

HARRY POTTER AFTER 2020

with LORRIE KIM and JC

Transcript

Episode 1.9

Book 1, Chapter 9: The Midnight Duel

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 from 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 Nine: The Midnight Duel.

Lorrie: Hello, JC!

JC: Hello!

Lorrie: Today, we're talking about Chapter Nine: The Midnight Duel. This is the exciting chapter where Harry finds out he can fly; Malfoy realizes that he better shut up with his boasting, and then Malfoy challenges Harry to a duel, and they find something that they weren't expecting to find. It is, in short, the first adventure.

JC: Yes.

Lorrie: So, what stood out for you?

JC: There's just so much plot in this chapter; so much happens. It's like, okay, now we've met all the major characters; now, let's get rolling.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And the story gets sped along. So many things happen; enough world-building has happened at this point that we can just go, so that's really exciting.

Lorrie: Yeah, and there are some things that we can come back to later, like when Draco gets sweets from home. The first thing I think is, "What, there's not enough at Hogwarts?" And then I realized, "Wait, is Dobby making them? Oh, my God."

JC: Now, that's interesting.

Lorrie: Yeah, and then Neville gets the Remembrall from home, and that is such a good joke about these coping mechanisms that don't actually work.

JC: Oh, gosh. Yeah, that's true.

Lorrie: That's so not helpful, but it's also one of the many gorgeous, gorgeous spheres and eggs in this series. I love it.

JC: I want to go back to the very beginning, because the opening sentence in this chapter is just amazing. "Harry never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley, but that was before he met Draco Malfoy." Oh, my God, this whole chapter... I laughed my way through it. I probably didn't laugh my way through it the first time I read it -- and probably most people don't - but Draco is such a little shit in this chapter.

Lorrie: He's terrible.

JC: It's amazing, and it reminds me a bit of the last episode. We talked a lot about the way that Snape was introduced, and it struck me reading this that Draco is sort of introduced in the same way: he's just as nasty and awful, and as much of a spoiled brat as he can be at every possible moment. There's no... we're being told, "Okay, pay attention to this kid. You can't not pay attention to him. He's going to become important." I found that really fun, just to go through it and revisit. It's not the first time that Harry's met him, but this is where we really meet Draco.

Lorrie: Oh, yeah. This is where he proves that all the first impressions were correct. He's so very punchable.

JC: Having been a teacher and having worked with kids of all ages: God, I've known kids like this. It just brings back these memories of working with kids like this: kids who've always been given everything, and they don't know what to do when they're suddenly not getting everything. "But I deserve to be the king of this school. I deserve to have all this respect. I deserve to have all the attention. But I am the best." When they're suddenly not and hitting that wall of, "Oh, wait, how do I deal with that?" Kids deal with that in different ways; Draco's is to turn into a bully, to throw fits about it, and to use very devious means to try to eliminate Harry. Something that is fascinating to me about Draco and this whole chapter is that we see him using the system. He knows how to use the system against Harry, and Harry doesn't really know how to use the system in this way. Draco has decided that "I am Harry's nemesis." He has defined himself as the Harry anti. "I am the nemesis, and I'm the one who's going to get this guy," and that seems like it becomes his whole personality in the beginning of the series. It's all about going out of his way to antagonize Harry and to get Harry in trouble, and just get Harry back for existing and taking away Draco's rightful place as King of Hogwarts. There's a lot we could say about that, but I think it's also fascinating that Harry's response to this is he recognizes that Draco's a bully because he knows bullies. He's grown up with them, but this is the first time in his life that he has felt like, "I don't have to just take it and then dig back in little ways. I can actually stand up to

this guy." That's the first time, I think, in his life he's been able to do that; that enmity that he has with Draco, it doesn't feel the same as with Dudley.

Lorrie: It's more empowered.

JC: Yeah, it's more empowered. I think that, too, directs us to pay attention to Draco in a way that we didn't have to pay attention to Dudley.

Lorrie: Right. Yeah, Draco's feelings are quite complex, and the way he plots is commendable in its own horrible way. He's clever.

JC: It's the Slytherin, right?

Lorrie: Yeah. Oh, Draco snatching the Remembrall from Neville: that got to me viscerally, because I was totally the kid where if you snatched something from me, I wouldn't be able to physically get it back from you. You show that something is important to you, uh-oh, then it becomes a target. I also identified strongly with how Hermione and Neville have terrible balance, and flying on brooms or anything athletic is just terror for them -- because that was exactly my profile as a student -- and, well, we'll see later that Snape is like that, too. Oh, and we meet Madam Hooch. Madam Hooch is one of my favorite minor characters because she is so well-drawn. Okay, Rowling is brilliant. With her few appearances, we get such a vivid image of who Madam Hooch is and what she's like. Then the school brooms, the way they're so pathetic. The image I have is: you know how there are caddies of school safety scissors when you're in first grade with the brightly-colored plastic handles, and they're all gummed shut or very dull or they're misaligned?

JC: What it brought up for me was actually something similar, but it was the school-issued band instruments: the kids whose parents can afford to pay \$5000 for a really great flute, versus the person who has to borrow one from the school and it's always dented and not quite right.

Lorrie: When I held the reading group with some fifth graders and we talked about this chapter, I saw how much this chapter foregrounds the difference in privilege between pure-bloods and half-bloods and Muggle-born kids. The question that they got -- which all the kids understood instantly -- was I asked them, "How long have Pansy and Parvati known each other?" Because there's a moment when Pansy says to Parvati, "I never thought you were a crybaby." *Never* thought? Why? How long have they -- who's been hanging out since they were kids, and who's just doing this for the first time? Harry has already been thinking about how Seamus and even Ron have been talking about their childhood adventures on brooms, but that's such a good writer detail, that bit of dialogue. That is a piece of subtle reading that the fifth graders I was working with had no problem catching because it's something that they would deal with every day.

JC: Along those lines, the school -- Okay, so the way that Hogwarts teaches flying is they just pretend that everyone is on the same level and they make them stand there and they make

them do it one step at a time. This is incredibly frustrating for the kids who have already been flying for five years, and humiliating for the kids who've never done it. This is the classic school institutional way of handling a situation like this. It's so interesting to see that yeah, even Hogwarts... It's like, oh, come on, you know you would do a placement test, and then you would say, "Okay, we have kids who are all at different levels, so let's schedule. Okay, it's tracking. Yeah, it's tracking." But for the first flying lesson, why would you put the kids who've never done it next to the kids who have been doing it their whole life and watch people be humiliated? What? That's not helping anyone. So there's that.

Lorrie: Although there's the enormously satisfying moment when all the kids get to watch Draco be told that he was gripping the broom wrong.

JC: Yes.

Lorrie: There's something to be said for standardizing the knowledge. No matter what background you come from, you might do it your way, but it's good to know the standard way that's being taught here.

JC: Yeah, and that's a great little moment for everyone who doesn't like Draco, certainly. I think that the scene where we hear all the stories of kids bragging about their adventures, and the stories get big -- "The fish was this big!" It was that kind of a thing -- and Harry just sitting there and thinking, "Oh, great, here's one more thing I don't know about." But then, of course, it turns out that he does know about flying, and he's very natural at it. That's a wonderful moment in the book, but it's also interesting for me to think about what that would look like from the outside, from someone who's not hanging out with Harry. It might come across as quiet confidence; he didn't have to brag, because he already knew that he was going to be great. They don't know that, but I love the fact that he didn't tell any bragging stories. He gets out there, he kicks ass. He actually is so good that he gets put on the Quidditch team pretty much sight unseen. Your competence kink would kick in if you were like the other people.

Lorrie: Yeah, he's beyond competent. He's gifted. It's a phenomenon, yeah.

JC: It's a win, and he needed that. At this point in the story, he needed it so much.

Lorrie: Oh, my God, yes. Well, that is, to me, one of the iconic moments of the series. I have quoted this passage a number of times because it's so important. His Gryffindor flight moment -- and it's a Gryffindor moment because he shouldn't be doing this, but he can't even think anymore; he's just like, "Oh, I've got to do this!" It's a Gryffindor flight. "Up, up he soared. Air rushed through his hair and his robes whipped out behind him. And in a rush of fierce joy, he realized he'd found something he could do without being taught. This was easy. This was *wonderful*." That's his true self. That belongs to Harry. So many things don't; that does, and it's the same ecstasy that we've seen in the previous chapter when Snape gets lost in a reverie, describing the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes. This is people's true selves, and it's so satisfying to shove it in Malfoy's face. The strength, the magic in

this series, is all based on drawing from your true self. The way that you win important battles in the series -- like Harry facing Voldemort -- when it comes to that battle, you have to draw on your signature magic, the thing that is yours. So this is crucial and it's exhilarating. It's a good piece of writing. I think it makes the reader loyal to this series and makes the reader happy. I don't know about you. I'm thrilled for Harry.

JC: Oh, it's a great moment. Clearly, it's the first moment where he feels, "I belong here." I think it's really the first time where he looks around and goes, "Oh, yeah, this is where I belong," and he'd been kind of feeling a bit of imposter syndrome up until that point. "Everybody thinks I'm famous for something I don't even remember, and everybody thinks I'm this and I'm not," and suddenly, mind blown.

Lorrie: Yeah, "this is what I mean to myself." Yeah. And then we get the first of many, extraordinarily satisfying McGonagall about-faces.

JC: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

Lorrie: Oh, my God. What a character.

JC: Coming at it from a teacher perspective, her excitement over discovering the new Seeker is so much fun. I think it's that first crack in the hard-ass facade that we see. We just see her as -- she's been described as severe so many times, but this humanizes her. She's like, "I have a chance; my team is going to...!" That whole idea that that's so important that she's going to bend the rules here, because she should have punished him because he broke the rules. But Gryffindor needs a seeker and that is more important. She does play favorites in her own way, and it's her first realization of, "Yes." She's not like what they thought she was at first, so that I love. Another thing I love about this scene is that she pulls Oliver Wood out of class and introduced him to Harry right then. I get the author was telling the story a particular way; but as a teacher, the fact that you're constantly dealing with interruptions: you've got all these kids, you're trying to keep them on track, and then the office comes. There's an announcement about something, or somebody comes and says, "Oh, I need this person to go because they've got to go to a dance thing or a sports thing," or "they need to be tested," or "they've got a doctor's appointment," whatever. Kids are constantly coming in and leaving; it's so much to manage, and it's just life as a teacher. This is just what it's like; you don't just get a whole hour to teach kids. The fact that this happens at Hogwarts, too; I was just like, "Oh, my God, of course, she'd go and pull him out of class. This couldn't wait until the end of class? Really, McGonagall? Really?! You have to do it right now? Sports is more important than whatever he's learning right now?"

Lorrie: No, she can't wait.

JC: It's just like Texas high school football. Oh, my God, it's the same thing. Then teachers do it to each other, because their thing is more important than whatever the history teacher's doing right now.

Lorrie: Yes, they do. Oh, yeah. Now, my take on this -- just like you came at it as a teacher, I'm coming at this as a parent -- the long walk, in which she lets Harry think that he's in trouble. That's a long time. She knows he's stewing. She could've reassured him; she let him stew. What is she thinking during that whole long walk? She's not thinking about him. She's thinking, "Okay, what do I want? I want to do this, I can do that, this is my plan," and also thinking, "I have to keep my authority. He did break the rules." All of these things she's managing in her head, and she's buying herself the time and space to do that by letting his guilty conscience keep him quiet. She hasn't figured out her plan yet. She's figuring it out as they're walking.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: And she's using that; meanwhile, Harry is thinking he's going to have to quit school and become Hagrid's assistant. There was an earlier episode of this podcast where I was thinking there aren't a whole lot of academic failures in the series. I forgot: Hagrid. This whole half in, half out, semi-qualified inferior position -- and Filch -- but yeah, Harry is thinking, "Okay, I'm going to have that status now." Yeah, McGonagall didn't have to set up the reveal that way, but she's a little naughty and I love that she's thinking on so many different levels during this one walk. She's enjoying her reputation as a scary teacher. She's reaping the benefits.

JC: She's been doing this for a long time. Who knows how long, but she's been doing this for a long time and she's definitely worked hard to cultivate this impression because it makes everything work for her.

Lorrie: It really does. And the students like it. It's reassuring to them.

JC: Even if someone is strict, to know that they've established boundaries and that they're going to be fair in enforcing them, that is everything to kids. It's so important.

Lorrie: Of course, she's not fair. This decision is, in my opinion, objectively a terrible decision. You don't pull rank to break a rule that everyone else got in their Hogwarts letters in all caps because you have the ear of the headmaster, who happens to be the same House as you. This has repercussions for years. The Slytherins... this is the strongest message that if they want to fight to even have the smallest chance, they can't fight fair because it won't be given to them. They have to fight really dirty because look: they were just abiding by the rules like everybody else, and look what got done to them. The other thing that's so, so painful is brooms are expensive. Harry didn't pay for this one; if they're going to buy somebody a broom, there's a bunch of unfairness that this sets into motion, and it's from the teacher who's supposedly fair.

JC: Yeah. This is a good point.

Lorrie: This is very much one of those scenes where kids can be taken through the reading from the given point of view, and then taken through it again from a Slytherin point of view; then they start to understand why some kids are super defensive and walking around with a chip on their shoulder, assuming that the odds are stacked against them because this time, it was. Also, that

he was the youngest; all this stuff that Snape falsely believes Harry thinks of himself is playing right into that.

JC: Right. That's true, isn't it? Yeah.

Lorrie: And Harry has not asked for any of this, but also there's so much gorgeousness here with McGonagall saying, "Was that your first time on a broomstick?" As far as he knows, it's yes and the way we find out very, very much later that it wasn't.

JC: Oh, yeah.

Lorrie: What a payoff! And the thrilling moment she says that "this is a connection to your dead father," that's so, so thrilling. Then again, much later, we get the thrilling payoff of learning that, actually, he got his flying from both sides. Flying: this is his magic. It's so thrilling.

JC: It's so interesting, too, to think about the fact that I think is the first thing we've heard about Harry's father, isn't it? Other than the fact that he died.

Lorrie: Pretty much. Hagrid says that James and Lily were wonderful, that everybody loved them.

JC: And it's the first time Harry's learned something new about his dad. It goes quickly. That was a moment. If I was a beta, I'd be like, "Look, can we linger on that for a minute?" But then again, Harry's an 11-year-old kid. Maybe he's not going to linger on that, but it's just such a beautiful moment.

Lorrie: Actually -- for me, even though it went by quickly. To me, it had enough impact because it's such a thunderbolt, and it comes as the last line of that passage, which has already been building and building with so much excitement and twists and turns and Harry going, "What? What?!" For that to be the final -- and she delivers that line with a smile. "Uh oh, McGonagall's smiling. What is going on? This is important." I thought it had enough impact.

JC: Ah, interesting. Okay.

Lorrie: Certainly, I don't think that the fandom underplays the importance of that piece of news to Harry. Also, because it mentions his father at the end of him feeling himself, having his magic come thundering through him unexpectedly and just possessing it and loving it. For that to then be confirmed in this other way, with this piece of information, I was satisfied. But on the other hand, Let's Play Beta is one of my favorite games and that would be a fun exercise: a little fic where you write this scene five different ways or something, all of them wonderful and very different.

JC: I think, too, as a reader, people just have different needs for dwelling on those kinds of emotions. For some people, it's like, "Okay, now I get the picture," or "That was enough, that

was all I needed, it was the perfect little bite. The rest of it can live in my head." Other people are like, "No, I want to know more. Give me the pain, give me the suffering." So yeah, it'd be interesting to see other versions of that, for sure.

Lorrie: Although that does bring up a problem that I frequently have recurring in this series: every time Harry gets a tidbit of information about his father or James's friends, I feel like that kid should be pressing more. I don't feel like he should just take that one piece of information and then let the other person just walk away without saying, "Wait, come back here. What do you mean? Tell me some st--" It's not unrealistic the way Harry is portrayed doing that, because there are lots of reasons for a kid to be overwhelmed with a piece of information and not feel entitled to call attention to themselves. But yeah, that is something where I have wondered.

JC: I think, too, there's a storytelling need and then there's that human need, and sometimes those two things are at odds with each other. There's lots of reasons why an author might dole out little bits of information and then leave it at that -- even though, maybe in a real situation, the person who was receiving that information might react differently -- but it's a story, and so you have to keep the story moving and you've got to plan later on.

Lorrie: And, of course, Harry being 11 and McGonagall being terrifying, she's not the easiest person to run after and tug on and say, "Wait, wait, wait!" He's still grateful that he's not been punished; don't push it, Harry. Then we get Malfoy flexing his pureblood privilege: now that he's been bested in the flying demonstration in front of all their classmates, how's he going to get back at Harry? He sets the wizard duel knowing that Harry is coming to this insecure, because he doesn't know what a wizard duel is, so he's probably going to say yes and he's probably going to fall for whatever plan this is. This is quite clever and a conscious use of his privilege, and he was right. Harry totally took the bait.

JC: I think one of the things that stands out to me about this scene, too, is this is where it is totally established that Ron is Harry's ride-or-die. Ron's like, "Yeah, I'm your second. Here we go." He steps right up.

Lorrie: Yeah, and Harry's like "Wait, what is a wizard's duel?"

JC: "What's happening?" "If you die," just casually...

Lorrie: "Yeah. Wait, what?"

JC: Harry's never had this in his life, and I keep coming back to the Harry/Ron friendship as one that just... aaawww. I love it so much because Harry's never had this, and Ron is just like, "Yeah, this is what friends do. I'm here. Let's go."

Lorrie: "Okay."

JC: I'm so happy for both of them, that they have this.

Lorrie: And they're so incompetent.

JC: Yes!

Lorrie: The line where Harry says, "Well, what do I do?" and Ron says, "Uh, punch him on the nose?" That's so human, and they're just little boys. Oh, my God.

JC: Yeah. It's so middle school. Reading this chapter, I was like, they're basically the American equivalent of sixth graders. It's that first year of middle school; they're the littlest kids and everybody's so big, but they feel so grown up and they act out in all these stupid ways. The author did a really great job of capturing what it's like to be that age.

Lorrie: And then we get the description of Hermione "hissing at them like an angry goose," and I lost it all over again. Yeah, they're good characters; they're lovable, they're individual. You can totally know them as people.

JC: I love that -- even though it's accidental in a sense -- we get the four of them on this first adventure together, because that's how it ends as well. The four of them are so important, even though Hermione and Neville weren't actually volunteering to go on this adventure; it just happened. It's great to have the four of them together in the scene, because it's just like, "Here's the beginning."

Lorrie: As we find out later, the teachers are watching this, and they see it. And oh, God, here we go again. We have the ableist password system.

JC: Ah, yes. Yes, yes.

Lorrie: They really should have had some alternatives. Neville's not the only kid, I'm sure, who can't remember passwords. This is awful, and he gets punished for it. We get to enjoy the characters being themselves when Peeves provokes them, and they all react as themselves. These are the characters we know. Hermione, the first magic she does: in one of their naughty rule-breaking adventures, she casts Alohomora because she's losing patience because everyone else is so incompetent.

JC: Yes.

Lorrie: There's a locked door and everyone's like, "Oh, no, what are we going to do if the door's locked?" She goes, "I can't right now. This is what you do," and she got tricked into being one of them because they were so bad at it.

JC: Actually, yes. We're so familiar with the series and we know where it's all going. It's actually hard for me to keep in mind, as I read this, that she's not their friend yet. She's just there. She's actively not their friend at this point.

Lorrie: Yes. Then for that extra thrill of adventure: awesome, a three-headed dog. Awesome. This is great.

JC: This is not the first time that they will sneak out and get in trouble, and we know that other kids do this. They're not special; Fred and George are experts. But the way that, even though they run into a lot of difficulty, they make it back. They don't get in trouble; they get away with it, and it's just such a relief at the end of reading that. Filch is there and Peeves is there. We know when they've been set up by Draco, and they escape. It's like... (exhales).

Lorrie: It's such an adventure. The first one in the story is the one where nothing bad can happen because you have to establish the taste for it.

JC: Something else that we learn here: the people in the paintings in the castle are –

Lorrie: They move around.

JC: They're maybe sentient, and they live in a different world where they can just go to each other's paintings. There's some other dimension in which they have a whole other existence. It's not just sit in the painting and move around a little bit. That opens up so many amazing questions: who are these people? Are they just characters? Are they imbued somehow with the spirit of the person that they were before they died? Is this a form of afterlife? What's going on here?

Lorrie: And then, when we write fanfiction based in this universe, how much can we use this as a plot device? And what resonant details will make that use of the plot device feel true? You can't use it in an obvious way; that won't be thrilling. You have to figure out how this works just so that you can give that satisfying feeling to your reader.

JC: I do love that there's a hint here that the author has really thought about how this is going to work. It's that idea of, okay, here's what it looks like, but clearly there's a lot more going on here that we're going to find out more about later.

Lorrie: Yes. There's trust there. I have faith as a reader that when I learn more details about this system, it's going to be consistent. The author is taking care of me. And then: love, love, love the Hermione moment at the end, where she says, "Didn't you see what it was standing on?" and Harry says exactly what I was thinking: "I wasn't looking at its feet. I was too busy with its heads." Hermione, you are beyond us, but, of course, she's right. What she points out is the relevant detail here.

JC: It's amazing that they're in this room, and there's this giant beast that's growling at them and they're all, like, "panic mode, panic mode," and Hermione is the one who's doing the Sherlock Holmes thing of looking around the room. Let's check on all the details: why is there a giant

monster in a school? That doesn't make sense. What could it possibly be? Oh, it kind of goes... the logical progression.

Lorrie: Asking the right questions. "So, this is the place we're not supposed to go through ever. Hmm..."

JC: "I wonder what's going on," yeah.

Lorrie: And then, of course, once you figure that out, then you know how to protect yourself in the future when you run into this again -- unlike the normal kids who stumbled into this, are terrified, and would have left without drawing any conclusions -- and that her role in this chapter wraps up with the iconic line: "We could all have been killed, or worse: expelled." In some ways, she's a stock character -- the smart girl, the best friend -- but she is an individual. That line, I feel so much love for her. Then the end of the chapter is classic Harry: he has now put everything all together and he's caught on to the larger story happening. "It looked as though Harry had found out where the grubby little package from Vault 713 was." He is the hero; he has put this together. Whatever they say is happening during this first year, what's happening for him is deeper, bigger, and it's involved with the grown-ups. The other kids are students. Harry, his story, is with the grown-ups, and he can figure it out. Ah, a perfect adventure chapter.

JC: And then the beginning of the next chapter: I love that it starts with that this is now the thing that Harry is obsessed about, and that Malfoy can't believe they didn't actually get caught and expelled. They fell into his trap, but it didn't spring and he's like, "Aaaahh." But they're like, "Oh, no, we don't care about that anymore. What we really care about is this new thing we've discovered."

Lorrie: "We're beyond you, Malfoy. Not only did your little plan not work, but you don't even know what we're doing next."

JC: "In fact, *thank you*. Thank you!"

Lorrie: Yes! Oh, my God, yes!

JC: It won't be the last time that Malfoy's scheming actually benefits Harry in the end.

Lorrie: So aggravating.

JC: Oh, yes, it's wonderful. I love it.

Lorrie: Well, more adventures, please, and the next one is going to be Halloween.

JC: In my British edition, it's Hallowe'en with an apostrophe between the two E's.

Lorrie: Oooh.

JC: That was just a little exciting.

Lorrie: Apostrophe, "even."

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.