

Transcript

Episode 1.3

Book 1, Chapter 3: The Letters From No One

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 re-visit 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 One, Chapter Three: The Letters From No One.

Lorrie: Good morning, JC.

JC: Hello.

Lorrie: Today, we're going to deal with chapter three: The Letters From No One. This is the chapter where Harry gets the first letter of his life, right before his 11th birthday. Uncle Vernon destroys it, and then more letters keep coming. They come inside eggs, through the windows; they're unstoppable. Uncle Vernon keeps the letters away from Harry and drives the family somewhere remote. It doesn't work, and then there's a booming knock at the door. Ooh.

JC: Yes.

Lorrie: It's starting to happen. So, JC, what things stood out for you from this chapter?

JC: The first thing that really stood out to me is in the very beginning: it's just summer, and the description of Harry wandering around all day to avoid Dudley and his gang felt very Gen X/older millennial to me. That was my childhood. This is set in the 90s, but it could have been in the 80s, too, just the way that everything is written. It's really interesting to read a childhood that feels familiar to me, but is so vastly different from the childhood that my child is living. There's no phones, there's no internet; watching TV is still a thing that kids do, so throughout this chapter Dudley's obsession with his favorite TV shows is a big thing that keeps coming up. I don't know any kids today -- other than three-year-olds who are really into PAW Patrol -- who are obsessed with TV. Do kids even watch TV anymore? My limited experience with the kid that I know -- and his cousins and his friends -- is that they don't really watch TV. That set this in such a particular time for me. I just found that really interesting.

Lorrie: It's interesting to me that you say it could have been the 80s, too, because I think that might be some bleed-through from the age that the author is. She's, what, six years older than you?

JC: Probably. Something like that.

Lorrie: Yeah, and a couple years older than me, so she would have experienced that 80s childhood.

JC: The wandering around, the drinking from the hose, all that stuff. Don't come back till the street lights come on.

Lorrie: One thing that stood out for me was the bedroom layout. There are three times in the series where her description of houses and their bedrooms make a big impact on me, and this is the first one. There are four bedrooms: there's the master bedroom; a guest bedroom, which is usually empty; and then two for Dudley. And this is the house where they stick Harry under the stairs. Because in this podcast, I do want to skip around and ahead -- even to books that we aren't going to get to for a very long time -- the other two house layouts that make a big impression on me, they both come in *Half-Blood Prince*. The first one is Spinner's End, which is a very small, typical working-class British house that has two bedrooms upstairs, but the layout of that house is that there's a secret hiding spot behind a bookshelf and that's where Snape has grown up emotionally. The other one is the Gaunt hovel; I didn't notice this one for years. It was quite recently that I realized what she was doing here; it's very subtle. So the Gaunt hovel: Marvolo, the dad, lives there; Morfin, the son, lives there; and Merope the daughter lives there, and here's the sentence: "The house seemed to contain three tiny rooms; two doors led off the main room, which served as kitchen and living room combined." This is so brilliant to me. It just opens up the question: where does Merope sleep? There are at least three options and all of them are horrifying in different ways, and that's as far as she goes. She just tucks that right in there. I kind of love it, that she just gives the layout and then leaves it. Here we have a fairly vast four-bedroom suburban house for a family of four, and they stick this kid under the stairs.

JC: I wrote a note about the house layout, too. That stood out to me as well. The idea that they have a guest bedroom, which occasionally Aunt Marge comes and stays with them. And Dudley's got his two bedrooms. I have one kid, and I have a household with enough bedrooms that my kid has two bedrooms, so we've always joked that it's his second bedroom like Dudley had. But the idea that you would put a second child in a closet... It's so over the top, and I think that's funny. One of the other things that strikes me about this, too, is that there was a period of time in the 2000s when real estate listings started calling those closets under the stairs "Harry Potter closets." I don't know if they still do, but I remember seeing that in listings in the early 2000s. It was like, "Oh, my god, this has become a real estate term? Are you kidding me?"

Lorrie: What else stood out for you?

JC: There's a lot of humor in this chapter, which is really appreciated, especially because it's juxtaposed against this incredible cruelty. It's this cruelty but in a funny way, which is a hallmark, honestly, of the whole series. Another detail that stood out to me was in the very beginning, when they're talking about what schools they're going to go to next year when they start secondary school, and Dudley's going to go to this funny name, Smeltings, which I think is amazing. The description of the smelting stick, I thought, was such a funny detail. From the book, it says, "They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life."

Lorrie: I know.

JC: That says so much about British public schools, it says so much about the class system, it says so much about boys and toxic masculinity; there's so much you could pick out of that one. What is this boy being prepared for in life, and what are the expectations that he has about who has power and how he accesses that power? There's so much there. That really stands out to me.

Lorrie: There's an astonishing amount of sarcasm packed into those few sentences. Yeah, that is an unforgettable line. Funnily enough, my second thing also is cynical or ironic humor, because it's very heavy in this chapter and irreducibly brilliant. It gets it as bitter as it can go, but it's so funny you can't deny it. The fact that the letter comes and it's addressed to "the cupboard under the stairs." You can't even say anything to that; they know. But then, just when I thought that was good enough, then the next one is addressed to "the smallest bedroom"? That is devastating. I do, in fact, know people who sort of were and sort of were not adopted into families where, if the family said, "No, we think of you as ours," then the bedroom they got always was the smallest one. They got one; you don't want to be ungrateful, but yeah. I also knew someone, when I was living in Korea, where step-parents and step-children... it's often harsher than it is in the US; this adult, middle-aged woman I knew was obsessed with roasted sweet potatoes because when she was growing up, her stepmother -- they had a ton of sweet potatoes -- she would give roasted sweet potatoes to her biological children, and she would never give any to the step-children.

JC: Oh, my god. Wow.

Lorrie: There was enough to go around, but they weren't allowed to have any. Thirty years later, this woman still is like, "I'm getting a sweet potato."

JC: "Because I can!" Wow.

Lorrie: When Harry is fighting with Uncle Vernon and Vernon says that the letter was a mistake, Harry says, "It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily. "It had my cupboard on it." Then when they're in the hut, Harry sleeps on the softest bit of floor he could.

JC: Oh, my god. Yeah.

Lorrie: There's no "soft bit of floor." Spoiler. "He hoped the roof wouldn't fall in, although he might be warmer if it did." The cynicism, amazing. I have no notes.

JC: Just picking up on something that you were just talking about: the fact that the letter was addressed to the cupboard under the stairs, I really was intrigued by just how much that rattled Vernon and Petunia. They know who the letters are coming from, they know what the magical community is capable of, but that rattled them. The fact that they instantly were like, "They know where he sleeps," and they moved Harry to Dudley's second bedroom not out of kindness for Harry, but out of this fear of being shamed. We talked about this a little bit last time, too, but they are very aware of the cruel way in which they're treating Harry, and what they're now worried about is retaliation. They know what these people are capable of and that's when they move him. It's such an interesting note to me. At the same time, the fact that this is probably the first time in Dudley's life that he's not gotten his way, so he pitches a tantrum. He's shocked. He throws a fit, and they're just like, "Nope, this is what's going to happen."

Lorrie: It doesn't work.

JC: But it's the first time that Dudley has not gotten his way, and the entire chapter he's just baffled by everything that's happening here. He wants the letter -- all the things that he demands -- he wants to watch his TV shows. He gets nothing he wants in this chapter; he's just like, "UGH!" and then it gets worse for him in the next chapter.

Lorrie: Oh, my gosh, it sure does.

JC: It is not a good week to be Dudley.

Lorrie: No. He hasn't been prepared for this. He was living on borrowed time.

JC: Also, what it reminds me of? Take a white man: for the first time, things don't go exactly the way he expects them to, and just that bafflement of, "But, but I deserve it!"

Lorrie: "Now I'm being oppressed."

JC: "I'm being oppressed. Help, help! I'm being oppressed." Right, exactly. It feels a bit like that.

Lorrie: "I'm not privileged. I'm oppressed." Yeah, it's the shock. I remember that the author, when she was young, had an entry-level job at Amnesty International; that has always stuck out to me because of the letters, because Amnesty International has that letter writing campaign for rights...

JC: Oh.

Lorrie: Where people can send letters to political prisoners. The letters may never get to the prisoners or they might get there all at once after the prisoners are released; you just never know. But there's something that happens emotionally when a prisoner realizes, "They knew I was here." Even if that realization doesn't come during the time they need it, even if it comes after, something still happens. It changes things. The author did speak about how this made an impact on her; everything she learned Amnesty International made an impact on her. I was thinking about when I did ACT UP-type activism in the 1990s: one of our chants, like for police brutality or other prejudice, would be, "The whole world is watching, the whole world is watching." One of the shifts that ACT UP was particularly strong in was doing outrageous things in order to get more media coverage. Not because of craving attention, but because that is a way to tell people what they cannot get away with. Of course, now, with the whole anti-police brutality movement, cell phones and TV coverage has democratized that, so you don't need to go to the extent that ACT UP did to stage theater. If you have a cell phone and an internet connection, you can access this power. How could they possibly know where he sleeps? It engages all of the guilt that you've negotiated within yourself quietly when you could get away with it.

JC: This just raised this idea of, if you wrote this story today, Harry would be making TikToks from his closet.

Lorrie: Oh, my God! Like Claudia Conway.

JC: Yes, yes, exactly. It'd be a very different story, wouldn't it?

Lorrie: Do you remember when Kellyanne Conway got COVID from Trump, and Claudia broadcast the sound of her mom coughing?

JC: Yes. Oh, wow. Yeah, I'm just trying to imagine young Harry Potter with a TikTok account now. Oh, my God. Would he have found out that he was magical sooner? Because there would have been videos. "Look at my hair; I just shaved it off."

Lorrie: Oh, my God, that's right.

JC: "My aunt shaved it off, and now look at it? This is the next morning!" Someone would have been like... there's got to be some witches and wizards out there who are hip enough to be on social media who would've been like, "This kid... wait, his name is Harry?" You can just imagine. It would be a much shorter story, probably. Oh, back to the Hogwarts letter. You mentioned this already, but the idea that the Hogwarts letter was the first piece of mail that Harry's ever gotten. I don't remember reading that detail before, somehow, so that was like, "Oh." At a time when mail was a thing that was valuable; I remember the first time that my own child got a piece of mail, and it was not that big of a deal because he'd gotten emails and texts and stuff at that point in his life. But this is the first time anyone outside of his family has tried to contact him?

Lorrie: He exists.

JC: Exactly. It must have really blown his mind that these letters keep coming. Someone knows he exists, they know that he's been sleeping in the closet, they know when he moves to the smallest bedroom. He doesn't have a memory of anyone giving a shit about him, and it's not explicit in the text – which is a point I'll probably bring up later -- but the idea that this is the first time anyone has really cared about him in his experience of being almost eleven years old? That's got to have blown his mind.

Lorrie: Yeah. And watching the change that this has wrought in his relatives, to look at them losing it. Wow. I love the unstoppable of the letters. The detail about them being rolled up into eggs that were passed in through the window, that enchants me. That takes my breath away every time. It's so magical. It's also the first egg symbolism of the series. There are lots of egg symbols, and that one is so magical. It's such a departure from Muggle life. So bewildering. How? Those letters are big! Eggs aren't that big. What do you do? You crack them and then... wow. Okay, this is magic. There's two dozen of them. You're a mathematician; did you make any note of the mathematical progression of how many letters there were?

JC: I have not. And that's actually an interesting question, now that you bring it up. Yeah, no, I haven't.

Lorrie: It's not Fibonacci or anything.

JC: Which would have been clever.

Lorrie: But it's also not emotionally... it goes from one to a few, and then it goes to two dozen, and then it goes to 30 or 40, and then it goes to a hundred. It's emotional quantities, not numerical.

JC: I see.

Lorrie: Anyway, that was something that I looked at this time. But yeah, the unstoppable of the letters is Petunia and Vernon's deferred truths of what they do. Whatever bargain they made: okay, time to collect. But I love that. It feels like, to me, what happens when you have an emotional breakthrough, you put something together -- a truth about your life or your family -- and you might want to try to deny it, but once you make that initial connection, you can't stop it.

The connections keep making themselves. It takes you over, the unstoppable. I like that we see different ways that Vernon tries to do something about this. He tries denial because he boards up the house; he tries superstition by crossing the water; he tries violence -- he buys a rifle; I don't know how he's bought a rifle in England, but he has; and he tries escape, just flat out out-running it, and none of these things work. That's what happens when you didn't ask for a realization, but it keeps coming and coming. Ever since I've read this series, the unstoppable letters and how they keep increasing and becoming more insistent, that image has always stuck with me since then. When you make a realization and you can't stop it, you just have to give in. There's nothing you can do about it.

JC: The comedy of Vernon's slow descent into madness over the letters is something I find really fun to read. It's done so well. The image of him trying to hammer a nail with a piece of fruitcake is there. It's just bizarre. Or he's humming "Tiptoe Through The Tulips." There's all these little things that are just... he's losing his shit.

Lorrie: He really is.

JC: It's just so funny. It's so funny, and I think that the writing in this part really captures how hilarious all of that is. Then, of course, they end up in this incredibly unrealistic, improbable location, but it was the most extreme kind of ridiculousness. I just love the way that that all plays out.

Lorrie: I guess the ridiculousness of the hut on the rock is what's left of Vernon's sanity.

JC: Yeah, right.

Lorrie: That is what his mind looks like. Actually, the clever writing of Vernon's disintegration was something that I picked out also. He is fraying; he's falling into illogic and disorder, and the things that he is doing... he's using such establishment British things to work impotently. He's nailing things with a piece of fruitcake, which is this infamously unpalatable, British weird dessert. Using it to nail things -- this is not the first time somebody has said that about English fruitcake. He's spreading marmalade on his newspapers. Marmalade just seems very British tea. Tearing out tufts of his mustache, this complacent mustache? He's got trichotillomania now. So, just the conventionality fraying.

JC: Something on top of that, that was standing out to me about this whole descent into madness thing, is that a question that I remember asking myself in the past -- and I asked it again as I was reading -- is this question of, okay, if the Dursleys really hate Harry so much, this is an opportunity to get rid of him; why not just send him off to Hogwarts? Why, in particular in the beginning in the first chapter, Vernon's walking on eggshells around Petunia around the whole idea of magic. He hasn't gotten anything to do with it, he thinks it's weird, whatever. By this point, by living 10 years with a magical kid, it's personal. He's digging his heels in. It feels like, in addition to the things that you were saying, it's this very particular brand of toxic masculinity. It's this very patriarchal, "Look, I'm the man of this house, my word is law and I'm not giving in." It's personal. He's going to squash this; he's not going to be defeated by this freaky abnormal kid. That brings up a lot of interesting things. When I think about the author's transmisogyny, for example, hey. Again, the Dursleys are acting out the kind of behavior in this book that she seems to be acting out in her own real life. That's a theme I think I'm going to keep coming back to, but that's wild to me.

Lorrie: Yeah. With Vernon, it's like, "I didn't oppress you for 10 years as hard as I could to just apologize now." But it's also what Dumbledore keeps telling Harry about why Voldemort has a less stable soul than people who have committed fewer crimes. Every time you hurt another person, you lose a bit of your soul; it becomes more unstable. If you are going to try to reintegrate yourself through remorse -- if you have made yourself that unstable and small by hurting other people that much -- then the act of remorse and apology might kill you. If you're somebody who committed a few crimes and then you undergo remorse, you may make it; by the time you've done as much as Voldemort has done, there's no way back. If you feel what you've done, it will destroy you, so you can't afford to apologize, you can't afford remorse. This is what Snape's problem is -- when he spends six years plus treating Harry terribly -- because this orphan comes to school, and Snape knows that every bad thing about this orphan's life, Snape contributed to. The thought of having to face that is so awful he can't, but he just accrues more and more bad behavior towards Harry. "Okay, well, you were going to have a hard time apologizing before, but now..." This is something that is so easy to see in daily life with people who abuse the power they have over children or underlings. The more you mistreat somebody, the more you hate them.

JC: I'm not going to blame everything on toxic masculinity or the patriarchy, but hey, we're here. That feels like a very patriarchal, "I can't apologize to you, because then you will no longer respect my authority. If I apologize, that makes me weak and I'm not going to look weak in front of this person who's definitely inferior to me." Going back to Vernon Dursley, that's that idea of... I'm trying to remember. It's been a long time since I've read the seventh book, but I feel by the end, he has been humbled enough. But here, at this point, it's very much, "No, me getting my way is more important than this child's life or this child's mental health or well-being or whatever," which is really horrible, but it's also written in such a funny, over-the-top way.

Lorrie: Yeah. Just observing it, alone, is funny.

JC: This is a complete change of topic, but I did find interesting that Aunt Marge was mentioned twice. It was in that way of authors adding in little bits and pieces of things that you will realize later are important. Aunt Marge makes an appearance later; at this point, we have no idea who Aunt Marge is, so going back and reading it again is fun. They mention of her coming and visiting and staying in the guest bedroom, of course, but the fact that she is the kind of person who would buy a postcard while on vacation, write about how she got food poisoning, and send that to you? That just reminded me: I have a relative who reminds me so much of the Dursleys. I have many relatives who remind me of the Dursleys, but just thinking about that idea: this is a person who they're going to go on vacation, and they're going to find something to complain about, and that is the thing that they're going to tell you. "How was your vacation?" "Oh, blah blah blah." All the bad shit that happened. That just struck me as an interesting, tiny little detail that tells you so much about Aunt Marge, and I thought, "Damn, that's good writing!"

Lorrie: Whoever you are who's listening: If you think this is about you, it's not. It's one of the other relatives.

JC: It's someone else. Yeah, exactly. The other thing, though, is what she says -- and I'm reading the British edition of this -- that she ate a bad whelk. I'm just curious: does it say that in the American version?

Lorrie: It says "a funny whelk."

JC: Oh, it does say that. Okay. "A funny whelk." Okay, so it does use the word "whelk," which I thought was interesting.

Lorrie: Because the word "whelk" is so brilliant here.

JC: It's a great word. But also, by having spent most of my life in places that are not particularly close to the ocean, I had to look up what a whelk was. I think it's a kind of shellfish, but I'm not actually sure. Anyway, I was wondering if that was... I know they're more commonly eaten in Europe than they are in North America, so I wondered if that was a different word, but okay. Same word.

Lorrie: Sorry, I couldn't resist talking about your relatives.

JC: But I think the Dursleys are supposed to remind you of your relatives that are small-minded. That's the whole point of this, is that everyone's got people in their family that, over Thanksgiving dinner or whatever family get-togethers, you're dreading the shit that they're going to say, how they're going to treat you or how they're going to treat your cousin, or whatever; everyone's got that. That's something that is interesting about the Dursleys, too, is that they function as this really familiar annoyance, force for bad shit in your life, and everybody knows somebody like that.

Lorrie: One of the major themes of this series comes up in this chapter: when Harry is arguing with Vernon, and he says, "That's mine. I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine." This is the thing that gets Harry more than anything else. Nothing makes him angrier than having his own story withheld from him. There are these letters, there are the letters from Ron and Hermione that Dobby keeps from him in book two, and there's the half of the letter that Lily wrote to Sirius. That's his. This is something that he is driven by, even more than he's driven by his saving-people thing, and that distinction is really important because Voldemort doesn't know that about Harry. Voldemort thinks Harry's primary motivation is the saving-people thing because Voldemort is the person who turned Harry into that. The difference is Snape does know this about Harry; Snape knows that, even if you threaten to kill Harry's loved ones, there's something that will call to Harry more, and that is, "I have a piece of your story; come and get it." That's something that Snape knows and Voldemort doesn't. That becomes very important to the denouement of the series. The personal thing about Vernon keeping the letters away from Harry is that one of the things in my life that I've been angriest about was something very similar: there was a piece of mail that was important -- that was addressed to me -- and somebody, who was more powerful than I was, physically took it away from me and wouldn't let me see it until they were done with it. It took me decades to stop being actively boiling mad whenever I remembered it, and that really affected how I respected my kids' intellectual property from the moment they were born. Because Harry -- you can abuse him however badly you want, but he'll still know, "Some things are mine," and that's a beautiful thing to have as a birthright and as a conviction. Your story -- who you are, where you came from -- that does belong to you.

JC: It also makes me think about -- going back into the metaphor of the magical community being a metaphor for queerness -- that there are so many examples in the world of populations (who are minoritized or colonized or oppressed) where their story, their history, was kept from them, and we can all think of examples. That's making me think about that, too: that idea of knowing your own history and identity is so important. It's important for a lot of reasons, but when it has been actively kept from you? If you have it, you become powerful in a way that your

oppressors don't want you to become powerful, and they're afraid of letting you have that power. It's such a metaphor for so many different things. Ah, it's really powerful.

Lorrie: Yeah. There's a difference between having it be lost and having other people -- the ones who are intentionally keeping it from you to disempower you -- having them know it. That is a poison that can't be forgiven. This is a theme that comes up for Harry over and over again: there's so many things that nobody tells him, and it's not that they don't know, either. They all know Harry's the only one who doesn't know, and nobody's telling him. That drives him ballistic. To me, there's only one and completely reasonable, completely understandable, reason for Harry being capslock HARRY in book five: because Dumbledore is doing that to him. There's stuff going on that involves Harry; Dumbledore knows what it is; he's not telling Harry, and he's not letting anyone else tell Harry, either. That is the thing that Harry hates most in the entire world: "That's about me, it's mine." Here we have the essence of what is the most important to Harry Potter, the person.

JC: Yeah. Okay, I'm going to keep looking for that as we go forward. That's a theme I hadn't really thought much about before, but I can see it rolling out in front of me now.

Lorrie: And it's so sensitive. It's a very sensitive topic because when you get to the entire universe of people who were adopted as children, the hunger to know about your genetic origin story is separate from however loving and bonded you are with the people who took care of you every day and love you and are crazy about you. Sometimes there might be this false equation where, if you have that hunger to know about your genetic relatives, that that somehow invalidates how much you love your adoptive family. No; they're unrelated. Literally unrelated. This is not something that's logical. All right, that's really sensitive. Finally, something that I noticed about this chapter is the ritual aspect for me. This is the eve of it all starting.

JC: Oh.

Lorrie: When my older child was turning 11, the night before, I gave her and her friend each a bag of chips and a banana, because that's what's for dinner at the hut on the rock. It's convenience store food, and it's your last grasp of the mundane before it happens, before you get woken up at midnight. To the extent that Harry Potter, the phenomenon, has become ritualized in popular culture in everyday life, this was part of it for me.

JC: There's a lot I feel I could say about the whole Hogwarts letter, but I think I'll save that for the next chapter because that's what's coming. I'm excited. That's going to be fun.

Lorrie: So, do you have further thoughts?

JC: We talked about the author's fatphobia a lot, but it keeps popping up whenever she talks about Dudley. There's this detail at the very end where Harry is counting down the seconds to midnight, and he's looking at Dudley's watch, which is "dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist." And I'm like, "Really?!"

Lorrie: Exactly! Just take that word out.

JC: Yeah, just... oh, my god.

Lorrie: It doesn't even serve any purpose.

JC: It serves no purpose there except to remind us that you hate fat people, author. Oh, it's just so annoying. That just... ERGH. A completely different observation there is the day that the first letter comes and there's some scuffle about who's going to go get the mail; Harry goes to get the mail, and he takes a while because he's standing in the hall and staring at the fact that he's gotten the first letter he's ever gotten in his life. Vernon makes a joke about, "Oh, you checking for letter bombs out there?"

Lorrie: Oh.

JC: That was so interesting to me because, obviously, the IRA would have been very active during Vernon's life -- that would have been a big part of his life. But I read that and thought, "Yeah, that's a detail I'd have to explain to my kid." That joke would completely fly over the heads of a lot of younger readers today, so it just made me again think about the age of the author and the experiences that she would have had, and that this is a thing that someone Vernon's age would've made a joke about.

Lorrie: Yeah, and that whatever troubles there are, they're not about to come to whatever suburb these people are living in.

JC: Right. There's no expectation, but yet it is a bomb. Literally, the letter is a bomb, which is what makes it ironic.

Lorrie: Yeah. When he realizes what the letter is, he changes colors.

JC: Exactly. So that one is fun. Another thing: we talked a lot about the humor of the letters coming and all of that stuff, and I find it interesting that the author makes a really deliberate choice to describe what Harry is observing without giving us any of his inner monologue about it. You're left to imagine what it would feel like for Harry, but there's no explicit -- Harry taking any moments and going, "What the hell is happening?" or that idea of thinking about "who's trying to find me so hard, and why would they be doing that?" It's interesting to me that that was the choice, to let it wash over Harry and there's no dwelling on what he's thinking about it. It would read very differently obviously if we did, but that just stands out to me as it's interesting that that's not there. It's just so conspicuously absent. How does Harry feel about all of this, other than "give me my damn letter?"

Lorrie: Yeah. I like that choice, especially since -- if we were going to look in his inner monologue -- it would be changing second by second. It's such an experience of consecutive, "Wow, I've never seen that happen in this house before." "Oh, and I've never seen that happen." "Oh, and that, and that!" It's experience now, process later. Also, the differing ways that Harry and Dudley respond to the fact that they can't do anything about anything that's happening. Vernon is just going to say stuff and make it happen, and Petunia, in her way -- and Dudley and Harry, in their ways -- just have to adjust, and Harry's had more practice with this.

JC: Yeah, this is true. It's not nearly as unusual an experience for Harry. Yeah.

Lorrie: It's like, "Look, whatever is happening, just go with it."

JC: And Dudley's like, "I'm missing my TV shows. You're treating me cruelly! I'm being oppressed!"

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah. It sure is not a boring day for Harry Potter.

JC: One more thought that I had while reading this: I can't remember if we get an answer to this later in the books, but who actually writes the Hogwarts letters? Does someone sit down with a quill and write this letter, and then use some kind of duplication spell? Or is there someone who is freaking writing every single one of these? Who's putting them in the eggs, all that stuff. That is so interesting to me. What's the magic behind that? That's something that I was thinking about. We mentioned that already a bit, but the physical writing of the letters fascinated me. The other thing is that, later on in the series, we learn that there's this thing called a Trace, which all juvenile wizards have a Trace on them so the Ministry of Magic can keep up with them. That explains the magic of how they know where he is, but the fact that the Trace is specific enough that it can tell them what room he is in a house is kind of disturbing, in a way. It makes me think, "This is being monitored by whom? How does this work?" It made me want to dig in a little bit to the theory of how does the Trace work exactly, what does it monitor, and who is monitoring it. I'm imagining this big... your personal FBI agent, like that meme. Is it like that? What the hell. Have people in the Ministry of Magic been watching Harry his entire life, and they're aware this whole time of what kind of life he's led and they've just ignored it? There's so many questions that brings up for me.

Lorrie: The best guess I have about how the letters are written: when we see McGonagall later on, working with the kids about their school schedules, they discuss it; then when the schedule is set in McGonagall's mind, then she taps the paper with her wand and the schedule appears. And she does sign the letters. I'm imagining that she thinks about the letters that she's sending out, and then she does a spell and the physical letters appear. That's what I picture. And that the ink is green also associates it, in my mind, with McGonagall. I believe we find out in an upcoming chapter that Hagrid is responsible for the specific ways that the letters escalate.

JC: Ah.

Lorrie: He is the one who comes up with forcing one reality through a barrier into another reality, which is Hagrid's function. I would imagine that he's getting communications from Dumbledore about what's happening. I don't think that the kids are being monitored usually, but I do think that the point of contact -- when wizards first approach a student who's been raised Muggle -- I think they have had a wide range of responses from the families, and this is not unknown. It definitely has that kind of seeing through walls, Legilimency feel that would take a specifically powerful wizard like Dumbledore to know.

But this is just speculation. I think we will find that Hagrid had something to do with the increasing letters, though.

JC: Okay. There's a lot to look forward to as we continue on. I'm finding it really interesting to do this chapter by chapter and dig into small details. Yeah. I've not read the books this way before. I powered through. I binge-read them. Like when you binge-watch a show? I just binge-read them. I kept turning the page. "What's next? What's next? What's next?" I don't think I have -- in the way that I know you have -- I've never really slowed down and thought through these chapters, so this is going to be a very interesting experience for me going forward.

Lorrie: I can't binge-read. I read really slowly, and I also enjoyed how richly detailed this series is, because the details are weighted down with future import. You can tell they're all clues. They're all glowing: "Remember this one, put it in your sack; it'll be useful later." And if you don't do that, then as you read the series, you become more and more aware that that's the way this game works -- this particular game -- until by the time you're used to this author, you're doing

that with everything, including some that are just red herrings or dead ends. By this time we're jumpy, like, "Oh, no, another mystery! I better remember that just in case." But more often than not, it is deliberate here, and that is what has made this series so incredibly valuable for teaching kids how to read. Not every author writes this way, of course, but it is the way that you start to scan literature to see how to understand it. It's almost like a textbook, it's so well done. I find it valuable. The way that it makes you want to see more, it equips you with some things and then says, "All those things you just picked up? In the next chapter, you're going to get to use them... but not until the next chapter."

JC: Which is what I've been dreading, honestly. Particularly from books three on, in the sense of being a page-turner, I would get to the end of a chapter and it would be three in the morning, and I would go, "But... but I've got to keep going."

Lorrie: For me, the pace increased for each book. At the beginning of the book, I read slowly, and then in the middle, I'm savoring it. Then there comes a point, about 80% through the book, when I just read faster and faster and faster and faster. For the end of a Harry Potter novel, you take one breath. You're not done until it's over. "It's going to happen!" Yeah, my enjoyment of the reading of the series has been unshakable in ways that are sometimes sorrowful now, but it's still there. And, as we have discussed in this chapter, I have very little patience for people who make fun of J.K. Rowling's writing as being workman-like. You can nitpick specific things about her -- like the adverb over-use -- but she's a good writer. There's something real there that you cannot imitate, you can't fake it. The heavy sarcasm that we noted, how succinct it is; the point of view that she delivers without even doing any internal monologue. That's real. That can't be faked, and I am in awe. The woman can write. No matter what all else is going on her head right now -- which I don't understand -- the woman can write.

JC: Up next is *The Keeper Of The Keys*. I'm excited.

Lorrie: Woohoo!

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.