

Transcript

Episode 1.2

Book 1, Chapter 2: The Vanishing Glass

Caroline: You're listening to Harry Potter After 2020, an HP chapter re-read 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 longtime HP fan. I'm your editor, Caroline. In this episode, Lorrie and JC tackle Book 1, Chapter 2: The Vanishing Glass.

Lorrie: Good morning, JC. Are you ready to discuss Chapter 2?

JC: Yes, I am. The Vanishing Glass. We had the great intro last time, but there's so much interesting extension of the stuff that we talked about in the last episode that we're going to continue talking about here.

Lorrie: Yeah. In chapter 2, The Vanishing Glass, it's Dudley's birthday and Harry gets woken up rudely because he has to be the servant who makes Dudley's birthday breakfast. They have to bring Harry with them to the zoo outing because Mrs. Fig, the crazy cat lady, has been injured and can't take him. That's usually where they shove him when they take Dudley out anywhere nice. When they go to the zoo, Harry empathizes with a snake and he makes the snake glass disappear; the snake escapes, and the Dursleys have to apologize to the zookeeper. What are some of the top five things that stood out for you from this chapter?

JC: Dudley's awfulness is just so over the top: how spoiled he is, how he's a bully. He's physically the opposite of Harry in every possible way. All of that is very fairy tale. Extending a theme we talked about last time, I keep coming back to Cinderella or something like that, where you have the one step-child who's treated horribly and the others who are completely spoiled and get everything they want. I get that that's what the author's going for, but at the same time -- and maybe it's because I'm reading this as an adult -- it feels so over the top in a particular way, in the way that she's making his outward appearance a manifestation of how horrible he is on the inside. I get that that's a thing that authors do, but did she have to make him being fat part of that? I know that's a theme that people have talked about a lot and that's not the only place in these books that it comes up, but that was really a thing that stood out to me even more than the last time I read the book, which we've established as seven or eight years ago. Oh, that piece of it still just made me grit my teeth all the way through. He is a bully, but he's being presented in a particular way by the author, in a way that's it's supposed to make him the most

revolting human ever. It's that same feeling I get when people make fun of the orange one by calling attention to his weight.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Okay, you can talk about how awful a person is without also saying that you're physically disgusted by their appearance. I have to grit my teeth through that.

Lorrie: Yeah. Actually, I'm starting to think that maybe the top five things that stood out is not the organic way to talk about this chapter, because there are other things. But that one thing is so prominent that I think it ties together everything else I noticed.

JC: Oh.

Lorrie: No, not everything else. But yeah, I did definitely realize, "Okay, Harry being a servant, it is a Cinderella setup," but it goes so quickly into the fatphobia and it's so overwhelming. I don't actually think that we even could say this is a thing authors do, because even when people use fat this way to ascribe negative characteristics, they don't usually go this far. The traits of Dudley's that are connected to the way he's being written as fat include that he's gluttonous, that he's lazy (because when he asks for a racing bike, Harry doesn't know why he would want one; we find out later in the series that he does use the racing bike, and maybe he wanted one to ride it), that he's stupid (and that is somehow connected to his being unable to count), and that he's cruel. There's a genuine revulsion that comes through in the word choice, describing Dudley and equating him with these traits, that feels to me more than tropey. It feels like, "Okay, that's coming from the author. That's personal." To me, it's more than gritting teeth, personally. I think the fandom generally has dealt with this from day one as a group, because it's not one of those things that is open to interpretation. You don't have camps of different fans saying, "I read it another way."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: No one says, "If you interpret it this way..." Everyone says "No, this is egregious and strange, and there's nothing redeeming about it." If you're going to enter the Harry Potter fandom, other fans will come greet you with a welcome packet, and a major part of the welcome packet will be "Here is how to prepare for the Dudley fatphobia element that comes with this author, because you cannot have the series without it. The series is worth getting into. Here's how to get over that; if you decide that you can't because it's too awful, sure. Fine. But all of us who have found value, this is what we have prepared for you. These are the discussions; this is not subtle. It's major." This leads into all the discussions people have: "J.K. Rowling, she's not just transphobic, she's always been this, she's always been that," and I don't believe that most of her other prejudices are anywhere near the degree that the fatphobia is. She's transphobic, but not so much in the series. Yes, you can find places where you can tell, but it's not a heavy, hit-you-over-the-head-with-it thing. The transphobia didn't blossom for her until much later.

JC: Yeah, yeah.

Lorrie: This is embedded in the premise of the series. This is Harry's origin story. The fatphobia is embedded in the origin story. A lot of the things that people say, "Oh, no, she's anti-Semitic," or whatever. I sense, in fans, that kind of talk comes from people who read the series as a child, didn't notice, and then are startled when they come back as older readers. "Oh, my god! This was here the whole time, and I couldn't defend myself against it because I was eight. And now?"

Ew, yuck.” And that is not a response that I had -- since I was in my 30s the first time I read it -- where I saw it. I have had people who are millennials say to me, “Wait, you saw that all along?” “Yeah, I was 30.”

JC: This is true.

Lorrie: I didn't have the reading-children's-literature experience that they did revisiting. At the time when I saw, “Oh, many things that Rowling does are basic elementary tokenism? That's not great, but I know where it's located on the spectrum of racism. It's contained, it's consistent, it's ignorant and I'm just going to deal.” The fatphobia felt different. It felt personal, and easily -- instantly -- identified and rejected by the majority. To me, the fandom collective response to it serves as a pre-existing, very good and healthy template for how to deal with other offensive areas in the story if you're still going to extract the things that are valuable. By the time I entered the fandom, the collective ways to deal with this fatphobia were already well in place, in my experience.

JC: And I guess, too, knowing what's coming in the future of the series, it gets worse. I'm thinking about Aunt Marge; there's other instances of the fatphobia that are really bad and are played for comic cruelty, I guess. Yeah. There's so much that has been said about this, but that was something that struck me again, reading it, how uncomfortable it is. I think that your point -- that it's just unnecessarily cruel and over the top -- she didn't have to hammer it home at every possible opportunity. At every possible opportunity, she compares Dudley to being pig-like, and she makes comments about his weight constantly. That image is seared into your brain, and the association of being fat, with all these other negative things, is a lot.

Lorrie: It really feels like something that's coming from her. It's not like, “Okay, make up a character,” and they make up some traits. The revulsion feels like, “No, that's a feeling from the author.” You could have stopped. We get the point, okay? When my kid was in fifth grade, there was a winter that had a ton of snow. We had so many horrible snow days. That winter, I decided I was going to start a fifth grade reading club of Harry Potter.

JC: Oh, yes. I remember this.

Lorrie: Just because we were all -- we, I mean the parents -- were all going crazy with these kids. Little did we know that the pandemic was coming, but anyway... During that winter, I asked a bunch of my kid's classmates if they wanted to take part, but they had to commit because every session was going to be two to three hours long with a break. A few of them did and it was really nice, and I got to see up-front how fifth graders very intelligently processed these books, because, of course, they were about to turn 11, so this was topical. They impressed me with their response to the fatphobia: nobody had the slightest difficulty recognizing that this is a J.K.R. problem. This has nothing to do with fat people in the real world. This is not like, “Oh, well, for the time, that's how everyone wrote.” No! You can find books written at the same time; other people did not do this! I don't like when people say, “Oh, well, for the time...” because that's not always the case, but in this case it's particularly evident. I know people don't think that every author writing at the time was doing this. The fifth graders were really sophisticated in how they spoke about this -- because they didn't have the language for it, really -- but one of the kids I remember said, “It's like the author is bullying the character.”

JC: Oh.

Lorrie: That was such a simple way to put it, because the kids did not agree. While they were reading it, they weren't like, "Yeah, yeah." They were like, "That's really off-putting. We're not with you." It took them out of the story, and it made them perceive the author as an individual with personal tastes, not as the voice of God or anything. I was really impressed with them. They weren't outraged because they knew that people are prejudiced. This is something that happens. They were just like, "We're not taking part in this; she's doing that thing, and you shouldn't do that." We were saying things like, "Well, what if you're reading it in a group of people, and there are going to be some kids who are going to feel targeted by it?" They spoke really intelligently about that, saying, "Well, you have to make it clear that you don't agree. Authors are people, too, so people will be prejudiced once in a while." It made me feel greatly at peace about children's ability to read books written by humans with their own flaws. Really, I did not see people just accepting whatever was written to them, because children are not blank slates. They're not blank states when they're really, really small; by the time they're reading something like this, they're truly not. They have opinions, and they have years of experience in the classroom with real conflict. They've seen this before, and this is a case of an authority figure or an older adult losing authority in their eyes, because they're indulging in this thing that children are able to overcome in themselves, so why didn't they? Anyway, that's a long way of saying the kids were all right.

JC: So this connects to a quote that I wanted to talk about, which was, "They seemed to think he might get dangerous ideas," which is in reference to the Dursleys refusing to entertain or hear about anyone or anything behaving out of the ordinary. That, in addition to this ban on asking questions like this -- at the beginning of this chapter, especially -- it's so clear that Harry's not allowed to ask questions. There's no questions, there's no talking about anything that might be unusual. It made me think a lot about things that are happening currently in the United States, where we have a lot of right-wing extremists who are trying to control what information kids have access to, with this idea that, "Oh, no, if a kid reads a book in which, I don't know, something is portrayed that is out of the ordinary, then it's just going to harm them forever." That idea. Listening to your story about, "Actually, no, you can guide kids easily through having discussions about ideas that are different from what they've encountered before. Let's talk about what that means." Kids are smart enough to understand that just because it's written in a book doesn't mean that it's... whatever. You can take this in a lot of different directions, obviously. Again, the idea that the Dursleys are representing, in a lot of ways, the most close-minded, right-wing possible family; Harry's growing up, and if it was set in the United States, they would have been evangelicals, right? It's that kind of thing. It's so interesting to me that that was the choice of family, who was the most close-minded, because it takes me back to, again, this being a metaphor for queerness.

Lorrie: Yeah, because Moms For Liberty was just here in Philadelphia. I actually wasn't here this weekend, but I did know people who took part in the protests. One of the arguments that those people make -- one of those 'do you hear yourself' arguments, where they're saying, "If you teach children that there is such a thing as being non-binary, some of them are going to choose that."

JC: Amazing.

Lorrie: Um, yeah. Some of them might. Imagine that.

JC: Wow, the horror.

Lorrie: You can't tell them that exists, so if they don't know they can't... oh, Jesus.

JC: Yeah, Petunia would definitely have been in Moms For Liberty. Oh, my god.

Lorrie: It's not changing the children. It's just controlling how hard it is for them to fight to be themselves. It doesn't make anyone non-binary. Anyway, you know this, I know this.

JC: It's so frustrating, but it also shows me that... this book is set in the 90s, right? You and I were young people then; we were kids in the 80s. You remember all the moral majority and all the push to put the explicit labels on record albums and things like that. There's nothing new here. It's the same over and over. It's interesting to see that the same ideas are popping up in this book and that they're being presented as wrong here, so that's a plus, at least.

Lorrie: Yeah. Also, that the argument is not that there's no such thing as being non-binary as a child. The argument is we have to suppress it so that people aren't aware of it, because that's something else that shows up many times in this chapter: the hints of recognition that show through. They're not insensitive to magic; they know it's real. They're suppressing it. Actually, it was in the first chapter when Vernon sees McGonagall as a cat and says, "The cat's reading the map. No! The cat is not reading the map. Cats do not read maps." He saw it and he rejected it, but it's not that he didn't recognize it. Then there's the list of strange things that happened around Harry, like the time that he accidentally flew. Oh, yeah, that's Lily's kid. And then Piers Polkiss says, "Harry was talking to the snake." They recognize it. It takes effort to suppress; it takes effort to lie to yourself and substitute a different narrative. There's a different sort of recognition that happens. It's, in type, very different, but the feel is similar to me, and that's when the Dursleys are trying to get away with buying chocolate ice cream only for Dudley and Piers; before they can stop her, the ice cream woman recognizes Harry as a child with them, recognizes him as just another age-mate that's in the same group. Smiling in a very establishment sort of way that the Dursleys want to be part of, asks very kindly, "And what would you like?" And they can't get out of it. I guess they answer for him; they buy him the cheapest thing -- which is actually still really good, and I love that detail that it was good. But that recognition, to me, feels the same as there's a narrative and you're forcing it; when the truth is recognized, there's an undeniability about it that has its own power.

JC: Right, and we'll see that in the next chapter, too, where they recognize that they understand that what they're doing is wrong. They absolutely know they're being cruel and they feel guilty about it the moment they get caught. I think the ice cream is another example of that. They recognize that they shouldn't be doing this in a way that other people will be able to judge them, so they're trying to keep it quiet.

Lorrie: It is very much a case of people testing what they can get away with, not being innocent. It's an argument for de-platforming.

JC: Oh, gosh. You're right. Yeah.

Lorrie: It's an argument against saying, "Well, what can you do about it? People just find a way around it." No. You recognize it, you call it out, you push back. You tell them, "You know you're not supposed to be doing this. There will be consequences. We will shame you."

JC: Yeah, absolutely.

Lorrie: Don't just assume that everyone's doing it and there's nothing you can do about it.

JC: Yeah. Because at least the Dursleys have that fear of being shamed publicly. Or even privately, honestly, for their behavior. The moment anyone pushed back, they folded. Not Harry, but the idea that someone would think badly of them.

Lorrie: Somebody knows.

JC: That's really interesting.

Lorrie: I've heard people say, "Well, if they're just behaving better because of fear of punishment, that's not good." Yes, it is.

JC: It works.

Lorrie: It makes a difference. And if nothing else, it makes a habit of it so that the next time they can do it, they'll remember, "I know I'm not supposed to be doing this." Two unrelated writing details that really stood out to me: one of them -- because the beginning of this book, Sorcerer's Stone, is so iconic -- there are turns of phrase that really stand out to me because it's like the preamble to the Constitution, things that are well repeated. There's the phrase that Harry pulls a spider off of one of his socks because there are spiders in the cupboard under the stairs. Who pulls spiders? Pulls the spider by what? By a leg?

JC: You flick a spider off. What are you talking about?

Lorrie: Do you pick up the sock and shake off the spider? What? Anyway, it's kind of gross. Also, the author is somebody who doesn't regularly deal with spiders maybe, because I wouldn't pull a spider off of anything. I would get a sheet of paper, put it under the spider, clap a little plastic container over it, and then run to the door and shake it out.

JC: Or just flick it with your fingertip, maybe, if you're going to touch it.

Lorrie: I'm not flicking the spider because then it's just going to show up again.

JC: Yeah, that's true.

Lorrie: And there are people who would smooch it. Anyway, if you ever encounter anyone who pulls spiders off of things, let me know. I'm not taking issue with it. I like it because it's so memorable. Every time I've read this chapter, and I get to the part where Harry has to pull a spider off one of his socks, one of the things it tells me is that he is so used to spiders that it's like, whatever. It's not even gross anymore. Ugh, another day. The spiders aren't going to hurt me. Oh, god, another spider. There's no use trying to put it out because there's going to be more. We do know that spiders actually show up as a minor theme in the series; we know the author doesn't like them, but Harry has just had to learn to live with it. The other writing thing that super stood out to me was the brilliant British Dickensian characterizing in the sentence, "The whole house smelled of cabbage, and Mrs. Figg made him look at photographs of all the cats she'd ever owned." That's so specific, and I'm right there. It's also dimly lit in there; it's daytime, but not that much sunlight is coming in, and the upholstery and rugs are dark and heavy. Probably could stand to be aired out overall, and it's British. When I imagine being there, it's a British, closed-up little airless house. It's not an American one.

JC: I can imagine what the walls look like and what the furniture looks like, yeah. I'm trying to remember the details of this now, but I remember later in the fifth book -- when we find out that Mrs. Figg is actually a witch -- that there were some fan theories that related the smell of

cabbage to a particular potion that she would be brewing a lot. I can't remember which potion it was now, though. But I remember that.

Lorrie: Oh, interesting.

JC: So it wasn't just she eats a lot of broccoli or cabbage. It was making potions in her kitchen, and that's a particular smell associated with some kinds of potions, something like that.

Lorrie: Although, that would be fanon because she's not a witch. She's a Squib, so she can't actually make potions.

JC: Oh, okay. Yeah, all right. Now I can't remember exactly what the fan theory was. There was something, but it had something to do with magic. The cabbage smell had a particular... okay. Maybe by the time we get there, I will have remembered what it was.

Lorrie: But it's, to me, evoking a very particular kind of spinster lady, who's on a fixed income and has associations with being low status in society, but also sort of witch-like. The cat lady/spinster image. I find that this is a stereotype that's written with great affection; you could make fun of her, but it's more that society makes fun of her and there's more there. Don't -- you don't know what's under there. Later on, when we find out that she had to fake it, about being the most boring house ever and making him look at all... she was sorry that she had done that, that she had deliberately put on that persona because she wanted to create that effect of tedium.

JC: Yeah. But it is interesting considering that no one in Harry's life is kind to him. In this chapter, there's this emphasis on how he has no friends; the kids at school are shitty to him because they're afraid of Dudley, so no one even tries to be his friend. No one is kind to him; Mrs. Figg is kind to him, but he despises going over there because it's so boring. It seems a little bit inconsistent to me. If one adult in your life showed you kindness... she gives him chocolate cake, even though it's not good.

Lorrie: It's stale.

JC: She's nice to him and no one else is, and yet he's like, "I don't want to go to Mrs. Figg's house. It's boring, and it smells like cabbage." Maybe that's a very kid thing, but also I find that little bit of inconsistency interesting. There's other things around that, too. The way that Harry... he's so resilient in the face of all the neglect and abuse that he experienced. He's a smartass back to the Dursleys and back to Dudley, even when he knows it's going to get him into slapped upside the head or whatever, and I'm still not sure whether that's realistic or not. There are people, absolutely, who do that, but considering where his character goes and what he seemed toward the end of this book, it's a little bit strange to me. That's something that kept popping up in my head as I was reading this. Wow, he really is a smartass and it's a defense mechanism, but it hasn't been beaten out of him somehow.

Lorrie: Yeah. These are interesting observations, because I found both of those things more plausible. I think it's one of those things where people are different and bring different personalities and experiences to the reading. I found it very plausible that Harry just had different dread about going to Mrs. Figg's, because I think she's intentionally making it so that it would be intolerable and dreary for a child to be trapped there with whatever unlimited interests she has in pictures of cat after cat after cat after cat; the smell is depressing, and she's not actively kind to him. He is a hostage in her house to whatever weird things she's going on

about, and it's not personal to him. It's not kindness, it's not help. It's just, "Oh, good, you're here. I was wanting to show somebody this cat picture. You'll do." He doesn't have any power. He can't tell her, "Thank you. That's enough cats." He just has to accept it. He doesn't have any choice. So, to me, this was another facet of him never being left alone. Nobody ever asking him what he wanted. Everyone just imposing their weird agendas on him, and his only option is to sort of not be there. Maybe I'm just remembering being a kid and having to be around -- I was an only child, so I didn't have siblings to go off with whatever boring grown-up shit my parents were doing. I had to sit there politely in the room, and it was so boring. Oh, my God.

JC: And that's very interesting, because I have my experience. I was not an only child, but I was also one of those precocious kids who couldn't talk to the kids my age and desperately wanted adults to talk to me. The things that I was interested in, they could converse with me about on a different level, so if an adult -- if a neighbor -- had showed attention to me in any way, I would be like, "Let me tell you about string theory. Can we talk about string theory? Let me tell you everything I know, and then you tell me stuff, too. Let me impress you with how much I know about string theory." It would've been like that. That's me putting my own childhood experience on Harry, so that's interesting.

Lorrie: This is a cultural difference.

JC: It could be.

Lorrie: The Korean adults I was around would not have entertained my... if I tried to talk to them about what I was interested in, that was a no-no. Grown-ups have their own stuff to do; don't come to them with your little, "I'm reading Edgar Allan Poe today." Don't bother them. I think that would have happened with Harry and Mrs. Figg, too, the option of him telling her, "Oh, I had a dream about a motorcycle that just wasn't there." I think that's a power difference or hierarchy thing that's culturally specific. She's not there to be nurturing. It's not like he's living with Sirius or Remus, who would say, "Oh, I found a book you might like." She's got no interest in him. On purpose, we find out. What was the other thing that you were saying?

JC: That he's a smartass.

Lorrie: Oh, that Harry is smarmy. Yeah, his retorts. I do know kids who feel, "Nothing's ever going to be good. I might as well say what I'm thinking. What are they going to do? Put me in a cupboard under the stairs?" Also, they're so angry that they think, "All right, fine. Do your worst," because the only hope they have is trying to say something that will land to make them see themselves. Even if they never see themselves, at least he can hold on to his own perspective by saying something out loud. You do see this sometimes in kids who are in really bad situations, where they will look at the adults oppressing them and say, "You can make me stop saying it, but you can't make me stop thinking it." That might not get them very far, but that's what they have, and it does sometimes land. You do sometimes see grown-ups saying, "Ah, go away," or "I'll beat you for that," but it's true. You can't stop them from judging you when you deserve to be judged. What are they going to do? Try to hit him? They're already hitting him. But yeah, his smarminess is something that I recognized.

JC: It's really interesting. I think a lot of it, too, is it's the fairytale, over-the-topness of it. Not that children don't get treated horribly and aren't abused and neglected in the real world, because that does happen. But in this case -- the contrast of Harry's experience with Dudley's experience -- that's part of the story, part of the world that is being built here. But I'm always surprised in this

story that Harry never seems to completely suffer the ramifications of 10 years of being treated that way. I know we talked last time about how he does have slightly over a year with his parents, that he had this amazing start -- and that does make a big difference -- but also, 10 years of being treated that way. Maybe I'm just putting too much of myself on it there, but the fact that he's resilient in the face of that and that he goes to Hogwarts, and he's just like, "Okay, moving on with my life!" Not that he doesn't also face awful things at Hogwarts. We've talked in the fandom a lot about the trauma that he experienced as a child and continued to experience over the next decade of his life, but how he seems to come out of it pretty okay, which is a theme of children's literature though, isn't it? That children are exposed to horrible things, and then everything is fine.

Lorrie: Well, sometimes it operates as a guidebook saying, "I know your life isn't fine. These are the fantasies that I used to sustain myself until, eventually, I was an adult or I was safe. So here; it might work for you, too. Of course, it's not realistic; you're living the realistic life. What you need is a fantasy book." When you said that maybe you're putting too much of your own experience into this, you said it as though that might be a negative, but I am super gung-ho about that being the point entirely.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: It's not just a good thing. It's what makes literature useful to humans. This is why we write fiction and read fiction. You're supposed to. It's supposed to be different from how somebody else interprets the exact same words, so that you can talk to each other and learn about each other more. "Okay, we read the same story. How did we come away with something so different?" It makes it easier to talk about. It makes it easier to tell somebody else who you are. The other thing that I'm very gung-ho about, that I think is not only not a negative but an active, wonderful positive: there's a suspicion of readers perceiving the author as an individual that, I think, is supposed to date back to like mid-20th century American lit crit. It drives me nuts. I think it's a natural thing that happens. I don't see the point in fighting it. I agree that it shouldn't be considered as 'voice of God' or authority, but it is a thing. In this case, with the fatphobia, the natural way that the fifth graders were saying, "That's the author; not everybody writes that way about people. She could have made the same point, but toned it down. She should have stopped here. That was just mean. Most people I know wouldn't be this mean about it. I know people of all sizes; it doesn't even have anything to do with what she's trying to say." They got an image of the author as an individual person, and that empowered them.

JC: Oh, interesting.

Lorrie: To reject what they knew to be false, and along the way to protect themselves and their peers, who would be affected by this kind of judgment.

JC: Oh, you're casting a spell, a protection spell, on yourself.

Lorrie: And on the people around you who are in your reading community. I very much believe in the author as a presence; not necessarily the actual individual -- because we don't know that person -- but the image of the person that is formed in the reader's head because of things like word choice, plot choice, characterization, and how we relate to that image of a person who's telling us the story. There is a storyteller; the storyteller is human, no bigger or smaller than any other human. You receive the story; some of it works for you, some of it you need to protect yourself from, some of it is about them. I love authors. I love reading, and I love that when you

read fiction, there's somebody else there with you, someone else's mind. You won't always agree with them, but if you didn't read other people stories, you could just tell yourself stories. You don't have to read other people's stories. You read other people's stories so that somebody else can tell you a story. It's a person. They can make up stuff that you weren't making up on your own. There's use in that, and art in that. Yes, that's one of my many, many pitches for the author not being dead in the lit crit sense, which strangely has nothing to do with an author being actually alive or not.

JC: Right, right.

Lorrie: You can try killing the author in your mind, but you're going to be missing out on a lot.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: And in this case, you would be missing out on your right to say, "This is bullshit. This is fatphobic."

JC: That's actually a really good point, because if the author is not dead, then you can rail at her for all the bullshit she puts into things. You can be angry at her.

Lorrie: This is personal. This is a you thing. Yeah, the fatphobia is so overwhelming. That's pretty much the main thing I take away from chapter 2. What about you?

JC: That, plus I get even a stronger sense here of Harry's magic being a metaphor for queerness. At the age of like 10 -- he's like 10 for most of this, and he's about to turn 11 -- he doesn't know, but everyone around him does. It's that idea of having a child who is obviously different from other kids in various ways. You're looking like, "That kid... that kid is probably queer." You get the feeling that the Dursleys are looking at him in that way, and they're denying him any information about it. They're punishing him when he leans in that direction too far; even though they know it's just his nature and he can't help it, they punish him for it. It's such a metaphor for queerness. It's all I see.

Lorrie: I guess they're hoping conversion works on him.

JC: Yeah. That's a good point. If they could send him to an anti-magic school, they absolutely would. Yeah.

Lorrie: Well, St. Brutus's School for Criminally--

JC: What a name!

Lorrie: I guess that's conversion camp, right?

JC: Oh, my gosh, yeah. Exactly. One more small thing.

Lorrie: Yeah. Yeah.

JC: I don't know why this jumped out at me, but the idea that Dudley's birthday-- first he gets this over-the-top number of presents, and it has to be more every year or he throws a shit fit. But then they take this outing and he brings one friend, and they go do something completely mundane. They go out for burgers or they go to the zoo. I don't know. There was something about that that just made me laugh, because when I think about parents who are completely spoiling their kid, they would rent out the roller rink and have a massive party and invite

everybody. It just seems so small and mundane (these outings) compared to what I would have expected them to do, and it could be that it's a more British versus an American thing. I don't know why that's stood out to me. It was unexpected. Having been a parent and having raised a kid through all those years, and having gone to many of those blowout birthday parties -- and having, honestly, thrown a couple myself -- I was just surprised that it was just this, "We're going to go to the zoo, and that's your special thing for your birthday," and then Dudley basically hates the whole zoo experience in the way that only a tween can.

Lorrie: I think, actually, over-the-top party extravaganzas, that was a trend in the US that came about, I guess, in the late 80s and then kept growing, especially as people stopped wanting to hold parties in their homes, and then it became a competitive thing. If every party has a theme or goes to a place with bouncy castles, then you can't just have the kids over for punch and cake because they'll be like, "Where's the party?" But that does seem, to me, a very American thing.

JC: Yeah, probably so.

Lorrie: But the other thing I'm thinking is what she's showing is normal: the normal that Harry is being deprived of.

JC: Oh.

Lorrie: He doesn't pine for 39 presents. He pines for one or two.

JC: That isn't a pair of socks. Old, used socks.

Lorrie: Yeah. The over-the-top thing is one thing, but what he's really being deprived of is normal, "We're your parents, we'll pick up a friend, we'll take you to the zoo for the day." That's the thing that really would nourish him if he got it.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: Sometimes you talk about Harry Potter and you think about the actual story and the actual kid, and it's sad.

JC: Yes. Oh, my gosh, I remember, the first time after I had read the last book, that I went back and watched the films. I cried through the first film, and it's surprised me because I had seen it 20 times at that point. I cried at the first film because I looked at those little baby faces and thought, "They don't know what's coming," even though I was looking at the actors and I knew that. But thinking about those little characters and what they were going to have to suffer through, I just sobbed through the whole movie. It was the strangest experience, but yeah.

Lorrie: Iris, my 19-year-old, said something very similar. We were talking about the chapter in Prisoner of Azkaban, where Harry throws mud at Malfoy and Snape and Lupin fight over the Marauder's Map. She was seven when she read it; now she's 19, and she says it's so weird, the perspective that now she's so much older than the kids. She says, "He was 13. He was a little guy. To go through all that and have these mysterious adults having this mysterious fight, and nobody's explaining anything to you." At seven, as a reader, 13 seemed like he was more equipped to deal with it. Then, of course, there's the reality that when you are those ages, you really do have to deal with all these weird mysteries that nobody's telling you about.

JC: Hmm. Yeah.

Lorrie: Just because you're small and you still have round cheeks, the world does not spare you. But I find that I still have affection for the book, the story, and the characters. There's so much about this chapter that's thought-provoking, not necessarily in a good way. My affection for it is still intact in general.

JC: It does such a good job of setting up the contrast, obviously, for what Harry's life could have been. When he learns who he was, he learns about his being a wizard, he learns about the part of life that he missed out on, I feel like this is such a contrast. No matter what awful shit happens in Hogwarts, it's still better than living with the Dursleys. "Okay, there's a serial killer that's arisen from the dead that's trying to murder me? Okay, I'll take it."

Lorrie: Bring it on.

JC: It's better than living with Dudley.

Lorrie: Yeah. Any final thoughts?

JC: I'm excited to get into the next couple of chapters. It jumps right into the part where we start to see the magic.

Lorrie: I'm excited, too.

JC: It's going to be really, really fun.

Lorrie: All right. Well, I'll talk to you then. Thank you, JC, for joining me.

JC: Thank you, Lorrie. Bye.

Lorrie: Bye.

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.