcript

Episode 4.10

Book 4, Chapter 10: Mayhem at the Ministry

Caroline: You're listening to Harry Potter After 2020, an HP chapter reread podcast wherein two friends who read the books way back in the day as adults revisit the series through a post-2020 lens. Your hosts are Lorrie Kim, author of *Snape: The Definitive Analysis*, and JC, an educator and long-time HP fan. I'm your editor, Caroline. In this episode, Lorrie and JC tackle Book Four, Chapter Ten: Mayhem at the Ministry.

Lorrie: Mayhem at the Ministry. Everyone goes home after the Quidditch World Cup, and the Ministry struggles with damage control after the riot. Woo! It was a big chapter, and here we are with the aftermath. What do you think, JC?

JC: It starts off with them running into Mr. Roberts, the Muggle, on the way out, who seems like his memory's been modified.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: But he doesn't know where or when he is, and there's a little bit of 'Well, he'll probably be okay.' We talked about this a bit last time, how terrifying it is. It's terrifying that it's just a practice in the wizarding community...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That if you run into Muggles, and they see something that you don't want them to see, you can just modify their memory.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And how damaging that is and how that's very non-consensual. There's just so many things wrong with it; this is played for humor, but it's not funny in a pretty terrifying way.

Lorrie: I'm not sure it's entirely played for humor. Mr. Weasley says, "Sometimes, when a person's memory's modified, it makes him a bit disorientated for a while... and that was a big thing they had to make him forget." I think that's, on purpose, written to be not entirely reassuring. Messing with a person's memory is taking away their own story, and we know that's the thing that's most important to Harry.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: So I think we're meant to be wary. The whole concept of harming another person and then modifying their memory of it... That doesn't remove your guilt; it just removes your accountability for it.

JC: Oh, yeah. Okay, what you just said really hits home, because it connects to the fact that sometimes people have trauma-induced amnesia.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: They know something horrible happened to them, but they don't know exactly what. Yeah, and the idea of having that not be in your control...

Lorrie: Ooh... yeah, yeah.

JC: I don't know. I guess I can say this as a person who does not have massive trauma in my life. I don't know what it would be like to have trauma so terrible that you would be like, "Yes, just erase it from my mind." I don't know what that feels like, but sitting in my relatively privileged position of not having had massive trauma in my life, it sounds really terrifying to think that someone could just reach into your mind and take those things away.

Lorrie: Yeah, because people can take away the specific memories, but there are other lingering somatic effects.

JC: Right, that's true.

Lorrie: So you can tell uneasily that there's something off balance.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And that's not something you can ever entirely erase. That's going to be a theme coming up in this book: when you try to control other people's minds, there are limits to what you can do. But yeah, it's an abuse of power.

JC: For sure.

Lorrie: At best, and it's creepy.

JC: Yeah, for sure.

Lorrie: Yeah. It can't be rationalized, and I don't think we're meant to think it was okay.

JC: Okay. Well, I don't know if that's any consolation or not. I'm still "ugh" about it, but yeah. Yeah, I guess, too, because we're coming out of this horrible thing that happened, and it's hard for me not to map that horrible thing onto horrible things that have happened in our society and to think about...

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: It almost feels like a metaphor for when a political figure does a horrible thing and then we're reminded of it, and then that political figure's followers are just... It says, "If it didn't happen..." and it doesn't matter.

Lorrie: Yeah. Or it was normalized.

JC: Yeah, it's normalized. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's hard for me not to make that connection. I think that's a lot of my dis-ease here, too.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: The way that people are so willing to just not worry about the things that are inconvenient to them -- and that's human -- but I don't know. It just feels like it's happened a lot recently.

Lorrie: Yeah. Also, well, what could the wizards do? Because in the position of Mr. Weasley and the other Ministry officials, what would you do?

JC: Yeah. Yeah, you've got these folks who don't know anything about this whole world. They don't really have a way to process what they experienced. It'd be like...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Aliens grabbing you and dangling you around, and then dropping you back down again. Yeah. How would you even process that without thinking you just lost it? I don't know.

Lorrie: And we also do see that even within wizarding society -- in the psych wards of the hospital of Saint Mungo's -- there are not a lot of solutions for some kinds of long-term damage.

JC: Yeah, that's true.

Lorrie: Yeah, this is one of those major areas where magic can't solve everything.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: Speaking of traumatic events... Right now as we're recording, it's just past the anniversary of September 11th. The way that all of the Quidditch World Cup attendees are clamoring to get away and they're swarming around the Portkeys and queueing... That reminds me of a friend of ours who was in Manhattan that day and took refuge with us; there was no way he could fly back to California, so eventually he got on a train. He found a train, he got through to us by cell phone, and we knew to pick him up in Philadelphia. But yeah, there were those terrifying hours on September 11th when the cell phone lines were all jammed. The signals were being so heavily used; when we see Mrs. Weasley panicking and what a terrible night she had, I thought, 'Yeah, if the grid goes down...' We're so used to being able to communicate by cell and text, but if the grid goes down, yeah, we would panic too.

JC: Yeah. I was trying to think of... It made me think of 9/11. It also made me think I have a kid in school, and made me think of recent school shooting events.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: There's a big movement right now -- at least as of this school year in a lot of places -- to ban cell phones in schools because of the issues they cause for learning. And hey, being a teacher - - even being a college teacher -- I have to have conversations with my students: "Put the phones away." And when my students go to schools, they're struggling with competing with the phones, too, and a lot of teachers out there just decided, "This is not a hill I'm going to die on; I'm tired of fighting," so schools are putting in policies; some of them are banning them outright. Many of them are using a different approach, which is to have a thing that you hang on the wall

and you put your phones in when you come in and then you get them on the way out the door. But if you think about what happens in an emergency situation -- and the fact that kids not having their phones on them might mean not being able to get a message out...

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Yeah. Of course, the odds of that happening to any specific person are really, really low. There are school shootings that happen -- they're horrible, they're random -- but what are your odds of dying in a plane crash? They're really, really low. You're much more likely to die in a car accident on your way driving your kid to school than... etc., but still, the specter of that...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And that fear of... All she had was the newspaper. She knew something had happened. I don't know if the older boys had Apparated back at that point, but yeah, Molly is there alone. All she knows is that there was this horrific thing that happened where all of her family was.

Lorrie: Ai. No news...

JC: And she's just there by herself and can't do anything about it. No news; just has to wait. Ugh.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That's horrible. Wow, this chapter starts off on a dark note. The last one was dark, but this one starts off dark.

Lorrie: Yeah. They're getting away from something that changed the whole series. Yeah.

JC: Yeah, for sure. It really hit me. Molly grabbed Fred and George and said something about how "The last thing I said to you was spoken in anger, and what if I'd never seen you again?" That was a gut punch. Oh, my God. Yes, that's something that... something that I honestly think about all the time.

Lord: Yeah.

JC: Not in this specific moment, but I never like to let a family member or a friend out of my sight when there's any tension between us, even at night. Never. I'm not a 'go to bed, say goodbye angry' person -- hang up the phone angry -- because it always occurs to me, 'What if this is the last time I talked to this person?' I don't know if I'm just anxious or what, but that's such a big deal to me, so when Molly said that, I was like, 'Oh, I connect. I connect with that, Molly.'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Oh, my God.

Lorrie: And because I also have that tendency, I think partly it is an anxiety reflex. But on the other hand, when you live too much like any moment could be your last, that can get in the way of life, too, because you do need to work through difficult stuff with people -- with family members -- and Fred and George really do need to be spoken to. That's a balance that I've frequently tried. I don't want to be so anxious about "What if this is the last time?" that I let myself off the hook from doing difficult parenting things. But that's the self-talk of somebody who is (default) always thinking, 'This might be the last time.'

JC: Oh, my God. Yeah.

Lorrie: It's tense. It's a tense way to live.

JC: Yeah, it is. It's true.

Lorrie: So yeah. We have the introduction of Rita Skeeter messing with the news by making news as she reports it. As the critic Clare Dederer says in *Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma*, any work of art is two biographies meeting: the biography of the artist and the biography of the consumer. This artist, J.K. Rowling -- by the writing of this volume -- is now somebody who has been the subject of tabloid journalism, so that's going to feel different when she writes about it than it did at the beginning of *Chamber of Secrets*, when there was some media publicity talk but it hadn't affected her personally as much. Her hostility about being in that unpleasant position... I think you can feel it in her characterization here.

JC: I didn't think that much about the author, because that's just not my thing. I don't read that way. I don't think about, 'What is the author intending here?' I've never really read on that level. But all the stuff around Rita Skeeter in this chapter... I remember that the first time I read this, what it made me think about was the National Enquirer. This is really going back in time. Tabloid journalism... that's what she was supposed to represent.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: This time, it felt very different, because this time it was like, 'Oh, wait.' Since I've read this book last, the whole fake news thing has arisen and we have so much disinformation online, and the way that news spreads has changed. It just hit me that I'm going to read Rita Skeeter differently this time than I have in the past because of what's happened in the last decade. Yeah.

Lorrie: Well, definitely, there are fewer reputable news outlets than there were at the time that this book was first published. Different media empires have consolidated or gone belly up, and we have the whole phenomenon of Russian interference in U.S. elections in 2016 and 2020 (and undoubtedly currently in 2024), which is something that can proliferate more with the decentralized social media that people are referring to -- getting their news from -- but also because reputable journalism has been systematically dismantled or bought out. For example, it's been a couple years now since Voldemort -- I mean, Elon Musk bought Twitter in order to destroy it...

JC: Oh, my God.

Lorrie: So that it couldn't be a method of communication and could only be an outlet for propaganda. Yeah, it's a very specific historical moment here where Rita Skeeter is this tabloid journalist that has a specific feel to her. It helps that the newspaper Molly Weasley is clutching is in black and white; the photos are moving, but they're in black and white. We're less likely now to come home to a mom who's clutching a physical newspaper anyway.

JC: For sure.

Lorrie: And then there's also the culturally specific phenomenon that British tabloid media is a bit different from what we know in the U.S.

JC: Yeah. True.

Lorrie: It seems like they have more leeway to make things up. But yeah, she's spreading the rumor... What she writes in the article is rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods.

JC: Like Fox News. "Some say..."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And Mr. Weasley says, "Well, there certainly will be rumors now she's printed that," which is exactly... All it is is if you want to make it up, you can put it that way. A rumor doesn't have to be substantiated or attributed, and I like the way that Rowling here is using her powers as a fiction writer to critique the genre of tabloid journalism to show how empty and morally bankrupt this is. Tabloid journalism can manipulate the appearance of truth to be disingenuous about the ways in which it is fiction, but there's also uses of the power of rumor in this series that are helpful to our protagonists. Dumbledore... Humans will make up conspiracy theories and enjoy rumors just by nature. Dumbledore takes advantage of this human vulnerability to sensationalism for his own purposes; he instigated the rumor that the Shrieking Shack is haunted -- and that's how he kept people away from Lupin during transformations -- and he instigated the rumor that Snape wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts position. Nowhere in the series is that ever in the active voice. "Rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods..." Everybody knows that Snape wants that position; nobody ever attributes it.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. This is a tendency that humans have in our nature that's just right there for the exploitation.

JC: For sure.

Lorrie: But it's a constant in our nature.

JC: Maybe I was... I know I was naive a lot. At the time I first read this -- it's been... I don't even know how many years it's been since I read this book; I probably have read this book once, to be honest. I think we're at the point where I've read the books once. I'm sure I did not ever come back and reread this one after the first time I read it, so this would have been 2004. It's been twenty years since I read this book, and it was very naive, the way that I looked at Rita Skeeter. Well, obviously, she's just this corrupt pseudo journalist who's making up stuff to advance her career, and that feels like an incredibly naive perspective to have now. It's not that that didn't exist then, because I knew it existed, but it feels different now in ways that I'm having a hard time articulating. It just feels so different now. Ugh.

Lorrie: Well, we're currently in an election cycle where the New York Times has been so uneven in slamming Biden and giving a pass to Trump. It's what Lawrence O'Donnell on MSNBC recently called 'sane-washing', where Trump will say crazy things and then the New York Times will say, "What it *seems* to mean is *this*," which is not journalism. We have the evidence that a couple years ago, the New York Times editorial policy was to divert people's attention to being anti-trans. Yeah, having these things exposed... It's good to have them exposed, but to know and to see baldly how it works, it's disillusioning at any time.

JC: Yeah. Yeah. For sure. Yeah, just thinking about Mr. Weasley's response to this, too -- that he has this moment where, in my mind, he's closing his eyes in that way that you do when you're like, "Ugh, God." He said, "I'm in this," but what he means is she used his words to stir up shit. He didn't know she was there; she was in her hidden form, perhaps, because if people had known she was there, it would have been different. But she was probably there in her Animagus form... And his realization of, "I could have been more careful, but I was panicked. I was trying to get these kids out, and what was happening..." but you could almost see it settling over him. "Now, I have to be careful. I have to really be incredibly careful with my words from here on out, because I just never know when she will be listening, and she's going to take my words and twist them." Oh, God! That's an awful feeling, too.

Lorrie: But there's also only so much you can do, because he said, "Well, what was I supposed to say?"

JC: Yeah, that's true.

Lorrie: She's mocking that he said nobody was hurt. Well, nobody was hurt.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, and there's a certain point at which you can learn. There are tricks to learning how to deal with media, but the truth is always better. Spending too much time trying to second-guess how something will sound in the media... Eh. You can't get everything.

JC: But also, there's not been awareness before that this is something that people like Arthur would have to do. I guess that was part of it for me. It was like, oh. Prior to this book, it's been like, "Arthur has some random job at the Ministry, and he's kind of goofy."

Lorrie : Right.

JC: You get the sense that even his kids look at him like, "Oh, wow, Dad. You work in the Muggles department and you really don't know much about Muggles." Everyone kind of looks at him as a big goof, but this is the book where it seems like "Oh, wow, wait. No, he is competent and people respect him and he is doing important work," and then that realization of, "Oh, wait." That means that he does have attention on him and the way that he operates in the world, and it's like, 'Oh, shit.' Arthur's not just this bumbling dad; he's out there and he's going to become even more important as the series goes on. I guess that's part of it, too, is oh, wow, Mr. Weasley. Okay.

Lorrie: Well, definitely, this whole book is about fathers and father figures, and he is definitely one of the more solid ones. The article, Rita Skeeter says: "If the people of the World Cup expected reassurance from the Ministry of Magic, they were sadly disappointed." That is useful; that articulates the expectations. There is leadership expected of fathers or authority figures or governments in times of crisis, and that's what Arthur and Percy and all of them are actually busy doing right now. They know this and they're taking responsibility. That's also what makes this series a children's series: when you look for adult guidance, you often find it more consistently than there is in the real world. Harry is doing his version of this: he suddenly asks if Hedwig has come, because he's looking for a letter from Sirius; he is also individually looking for guidance from a father figure. While he's doing that, Harry has this fascinating moment of experiencing some responsibility more like an adult. He has to make decisions about fear mitigation, because he has to explain to Ron and Hermione that he has been keeping from them

that his scar hurt again. He had to decide, 'Well, on the one hand, it's supportive to me to tell them, but on the other hand, I'm responsible for scaring or not scaring them. I have that power.' He says to them Voldemort and Wormtail "were plotting to kill... someone." He was about to tell them who, and then he looked at Hermione and couldn't make himself do it because she looked so horrified already. So yeah, there he is making decisions about how to contain the fear of his loved ones, in addition to dealing with the actual mysteries.

JC: He goes on to tell them about Trelawney's true prediction from the previous year. Did they know about that before, or is this him telling them that for the first time? They knew?

Lorrie: He told them.

JC: Okay, at the time. I couldn't remember. Was it in the last book? It feels like it was a long time ago. Yeah, I couldn't remember if I did, but one of the things I really liked about this was that it was like a lovely moment where we weren't being hit over the head with, "Here's what happened in the last book." I just really appreciated that the author could just state it as if, "Yeah, you just read this book, so you already are aware of what this prophecy said." Yeah. There's this little moment where, 'Oh, that's a relief that I don't have to slog through a paragraph of exposition about what happened in the last book.' But yes, all the things that you... That was just me having a little fun reaction to something that was written, but it is interesting that as the kids get older, Harry thinks a lot about what to share with them and whatnot.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: But also, they are such a unit now to the point where they had a secret code for how to get upstairs to have a conversation, and nobody questioned this because it was just so natural. They're such a unit. But at the same time as they're a unit... They know each other pretty well, but they don't know each other as well as they think they do, because Ron's like, "What we really need to do now is we need to go play Quidditch," and Hermione's like, "You don't need to... Harry doesn't want to play Quidditch. Harry's worried about Voldemort," and Harry's like, "No, I want to go play Quidditch," and Hermione's like, "What?!"

Lorrie: Oh, man.

JC: The way that was written, I just love that. I thought that was so funny.

Lorrie: That was perfect.

JC: Yeah. It's like you think you know a person, and... Oh, my God.

Lorrie: Yeah. I so respect Ron knowing that, and I like that Ron could think of that idea as soon as he's calmed, because he thinks, "Oh, you wrote to Sirius. There might be advice from Sirius coming. Okay, there's some adult guidance," and then he has the room in his brain to think, "What next?" and he suggests Quidditch. I would have been just like Hermione; I would have dismissed it, and I would have been just as wrong as Hermione.

JC: Yeah. For sure, for sure. It's like, "No, I want to wallow in angst for a little bit longer" versus "Yeah, let's go do something else."

Lorrie: Well, Quidditch would definitely make me more anxious. Physical movement makes me more anxious. Hermione's like, "No, no, why would you add stress?" That's not how these kids experience it. But yeah, going back to Harry deciding how much to tell Ron and Hermione

because he knows it'll worry them: that's actually the same kind of decision that Mrs. Weasley worries about all the time. She comes under a lot of criticism (including from me) for going too far into the realm of wanting to keep kids absolutely ignorant, because the experience of being worried and being unable to do anything about it is so awful to her, she just can't imagine that that's healthy for children. This is Harry having to consider the same things.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Oh, I like when Arthur and Percy go to the Ministry early in the morning and they return late, because the Ministry's in crisis management mode. That didn't hit me the first time I read it (pre-2016) the same way it does now. What I remember in 2016 -- and with that presidency -- is that there was daily crisis but in different areas all the time, and it was crisis management mode constantly. Molly Weasley says, "Your father hasn't had to go into the office on weekends since the days of You-Know-Who," and the work of the Ministry is to try to head off and counteract some of the exhaustion that people experience with this kind of destabilization. That's a dread I remember so well, that feeling of there being constant crisis, and that's a dread I can understand now that I didn't before 2016.

JC: Yeah, that's for sure.

Lorrie: When people are like, "No, he's not back. Tell me he's not back."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. Okay.

JC: Yeah, exactly. I think the word 'doomscrolling' didn't come into my vocabulary until post-2016. I don't even know if it existed as an idea prior to that, but definitely the dread of what fresh hell will be unleashed upon us this day versus not having to worry about it and being able to just live your life and go to work at normal hours. Yeah. Yeah, that does feel different at this rate. You're right.

Lorrie: Or the feeling of we know what that hell was like, and the dread of returning to it can make us want to deny reality.

JC: True. Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, that is true.

Lorrie: With not only politics but also COVID.

JC: Yeah. Yep, that too. Oh, I think they're waiting for Arthur to come back. We have this little Weasley clock and we get to another side of the clock, which I think is such a fun device. There's this moment, this paragraph, where all of them are sitting around the fire and every sentence is telling something about their character, which is interesting.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: But I really like the moment where Ginny is sitting there and she's repairing a textbook with tape.

Lorrie: Spellotape!

JC: Spellotape. And I love this very subtle implication that this book has probably been passed down through all the kids...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And this is the book she's taking back to school next year. She's probably the fourth Weasley or fifth Weasley to use it...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And she's got to repair it because it's so old -- even though she's the youngest and she probably has gotten more new things than Ron did by virtue of being the only girl. But still, the hand-me-downs and the...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I thought it was a nice little subtle reminder. Even while they're all sitting around the fire, surrounded by the wealth of the family and the love that they have, there's all these little hints of implied poverty that they live in. Yeah.

Lorrie: And there's that Britishism that it's a pun on sellotape, which is one of those British terms I didn't know until this series.

JC: Or cellophane tape.

Lorrie: Yeah. It was actually after the movie version of this book came out that I heard a really interesting presentation on why some costuming choices in the movies are slightly different from the book. This was in response to the color of Hermione's dress robes for the Yule Ball, which is a famous change from periwinkle in the book to pink in the movies. But the person giving the presentation also said, "Notice that most of the Hogwarts girls wear uniform skirts." Ginny's always in pants because she's not the first Weasley to wear that uniform. Yeah.

JC: Interesting! I don't know if I ever noticed that. Wow!

Lorrie: Yeah. She said this is a level that we're not meant to think about consciously, but it's the kind of thing that costumers have to think about all the time.

JC: Oh, that's interesting. Right, so maybe even her robes are... Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Oh. This is also the beginning of the mention of the relentless rainstorming that goes on, which we find out later is coinciding with some terrible, terrible plot points behind the scenes. Oh, Mr. Weasley and Percy and Hermione all discuss Mr. Crouch and Winky, and they all have these really strong feelings about it. Something is truly wrong going on in that family, but honestly, what Percy says is so disgusting to me. He says to Hermione: "A high-ranking Ministry official like Mr. Crouch deserves unswerving obedience from his servants." That's gross.

JC: Yeah, yeah. Oh.

Lorrie: Percy is an interesting character. Watching how he starts to diverge from the rest of his family and the real tensions that he's reacting to -- and the way he politically changes and goes against them -- that's always very subtle. And there's this extra dimension that Chris Rankin (who's the actor who portrayed Percy Weasley in the movies) has been a fixture in Harry Potter fandom...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: That he's totally a Harry Potter fan and did academic work on the Harry Potter movies, and continues to show up at conferences and give talks. He's been asked about the character Percy, I think, to the point where he's relieved to talk about other things. Often, you can see several sides to the Percy issue, but in this one case, wow... That statement that Mr. Crouch is so high-ranking that he deserves a certain kind of unquestioning loyalty? Oof.

JC: Yeah. On a more lighthearted take on Percy: I know that the first time I read this book, he really struck me as... Okay, there was this sitcom in the 80s that I watched growing up called *Growing Pains*. It was about a family where the parents were former hippies and they had two kids. The oldest son was played by Kirk Cameron, and the character in the show was absolutely enamored with Ronald Reagan; he was a Ronald Reagan conservative. It was about the fact that these hippies could be raising kids who would try not to be politically the opposite of them with family drama, and it was all played for last in a way that I don't know if you could do now the same way you could do it in the 80s.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Anyway, I think Kirk Cameron, the actor who played the Reagan fan in the show, went on to be this conservative Christian. He was kind of already there at the time; it just wasn't as obvious because he was a little bit of a teen idol. But yeah, he went on to be way off to the right, and I think he probably still is.

Lorrie: Oh, dear, Oh, dear.

JC: Anyway, Percy always reminded me of that sitcom. Here he is in this family and he's this one who's like... What do you do to make yourself stand out in this family? What do you do to be different from everybody else? He's got Bill and Charlie... The younger ones, maybe he's not as worried about, but the two older ones, it's like, "What do I do?" He's going to embrace something that is completely different from his family. It reminded me of an 80's sitcom. That's a lighter take on Percy that's a lot harder for me to take now, because now I see it reminds me of young white boys in particular who get swept up in ultra right-wing stuff online, and their parents are just watching it happen and don't know how to help, don't know what to do. There's that divide between... You get to have your own life and your own beliefs and you're heading in a direction, but it doesn't feel like a good one. Yeah, so there's a little bit of that now, too. It used to be like, "Oh, ha-ha, Percy," like a sitcom. Now it's like, "Oh, shit. Percy... has he fallen down a right-wing rabbit hole?"

Lorrie: He is.

JC: Yeah. "Is he going to end up being a Voldemort supporter?" If I read it for the first time now, I'd be thinking more along those lines. 'What's Percy... What direction is he heading in? Is it a lot darker than I had originally thought?'

Lorrie: Yeah. The topical part of it -- when he says, "A high-ranking Ministry official deserves unswerving obedience" -- that's that attraction toward authoritarianism or a strongman mentality. Percy is reacting... not in a way that I would, but he is reacting to the distress that this family has suffered from Arthur Weasley's lack of income and lack of status, and there's a lot of different ways to react to it. This is not a particularly good one, but it is in reaction to something that's made him very angry, and it is topical to him because all of the Weasleys are raised to be

really very proud and highly achieving. Percy's there with his flawless grades, and yet they have this notion that, with all of that hard work and ambition, he's supposed to take a path that is going to continue to probably have low prestige and low income. He's reacting to the fathering he's gotten in good and bad ways. We're going to see later on in this book another example of a son reacting strongly to a father's influence and how this can turn you dangerous, even if you don't become a Voldemort supporter. But yeah, what comes out of Percy's mouth here is chilling to me.

JC: Yeah, yeah. Hermione getting into it with... getting into this conversation I love, and coming back and saying, "No, that house-elf was a slave." It's the righteousness of... Oh, it just reminds me of me. I think that's it. It reminds me of me being fourteen and being at a family event where people are saying racist things, and me standing up and going, "No, you can't..." with all of the youthful idealism -- as if me saying something in anger isn't going to have an impact on the people around me -- not yet understanding that people look at the things that young girls get upset at as not something to take seriously. Hermione is right and Hermione's righteous anger is very real, but even the people who care about her are not going to take her seriously, and that's just the experience of being a 14-year-old girl. Ugh.

Lorrie: I do like that -- this separation, this parting of the ways. Hermione and Percy have been so similar in so many ways until now. They're both so pedantic and rule-loving, and yet there's something deep in her that's guiding Hermione right. She has no hesitation in recognizing that thing that Percy says and in immediately rejecting it. Yeah, she's fourteen and she sounds like it, but I trust where she's going with it. Everybody who totally knows what they're doing politically was fourteen once.

JC: Yeah, yeah.

Lorrie: And this is what they sounded like.

JC: Right. But I love that it's so familiar.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I think that's what... Yeah, it was very familiar to me, to say a thing and then get the sense that all the older people in the room are rolling their eyes.

Lorrie: Or they're trying to head off where this discussion would go if it's not shut down soon.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Which I actually don't blame them for, because it's not that they disagree. It's that they know if you don't head it off now, it's going to devolve into shouting.

JC: Yeah, yeah. For sure.

Lorrie: So then we get this excruciating painful scene with Ron that underscores the kind of distress that Percy is reacting to, where Ron has the most comically, mortifyingly hideous dress robes. Of course they're maroon, his least favorite color, because everything in Ron's life is maroon. Harry, in contrast, has these really elegant, sharp-sounding dress robes where I love what Mrs. Weasley did. He can afford this, and she did her darndest to do right by Lily Potter. If you had them, you would get your kid the best, most handsome thing that you can afford; she really thinks about him and it's lovely. He has the gold from his vault that she got out for him and

she washed his socks, and that beautiful sentence: "I thought they'd bring out the color of your eyes, dear."

JC: Aaawww.

Lorrie: At no point does Ron think that she loves him less. They can't even say why he gets this piece of crap; they know why. Oh, it's just so painful, because Ron is just gagging. He cannot pretend -- and I don't blame him -- and Mrs. Weasley is flushing, and neither of them is wrong at all.

JC: Yeah. This is a world-building question: I understand why Ron has to have the horrific robes, and I understand what it's doing in the story, I get all that. But then there's a part of me that's like, 'These people have magic. Could they not transfigure these robes into something more stylish?' The fact that we have access to magic and we can't fix that problem is just mind-blowing to me.

Lorrie: Well, yeah.

JC: I get why (for the function it serves in the story), but at the same time I'm like, 'Oh, come on! Are we not wizards here?! Come on.'

Lorrie: We do see Ron doing his best with them later.

JC: True, but Molly knows all these incredible spells, right? Molly can make sweaters knit by themselves.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I know she's had a lot on her mind and I know a lot's been happening, but at the same time I'm like, 'Hmm...'

Lorrie: Well, that's the wish.

JC: I'm also side-eying this whole thing about sending your teenage children off to school with formal clothes that they're not going to use for a month. I'm thinking how many kids are not going to fit into these clothes at the time this thing comes around. They're going to be six inches too short or whatever, because this is the age where everybody is just sprouting randomly.

Lorrie: That's true.

JC: But yeah.

Lorrie: What I love though... The point that you're bringing up -- "Why does he have to have this moldy old thing? They have magic" -- that is a whole department of beautiful fantasy. This whole wish -- "What could I do if I had the power or the money or the magic to make it happen?" -- looking at the situation you're in (which is really not okay), and then spinning dreams out of it... The whole genre of fantasy is based on that really beautiful, imaginative urge. The Yule Ball that's coming later in this volume is a culmination of that urge that's such a fixture in fairy tales. "Okay, you maybe don't have the resources, but you do have imagination and you do have stories. Okay. Let's see what we can do with this." The Cinderella phenomenon is starting here; this is the Muggle fairy tale that is one of the themes of this volume, which is so well suited to poor 14-year-olds. Oh man, I rarely have so strongly felt in this series the desire to tell one of the kids, "It gets better."

JC: Oh, God, yeah.

Lorrie: Because he's just not going to have a very good time.

JC: True.

Lorrie: It does get better, but it won't for a very long time. I'm sorry, Ron. Ugh.

JC: Oh, and this book is rough. This book is rough. Oh, my gosh.

Lorrie: I actually always admire the way that Mrs. Weasley is written to have a comeback when Ron is throwing a tantrum over his hideous dress robes. She says: "Well, Harry, get a picture of him naked because I could do with a laugh." I thought, "Wow, that is a remarkably resilient comeback to a terrible no-win situation." She's not saying, "You ingrate! I cried at the store."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: She's not saying that, and as a writer I think I would have had a hard time coming up with the perfect mom line. How do you react when you knew this moment was coming, and your kid is taking it just as badly as you feared?

JC: It also makes me wonder who else has worn these robes... Fred and George. Well, I guess maybe they haven't had formal events.

Lorrie: No. She just bought these at the secondhand shop.

JC: Oh, okay. I thought they were in the family. Okay.

Lorrie: No. He asks, "Why do I have to get these? Why couldn't I get nice ones like what you got for Harry?" and she says, "There wasn't a lot of selection."

JC: Ah, okay. Okay.

Lorrie: But Yule Balls don't happen all the time.

JC: True, yeah. They don't have formal winter formals every year. Yeah.

Lorrie: No, it's just because of the special stuff that's going to happen.

JC: But she also has to buy stuff for Ginny and for Fred and George, so I'm like, "What are the other kids wearing?"

Lorrie: Oh, wait a minute. She doesn't have to buy for Ginny; it turns out later that Ginny can go because she gets invited.

JC: Oh, okay.

Lorrie: So we don't know where Ginny comes up with a dress.

JC: What are Fred and George wearing then?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I wonder... I guess we'll find out when we get there.

Lorrie: Well, whatever they wear, it's going to look better on them because they're older and not in this maximally awkward stage that poor Ron is suffering through.

JC: Poor Ron. Oh, poor Ron. And then Ron at the end of the chapter... He's just mad at the unfairness of his life. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And Harry is sitting there feeling like shit about it.

Lorrie: There's just no winning here.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: And this is another example of what I love when this author ends an emotional scene by having a non-verbal animal moment, because there's Ron looking at his yucky robes and then his not-quite-adequate owl is choking on an owl treat.

JC: Aaawww, and Ron's like, 'This is my life.' Ugh.

Lorrie: Yeah, it is, too. Ouch.

JC: At least he has a whole wand this year.

Lorrie: Yeah. It really is one of those situations where you have to remind yourself, 'Okay, he got a humongous wand.' Oh, Ron, someday you'll get an Order of Merlin. Someday, you'll get a Chocolate Frog card. I promise.

JC: Yeah. Just hang in there, kid. Hang in there. Ugh.

Lorrie: Ugh. Well, the next chapter is called Aboard The Hogwarts Express.

JC: We are finally going to Hogwarts!

Lorrie: Yeah, so I'll see you on the train!

JC: All right, yeah!

Caroline: You've been listening to Harry Potter After 2020 with hosts Lorrie Kim and JC. You can find show notes for this and all other episodes at HPAfter2020.com. There, you will also find ways to support the show, contact the hosts and more. If you like what you heard, consider giving us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. Harry Potter After 2020 is produced and edited by Lorrie Kim and Caroline Rinaldy. Original music was composed by C.L. Smith. Thank you for listening.