

HARRY POTTER AFTER 2020

with LORRIE KIM and JC

Transcript Episode 1.8 Book 1, Chapter 8: The Potions Master

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 long-time HP fan. I'm your editor, Caroline. In this episode, Lorrie and JC tackle Book One, Chapter 8: The Potions Master.

Lorrie: JC, welcome to our discussion of Chapter 8: The Potions Master.

JC: Oh, yeah.

Lorrie: I have a bit of investment in this subject. I think I wrote a book about this guy.

JC: Indeed. This is going to be fun.

Lorrie: Yeah. This is the last character who's very important in Harry's life that he meets in this book. It's quite far into the first book before he even meets Snape. He's met everybody else important. All right, what stood out to you in this chapter? It's a pretty packed chapter.

JC: It is. I think the first thing that really stands out to me is that Harry basically has the first day of school from hell. It's every nightmare you ever had about the first day at a new school rolled into one experience; not only is he constantly getting lost -- he doesn't understand what's going on -- but the school building is actively working against him to make it harder, and everyone is pointing and whispering at him. Everything that could go wrong goes wrong, but it's the first time in his life that he hasn't had to do this alone. He's having this really difficult nightmare of a first week of school, but he's got a friend to do it with and they're suffering together. That suffering together thing is going to be a theme for their friendship. But gosh, doesn't that make a huge difference to not be alone in that.

Lorrie: Yeah, and quite a few of the other kids are also suffering. There's some equal footing here.

JC: Right. Everybody is having this first week of school from hell. It's not just Harry.

Lorrie: They're all missing the trick step.

JC: Exactly. It's almost like there's a bit of hazing in that way. "This is what is going to be like; welcome to the magical world."

Lorrie: They seem very small.

JC: Yeah, like a little sixth grader. And I think, too, the other sense that I get here: you already talked about how he's not the only one who's suffering, but this realization that he has almost immediately is that magic is work. It's not just a superpower you get granted.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: You have to study and toil and practice, and that realization is: at any time when you start a new thing that you have a talent for that you think, "Oh, I'm going to do this, it's going to be great," and then you hit a wall where you go, "Oh, shit, I have so much to learn and I have so much hard work to do." It's like, "Okay, you have to come take that deep breath." It made me think about the first week of my PhD program.

Lorrie: Oi.

JC: I didn't get lost, and there weren't ghosts trying to keep me from going to my classes, but that feeling of walking into a class that you think, "Oh, this is my best subject, I am so good at this," and then sitting down and, 10 minutes in, having no idea what the professor is saying and looking around like, "Oh, shit, this is the first day?" That feeling of, "I have so much work to do; oh, no." That is really interesting, but as you said, he's not the only one struggling. Also, I think he could have felt even more ostracized, but he looks around at all the other kids; even the ones from magical families are going, "Aaaaahhhh!" at the same time.

Lorrie: The joke about Professor Binns being so boring that he's a ghost and he hasn't personally noticed: that never stops being funny to me.

JC: Exactly. Oh.

Lorrie: I lost it the first time I read that, and I lose it every single time.

JC: Yes. I think that we have all had that one teacher who probably should have retired a decade ago. The idea that they have that in the magical world, too, but it's even worse because even death doesn't spur anyone to retire.

Lorrie: No. I know he hasn't entered the narrative yet, but jumping ahead to Snape. This is such a good perspective about this series: you're a student. You sit in class for a really long time, hours a day, staring at the teacher, thinking thoughts about each teacher. So Binns: this teacher is so boring, he might as well be dead. And Snape... the way that we look at Snape through Harry's eyes is: what on earth motivates a teacher to be this much of a miserable wretch? Because you do encounter those teachers. Why are you even teaching? Why are you acting like this is some sort of punishment? Do you have some other secret life, and this is your penance? Because there are real teachers who teach like that.

JC: Oh, yes. Indeed.

Lorrie: And making up this elaborate story about why this wretch is just being so petty and taking everything out on children: that might actually be a much more satisfying answer than whatever the truth is about a whole lot of petty teachers.

JC: That's an interesting perspective, actually. The other teachers that we meet this day are so interesting. I love the introduction of McGonagall because she's that one strict, takes-no-bullshit teacher that you had at some point that you were terrified of, but also respected and knew you were going to learn a lot.

Lorrie: And adored.

JC: And adored. And she's the one that years later, you're like, "Professor McGonagall. Damn, I learned a lot in her class." I love the way that she starts the class by turning her desk into a pig and turning it back again, like, "Boom. This is what you're going to learn how to do. You're going to have to work for it, you're going to have to follow rules, these are my expectations." She's strict, but she's not mean; she doesn't play favorites. All of the things that you would love. It's almost the ideal strict teacher -- if you're going for that -- and the fact that Hermione just shines. Here's the first moment where we see Hermione start to blossom into the amazing witch that she's going to be.

Lorrie: Oh, and McGonagall smiles at her.

JC: She earns a smile. Yes, Yes, and that is something that was -- and I'm sure you can name the teacher and the subject and the year and the thing you did that got that smile from that one hard-ass, but fair, teacher. I can remember it to this day. I can tell her name, I can tell you what I did. Oh, Hermione... I had a moment. Quirrell's class being a disappointment to everyone, I thought, was such an interesting note, because later on, there are DADA classes that a lot happens in. But basically, that Quirrell's just like -- they're like, "Oh, we want to hear your stories about being lost in the woods and finding vampires," and he's just like, "Uuuuhhh..."

Lorrie: A taste of disappointment.

JC: Then the fact that they have this Astronomy class at midnight, which I just think that's amazing. Could you imagine being in middle school and having a class at midnight?

Lorrie: So romantic.

JC: Another one we meet, then, is Sprout. And, oh, here's the moment: why is she described as 'dumpy'? I do not trust the author when she makes references to people's bodies. Why 'dumpy'? That has such a connotation, and she's the one who likes to plant things. It's just, what's going on there? It just made me unhappy. There's so many ways you could have described her. Another thing that I think is really interesting about Hogwarts is if you think about what the courses are -- and think about comparing that to a traditional Western education -- at this level, they have Potions, Transfigurations, History, Herbology, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Charms, and other things get added later on. Oh, Astronomy. I forgot Astronomy. Other things get added later. That's interesting, because, from a curriculum design perspective, you're thinking about what it is that people need to be able to do at the end of this education, so how do we parse that out to get them there? These are the things that they start with. It's interesting that this is a model of schooling that is in some ways progressive, and in some ways super traditional. It's progressive in the sense that it's very, very hands-on, except for history, and I know that the social studies educators I know will be gnashing their teeth at all the opportunities that are missed.

Lorrie: Oh, my god, it's such a fascinating subject.

JC: You literally live in a world where there are ghosts that you can go and interview or something. I don't know. You could have Nearly Headless Nick come in and talk about everything he witnessed. Anyway...

Lorrie: The waste.

JC: It's such a waste, right? We know that there are tons of original sources out there that kids could be reading and doing things with; no, they sit there and they listen to the dead professor lecture.

Lorrie: Oh, my God. Yes.

JC: But everything else is very hands-on from day one. They're always doing something. There's this mix of theory and practice that school should be more like that, and good schools are -- good classes are -- and good teachers have kids actively doing things. "Okay, you want to learn how to turn a matchstick into a needle? Let's go! Here's just enough theory to get you started; now try," and you explore. Okay, maybe you need a little more information, you need some tweaking of your practice. That's such a nice contrast to that standard Western factory model education, where we sit the kids in rows, we open up their heads, and we try to pour shit into their heads; then we close the heads, and then we take a test to see how much stuck. It's usually not very much because that's not how people learn. There's a lot of really interesting

things that Hogwarts is doing in that way that makes it feel very progressive, but on the other hand, it also is very traditional in the sense that the kids don't really have any agency with what they're doing. I never get the sense that they get to ask questions -- what if questions -- or that the teachers ever put them in a situation to think about 'what if?' or 'ask me some questions' or 'what would you like to do?' It doesn't seem like there's any long-term projects or any stuff that we think of as the hallmark of modern progressive education. In that way, it feels like one of those elite college prep academies, where the students do really well on the tests at the end, but you get the sense that what they actually got out of it was not proportional to the work they had to do along the way.

Lorrie: Well, yeah. It's very much like, "Oh, good, you're here. We have so much to cover. Let's get started."

JC: It's all very top-down, the curriculum.

Lorrie: Yeah. "Okay."

JC: Anyway, that's my thought as an educator, my view of what I see happening at Hogwarts. It's very interesting, and it's something that we can look at more as we go on, especially when it starts to go to hell in Book Five. Wow, there are some fun parallels to things that are happening in schools today, but we'll get there in a year or two.

Lorrie: Yeah. Speaking of Harry's class from hell, he doesn't get Potions until Friday, so the dread has time to build.

JC: And it's double Potions.

Lorrie: Double Potions with the Slytherins. J

C: It's the worst possible.

Lorrie: The worst and it's in the dungeons, and there are slimy pickled carcasses all over the place. Nothing good can happen here. As a side note, as a Ravenclaw, we just never see a Ravenclaw class.

JC: That's true.

Lorrie: Harry never has classes with Ravenclaws. He has them with Hufflepuffs, he has them with Slytherins. I swear she hates us.

JC: That is really interesting. That must mean that the Ravenclaws and the Hufflepuffs have Potions together.

Lorrie: Maybe, or maybe just everyone said, "We're never taking classes with Ravenclaws."

JC: Could be.

Lorrie: "You can't make us." I don't know.

JC: They're the honors track that no one can get into. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. But that also raises the question: why is there no gifted program in this school? Because we do see Hermione have independent studies of the sort that you just mentioned, where you get to ask questions, but it's as an exception, and that's a theme that I'm going to come back to. But is there a gifted track? Are all the Ravenclaws –

JC: And on the other hand of that, gifted education falls under the umbrella of Special Ed, so what about for students who have learning disabilities? There are students... I think Neville, maybe...

Lorrie: Crabbe and Goyle.

JC: ...who theoretically can't read. That may be movie canon; I'm not sure. But that idea of, 'Okay, what about students who --'

Lorrie: Need accommodations.

JC: Presumably, they were home-schooled before they came here. This is another big question that... at least in the teacher circles...

Lorrie: They are definitely home-schooled.

JC: So, do they know how to read? Do they know how to do arithmetic? They have such a vast array of experiences before they come in. There's not any placement tests. There's no point at which a teacher says, let's get a baseline. Do y'all know how to read? There's none of that; they just jump right in. It's a fantasy, I get it. It's just a story. That would be like the worst way to do it, so let's just go. But in reality, that would be a nightmare as a teacher. You have no idea what you're getting. No idea. If they've never been in a classroom, they don't know how to sit in rows. They don't know to raise their hands. It's like having kindergarten, except they're adolescents. Oh, they would have so many questions about Hogwarts that are... Anyway, we need to talk about Snape, don't we?

Lorrie: So, the first thing he says is, "Ah, yes, Harry Potter, our new celebrity." Excuse me? What is your deal here? Why are you picking on this kid already?

JC: Yeah, Harry's not even done anything yet. He just walked in the room and sat down.

Lorrie: No, he's just wandering in, completely blameless, and this is the beginning of one of Snape's worst misconceptions about Harry that he persists in despite zero evidence: that Harry enjoys his notoriety. This is completely incorrect. Harry hates it. Harry would love to be an anonymous student with the opportunity to just live his life like anybody else, and it's a defense; Snape has built this up. It's one of the ways that he makes excuses for himself to be hostile and defensive about the presence of this kid. It's very much not that he's looking at Harry for real; he has a few moments coming up in the series where, when he finds out the reality of what Harry's life has been like, that really shakes him because that's not what he was fantasizing about. He has this notion that whatever bad things you do to Harry, Harry already deserved. No, that is not the case with this little 11-year-old. Then we see Snape described: "His eyes are cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels," and that is the point at which I look at this 31-year-old and go, "*What happened to you?*" Because dark tunnels mean only one thing in this series. You see a dark tunnel, you take it. It always leads somewhere meaningful. It's never a dead end. You take it. You don't take it till you're ready, but you're going to find something. That is a rule about this universe. In other stories, there might be dead ends. There might be red herrings. Not this one. So he is the first dark tunnel you meet, and he's going to be the last one. Then we get the famous first day of Potions speech, which is a masterpiece. "You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of Potion Making. As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes; the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind and snaring the senses. I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death, if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach." It is seductive, it's creepy as hell, it's an ode to the bliss of the flow state, and it's also heartbroken. It's a reverie, but it's heartbroken because he has known through experience that people don't join him here, despite how beautiful it is. He already is heartbroken at these new students, who he hasn't even tested yet, for failing to join him here.

JC: Yeah. He says, "If you're not the kind of dunderheads I usually have to teach," right?

Lorrie: Yeah. And he says he doesn't expect that they're going to know to appreciate this incredible beauty that's just available everywhere, and he is someone who is seething resentfully against the limitations of his life in a way that seems distinctly petty, distinctly blaming. The thing that I take away from it, also, that really haunts me is that this is one example of many in this series about the loneliness of giftedness. He has love, he has bliss; he can't share it. He wants people to come join him, and it's not going to happen. It hasn't happened. But the seductiveness of this speech really lingers.

JC: And I hear it in Alan Rickman's voice. Yeah. Actually, I'm curious to know if you do. Is it Alan Rickman to you, or do you hear something else?

Lorrie: No. I barely register that the movies exist.

JC: Oh, okay.

Lorrie: I haven't seen them that often. Although I do recall that Rickman recognized the importance of this set piece and gave it his best. It comes across as an important set piece in the reading of it, because Rowling definitely loaded it up with all the creepy seductiveness she could. She put effort into this.

JC: Yeah. Everything about this tells you that this is one of the most important classes Harry's going to have, and pay attention to everything that happens in this scene. Absolutely.

Lorrie: And it's an initiation into the mystery of magic. This isn't like, 'Okay, if you're going to turn this matchstick into a needle, you're going to have to practice a lot. It's going to be hard, you're going to fail a lot.' It's not that. It's, "You want to know what magic is? This is magic. Are you worthy?"

JC: No foolish wand-waving.

Lorrie: Yeah. You get the pure feeling of it here.

JC: Then they do a practical thing and then it's just failure all over the place, to the extent of melting Seamus' cauldron. I'm like, Now Seamus has to get another cauldron. What? He went to Diagon Alley and he bought the cauldron, right? Like he was supposed to, and now...

Lorrie: He's going to have to get another one.

JC: Then poor Neville; no one's going to want to work with Neville. It's just all the things that pour out of the characters.

Lorrie: The children embarrass Snape. They embarrass him because he's so immature. Neville embarrasses him because Snape and Neville both come from a horribly awkward, traumatic, abusive backgrounds. Snape's defense, when he got here at age 11, was to be hypercompetent in some ways -- just very defensive, but in the areas where he could, advanced; and here's Neville, whose awkwardness and trauma he can recognize, falling apart in the most mortifying way. Now, when you see that as an adult, you can respond to that awkward 11-year-old in a bunch of different ways. The way Snape responds is so sensitive and personal, it's embarrassed. Probably the single biggest fan theory that any Snape person runs into is the one that -- people love this theory -- that Snape hates Neville because he wishes that Voldemort had chosen Neville instead of Harry.

JC: I don't think that I have ever heard that before. Wow.

Lorrie: If only Voldemort had gone for the other Chosen One, then Lily would still be alive, and he resents Neville for it. The love people have for this theory astounds me; the lack of evidence *also* astounds me, and it makes me wonder... I recognized right away in Snape the personality that is unable to tolerate incompetence, even though that's a terrible trait in a teacher. Obviously, Snape should never have been a teacher and he doesn't act like it's his calling -- and

we find out that it's not his calling and it's not his real job. But despite that, in real life you do have teachers -- you do have people who voluntarily enter the teaching profession who have the same rage response to a child that doesn't grasp things the way they do. Yeah, based on how readers respond, this is a universal classroom pastime, I think: hapless children bitterly psychoanalyzing their teachers.

JC: Right, and I think that one thing that stood out to me about it on this read is that what Harry is facing is that feeling that, "Here's this teacher and I will never be able to work hard enough. They've already made up their mind about what I'm capable of, about who I am. That's it." People tend to respond in multiple ways. One way is to fight really hard: "See, I'm going to prove to you if it kills me." Another way is to say, "I'm just going to keep my head down and I'm going to bear it." The third way is to check out and just say, "Fuck it, I'm going to put my head down, I want to watch a movie on my phone, whatever. This teacher doesn't give a shit about me. Why should I care?" Those are the three major ways, and I see these in high schools all the time. I spend a lot of time in high schools. I never see teachers who are as cruel -- this is obviously hyperbolic in the sense that there are teachers who do that, but it's not that common to see it to that extent. But you can walk into a classroom and you can look around, and you can look at some kids and you can say, "Okay, those kids are checked out for some reason." If you ask the teacher about it, there are teachers who will say, "Every day, I go to that kid and I say, 'Hey, how are you?' I invite them into the work. I try to get them engaged, and some days they do it and some days they don't, and I just keep trying." There's some teachers like that, and then there are other teachers who will say, "I don't know. The kid doesn't give a shit. Whatever; they don't have to do anything. I just say, 'As long as you're quiet.'" It's just so interesting to me, in this situation, to see which path Harry takes, and Harry seems to take that middle path of, "I'm going to keep my head down. I'm just going to do everything I have to do to survive. I'm just going to bear it," it seems. He doesn't check out; he doesn't fight harder. Hermione is like, "I'm going to fight so hard, I'm going to work so hard."

Lorrie: Harry's response: Snape provokes Harry multiple times for zero reason, and he keeps escalating and hammering it in more and more and more until finally Harry snaps, and he shows how much he's learned by living with the Dursleys.

JC: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Lorrie: He really gives Snape a lot of chances to back off, and Snape doesn't take them. Snape has richly deserved it by this point, and he says, "I don't know. Why don't you ask Hermione?" This is such a boss move. It names the dynamic that Snape has created. It brings the class's attention to the big picture. It doesn't let Snape define what the problem is. Snape is trying to have the problem be that Harry, for some reason, is deserving of bullying, and Harry's like "No, this is the situation we have here." He deflects and redirects the focus to where it should be. Harry wins this encounter. Snape loses this face-off, and he has to save face by saying, "I'm going to take a point off of Gryffindor," and that's it. It's over. Harry won, and it's so obvious that Snape's deal with Harry has so little to do with Harry the person. That actually can keep him strong. "Well, what can I do to make him happy? Obviously, nothing. I don't even know. What

am I going to get punished for next?" Nobody knows. And people try to say, "Well, he does do this to other people, too. It's definitely not you." The Snape/Hermione dynamic is fascinating to me. I love it. Snape does not love it. She is so eager; her enthusiasm in this class ratchets up in four distinct stages. Her hand is up the whole time, but finally, she's standing up. Control yourself, child. This is the first instance of many where Snape sends out a message; it doesn't reach Harry or Ron, and it reaches right into the center of Hermione's soul. He says, "Potions are beautiful, but I don't expect any of you are going to be able to get it." After that first big speech, Harry and Ron look at each other and shrug like, "What did we just hear? That's strange," and Hermione is incandescent. She has received this message; it wasn't meant for her. That is their dynamic the whole series, and you can always tell when Snape has noticed Hermione because he is ignoring her. It's a really powerful example of somebody who is not the main character. Snape's whole message to Hermione is 'you are not the main character.'

JC: Oh, man. That's hard.

Lorrie: Yeah. "What do you mean? You just said..." and he won't acknowledge her. My interpretation of this dynamic is that Hermione is the manifestation of how Snape's first chance could have gone in a better timeline. Partly, she is the Muggle-born, so he could have been more respectful to Lily as a Muggle-born. But partly, also, she is the mortifyingly enthusiastic student, who when he laughs at her for having memorized the book and not being creative, that's when you think, "I bet he memorized his books, too." When he says to Harry, "Oh, you thought you wouldn't open a book before coming here." Harry opened a book. He did fine. He just didn't memorize it, like some of you guys. So when he sees Hermione do this, he's not impressed by anything she's done. He's like, 'Oh, I've been there. You're not impressing me. You're not special.' She *is* special, but the way that she's not impressing him is personal. I think that she is the manifestation of his awareness that this is his Time-Turner second chance. The things that Hermione does well -- like having good judgment, understanding character, having empathy, being mature about things -- these are things he failed at that got him to the point where he's now having to do his high school years all over again.

JC: What a nightmare.

Lorrie: Yeah. So, here he is. He's looking at Harry, the evidence of his guilt. He's looking at Neville, who looks on the outside how Snape felt on the inside: completely incompetent and falling apart. He's looking at Hermione, embarrassing as hell. I don't ever want to go back to middle school and high school; it wasn't fun the first time. I imagine that even though that may be true for most people in general, that was especially true for this particular guy. It's an unusual punishment that he's the one who's going back to school. I don't think he wants to be here.

JC: I have so many students who -- wildly, to me -- go back and teach at the high school they went to, and I'm always like, "Why would you do that?" Then all of your colleagues were your teachers, and they knew you as an awkward teen. Snape is also in that position, right? Most of the older professors had him as a student.

Lorrie: Oh, they did.

JC: And Dumbledore -- and they all know. They all know that he was on the wrong side in the war. The awkwardness of being in that space in the first place, and then having to face this generation that comes in: that is going to only remind him of the worst parts of his life.

Lorrie: Yeah, although Harry does sense, to his bewilderment, that these people -- he knows that they all know stuff about Snape that they're not telling him, because that's Harry's life. People never tell him stuff that's important to him, and Hagrid is keeping stuff away from him about Snape. But somehow, this completely unacceptable ogre of a human -- somehow these really respectable teachers seem to respect him. This is very mysterious. Is this just loyalty between adults? No, there's something there. Not that anyone's going to bother to tell Harry.

JC: And Harry doesn't want to believe it. All the evidence -- I guess, in his limited experience and his experience with the Dursleys, he doesn't trust adults or trust their motives.

Lorrie: Yeah. And the evidence of jerkiness from this guy is so extreme. It's really hard to see past, and in fact, we have many, many readers -- fans of the series -- who never do, and they accurately recall what an asshole he was during Books One through Three. There are four other books that come after that, in which he shows an enormous amount of character growth. A lot of readers don't get past the first three books to see that because he was so offensive that, depending on who you are and what your life experience is, someone can burn up so much of your goodwill that way that you just don't have any left for them.

JC: Yeah. And that is something -- we'll get into this a couple of years down the road as we get through the books. I have such strong memories of: before the seventh book came out, all the fandom speculation that was happening, and it seemed like everybody knew what was coming: that Snape was going to "be redeemed" in a sense that we were going to learn more about his backstory, and we were going to find out that he was really not what we thought he was all along. There were so many people who just like, "Nope, nope. I'm not going to accept it. If that's where the story is going, I'm out, I refuse." They could not get past what you were just describing. Then some of that discussion happened after the book came out.

Lorrie: Oh, some of it is still going on.

JC: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Lorrie: Oh, it is still going on.

JC: I haven't been in those discussions in a while.

Lorrie: Show up somewhere and say, "I've written a book on Snape," and then wait and see what happens.

JC: Oh, man.

Lorrie: Yeah, I get to hear it.

JC: I'm sure.

Lorrie: I get a number of one-star reviews. I don't know what they say. I used to read them; I now know better. It's just like, "Okay, you hated it. Well, there are other people who agree with you. Go read them." The thing that Snape does -- that I find the most perverse in this chapter -- is when Neville has his disaster, Snape then punishes *Harry*.

JC: Yes.

Lorrie: "You, Potter. Why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's another point you've lost for Gryffindor." The way that he makes up and ascribes motives to children and then punishes them for this invention? The capriciousness? It's so arbitrary. There are unspoken rules that Harry has broken that he's just made up. The favoritism to the nth degree. Unfairness drives children crazy.

JC: Yes.

Lorrie: From infancy -- even before children are old enough to talk. If they perceive something as unfair, they will cry out. It just enrages them. This kind of unfairness is very well designed by the author to be maximally perverse. To me, that's the moment -- when he punishes Harry for letting Neville be a disaster -- that Snape enters, takes his permanent place of pride in the literary pantheon of bad teachers in English literature.

JC: The worst teacher ever.

Lorrie: I don't think he's the worst. There are worse.

JC: I do find it fascinating that he is painted in this way. Like you said, the author very intentionally makes the worst possible first impression as a character. We did see him at the feast, but this is his first impression on us as readers. It could not have been worse. Maybe he could have slaughtered a student in front of us, I don't know, but like it almost couldn't have been worse. He only has one direction to go through the series. You can't really get worse.

Lorrie: Oh, he can.

JC: Well, yeah, but this is a pretty low starting point.

Lorrie: It is.

JC: And so, as a reader looking at it now, I'm like, oh, okay, I see. We're starting off like this, with the worst impression we can have of him, and it's going to completely flip by the end of this. Well, for some of us, it's going to flip by the end and we're going to understand what a complicated character this is. There's a reward in that and understanding that, maybe, if you buy it.

Lorrie: Yeah. I actually don't experience him the way you just described.

JC: Oh, that's interesting.

Lorrie: He's so repellent in this chapter that what you see is hard to grapple with. But what we haven't seen yet, the depths he can get to? No, there's plenty of room for him to get worse.

JC: But he's going to get worse.

Lorrie: He is going to get worse, and that's actually the formula for this character. Everything about this character is: whatever is the most emotionally taxing, that's the thing that's true about him. For example, when people say, "Did he even care that Charity Burbage was being killed?" Yes, of course, because that's what this character is. If he didn't care, then the author wouldn't be putting him through that. It must have been tearing him up inside because that's his life. She says, "Severus, please," reminding him of what Dumbledore's last words were. "Well, did he even care that he killed Dumbledore?" Yes, of course he cared. Whatever is going to cause this character the most pain, that's where this story is going. He is the meanest, the most petty and perverse, the most immature with the 'nobody to blame but himself' backstory. Why is he so seething with resentment at the terrible, unsuitable career he finds himself in? It's the seething of someone who actually has nobody to blame but himself. It's the self-loathing that he has to live with as he bitterly goes about trying to do the things he feels he should do in life. Everything is just cranked up to 10. He's fun.

JC: Well, maybe this is a good place for me to ask you a question that, I think, maybe people who are listening are wondering about, too, now: at what point in reading these books did you decide this is the character that I'm going to study, I'm going to dig into, I'm going to write a book about one day? At what point and what was it that made you go, "Yes, this guy?"

Lorrie: Let's see. When I first read this series, in the first book I just hated him. Why? Stop being so immature. As Books Two and Three went on -- actually, even up through the end of *Order of the Phoenix*, I got tired of the way that the story pushes him toward the reader at every moment anytime anything important is happening. "And then, somebody shows up; who could it be?" It's always him. Again? You try to go on side quests and no, it's always Snape. He's always the story. "Okay, okay, okay, I get it. I get it. You have to watch Snape. Just watch Snape; that will explain everything. I get it, I get it." Then it was when *Half-Blood Prince* came out, and I remember reading the chapter in Spinner's End where Narcissa and Bellatrix go for the Unbreakable Vow. I closed the book after that chapter and I said to my husband, "Snape just got even more interesting." That's when I just gave up, like, "Fine. There's no resisting it. Okay,

fine. He is the whole story all by himself. I get it." And then at the end of *Half-Blood Prince* -- when I didn't know what on earth this man was going to do with the corner he painted himself into -- he is now the single most hated man in his entire world. What options does he have? Everything is in mortal peril. He hasn't slept in years. Any mistake he makes is going to cause many deaths. Nobody understands him. He has nobody with him. One person left in the world understood him, and he killed the guy. Everybody hates him for reasons that aren't even true, as well as the ones that are. Those are not conditions under which humans do well. It's very hard to be that hated. Most people can't tolerate it. He was so gifted and so lonely. That was one moment, but I think the seeds had also been planted for me when in *Order of the Phoenix*, when we see the flashback to him as a small child crying while his parents are shouting. That reminded me of things, and my heart just dropped in me. That was a super personal response that I had. I understood how that connected to his autodidactic brilliance he has, his defenses, his proud superiority in a few areas, and also his life-long propensity for revenge. Because being a child who comes from a situation of domestic turbulence, where you see and judge adults creating mortal danger, revenge in cases of power imbalance -- revenge of a small child against people who are stronger than you in every way -- that becomes part of your nature, and that became part of his nature. That tiny flashback: that devastated me and that informed how I read him. Then at the end of *Half-Blood Prince* -- when he was completely alone, completely gifted and everything depended on him -- I thought, "I just need to know what happens to him. I need to know that he's going to be okay," and I didn't know. At this point in *Sorcerer's Stone*, when we read this chapter and we get told that this man has dark tunnels for eyes, I didn't know yet how to read this series. I'm not a big fan of postmodernism, but there is a literary phenomenon where people look like they have depth to them, and the answer that the author is giving you is, No, they don't. It's just surface. Things don't always mean anything. Is he one of those people? Readers -- very rightly -- explored that possibility as well. What if he's just an asshole? Well, people are sometimes, but that's not how this series pays off reading him. You can take that reading; you're kind of fighting it, though. You're fighting the story if that's the reading you choose to stick with for your own reasons, which are, I have to emphasize, *good* reasons. If you have a reading of Snape that doesn't go with the main flow of the story but it's your reading, it's because this character is written in such a complex way that he may speak to a narrative that's super important to you. Even if that may be contradicted in the text by other things about this character: if that's not the part of the story that's speaking to you, then you have to defend the part that's speaking to you. There are people who say, "He was never redeemed, he never did anything good, he was always looking out for himself," which, in the text, is the least supported reading. He never got any reward for any of the crap he put himself through toward the end of his life. But if you want to say, "No, he was only ever in it for himself," that's because that story is more important to you than other readings. This character is written to such a high degree of complexity that it allows for that, which is why settling the Snape debate is actually -- in terms of the importance for the fandom -- a somewhat destructive goal, because you don't want to cut off what this character means for some people, even if it's not quite what it says in the text. That's something that I like to do on simultaneous parallel tracks, I say, "This is what I believe is supported by the text. These are interpretations that I think can be made. They're not contradicted, although I don't see support for them, such as him disliking Neville because he wishes Neville had been the target." Then there are things where I'm like,

"I'm sorry, that's downright wrong, but tell me about *you*. That's not the character, but your story is more important than this book," and not a lot of characters in literature are written with so much complexity that it can support this many different, extremely volatile responses. But yeah, people's read of Snape, their personal interpretation of who he is, tends to be a lot more irrational and deep down than people usually get about fictional characters. That's genius. That is why this character is worth writing about. How was that done? Why is this important to people? What is so important that we have the blessing of this character in this story with which to work through our feelings? Also, I've tried understanding this series without dealing with Snape. In my opinion, it can't be done.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: You want to try that? Good luck. Go, be my guest. I have seen that. I've seen books about Harry Potter where they don't deal with Snape at all. Okay, it's worth doing, but you know and I know that the real story is right there, and oh, it's ugly. He's so ugly. I love that about him, too. I guess this is the point where I should say I love Snape because he reminds me of things I like about myself.

JC: Things you like. Interesting.

Lorrie: He reminds me of my best qualities that I'm the proudest of, which is primarily when there's something you absolutely know you have to do, even though it's your least favorite thing in the world to do, you can't stand yourself, and it feels terrible the whole time. You're never going to get credit for it -- not that you probably deserve credit, not that you have anyone to blame but yourself -- but you go ahead and do it anyway. Anytime I have made myself do something like that, I am proud of myself. This has some things to do with parenting; here, Snape is getting all the bad stuff about having to parent without any of the good stuff of being an actual parent.

JC: True.

Lorrie: It just means face your own traumas; go into flashback, watch yourself do all the immature shit that you can't believe you're watching yourself do; have small children judge you correctly; and then after the end of the day, when you've done the things you were supposed to do, you just feel so much worse than you did before. He makes himself do it. I'm so proud of him because -- look, anyone can try to do the right thing, but if you're an internally, intrinsically good person, it's just not the same as if you're a truly rotten-to-the-core person trying to do the right thing. It's just a lot harder for Snape. He tries. He's not very gracious about it.

JC: I'm sure this is a topic we're going to come back to a lot as we go forward, just understanding the complexity of this character and all the reasons why it's worth digging in and understanding this character. I haven't been in the fandom for a long time, but from my time in the Harry Potter fandom, there were plenty of people who just didn't even see that as a worthwhile endeavor. "No, I just hate him. Why bother?"

Lorrie: He is extreme.

JC: Yeah, it's very interesting.

Lorrie: In my fantasies, there's an alternate universe in which Snape, after this disgraceful performance of a first day of Potions class, gets disciplined, and there's a headmaster saying, "You can't do that. You're on probation. What was that? Behave!" If I were headmaster, I wouldn't have fired him after the first day; I would have put him on probation, because I don't think he crossed the line into being fired. But I would have wanted to say, "What the heck was that? What is wrong with you?" There's that alternate universe where that happened, and then there's the universe we live in, where real teachers really act like that, and real headmasters and superintendents don't notice, don't care or don't do anything.

JC: Unless they go viral because someone took a video of them being awful.

Lorrie: Yeah, but then that may escalate in ways that don't resolve the problem.

JC: True.

Lorrie: For people who say, "Well, why did Dumbledore allow this?" I don't know. Why does anyone allow this? Do you recognize this kind of dynamic from real life? I bet you do, and that's what this story's about, not what should have been but what we know sometimes happens.

JC: And I think that's a really good distinction, because very often I see people in discussions of this fiction and other kinds of fiction and fanfiction as well. People really struggling with characters acting in ways that are unhealthy -- toward other people, toward themselves -- and that idea of, "No, that's not how -- it should be perfect somehow. They should have done this. This is what should have happened, and I'm not satisfied because it didn't turn out the way that it should have gone." But this is a reflection of reality. The interesting thing about this whole series is that the Wizarding World is like a mirror of the world that we live in. Yeah, they have magic, but it doesn't actually change human nature. It doesn't change the fact that there's still all these awful things that happen, and awful things happen. Then what do you do?

Lorrie: Yeah, and that's the function of fiction: you're supposed to read and say, "That's horrible, that's not how it should have gone." Right. You're supposed to carry on the story in your own head, according to the narrative that's important to you.

JC: Instead of sending hate at the person who wrote it. Well, we can send hate to her for other reasons, but yeah.

Lorrie: Oh, God, yeah. But that's why you have fiction, so that if this is something that caught on your emotions so that you're working through it, that's what stories are for. And yeah, sometimes I do think, "What if I were his colleague?" If I knew him personally, I would be going

down to the dungeons, knocking on his door, and he would say, "Go away, I'm not here," and I would walk in anyway and I would say, "What are you doing?"

JC: But having been a teacher who had an awful colleague who was not doing what they were supposed to be doing -- I admit it was probably just me being a very young woman at the time, and this person being an older man -- I didn't feel like I had any power to do that. Now, the dynamic with Snape is different, but that idea of the collegiality of the environment and who gets to say what, yeah, it's complicated, too. Snape's mentor is Dumbledore, in that sense.

Lorrie: That is a seven-course feast right there that you just said.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: I love Dumbledore, also.

JC: Oh, gosh, there's so much about Dumbledore to come, but should we talk about the tea with Hagrid before we close this out?

Lorrie: Sure.

JC: I guess one of the things that I love about that whole scene is that it establishes that not only was Hagrid the first person from the Wizarding World that Harry had met that ushered him into the world, but that Hagrid is going to keep being there for him. That they're going to have this friendship, that Hagrid has become this zany uncle figure in Harry's life and that Harry's going to be able to rely on him. That Hagrid actually knows more about what's happening at the school than maybe first impressions would convey. Harry really needs an adult that he can trust, and Hagrid fills that role because the teachers haven't filled that role, certainly. But Hagrid is this adult that Harry can count on, and the fact that Ron comes along and they have the vicious dog who drools on Harry's lap and they eat the rock cakes that they almost break their teeth on. Yeah, there's just so much happening in this scene. It's just a lot of fun.

Lorrie: Yeah. All of Hagrid's cooking is a direct reference to Levi-Strauss's *The Raw and The Cooked*.

JC: Oh, interesting.

Lorrie: It's like, "Is it food? Maybe. Not food as we know it."

JC: Then we end with this mystery, which is interesting: one of the last lines is about how Harry finds this more interesting and intriguing than anything he learned in school the whole week, which I laugh at because as a teacher -- no matter how much work you put into creating great lessons and doing great things -- at the end of the day, the kids will still be like, "Eh, that's fine." He learned a hell of a lot this week.

Lorrie: Yes, he did.

JC: He's just like, "Eh." It's just so kid. There's something very human about that.

Lorrie: But I like it, too, because he's keeping his eye on the bigger picture.

JC: Definitely.

Lorrie: As he should be, and I like that the other teachers aren't warm and fuzzy to him because they're very much like, "We are not your parents." And Hagrid is: who are you to Harry Potter? Hagrid is his friend, an older, somewhat authoritative, somewhat less bright, very experienced, and very kind friend. Ah, so what do we have coming up next here?

JC: It is The Midnight Duel, right? Oh, it's the Malfoy chapter.

Lorrie: We're getting some Draco next.

JC: I'm very excited.

Lorrie: I am excited. I'll talk to you soon.

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.