

HARRY POTTER AFTER 2020

with LORRIE KIM and JC

Transcript

Episode 2.2

Book 2, Chapter 2: Dobby's Warning

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 2: Dobby's Warning.

Lorrie: Hi, JC. It's been a while.

JC: Yeah. We took a break right after the first chapter of Chamber of Secrets. Yeah, now we're back.

Lorrie: Yeah, and I'm glad we got that one chapter in because it's taking some work to get my head back into this headspace. So, briefly, what have you been up to during the time that we took the break?

JC: Just getting ready for the new school year, which has just started. So yeah, that's basically it.

Lorrie: Right now, as we're recording, it's the end of August 2023. I spent August on a trip that started out in Chicago at LeakyCon. Then I went directly from Chicago to Korea to visit my family, which was an interesting contrast.

JC: I bet.

Lorrie: At LeakyCon, I gave one presentation on "Snape after 2016," and another one called "Cho Chang Married a Muggle: Almost Koreanness in HP, *Fantastic Beasts* and *Prairie Lotus*." This was about, among other things, issues of representation important to readers in the Korean diaspora.

JC: Are those talks -- I don't know if they're recorded or written, posted anywhere that we could link in our show notes -- or is it just an ephemeral "you gave the talk and now it's over"?

Lorrie: They both contain material that is covered in my blog here and there, and some of it gets updated or customized to the venue. But yeah, if you go to LorrieKim.com, you can find various

thoughts of mine on how the meaning of Snape has changed to readers after 2016 and on various Cho Chang thoughts and Koreans and *Fantastic Beasts* thoughts and *Prairie Lotus*, which is not about Harry Potter. It's a book by Linda Sue Park that's a fanfiction -- a critical fanfiction -- of the Laura Ingalls Wilder series, which I chose as an example of a really beloved children's series that has highly problematic love-hate issues for readers, especially around race. To see what Linda Sue Park did with it, by choosing to engage rather than choosing to go elsewhere, that seemed relevant to Harry Potter fans.

JC: Yeah, for sure.

Lorrie: And yeah. This LeakyCon, it's the second one that I've attended since after the pandemic, and it just felt amazingly beautiful. It was smaller. It was smaller for a LeakyCon, although compared to MISTI-Con, it was enormous. That took some adjusting, but it felt, again, like everyone was there intentionally. What I see of this fandom: it's getting queerer than ever.

JC: Nice.

Lorrie: And it felt like everyone there was a veteran of all of the ambiguities and grief of dealing with the author, and their presence felt to me like a declaration of willingness to engage with all of these complexities and the regret and the ambiguity, and to be willing to be uncomfortable and to do the work of staying. That made the beauty extra intentional; I remember on the night of the ball, I've never felt so much joy in just walking around and looking at everybody and just being amazed at how beautiful they were. It was all very much on purpose and very aware. There was fatigue. There was fatigue under the surface and sometimes right there on the surface, including from the professional talent, the guests. Yeah, everybody. And there's a really conscious choice to be there and to make something. I went from that directly to Korea; right around the corner from our hotel was this five-story Harry Potter cafe called 943 Kings Cross. 943 is actually the street address of the property they bought, so they cleverly use that. It was a different feeling entirely. I got the sense that Korean fans -- not Korean American or Korean diaspora fans, but the ones in Korea, Korean Harry Potter fans -- have zero interest in seeing themselves reflected in the series. It's irrelevant because the fun of this series is being a representation of a certain kind of British culture, which is predominantly white, and there's nothing interesting in the thought of finding out what the author of this series might have to say about Koreans. That's not what we're here for. I definitely got the sense that Korean fans spent very little, if any, time thinking about the person who wrote the series, and they have no idea she's been involved in some sort of controversy on Anglophone Twitter. When I mentioned that, they looked confused and asked me what it was about, and they seemed confused at the answer because I don't think awareness of trans issues is mainstream enough in Korea for it to make sense to people. Why would an author make this suddenly her flagship "do I die on this hill" issue? I don't know. And they asked was it about the series at all, and I had to think about it carefully. I said, "No, no, I don't think it is." I did donate a copy of my Snape book to the cafe, and I did wear my HP Fan for Trans Rights shirt to the cafe when I did that. I don't know that it registered with anyone there.

JC: Wow, that's really interesting. It does, again, remind us that a lot of the things that we -- Harry Potter is a very international phenomenon. We Americans are so good at centering ourselves in any kind of dialogue about anything, and it's not just Americans. Obviously, it's Brits, too. It's primarily Brits, actually, in a lot of ways, but that is such an interesting reminder that the perspective that we have here is not necessarily representative of everybody, as we have talked about before, as we've talked about this book. We're taking a very American perspective on the text when we talk about it.

Lorrie: Yeah. Korea is just as much an important overseas market for this British property as any other country you can name, but it's how Americans see things. It's not universal.

JC: I'm really delighted by the idea that there's a copy of your book in this cafe, this Harry Potter-themed cafe in Korea. Is it people can pick it up and thumb through it, or...

Lorrie: Part of the decor is books. It's a five-story cafe, and each floor has a different Wizarding theme. The basement is genuinely creepy; it's very Hog's Head. You go there and you're like, "Somebody in here is going to cast Dark Magic on me," or you're going to want to duck just in case something suspicious is around. It's creepy. Then there's a floor that's just like a Wizarding cafe. Oh, my favorite floor: it's Christmas themed, and they have light-up deer. Americans use those as lawn ornaments; they're just made up of lights and they're in the shape of deer. There's a stag and a doe and a fawn made of light. I felt like I was meeting Snape's Patronus, and I am so jaded! I've been to all the Harry Potter places -- whatever, I'm jaded -- but when I met that Patronus, I felt it. Wow, I'm actually -- oh, hello, Snape's Patronus. So yeah, and in the cafe area you can buy a little pink cake with green icing that says Happee Birthdae, and yeah, you can get butterbeer.

JC: Oh, my gosh, that sounds like so much fun.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That's cool. So your book is just on a shelf somewhere?

Lorrie: Yeah, they have a bunch of... there's Shakespeare books, just the look of old British books that would make you feel like it's part of the world that she's evoking. I thought, "Well, I'll stick my book up there," and the baristas were kind of confused, but they took it.

JC: Wow, okay, so I'm imagining someone coming across this copy of your book in the store now.

Lorrie: Yeah, I hope so.

JC: That's awesome. That's great.

Lorrie: So that was my trip in August, and now we're plunging back into Chamber of Secrets, Chapter 2, which is called Dobby's Warning. This is the chapter where we meet Dobby and we are introduced to the concept and existence of house elves. Are you ready to talk about this, JC?

JC: Oh, Lord, yeah. There's so much. Can I start by saying that I dislike this chapter so much? This is the point at which I almost stopped reading the series the first time through. I got halfway through this chapter, and I was like, "Oh, fuck this," because it's this storytelling device that I hate more than any other.

Lorrie: Which is...

JC: Where a person spirals down into a certain amount of trouble through no fault of their own, and it just keeps getting worse and worse and the worst possible thing happens until you hit rock bottom. And at that rock bottom, you just have to take it, and there's no opportunity to defend yourself or anything, and people just speak horrible things about you and there's nothing

you can do about it. That's my worst nightmare. I understand that it's a kind of... I don't know. I want to call it a psychological horror because that's how I experience it, but I also get that this is the kind of thing that you would put in a children's story because it helps kids feel seen, because children are helpless. Crap like this happens to kids all the time, and so this is the kind of thing that would make kids feel like, "Oh, Harry experiences this, too." I get that; that's great for those kids. For me, it was awful. I had to read it through my fingers. This is maybe the third time ever that I've read this, but I had to read parts of it through my fingers. I was just like, "No."

Lorrie: Yikes. Oh, gosh.

JC: Oh, yuck.

Lorrie: And meanwhile, I'm thinking about this as a Snape fan, because the spiraling and people thinking terrible things about you: it's qualitatively different for him because, unlike Harry, he does have himself to blame. Harry is like, "I'm at the mercy of forces I don't understand," and Snape is, "I have no one else to blame." Yeah. My main lack of love for some of these chapters is that the topic of house elves is not that sexy. It's kind of dreary. But when I put that aside... It's not a topic that makes me go, "Ooh, I want to write fanfic about this. I want to seek out more fanfic. I want to take these characters and do more." It's just more like, "Oh, no."

JC: I wish I could say I had never read house elf fanfic or a fanfic that featured Dobby. I wish I could say that. I wish I could erase some things from my brain, but, alas, I cannot.

Lorrie: I retain my innocence. I'm going to endeavor to keep it that way. But yeah, after I put that aside and I looked into the chapter, there was quite a lot that I found there.

JC: Yeah. When I forced myself through it -- and I really did -- there were a lot of things that stood out to me, too. It's true.

Lorrie: So, do you want to start?

JC: I guess I'd like to talk about the whole -- throughout the series, the idea of house elves as basically slaves in the Wizarding World and how attention is paid and not paid to that idea. This is the thing that we'll pick up again, obviously, later, but it is fascinating to me that the first house elf we ever meet is this particular house elf who desires to be free; then we get the impression later that most house elves don't, which plays into some pretty horrific racist stereotypes. The idea of Dobby as being -- I don't know if Freedom Fighter is the right word -- but really longing to be free and stepping outside of what he's supposed to be doing to, in his own way, trying to help Harry Potter. It's interesting that that's the first introduction that we have to house elves, because we meet a bunch of house elves later on throughout the series and they're not like Dobby. We don't know at this point that Dobby is different, so that's really interesting. There's so many things to say about Dobby here, I guess. I can't read this without saying that the way that he was in the film with the horrible voice and the 3D animation. Oh, my gosh. I went looking for commentary about the house elves and slavery and things. Maybe I didn't dig enough, but I didn't find as much as I thought I would, which is interesting. I know that a lot of people have talked about this and written about it, but the idea -- that we'll encounter later on -- that most house elves just think that Dobby wanting to be free is really weird and okay, yeah, he's rejected by everyone for this. They just look down on him for it. I don't know; it's weird. And the fact that I don't think the series really ever deals with the house elf question? I don't know. I found it much more uncomfortable on this reading than I did in the past.

Lorrie: Well, having to look at it is uncomfortable because my usual approach to reading house elf stuff when I'm doing a read-through is to stay on the surface and skim past it because it's not comfortable. I also just realized: one good thing about how the house elves are depicted is the individual house elves genuinely have personalities. That's good. They're not indistinguishable. They're not made to be representative. They are just as much characters as the human ones, and I'm glad to be conscious of that and to appreciate that. The first thing I noticed in this chapter was the line from Dudley: Harry is upstairs, pretending not to exist, and he hears Dudley say, "May I take your coats, Mr. and Mrs. Mason?" There are two things I get from that line: one of them is that, literally, the Dursleys are following a script. They're following the script that they've set for themselves, but they're also following a stereotypical script of the kind of life they want, the kind of manners that they're hoping to pull off, the kind of reality that they wish they lived in. We know what happens when you try to stick to that script and you can't. The other thing that it reminds me of, I thought I was reaching at first: Mason. That name -- if you're, like me, a fan of *Jane Eyre*, which was a formative text for me -- Mason is the last name of Bertha Mason, who is the madwoman in the attic, and her brother, Richard. This is the secret that Mr. Rochester keeps upstairs -- that he's trying to deny as he's trying to marry Jane -- and that secret cannot be kept. It will out. And there we have Harry, the mentally ill (supposedly) secret of this normal Dursley family, upstairs making these banging noises. They're trying to explain away the noises and not telling the truth, just like Mr. Rochester does to explain away various things that Jane notices about whoever's haunting the mansion. Okay. Yeah. Can't keep these secrets. You can try; it's not going to go well.

JC: It is interesting, too. I honestly don't know if I've ever read *Jane Eyre* -- I was trying to remember if I had or not -- but also very interesting to me that the idea of the script that you were talking about before: we got hints of it pretty obviously in the first chapter, and in this one, this idea of they've prepared the script, they planned it out, and then it all goes to hell.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: There's a little bit of satisfaction. Even though it's at Harry's expense, there's a little bit of satisfaction in knowing that they're not going to pull this off.

Lorrie: No.

JC: And they're going to make fools of themselves. That's the only good feeling I can get out of this entire chapter: they kind of got what they deserved there.

Lorrie: They did, because their script is based on erasing a whole person. The other reference, aside from *Jane Eyre*, is Cinderella.

JC: Ooh, yeah.

Lorrie: That moment when the king's men come through and say, "We want this shoe to be tried on by every young woman," and they're like, "There's no other young women in this house." "There are; you just don't think of them that way. There are." The way that this truth is forced on the denying family is so angrily satisfying, so there's some of that here.

JC: Yeah, that's true. It also makes me wonder: what if the Dursleys approached this differently? What if Harry had been part of the dinner that night? How differently would this all have turned out? "This is our nephew."

Lorrie: "He's got stuff going on."

JC: "He's spending the summer with us." The fact that he's an embarrassing thing to be hidden away is a whole thing, but what if they had just pulled him in? How different would this have all gone? I don't know. Maybe not; maybe it would have been worse.

Lorrie: Well, I think it might have been worse, because Dobby would have still shown up.

JC: Yeah, probably.

Lorrie: There would have gone the dinner. You can't really explain this.

JC: This is true. This is true.

Lorrie: Oy. And then I noticed Harry is trying to say, "Sssshhhh," and look comforting at the same time, and that's the first we see of the relationship between Harry and Dobby, where he is being sort of like a parent with a small child. Harry feels protective of Dobby, and that will continue; that especially becomes important in the middle of the seventh book, when Harry loses Dobby and then he gains the horrible power that people gain when they have failed to protect somebody that they felt responsible for and that person dies. That's the loss of innocence that gives Harry his final power that enables him to learn how to Occlude Voldemort for the first time. When he is digging the grave for Dobby and he's able to Occlude Voldemort for the first time, the text actually says he's finally able to learn what Snape had been trying to teach him during the Occlumency lessons: that grief pushes out obsessiveness, fear, all of these other thoughts that are trying to take over. Yeah, this is the beginning of it when he's trying to shush Dobby but he's trying to comfort Dobby at the same time. As a parent, I know that feeling. You want to comfort the small child partly because, "Shut up or bad things will happen. Shut up." Oy.

JC: I dug into Dobby's speech a little bit here, this sort of agrammatic way of speaking. I looked for some stuff -- I was looking at who's written about this; surely someone has. Most of it is just talking about the trope of othering a group of people by having them speak non-standard English, and people had lots of fan theories about why house elves might speak this way. It was also noted that they don't all necessarily speak the same; an interesting exception to this was Kreacher. Most of them do the thing where they don't refer to themselves as I; they use their name instead. They don't use personal pronouns, except for Kreacher, which I thought was really interesting. But I dug into that a little bit, because I think that what was sitting really uncomfortably with me was the particular grammatical constructions that have been depicted in ways that other and demean actual people in media. I thought, 'Why did she do that?' Because, as we have said before, I no longer trust her motivations. I don't trust that she had a good reason for doing this. At this point, she was either falling into a horrible racist trope and didn't care or didn't know. I don't trust her ways of depicting minorities in this world.

Lorrie: It's rough that way. I can see where I think she was going with it. There's a patois that serving class people use when speaking to the master class that is related to but separate from how they speak amongst themselves, because you have to build in deference as a self-protective measure. If you're trying to express your own desires, it has to be filtered really carefully to appear to the master class to converge with their desires or to be undisruptive, and you can't be too much of a subject. You can't be an 'I' because they don't want to think about you as a person. There's also the lack of education -- the lack of access to education -- which might come across as laughable and ungrammatical, but can also be part of the self-protective

patois. Then there's definitely a sense of secrecy about how they talk when there are no master class people present, and we don't know that. We do get some, I find, very powerful glimpses of the strength of that culture later on in Book Four, when Winky is assimilated into Hogwarts. We see the very strong house elf culture around dealing with Winky -- how they're ashamed and they're trying to hide her and her uncontrollable grief -- but we don't hear how they talk among themselves. I did see where she was coming from with that, and I think part of the discomfort is because having a slave class in life, as humans, there's nothing good about it. It's very, very miserable and uncomfortable.

JC: Another thing I think about, too, is the fact that first of all, this is our first introduction as readers. It's also Harry's first introduction to the concept of house elves. For the entire first year at Hogwarts, things just happened and Harry just assumed it was all magic; then we find out in this book that a lot of it was not. It was basically slave labor, and that is incredibly eye-opening. As we get into that, it'll be interesting to read that again, but it wouldn't be the first time. Also, it stood out to me at the time that the only person who seemed to really be horrified by that truly was Hermione. Everyone else was like, "Oh, that's just how it is," or the Wizarding kids or their Wizarding families are like, "Oh, yeah, they're just used to it." It's part of the culture. And there's such darkness in the Wizarding world. We knew there was darkness, but this is a different kind of darkness. Ugh. Yeah, uncomfortable.

Lorrie: Too real.

JC: Yeah. I know that Harry is twelve and has other things going on, but I wanted him to care about it more. I don't know. I'm on Hermione's side here. I'm like, "Come on, people." Anyway.

Lorrie: Yeah. And to delve deeper into discomfort, then we get introduced to the subject of self-harm. Woo! I think it's pretty accurately depicted in this chapter that the self-harm instilled into house elves works because it depends on the anger of oppressed people having nowhere to go. You're angry because you're oppressed; who can you take it out on? Yourself. Who else? Nobody. That's just dark.

JC: Yeah, for sure.

Lorrie: And then Dobby says, "Sometimes, they reminds me to do extra punishments," and that's the beginning of something stressful but beautiful. Dobby is more oppressed than Harry because Harry does not punish himself, even though I'm sure the Dursleys would be thrilled to remind Harry to do extra punishments. The Dursleys do give Harry extra punishments, but they haven't gotten to his soul. The house elves have just a harder condition, and it has gotten to their souls more, even Dobby. He won't fight back on his own behalf, but he'll fight back for somebody else. He puts himself at enormous risk to make up whatever he does in his head about how to help Harry, and he does this for someone else. Then when Harry says, "Can I help you in any way, Dobby?" Dobby sets up this racket; he wails, because that's the thing that hasn't been ruined in Dobby: the desire to do something for somebody else. When Harry wants to help Dobby, that cuts through everything. He's so emotional about it. But that's a big theme in this series: don't try to pull yourself out of depression by thinking, "Oh, you have to help yourself, you have to love yourself." No. When you're depressed, that power is dead, but you might still have the power to rouse yourself to do something if you're going to protect somebody you care about, and that is a greater power. That's the difference between people like Harry and Dobby and Voldemort, who doesn't have the power to exert himself more by caring about someone else because he was never given the opportunity to care about anyone else. But yeah, that's the thing in Dobby that remains intact, and it actually remains intact in other house elves as well.

That turns out to be the thing that Hermione doesn't get when she's a very young teenager and trying to liberate the house elves: she underestimates how powerful personal bonds of affection are among house elves. You can't just liberate them; they actually care about some aspect of the people or families or households that they're in. That's important; that was never taken from them.

JC: Another thing about house elves that I'm thinking about now, as we're talking about what their abilities are, what hasn't been taken from them: they have powerful magic. That's a thing that I've thought about before, especially in the last book, I think, you see it. But even here, the idea that Dobby has somehow managed to stop all of Harry's mail from coming. What kind of magic does that take? And the idea that you have this oppressed class that retains this incredibly powerful magic, that is interesting. I thought, how is it that they're bound to Wizard -- Maybe you know the answer to this, because you've thought more deeply about this stuff than I have, and I also haven't read a lot of Pottermore stuff. But how is it that they're bound to Wizarding families? The first thing that popped in my head was the Unbreakable Vow. How did this happen in the first place? I wonder how this happened: how we have these incredibly magical, powerful beings that are essentially bound to wizards, yet they have in some ways more magic than a lot of wizards do.

Lorrie: This is how I read the whole series. I just assume that these are allegories for real things in our lives. How does one group of humans ever enslave another? The powers are equal. It's through violence, through psychologically breaking people, enforcing that through punishment. One of the things that I dealt with, on my trip home, was a photo history of my grandfather, who was a civil servant during the Japanese colonial era. He was quite an accomplished scholar and engineer, but if you were somebody like that as a Korean -- there were no Koreans under the Japanese colonial era; you were either Japanese or you were a Japanese slave. So if you're talented like that, either you can resist and make yourself a non-person (possibly, genuinely just get killed); or you can do the things that you are put on this earth to do, that come naturally to you that you're really good at, knowing that you're going to be exploited for them and they're going to go directly to funding your own oppression and the oppression of others. To me, it's not difficult to see why the other house elves would feel dread at Dobby's choice, because in order to break out that way, you have to be willing, basically, to die, to choose non-life; to choose to be alone and friendless and not have a lot of comfort, but get your comfort where you can from your ideals. That's a very unusual trait among humans. That's one of those character traits that, if you survey the whole population, it comes up as one percent. The frustration of revolutionaries like that -- watching people buy into their own oppression because it's too scary to step away from that -- the frustration is you can't actually really do that much to change people into being revolutionaries. There are historical moments when the power and the momentum of revolution surges so undeniably that even the average citizen who has fears and love for comfort can let their inner sense of justice out to control more of their actions. I live for those moments. Those are moments of incredible beauty and history; they don't come along all the time. Most of the time, if you're a visionary like Dobby, it's a lonely existence. That's my read on what I think Rowling was getting at by writing this class into the series, and I get more satisfaction seeing it that way allegorically than in taking at face value how she depicts it, because I don't know how successfully she could have done it. It was very ambitious to want to put this into the series and it's not sexy. It's not the fairy tale that tells itself of the rage against the oppressive foster parents. This one requires thought, and it's depressing.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: But it's there, and it's an important key to understanding Dumbledore, because Dobby

and Dumbledore have the exact same conflict regarding Harry Potter. They want to help him, and they do it wrong. This whole "Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts," that's the conflict that Molly Weasley has; she wants to protect Harry. You can't keep people from their destiny. That never works. Dumbledore -- being a great, great man -- knows that it is Harry's destiny to face Voldemort and be prepared for this conflict, and Dumbledore's job is to house him and to train him to be prepared for this. But Molly Weasley refuses to see that; Dobby refuses to see that. Dobby says, "Harry Potter must stay where he is safe. He is too great, too good, to lose." That is identical to what Dumbledore identifies as the times that he lets Harry down. Dumbledore calls that 'the flaw in the plan,' when he falters because he's looking at Harry and it's too pathetic for words. This sweet kid and all the stuff he's going to have to do, and Dumbledore's heart fails him and he can't be ruthless enough. Those are the times when things happen -- like Sirius Black getting killed -- when Dumbledore falters because the pity of it gets too human for him; if he had stayed steely about it and known you cannot keep people from their destiny, it would have been safer for Harry. But on the other hand, if you're steely all the time and you're not human, then you don't love; the love from Dumbledore is what helps Harry the most, even though it also causes the most trouble. Anyway, this is the paradox of human existence. But yeah, Dumbledore's flaw in the plan: he does the same thing as Dobby in Book Five. He's so scared that looking at Harry is going to trigger Voldemort possessing Harry that he just doesn't look at the kid for the whole book, and that is the same as keeping letters from Harry, keeping love from him. That is the single thing that Harry Potter hates most in life. "Give me my love. Give me my stories. That's the only thing that makes life worth living. You steal that from me, I will do anything to get that back." But yeah, when Dobby has that thick wad of envelopes... I don't know about you; I feel the yearning. Those are riches right there. That's the whole vault at Gringotts, right there. "Give it here! Oh, my god, give it here!" That's Harry's.

JC: The thing that I find interesting about that, too, is that it dates the series so much that there were letters. I think about how different the world we live in is now. At the time that these books came out, we probably had AIM Messenger, stuff like that. Kids had computers, but it wasn't necessarily the primary way just yet in the early 90s that you would've communicated with friends from a distance.

Lorrie: Yeah, and it was considered rude to have personal loving interactions only by email. If somebody gave you a gift and you wrote a thank you note by email, that was considered rude.

JC: Oh, that's true. Yeah, that's right. It was, wasn't it?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. It shows me how much things have changed. But, of course, if we did this again and they all had phones, the Dursleys would never have given Harry a phone. There's no way Harry would have had his own phone.

Lorrie: Yeah, or the Wi-Fi password would have been switched.

JC: Yeah, exactly.

Lorrie: The spam filter. The Dobby spam filter.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Then there's a beautiful reference to Dumbledore when Dobby says, "There are powers

Dumbledore doesn't... powers no decent wizard..." and what he's not saying and we find out very late: it's not that Dumbledore doesn't have these powers. It's that, unlike Voldemort, he tries his very best not to use them.

JC: Oh, that's interesting. I read that completely -- well, I think I might have read that differently. My take on that this time around was that he was talking about the diary, and that Dobby knew what it was and that Dumbledore didn't yet know. Dumbledore suspects the Horcruxes at this point, but Dumbledore doesn't know about the existence of the diary as a Horcrux. I guess I was reading that Dobby knows exactly what the diary is, even though Lucius Malfoy doesn't really know.

Lorrie: Correct.

JC: Right, which again brings me back around to dang, the house elves have access to a lot of stuff. Dobby knows what's going on at a level that even Lucius is a bit of a pawn.

Lorrie: Yeah. Well, because this is an early chapter -- an establishing chapter in this book -- I was calling back to the first chapter of Sorcerer's Stone where McGonagall says the same thing. She says, "Well, Dumbledore, you're better than Voldemort," where Dumbledore says, "He has powers that I don't have." She says, "Well, you're too noble." Dumbledore disavows that, and that's the same thing here. Dobby doesn't say what Dumbledore doesn't. Doesn't have? Doesn't use? Doesn't know? Doesn't want? Oh, and then we find out later, oh, he wants them. He would love to give in and be able to use them. He has. And you know what makes him a little bit better? He tries to fight it. Oh, gosh, and then when Dobby beats himself with a lamp: the lamp sounds are crashing and he's also yelping really loudly, and I thought, "Oh, self-flagellation. That's another Dumbledore thing." To me, it always stood out so heavily when Dumbledore, during his "Dumbledore reveals all" speeches to Harry, the way he says things like, "No one can despise me more than I despise myself," is so indulgent. That self-hatred, it makes me want to kick him and say, "Get a grip, man!" That self-hatred is so indulgent. It's self-flagellation, and here we see Dobby doing it. So yeah, in terms of setting up the joke parallel to what Dumbledore does, what everything Dobby is trying to do to save Harry Potter is so very, very obviously wrong. But it serves to me as a really good counterpoint to the buried failures of Dumbledore.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: Oof, and then we get the reference to the Japanese golfer joke.

JC: Ugh, which, at least, that's being shown as bad.

Lorrie: I appreciate very much how that was done, because it only tells us what we need to know: that he's racist. It doesn't tell us what the joke is, but it definitely evokes the feeling that a lot of us have had where you're sitting with somebody and you go, "I don't want to ask, but I don't ever want to talk to this person again." Yeah, I thought that was evocative and well done. And yeah, when Dobby is trying to tell Harry, "You can't return to Hogwarts," the limitation of that vision of Dobby's from what would be good for Harry, it reminded me: there were times when I had to leave college for a while, and that was so painful because that's where my friends were. Anyone who made me who I was and made life worth living, they were all there, so to leave there was hard. It wasn't like going elsewhere would get me the same kind of support. "Yeah, not go to Hogwarts to do what, Dobby?"

JC: Yeah. Right.

Lorrie: Oof. Then Dobby says, "Harry Potter leaves Dobby no choice." Oh, boy. That kind of manipulation, that's classic. That's what happens when you let people know what it is that you want the most in the world. Voldemort operates on this entirely. That's how he gets all the Death Eaters. He finds out what is their taste, and then he manipulates that. Snape says, "Oh, I care about Lily." "Great. Now I've got you." Dobby knows what Harry Potter wants most, and for Dobby, it's out of sympathy. It actually turns out that the person who uses this knowledge the best is Snape, because in Book Five in the Occlumency lesson, Snape sees what Harry sees in the Mirror of Erised. He knows what Harry wants most in the world: that connection to his own story and his own family, and he uses it properly. He does not use it to manipulate Harry; he uses that in the end in Book Seven to draw Harry toward the truth and the things that will help Harry survive. I really respect that storytelling because I think it's challenging to see. I think a lot of people don't see it, but yeah. What happens when people find out what you want most in the world? That's giving them a lot of power, maybe. And then that pudding: it sounds so beautiful.

JC: Oh, the one with the sugared violets?

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: She worked so hard. As much as Petunia is... ugh, she worked really hard on that.

Lorrie: It sounds gorgeous.

JC: This is the big dinner, so she would have made the most extravagant dessert she was capable of making, and it ended up all over the floor.

Lorrie: I have candied violets. I have gone out and picked violets, washed and dried them, dipped them in beaten egg white and then in sugar, and then set them out on parchment for two days to make candied violets. They're beautiful. The crystallization of the sugar amplifies that when you take a fresh blooming violet and hold it up to the light, it does look crystalline. You see all the little cells and the light streaming through and the beautiful purple. This is also what Vernon and Petunia want most in the world.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. Wow, the scene: just picturing that kid covered in whipped cream. Oh, my God.

JC: Oh, it's so awful. It's so awful. Again, it's what I was talking about before: Harry sees it happening, and there's nothing he can do about it; then he has to take the blame for it. Ugh, it's a nightmare. It's ugh, yeah. Painful, painful.

Lorrie: And then we get the letter.

JC: Oh, God, the letter. Actually, there's this beautiful little moment of levity. However, it gets even worse. "It didn't contain birthday greetings."

Lorrie: No. Perfect line.

JC: It's so dry and it's funny, and you just know what's coming. You're like, oh God. But it's this little bit of levity before we go even deeper into the awfulness. Yeah. But I have to say: the

whole idea that the Ministry of Magic would let you know that you have broken the law about doing magic in front of Muggles by immediately sending an owl to give you this letter. What the fuck are they thinking? I know it's bureaucracy; that's the whole thing. It's hypocrisy...

Lorrie: Bureaucracy is ridiculous.

JC: The hypocrisy of the bureaucracy. It's totally ridiculous. It's not supposed to make sense, but it just -- so in that way, it's funny.

Lorrie: It is hilarious.

JC: Because that's exactly what the government would do.

Lorrie: That's just what happens.

JC: Oh, God. Yeah. But the image of the owl coming in and landing on Mrs. Mason's head and freaking her out, and then the Masons are like, "You people are nuts! We're out of here," which is what the Dursleys deserve.

Lorrie: "How did you know we have a phobia?" Yeah.

JC: "How did you know that my wife is afraid of birds?" What are the odds? Anyway, the Dursleys get everything they deserve, but of course, then they make Harry's life even more miserable because that's just Harry's luck.

Lorrie: Yeah, no. My favorite thing about the letter, though, is the beautiful authorial voice of Mafalda Hopkirk, where, in this business-like way, she delivers this terrible news factually and then says, "Enjoy your holidays! Yours sincerely..." That's so beautiful, and that's something that I've been thinking about a lot as a reader: that far from the author being dead for me as a concept, the reason I prize the experience of reading fiction is to experience the humanity of the voice behind the words. Mafalda Hopkirk comes across so powerfully as an individual to me. I hear her, I see her in my head, and then later on I was delighted -- Sometimes that happens in this series, where something happens and then, volumes and volumes and volumes later, that character comes back amplified and you actually get to see more of them. I was thrilled when Mafalda Hopkirk just showed up as a character; I couldn't believe my luck because I had always hoped. Just out of these two lines, I've got such a powerful sense of her: this is somebody who does a job at a desk and she takes some pride in it. She does everything she's supposed to do, and it's not personal. I got a strong sense of her life and what kind of middle-class Brit she is, the neat little home she goes home to, the neat little outfits she wears that aren't glamorous but nicely kept to come to work, her neat little shoes. Yeah, the author's voice... I'm trying to think of my term for it and I haven't quite gotten it yet, but it's something counter to the death of the author, and I'm wondering if it's the love of the author or the voice of the author. There's something so personal there. Anyway, good writing.

JC: And then, of course, this is the thing that Harry didn't want them to know. This is the one thing that was protecting him from the Dursleys: they didn't know he couldn't use magic, and now they know. They know that they can now be cruel to him in ways that he can't escape from, and there's nothing that he can do about it.

Lorrie: And, in fact, the Ministry is now on their side.

JC: Right, because now this plays into their narrative of Harry as like some kind of awful human being.

Lorrie: And then they put him in prison.

JC: Quite literally, though I have to say the image of the cat flap that they push the food through is really humorous. There's something really funny about this hand just like coming in. Oh, my gosh. It just brings up these images of prisoners of war. "What the hell? This is the most bizarre..." it's very fairy tale-ish at that point. He's been locked in a tower, he gets the little bowl of gruel every day that he has to share with his owl, and it's turned back into a fairy tale. Oh, and then the knight in shining armor does come and rescue him.

Lorrie: Oh, God, yes. But the coldness: the fact that it's a vegetable soup... there's not even any meat there for the owl. The fact that he won't even eat all of the small nutrition he's getting -- but he saves the vegetables for Hedwig -- is so touching to me, and the fact that it's stone cold is the starkest detail to me in the chapter. He gets the twice-daily bathroom breaks, regardless of when he actually has to go. My two-fold response to this is I don't know incarceration. I have never been incarcerated, and I don't have dear, close loved ones who've been incarcerated, but a lot of people do. This is a reality for a huge portion of the American population, and it's not a metaphor or fairy tale for them. How people react to this is a direct meter of privilege.

JC: Ooh, that's a good point.

Lorrie: I do know the feeling of being detained, restrained, and at the mercy of someone else who's completely capricious. You know that it's not about fairness, you know you can't argue your way out. You know it depends entirely on their mood. The other thing that this made me think of was how different everything felt to me after we experienced pandemic lockdown.

JC: Oh. Yeah, that's a good point.

Lorrie: You can't go anywhere. You really can't. Why not? You will die, and things are closed anyway. Those two things are really powerful when I think of it. Then Harry is wondering, as he's let out to pee twice a day: Would someone be sent to see why he hadn't come back? That is a theme, because incarceration is such a prevailing theme in this series, and Dumbledore especially is always locking people up for their own good. He locks up Harry in a cupboard at the Dursleys for almost 10 years so that he can survive until he can come to Hogwarts. He locks up Sirius Black. He sends Hagrid to the mountains. He's going to lock up the Malfoys at the end of Book Six, because he knows that, as long as you're surviving -- even if it's a miserable existence -- there's a chance. There's a chance that you can make it until your life can come back to you again, but it's not fun. The theme that we know from the author's life is that she briefly held one of those entry-level, just out of college jobs at Amnesty International, and it made a really big impact on her and that's one of the things that they do. That's one of their major projects: try to get messages to prisoners who are wondering, "Does anyone know I'm here? Does anybody care? What is my life worth to people who don't even know me?" Yeah, that's one of those areas where I'm really glad to know something from the biography of the author, and to willingly, happily, and productively apply it to reading the series. I would rather know. And then Ron Weasley arrives, and it's beautiful, and how humble and young and freckled he is just makes it more beautiful.

JC: The stolen car, yeah. I'm actually looking forward to getting to that chapter. Upon reading this the first time: Chapter Two, I was like, "Ugh." And then when the car shows up in Chapter

Three, I was like, "Okay, I'll keep reading."

Lorrie: Yeah, you made it through. That was hard, though, wasn't it?

JC: Oh, yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. But yeah, this is one of the worst -- possibly, THE worst -- of Harry's times at the Dursleys. They're actually starving him.

JC: Yeah. Yeah, that cold soup is going to stick with me, because you know how soup always has a meat broth in it and then it congeals with the fat in it? I'm imagining what that would feel like in your mouth. It's very ugh.

Lorrie: Although I don't think this one had any meat broth. I think it was all vegetables.

JC: Yeah. Yeah. They probably wouldn't waste any meat on Harry, alas.

Lorrie: But I think the margarine did congeal.

JC: Ew. Oh, God, the margarine.

Lorrie: Well, also, it's a post-war feeling. What were the Brits surviving on for rations during World War II? It feels like that to me.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: A lot of the scarcity or -- oh, my God, what's that horrible term that the Brits are being forced to use now?

JC: Austerity.

Lorrie: Yes, austerity. Austerity. All of the austerity, to me, reminds me of World War II-era Britain. I think that's the generation. The way that American literature -- 20th century literature -- when Americans want to reach for a certain kind of austerity, they would bring up the Great Depression. They would say, "Oh, yeah, my mom or my grandma, she saved string, and she never thought that wealth was ever guaranteed. That's when we had to make cake without butter or eggs." World War II-era austerity is what I sense underneath all of these narratives of Harry Potter. Yeah, that turns out to be more to say about this dreary grueling chapter than I expected.

JC: Ooh, yeah, we're back. We're back.

Lorrie: Yeah. Anyway, the Weasleys are here now. Everything is going to get better now.

JC: God, I hope so. I only vaguely remember -- I kind of remember the general outline of this book, but I'm sure I'm going to be surprised by things I read as we go forward.

Lorrie: It is a dark book and it is an ambitious book. It's not as fun as the others. But for a sophomore effort, it's commendable.

JC: Yeah. Didn't the author say later that she thought this was one of the more important books

in the series?

Lorrie: What we get from extracanonical interviews is that she had really grand-scale plans for it that she later separated out and put into the *Half-Blood Prince* novel, because they both have this theme of scary magical books from the past controlling the narrative. But yeah, I think it was smart of her to scale it down. Well, I'm glad this series gains momentum after this one, because I think a lot of people find it to be their least favorite book. I think the darkness ratio to the joy: there's not as much joy. Of course, *Sorcerer's Stone* is full of discovery and joy, and that's the momentum that carries things along so that you get surprised by the evil that keeps popping up. Well, I guess I'll be on the lookout for the moments of joy that we get here in this volume, and Ron Weasley showing up at the bars is definitely joy.

JC: Definitely.

Lorrie: Well, thank you. Is that what we got for this?

JC: I think so.

Lorrie: Okay, then I will talk to you next week, and we'll see what the Weasleys are up to.

JC: All right.

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.