

HARRY POTTER AFTER 2020

with LORRIE KIM and JC

Transcript

Episode 2.14

Book 2, Chapter 14: Cornelius Fudge

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 Two, Chapter 14: Cornelius Fudge.

Lorrie: Cornelius Fudge. This chapter is named after the Minister of Magic, and it's the series introduction to how political power works. Someone steals the diary out of Harry's room. Hermione gets petrified. The school goes on lockdown. Cornelius Fudge imprisons Hagrid as a PR scapegoat, and Lucius Malfoy gets Dumbledore suspended as headmaster. Wow. Where do you want to start?

JC: At the beginning, there's this moment when Hermione insists that the diary might be giving them the wrong impression of what's been happening, because with Tom Riddle and Hagrid and all the stuff, they're talking about this. Ron says, "How many monsters do you think this place can hold?" Which is really funny, because my first thought was, "A lot, Ron." That just made me laugh at the beginning of the chapter, like, "Oh, you sweet summer child." I guess there's some other things that are happening. I think, before the diary gets stolen, a few other things are happening or that things seem to be getting back to normal. There haven't been any more attacks. Everyone is like, okay, maybe it's over.

Lorrie: Uh-huh.

JC: There's this line that Ernie McMillan even asked Harry to pass him something in class politely. Poor Harry. This is what he's been dealing with this entire time. That stands out to him as, oh, maybe things have finally changed.

Lorrie: Yeah. I love that because it's such a human thing. It's the phenomenon that if there's a mystery and it was really dangerous but then the quiet starts again, the wishful thinking where you just heal over the memory of what was disturbing: that's such a powerful instinct. And every time I've gotten complacent like that, I have lived to regret it.

JC: Ugh. I guess a couple of other things that stuck out to me before we get to the main plot bit here is the Mandrakes threw a party, which made Professor Sprout excited that they were getting there. Then the comment that "when they start trying to move into each other's pots, we'll know that they're fully mature," and I keep thinking, "And then you're going to chop them up and stew them."

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: It's just so disturbing, this whole thing. I cannot get over how disturbing the whole Mandrake thing is. Oh, my gosh. Ugh.

Lorrie: That raises questions about how ethical it is to be not a vegetarian, right?

JC: For sure. I guess it's because they look and act like little humans, and their developmental cycle is a super-fast version of humans that is part of what makes it -- oh, my God -- a little bit freaky, and no one seems to question it. This is just...

Lorrie: Nope.

JC: Yeah, like that. So there's that. The other thing that is happening here, which I think really is accentuating the normality -- they're almost back to normal when everything goes to hell -- is that they start choosing their classes for the next year.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's interesting, because the third year is positioned as, I think, in an American school system would be your first year of high school, is what it feels like. This is where you start picking the classes that are going to have an impact on your future; you start picking your electives and all that stuff and how important it is to make the right choice. Some kids are stressing out about it, and some kids are going, "that one."

Lorrie: Um... yeah.

JC: Yeah. It just made me think a lot about when my own kiddo was signing up for high school classes for the first time and thinking about what he's going to do; even right now, he's in the middle of changing a pathway. Then we have a moment of exploring our options again, thinking, 'Well, what do you want to do? What would support that? What do you want to do? What would be fun?' Those things... It's interesting to see the parallel of that happening in this series, too.

Lorrie: I love this setup here for Hermione. We're setting up for her Time-Turner year.

JC: That's true.

Lorrie: She's not taking any advice. She's signing up for everything.

JC: Yeah, that's right, and no one questions it.

Lorrie: Right. And don't even try to talk to her about it, which is another hint that she has talked to a teacher about this. There's something going on that the other kids don't know about, and it's in direct response to the danger she's in. If she had been a little better educated, she might not have spent six weeks with fur on her face in the hospital wing. She is being targeted. She needs as much power as she can get, and it's really underlying the tenet that the oppressed have to work twice as hard.

JC: Yeah, that's a really great point. She also seems to be the one of the trio who looks ahead and plans the most. That's pretty clear throughout the series. But looking at not only for herself, but also thinking about what they might have to do down the line and thinking that she knows that it's up to her to learn all this information, because Ron and Harry aren't going to do it. She's the one taking on this responsibility of making sure that she's prepared to handle anything so that she can support them, do all the things that they're going to have to do. And I think that in this sense, the kids all know that even at this point, they know that they're a little bit of the last defense. And we're going to get to that later in this chapter, too, but yeah.

Lorrie: Things are getting real.

JC: Shit's getting real, for sure.

Lorrie: I have a headcanon. Clearly, by this point, Hermione has talked to McGonagall, and they've talked about the Time-Turner already. My headcanon is that McGonagall has been really upset, especially when Hermione was in the hospital wing; she's worried about all the Muggle-borns, but especially this one, who I think is dear to McGonagall's heart. In all her decades of teaching, every once in a while a student comes along that you just look at the student like, 'Okay, I can't actually refuse you anything.' Here is this frightened, partially adult child saying, "I need to learn these things because my life is in danger," and McGonagall is going to do whatever she has to do. As ill-advised as a Time-Turner would be for a 13-year-old, she's going to do it. Also, because when Hermione says all the things that are dangerous and happening that she really has to prepare for, they're all true in a way that you wish the other kids would be more aware of. But then when you see it in real life, when you see an actual little 13-year-old girl take it all seriously, it hurts. Oh, maybe we should be relieved in a way that the other kids are still too innocent to realize what they're facing.

JC: Ah, yeah.

Lorrie: This one, though? This one knows. 'Alright, we'll get you a Time-Turner.'

JC: Yeah. And I think that at this point, McGonagall knows that she can trust Hermione with that. It seems like it's a lot to give a 13-year-old girl the power to travel through time. Wow, that's

intense. But she knows that Hermione will follow the rules, even though she also knows that Hermione doesn't follow the rules when it's really important.

Lorrie: We find out later in Book Three that McGonagall made Hermione swear up and down and up and down that she would never break the rules with this Time-Turner, so I think, actually, she wasn't sure how much of this risk she should be taking.

JC: Ah, okay. Yeah.

Lorrie: But the other thing that they're all aware of is that the guy who possessed Quirrell and almost killed Harry Potter months ago is somehow back and trying to shut down the school and making an extremely good attempt at killing people now, and he's surely after Harry Potter in some way, as they can tell because Harry's always around when another person gets attacked. Harry, he's not just another kid. He does have a lot of awareness, but he has this ally who is herself being targeted because she's a Muggle-born. I think McGonagall realizes they're about to close down the school; they need extraordinary measures. What do rules mean when there's this monster trying to kill your students? They're in a pretty difficult situation.

JC: For sure.

Lorrie: It's a pretty grim book, this one.

JC: Yeah. I find it really charming that Harry is not a good student in these books. It's great when your hero has some flaws, right? He's not a Gary Stu. It's something charming about that, but he understands. He's like, "I'm not the best student. I can look around and look at who's a better student than me. I know what I'm good at. I know what my strengths are." That's a really good understanding to have of yourself at this age.

Lorrie: It's relatable that he just looks at stuff and goes, "I don't know." So there they are in Gryffindor Tower and Harry's belongings have been ransacked, and the diary has been stolen by someone in Gryffindor. Now we see why the author established earlier that girls can get into the boys' dorm rooms, and that must have been so creepy, that feeling. Then shortly thereafter, Harry starts hearing the voice again. Yikes. I think the first time I was reading this volume, I didn't necessarily connect those two things, that the diary gets stolen and then the voice starts happening again.

JC: Yeah, I don't remember, because once you know what's happening, it's like, 'Oh, of course. Of course, it stopped, and now it started again.'

Lorrie: Right, but the first time you read it, there are so many mysterious things happening and some of them aren't connected. I don't make the connection, but Hermione does. She understands something, and she dashes off to the library; the next thing you know, the Quidditch match is canceled and they go into lockdown, something that I know more about now -- as does the rest of the world -- than we did when this book was first published.

JC: Oh, Lord. Right.

Lorrie: McGonagall takes Harry and Ron to see Hermione and Penelope Clearwater in the hospital wing and says that this small circular mirror was found between both of them, which I love because it makes it completely unclear whose mirror it was. It applies equally to both of them; they are Muggle-born witches. That really underscores to me: okay, first of all, the small circular mirror, it's a gender symbol. It's the symbol of femininity that we get from the Venus astronomical sign with the circle and the handle. It underscores to me that part of what these wars are about, part of the pure-blood agenda, is about controlling the sexuality of Muggle-born witches. What does it mean to be concerned about the theft of power of magic by Muggles? Who are you cracking down on? You wouldn't crack down on the people already in the magical community that are having children with Muggles and Muggle-born witches; you'd be cracking down on the outsiders, on the vulnerable. Penelope and Hermione, especially because they're both high performers, they are definitely under greater risk. They're in danger, and that's in a way that would not have been as foregrounded for these girls before puberty. But it's this whole entering of a new era of risk, of people seeing you in a dangerous way that happens to people when they hit puberty, and girls in this particular way. So we have the mirror, and then we have the enchanted death-like sleep that they're in, and those two elements make me think, 'Okay, these are Snow White-fairytale elements.' Snow White is one of the fairy tales that starts with drops of blood when the mother is pregnant with Snow White, and she pricks her finger and she sees drops of blood. That can often be seen as menarche fairy tales, stories about girls getting their first periods. Then, during that time that follows, they enter this suspended time of change where they're neither nor; they're not children yet, they're not women yet, but their maturation is threatening the social order and they have to be controlled. There's a lot of heavy symbolism about encroaching danger and puberty in this volume, and the small circular mirror equidistant between the two Muggle-born witches, that I care about both of them. I want them to be safe. I want them to do well, and I don't want them to be seen just as breeding factories or threats. I care about them. That struck me as really haunting. We'll see later on in Book Four, too, that Hermione gets to be in another fairy tale. She gets to be Cinderella later.

JC: Right. That's true. So far, all of the victims of the monster, with the exception of Mrs. Norris, have been Muggle-borns, correct?

Lorrie: Let's see. There's Justin, there's Colin...

JC: And now Hermione and Penelope.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: So all Muggle-borns.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: So does that mean that the Basilisk is going after Muggle-borns? Can it smell them or something, or is it a coincidence that they're in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Lorrie: I think the implication is that the Basilisk is getting whoever is possessed to find Muggle-borns, and then to call the Basilisk to attack them.

JC: Ah, okay.

Lorrie: Because the Basilisk will Petrify anyone, but the heir of Slytherin has an agenda, which they're using the possessed person to further.

JC: Okay. And my memory of this, too, is that it's really amazing that no one was killed, because normally if you look at a Basilisk it'll kill you.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: But because they all saw reflections, that's why no one's died yet.

Lorrie: And we find out later this mirror is a defense, part of Hermione's strategy.

JC: So Hermione figured that out fast.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: They're in the hall, they're on their way to the Quidditch game. Harry hears the voice; Hermione goes, 'Oh, if only Harry can hear it, maybe it's a snake!' She runs to the library, everybody else goes to the Quidditch game, and then we get out there and Harry's like, "his only comfort was that everyone was now outside to watch the game." No, you just watched Hermione run to the library. What are you thinking? Anyway... Then instantly, McGonagall comes out. So whatever happened, it happened fast, and Hermione figured it out fast.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: You mentioned the lockdown before as something that you had a lot of experience with, too. That was my first thought, was, 'Oh, yeah, COVID lockdown.' But my second thought, and more immediately then: this is what school kids go through a lot.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Right? The idea of getting locked down because of a threat.

Lorrie: It's a shooter drill.

JC: A shooter drill, practicing the lockdown. I have been in a school building when it was an actual threat and we had to go into lockdown. I don't know if my kid has. I know my kid's done the drills and stuff, but obviously there are plenty of kids who have this experience. The real terror of being in that situation and having to go through the motions of blockading yourself in a safe place, that's what the kids are doing. But then there's this idea of, okay, from now on the teachers are going to escort you everywhere.

Lorrie: Oh, yes.

JC: The teachers are being asked to put their bodies between the children and the threat, which is what public school teachers have to think about, too.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: All of that stuff is so real in a way that it was not when this book came out. Columbine was late 90s, but I think --

Lorrie: But the way it's considered routine...

JC: It's different now, yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Now it's just routine. I remember when my kiddo was in first or second grade the first time they had a shooter drill at his elementary school, and you probably had a similar experience of thinking through, 'Wow, this is reality.' I've been in his school on two different occasions -- once in elementary school and once in high school -- during a lockdown drill, and it's so interesting to think about what your kid is doing and where they would be and what would have to happen. I also have the experience, when I was teaching as a specialist in an elementary school a few years back: normally, I teach at the University level, but teaching at a public school, having to think through, 'What would I do in this room? Where would we hide? Could we get out the windows? What would we use to break them? Could we get out them at all?' I'm going through that whole process of thinking through, 'What would you do in this situation?' That's a lot. It's so interesting that this seemed like fairytale horror to me the first time I read this, and now that's life.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And it's a very different read for me, personally.

Lorrie: And the feeling that the grown-ups don't actually know that much more than you do.

JC: And are just as terrified.

Lorrie: What we didn't know after Columbine is that there's no limit to how much slaughter there can be in an American school before politicians will act. They won't act. They don't care.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Back when Columbine happened, we thought, 'Oh, but surely, this is so horrifying somebody will do something.' Yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. My older child... Her first month at her high school, there was a kid shot. It was just drive-by shooting, not targeted, and ran into the school and they went into lockdown. Yeah. The thing that bears saying aloud here is that this is the U.S. Not every country has this.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: But for a long time -- and actually this still happens within Harry Potter fandom -- you get people saying, "What is wrong with Dumbledore? Why is he letting all these dangerous things happen? Why can't he stop it? Why is he hiring these evil wizards? Boy, Hogwarts sure isn't safe for children." Well, shooter lockdowns for six-year-olds are happening. I don't know. Look at our schools first before you wonder why Dumbledore being in this situation is an important story.

JC: For sure. Right. It's not in this book, but later -- I can't remember which book it's in -- when the school really goes into a lockdown mode where you can't get into the castle grounds at all without a password and all this stuff, which is even more the way schools have become in the United States. Now, any school that you go to -- when I go to visit schools now -- there's a doorbell that you ring and there's a camera that shines on your face, and they ask you why you're there; then you get let in, but you can only get into one little area. You can't just walk into the school. You're let into this one little area where they have to verify that you are who you say you are, and sometimes you have to walk through a metal detector to get there. Only then can you go and do your business in the school, and that's just normal.

Lorrie: Yeah. The funny thing about the high school that my kid went to was that they could only afford one metal detector.

JC: Oh, God.

Lorrie: And already school starts so early for teenagers, which is so cruel since they have a harder time getting up than the rest of us do. But then you had to get up even earlier, because there would be this traffic jam while you all went through one door.

JC: So yeah, we can't criticize Hogwarts too much, honestly, because it's like the 'throwing stones into glass houses' thing, for sure.

Lorrie: This is why they're doing this.

JC: That's all that made me think about. This part felt really real. Then we have... now, the rumor mill really starts. What's really happening?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Is anyone suspecting Harry anymore at this point? After what happens to Hermione, no one seems to be suspecting Harry anymore.

Lorrie: No, they know better. There's the very natural and very dangerous idea: "Haven't any of the teachers noticed that the Slytherins are all safe? Isn't it obvious all this stuff's coming from Slytherin? The Heir of Slytherin, the monster of Slytherin -- why don't they just chuck all the Slytherins out?" Oh, that is the essence of the problem right there; that's so dangerous, that way of thinking. This whole chapter is about that: the concept of being found guilty on suspicion alone without a trial.

JC: Yup, and the perception being more important than the reality, the perception that we're doing something.

Lorrie: And that you need a scapegoat as a place to discharge your fear, and that that can be seen as more urgent than actually getting to the actual problem. I think this is maybe the first time that this series deals with what it's like to be a Slytherin. Just your run-of-the-mill Slytherin, not like Lucius Malfoy's spawn. Just a kid who wears green.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: It's more subtle. 'Wait. No, these are children, too. They go to this school, too. No, you can't chuck them all out.'

JC: They happen to be ambitious. They're not evil, necessarily. Yeah.

Lorrie: They don't know what's going on any more than Harry and Ron do. Maybe less.

JC: Actually less, to be sure. I guess there's another interesting moment when they're in the common room, where Percy is sitting there completely freaked out; even George is like, "Oh, he must be freaked out because the monster will even attack a Prefect." I don't know if George is being serious there or he's just teasing or just being sarcastic, but I wonder: has Percy kept this relationship with Penelope that secret that not even his brothers know?

Lorrie: I think he has kept it that secret, because it's treated with the same level of mystery as how they keep explaining away Ginny's fear. "Well, I don't know why Percy's that way." But also,

with Percy, it's like, "Well, who cares what Percy thinks? He's so boring." Just like Ginny escapes attention because she's so little, they're not used to thinking of her as important yet.

JC: Right, and the idea is that all Percy cares about is being a Prefect, which is not true.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: In fact, he's not such a one-hundred percent rule follower. He's not above breaking the rules or using the fact that he's a Prefect to take advantage of getting together with his secret girlfriend. He's using it to sneak around, yeah.

Lorrie: And now a complete non sequitur. As a Snape lover, I have to mention my fondness for this passage in which Snape sneezes. That's it. He just sneezes.

JC: He just sneezes.

Lorrie: I love it.

JC: I wanted to ask you about that, because... Well, first of all, I hadn't realized that the invisibility cloak has not made an appearance until now. I was like, 'Oh, wow, he still has it.' It's just funny. But okay, they're going to break the rules. They're going to go visit Hagrid because things have gotten that serious; Ron stubs his toe and swears, and Snape sneezes at the exact same moment. The first thing I thought when I read this was: was that a coincidence or not? I'm thinking that you're probably going to say, "Yeah, it probably is a coincidence," but I was thinking about it.

Lorrie: I know. I think it's just a coincidence, and it's so undignified. 'Snape, what if you're trying to fool the Dark Lord and you have to sneeze? What then, huh? Have you thought about that? Huh, huh, huh?'

JC: Ugh. But it also makes me think these teachers are being pushed to the limit. They don't have time to rest. If you're going to get sick, too bad. You got a cold? 'Sorry, Snape. Get out there and patrol the halls.'

Lorrie: Although for Snape, this is a light year. He has a lot more to do other years.

JC: Yeah, I guess that's true.

Lorrie: And then when the kids make it to Hagrid's hut, oh, God. Poor Hagrid is a wreck for good reason. And we meet Cornelius Fudge with the lime green bowler, which I love because it's one of the best and easiest cosplay props ever. You put one of those on, everyone knows who you are. Love it. Fudge, though... wow. He is the advanced version of a subtle portrayal of evil. Lockhart is the person who looks annoying and harmless on the surface, and then he turns out to be genuinely dangerous. Fudge is such a more subtle, complicated version of that. He

appears to have good intentions, and I love how that ratchets up the problem of this kind of person. This thing he says is so creepy: "Look at it from my point of view. I'm under a lot of pressure. Got to be seen to be doing something. If it turns out it wasn't Hagrid, he'll be back and no more said. But I've got to take him. Got to. Wouldn't be doing my duty.... For a short stretch only. Not a punishment, Hagrid, more a precaution. If someone else is caught, you'll be let out with a full apology--" And as you read this, you have the dawning realization of horror. Oh, my God. He's going to torture this person as a PR move to cover his own reputation, and he's expecting people to have sympathy for him? And he wants you to think, 'Oh, yeah, you have real worries,' and he wants that to disable your ability to resist this utter wrongness? The evil in that, it's so entrenched. Cornelius Fudge is an amazing character and very realistic. Oh, my God. I just suddenly... He reminds me of Susan Collins, the senator for Maine.

JC: Oh! I was sitting here, trying to think: what's the parallel? Who is the politician that this reminds me of?

Lorrie: When you say, "Would you make up your mind already?" And she says, "I don't know. I have to think about it. I have to search my conscience." Lady, you are not searching your conscience. Ugh. That's just the thing you say that you know will get people to back off while you count your money or whatever. Ugh, anyway... But it works. Appealing to that when you're just your everyday citizen, your everyday voter, and you look at elected officials, they look like humans. When they say, "I have feelings, too, I have to really search my soul," you can believe that. Who's to say they're not telling the truth, even if they're just being very self-interested and willing to sacrifice everybody? Because what is he intending to do to Hagrid? Who thinks an apology would make up for the torment of being locked up?

JC: Right. "I'm just going to ruin your life, but it'll be fine. I'll be okay."

Lorrie: "Don't worry about me." Yeah.

JC: "Don't worry about me." Yeah, exactly. No, it's so real. There's nothing about that scene that struck me as over the top or as unrealistic. It felt very real. Yes, this is what a politician would do in that situation, someone who's self-serving and more concerned about their own image and clinging to their own power than they are about doing the right thing.

Lorrie: In fact, the realness of this is one of those moments when you read a children's book thinking, 'Is it time? Is it time to let children know that these things happen?' which is one of the functions of children's literature, and is one of the major contention points about age appropriateness. Are children stable enough at this age to be able to handle this fact about how the world works? While this is happening, we've just internalized the awful thing that Cornelius Fudge thinks he's entitled to do and thinks he has any excuse trying to justify to Dumbledore and Hagrid, as though they were going to do anything except run him out of town for such a disgusting idea. And that's when Lucius Malfoy enters the narrative brilliantly. This is an amazingly good way to teach young readers: this is how power works, this is how hegemony works. This is the kind of person who has the easiest time influencing policy. This is how

decisions are actually made, and who makes them or influences them. This scene is a perfect example of what millennials mean when they say that Harry Potter is one of the book series that formed their political educations as readers when they were children, and the critical attitudes that they developed and still have toward abuses of power. That was a hallmark of that generation of YA literature that Rowling founded. Because of the commercial success of the Harry Potter series, publishing opened up a whole new section, a whole new department -- an incredibly lucrative department -- that writers then happily rushed to fill. This is the political slant that started the 21st century YA movement in English literature. The gut-chilling thing is that this is exactly the critical perspective that millennials now turn on Rowling, because she's been using her wealth and her influence to campaign about Scottish politics but as we know, internationally, to campaign against workplace rights and medical access for trans people, something that she can influence because of her platform and her wealth and the scapegoating.

JC: Oh, the scapegoating! Holy crap, you're right! Wow.

Lorrie: That is the element that's hardest to digest here, because it's so audacious that there's almost an unwillingness to believe that it could be this true, this cold, this bald and evil. But the timing of Rowling's anti-trans campaign when it really hit full speed -- when she published the manifesto about gender on her website -- was during June 2020, during the time of the COVID pandemic and also the global Black Lives Matter protest movement against police violence that's racially motivated. And if you're a mainstream person -- say, a white person in Britain -- and you're helpless against the pandemic and you're very threatened by the police riot protests that are showing irrefutably that it's just more dangerous to try to live as a minority for real, and you're really uncomfortable with this change in perspective, what can you do to reassert your sense of safety, of superiority, of normalcy? What can you do to reassure yourself that 'you're not cis and white, you're normal! Some people are trans, but you're not cis; some people are people of color, but you're not white. You're standard, you're normal, you're not complicit'? To find a scapegoat and to redirect free-floating anxiety, because the atmosphere of fear at that time was incredible, the sense of defeat and of turmoil was incredible. We actually did see, for example, in newsrooms, editorial boards making decisions -- there's actual documentation that the New York Times did this, for example -- to say, "No, we're going to be 'both sides' about whether or not trans people should have rights," because it's supposed to take some of the pressure off of all this turmoil about race relations and about governments enabling the COVID pandemic by refusing to take steps. It's hard sometimes to make myself remember this, but no, 2020, in the U.S., Trump was president and he deliberately refused to do really common-sense things to mitigate the spread because he really thought it would be bad for the public image. He didn't want people to be scared. He thought that sending masks to households would get people scared, and he was mostly convinced that it was important to prevent that because of public image, which is exactly what Cornelius Fudge is talking about doing when he thinks his primary duty is to imprison Hagrid.

JC: Right, to make it look like things are under control.

Lorrie: Like he's doing something. That allaying fear is more important than actually solving any problems that are threatening people's lives. So yeah, Rowling's anti-trans campaign that started in June 2020 gained momentum from this combination of stressors. And I remember loving Katie Leung's retort to this -- Katie Leung, who is the Scottish actress who played Cho Chang in the Harry Potter movies -- because on the surface, there was nothing racist about Rowling making her anti-trans statements at the time. Her statement had nothing to do with race at all. It was just the timing, and Katie Leung, who from the beginning -- from even before she was on-screen as Cho Chang, just when the news came about that she was cast as Harry Potter's love interest -- had gotten so much racist backlash and had been lectured by people, "Don't talk about it in the media." At the time in 2020, she had never addressed it publicly, and she took to her personal Twitter and she said, "Okay, here goes. You want to hear my real thoughts about Cho Chang?"

JC: I remember.

Lorrie: Yeah. I was amazed, like, "Oh, my God, what's she going to say?" It was clickbait, and she had a string, a whole thread, of Black trans charities to donate to. There was nothing about race in Rowling's gender manifesto, but she put her finger on it, and I admired that.

JC: Yeah, I remember that now. I had forgotten about that.

Lorrie: Yeah, hats off to Katie Leung. But yeah, who taught us to read these diversionary tactics and the scapegoating and this hegemony, and who has the power to influence policy? Who taught us that?

JC: Right.

Lorrie: Here we are with Cornelius Fudge not even believing in what he's supposed to do, because Lucius Malfoy suggests things and Cornelius is shocked. "No, you can't remove Dumbledore," and Dumbledore is, of course, way ahead of Fudge. He says, "Uh, yeah, he can. I'm all right. I see. I'm removed." But yeah, no, this is not Cornelius Fudge's idea.

JC: This whole scene with those three people and then the two kids hiding, and then Hagrid just standing there like waiting to be a pawn.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's so interesting. This is the first time in my memory that we've seen Dumbledore as anything other than the benevolent leader of the school. He is pissed.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Harry keeps noticing the cold fury in his eyes and stuff like that, and he is just pissed. That is interesting, too, because I feel as a child, there's always that moment when you're a kid when

you realize that the adults are not in control, or that the adults that you thought were in control are helpless.

Lorrie: Ugh, yeah.

JC: And they're angry and there's nothing they can do. You always think, 'Oh, when the adults get mad, they're going to take care of things,' and this is a situation where that doesn't happen, so I think that's got to be terrifying for Harry and Ron sitting there watching it. But it also strikes me: the whole situation felt very real, too, because we are in an era where this board of governors ousting Dumbledore, that's very real.

Lorrie: That's happening now.

JC: That's happening now, yeah. And kids going to school board meetings and saying "don't shut down our GSA because it's the only thing that I have, etc.," and then the school board, "Nope, shutting it down," not listening.

Lorrie: Yeah, don't care.

JC: No number of adults standing up and saying, "This isn't right, don't do this," is making a difference. No angry shouting, nothing. Just these people, they have the power. Boom. Going to do what they want.

Lorrie: Actually, today in Central Bucks County, Pennsylvania, people did stand up and people did vote out the old school board and they are reversing.

JC: That's great. That's fantastic news.

Lorrie: So I wouldn't give up.

JC: Yeah. Well, this is why local elections matter.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Our last local election, it was really close and people came out and voted. There was a slate of really awful people, and they got hammered down; it was not even close. Anyway, yeah. So there's all that. Who gets on the Board of Governors? Is it donations to Hogwarts? We're introduced to the idea that there's this power outside of the school that governs what happens, and they're so powerful they can just take Dumbledore away whenever they want. And every time Dumbledore leaves Hogwarts, shit goes down. Bad shit's about to happen.

Lorrie: Hagrid says it right out. When Lucius Malfoy says that they've gotten all 12 governors to sign off on the order of suspension, Hagrid says, "And how many did you have to threaten and blackmail before they agreed, Malfoy?" When Hagrid says that, two things happen immediately.

Lucius tone-polices. He says, "Dear, dear, you know that temper of yours will lead you into trouble one of these days, Hagrid." That smugness is incredible. That is a textbook case of entrenched privilege. The burden of exposure is on the less powerful, and tone-policing is really a way to taunt. You wouldn't tone-police if you weren't absolutely sure that the power structures would take care of you, no matter what. At the same time that Lucius does that, Dumbledore stares at Hagrid and says, "Calm yourself." That's quite reassuring. Okay, Dumbledore knows what's happening. He is modeling for Hagrid how to resist, and he has just acknowledged that this is a power struggle with Lucius. It's only between Dumbledore and Lucius right now, and he's recognized what Lucius is doing, what he's saying in code, and he's speaking in code in return. He acquiesces right away with being removed, saying he's going to fight back in some other way when he says: "You will find that I will only truly have left this school when none here are loyal to me." That's answering this aggression. Then Malfoy says, "Admirable sentiments," and he bows. Okay, they have just entered a duel. They've just acknowledged that. This whole exchange... It reminds me of raising children. The points during parenting -- when you have to think, 'Okay, now they're old enough that I have to break their innocence about various things' -- one of the big ones about a talk that I had to choose was, 'What do I tell them about voter suppression? When do I tell them that the marvelous things that they learn in social studies in class about one person, one vote and equality and democracy... when do I tell them?' And here are Harry and Ron watching this happen right in front of them. Dumbledore's modeling pays off instantly; Hagrid immediately follows his example. He says, carefully, to "follow the spiders" -- he says this to the air -- and he says, to the air, that someone's going to have to feed Fang. He is being taken away, and before that happens, he's taking care of his dependents. He's giving a last clue to his students, and he's trying to take care of his dog. It's a really beautiful teaching moment in a children's book, showing, 'Okay, when this happens, model for each other. Do this.' And at the end of the chapter, this is one of my favorite things that this author does: when there are really emotional moments, she has the human characters go through them, and then she echoes their feelings by having non-verbal animals express the same emotions. Dumbledore has just left and abandoned Ron and Harry. Hagrid has just been dragged away and has abandoned Fang, and Fang started howling, scratching at the closed door. Yeah, they're going to have to gather whatever they can because they're not being protected.

JC: This scene... I remember reading this for the first time, and that moment when Harry realizes that Dumbledore knows that he and Ron are there and he's giving them a clue, he's telling them something: that was a startling moment for me with the first time I read this, and it was startling again with these 12-year-old kids. Dumbledore is putting a lot of faith in their ability and their judgment to do what they need to do, and that's so big. It's not "stay away, protect yourself." It's "here's what you need to do when it really gets bad, and I trust you to do what you need to do." Wow. That's huge.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That's a big message to give a 12-year-old kid.

Lorrie: Yeah. You're a little older now. Things are really dangerous. You can handle this. Oof.

JC: Yeah. You started off by saying that there's a lot of introduction to the politics of this particular world here, and by the time you kind of ticked off all your points, I was like, "Oh, crap, this is really heavy," and it really does set us up for what happens for the rest of the series. The politics later on, especially, were pretty obvious, but I think as we go forward -- because of what we've experienced in this country in the last handful of years -- I think that stuff is going to read very differently to me than it did the first time through.

Lorrie: Yeah, I didn't expect today to be talking about Katie Leung's Twitter.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: But the anger against J.K. Rowling for deciding to throw an entire group of people under the bus...

JC: Just like Cornelius Fudge.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: There's so many points at which she has done a thing that she wrote a villain doing. There's just no self-perception or whatever. How does she not see her hypocrisy?

Lorrie: Maybe she does, but it doesn't matter because if you're powerful, that will protect you.

JC: And if you think you're the good guy...

Lorrie: But you don't even have to, because does Lucius Malfoy think he's the good guy here when he says smugly to Hagrid, "Now, now, control yourself." Is that him thinking he's a good guy? I don't think so. I think he's just taunting, which is why people go ballistic when Rowling says things like, "Well, I still have your money from buying my books." That's not really the point. The point is the power imbalance.

JC: Yeah, that's true.

Lorrie: So yeah, heavy stuff.

JC: Okay, this is yet another thing, another layer of this series to really pay attention to going forward. It's going to get interesting.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Particularly by Book Five. Holy crap.

Lorrie: But next, Aragog. Whoo!

JC: Aragog, that's right.

Lorrie: Oh, boy.

JC: Oh, wow. It's funny. This part of the movie is when my kid has to leave the room. "I can't watch this. This is too creepy. I can't do it." I haven't read this chapter in a while, so I'm looking forward to seeing what happens.

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.