

Transcript

Episode 2.9

Book 2, Chapter 9: The Writing on the Wall

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 2, Chapter 9: The Writing on the Wall.

Lorrie: Hello. JC.

JC: Hello.

Lorrie: Are you ready to discuss The Writing on the Wall?

JC: Yes. The chapter with the very interesting title, considering the meaning of the idiom.

Lorrie: Ooh. What does the idiom mean to you?

JC: The truth has been revealed, whether you like it or not.

Lorrie: Oof. Yeah, something's been revealed. Yeah. So in this chapter, Dumbledore figures out that Mrs. Norris, the cat, is Petrified, not dead. Snape briefly steps out of the shadows. And we get to hear about the Chamber of Secrets. It's eventful, momentous, this chapter. What did you notice about it?

JC: The beginning of it is such an interesting continuation of the previous chapter, where Dumbledore just acts so swiftly in a way that's really telling. He's just like, "Nope, we're out of here." He shuts down Filch, he grabs the three kids, and says, "Let's go," and Mrs. Norris, and off they go. He drags everyone away from the prying eyes of the rest of the students and makes sure that they can investigate this mystery in private, which says that it's really serious.

Lorrie: Yeah. So we see here: Lockhart says, "Come to my office," so Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape and the kids go with Mrs. Norris. "Snape loomed behind them, half in shadow, wearing a most peculiar expression. It was as though he was trying hard not to smile." First of all, what is Snape doing with them? Dumbledore's the Headmaster, Lockhart is the Defense professor, (plus he offered his office), McGonagall's the deputy. What's Snape doing there? So that's one question. And then the way he's half in shadow, that's your classic indication that there's

something happening here. Keep your eyes on this character. There's doubt about him, but it's going to be interesting. So if he's trying hard not to smile, why is that? Did he have something to do with it? Does this make him happy in some way? I'm guessing that he just has a hard time not laughing at Filch, because this is so absurd and the cat is frozen, but we don't know. That's partly the theme of, "how do we feel about characters who we don't like or who seem ridiculous to us?" Is Filch that much different from Snape? Well, there's a difference in status. But yeah, he's currently half in shadow.

JC: That line, too -- that "it was as though he was trying hard not to smile" -- I really had to sit with that for a little bit and think about it, because his smiles come up again later. There's a lot of Snape smiling in this chapter, which doesn't seem to happen very often.

Lorrie: Scary.

JC: So I was trying to connect all the smiles and think about, 'Okay, what does it mean?' And the only thing I can really come up with was he's happy seeing Harry in potentially a lot of trouble. That was the only thing I could really come up with. 'Oh, finally, this kid's going to get what he deserved for sneaking around and doing stuff. I don't know what he's involved in, but he's involved in something, I can tell,' that kind of happy that maybe Harry's about to get his, but I don't know.

Lorrie: Right, we just don't know. And then in contrast, Lockhart is all surface.

JC: Oh, my God, Lockhart is so funny in this chapter. His shamelessness is over-the-top, and everybody in that room knows he's full of shit. Even Hermione at this point. Everybody knows he's full of shit, but he just can't stop himself from going on and on and on, and Dumbledore's just ignoring him.

Lorrie: He's opportunistic here, but he's treated as a distraction. He's like one of those toys that go off, and you don't know where it is and you can't turn it off, so you just try to live with it.

JC: Ignore it.

Lorrie: And then Filch outs himself as a Squib, so I guess from this point on in the series, that's not a secret anymore.

JC: It says something about the depth of the emotions he was experiencing. He really thought... In his mind, he's the main character. He thought this was about them. "Because my cat got hurt, it's about me. Who would be mad at me? Who would want to get back at me? Oh, it must be that kid who knows I'm a Squib, blah blah blah."

Lorrie: Right.

JC: It's an interesting train of thought to follow, and no one in the room even seems to care. It's also interesting here, though, that this is another instance where Harry is afraid that he's going to be expelled, and I think that tapers off at some point. At some point, he realizes, "I'm not going to get expelled, that Dumbledore doesn't do that. Dumbledore keeps the people that he thinks are important or that need his protection, or are important or whatever. He keeps them close. Hagrid is a great example. Maybe that's when Harry learns it at the end of this book. It's just interesting that he keeps thinking, "I'm going to be expelled." "Oh, honey. You're not going to get expelled from Hogwarts."

Lorrie: Snape wants that to happen so much that it's guaranteed not to happen.

JC: Yeah, pretty much.

Lorrie: And then we have a classic Snape moment. "'If I might speak, Headmaster,' said Snape from the shadows, and Harry's sense of foreboding increased: he was sure nothing Snape had to say was going to do him any good." And that's just beautiful character setting here. This is true. I guess this volume is really good for establishing the role that Snape plays. No matter what he does, your only reaction is going to have to be, "Oh, no, oh, no," and he turns out to be right about something. Often not exactly right, but he can sense when there's something there. So Harry says, "We were at the ghost party." The ghost party checks out. Then Harry has a bad conscience about that bodiless voice, so then he starts doing evasive maneuvers, which Snape can sense from around the world, and Snape arrives there unerringly. Then we get some distractions. The chapter gives us some distractions by humor, like Ron's stomach growls just when they said that they weren't hungry; then Snape and McGonagall, as usual, have this petty sniping about Quidditch, which, as far as I can tell, it's a form of flirting between them almost. It's so not important and they're so funny about it. But then we get the true level of what's happening: "Dumbledore was giving Harry a searching look." Whatever Snape is on about, nobody really knows, but Dumbledore knows. This "half in shadow" stuff about Snape: he's not in shadow to Dumbledore. McGonagall presumably has seen the two of them do this before, and she just trusts. 'They've got something going on that they understand, and I'm not even going to ask,' and everyone else there is completely shut out of it. And then when Dumbledore says, "'Innocent until proven guilty, Severus,' he said firmly," that's the story right there. There's some communication between the two of them: "Snape looked furious," but he has to accept Dumbledore's authority on this.

JC: "Innocent until proven guilty, Severus." That's the part you're referring to? Okay.

Lorrie: Yeah. Snape senses that Harry is hiding something, so Dumbledore goes in to check. That whole conversation has taken place between them and we don't know what they were telling each other silently, but the power dynamic is obvious.

JC: It is interesting how many things read differently. In this chapter in particular, so many things read differently to me, knowing how the whole series ends. That's one of them, that line, "Innocent until proven guilty," as in, "Remember my last, Petunia." It's got that kind of feel to it, which is really interesting. Oh, another question I have is Dumbledore announces that Mrs. Norris has been Petrified and then says, "But how, I cannot say." The last time the Chamber was opened, I guess no one got Petrified in the same way they did here. Maybe the basilisk appeared, it killed Myrtle, and that was it?

Lorrie: And that was that.

JC: That was it, okay. So they really maybe don't even know what the monster is. They don't understand what they're dealing with; no one does. It's not that they don't know and they're not telling anyone. It's that they don't know. Okay.

Lorrie: So then we have the one moment in this volume where Snape has to step out of the shadows briefly. When Lockhart says he's going to brew the Mandrake Restorative Draught, he says he could do it in his sleep, and that's when Snape has to stop pretending. That's when he steps out and he says, "'Excuse me,' said Snape icily, 'but I believe I am the Potions Master at

this school.' There was a very awkward pause. 'You may go,' Dumbledore said to Harry, Ron, and Hermione," and they run.

JC: I love that so much.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I remember reading this for the first time, and even if you dislike Snape as a reader at this point, you're rooting for him right there.

Lorrie: I was like, 'Oh, thank God, somebody who knows what he's doing.' But he's not there as a Potions Master. Why are these the only teachers there? You don't bring a Potions Master every time there's something weird going on. He's there as the real Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and he stays in the shadows and pretends that's not why he's there until Lockhart makes a noise that's so egregious that he has to stop it. Until then, they've just been treating him as this white noise, annoying. But then he does this and he might actually cause damage, and then Snape has to reveal himself a little and pull whatever ridiculous excuse he can to slap him down. That's the only time we see Snape do that in this volume. That's our only hint, that Lockhart being hired was as this decoy to draw the curse onto him and that Snape is filling the vacuum in the position, since having Lockhart there is like having nobody there and that Snape's keeping an eye on it.

JC: From the perspective of being a teacher, I think about the fact that you've got this really important position at your school and there's some different unqualified person in it every year, and I can just see it. "Oh, my God. I'm going to have to cover this. I'm going to have to figure out how to make up for this in some way. This person's just going to not teach them anything, we're going to be behind..." I can see, from the teacher perspective, how annoying it would be.

Lorrie: And you just try to minimize the damage.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Also, it's very easy to imagine this staff meeting where Snape says, "Do I get extra pay, not only because I'm doing two jobs, but also I have to do the extra work of pretending that I'm not?" "No, of course we can't pay you extra; then it would show up on the books. No, no. You have to do this out of the goodness of your heart." But I do love that after that really awkward pause, because, of course, Lockhart depends on social norms to get away with his outrageous butting-in everywhere. Then when he gets called on it, 'Oh, okay, that's different,' and that's when Dumbledore can't pretend anymore that it's safe to have the kids here. We don't know what happened after Snape said that to Lockhart. We don't know if Lockhart tried to say something and if Dumbledore had to step in; before any of that happens, he sends the kids away. This is not something that the kids can see. Me with my Snape goggles, I'm just thrilled that there's one moment in this volume that he steps out.

JC: Yeah. It's actually a really fun moment.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Like I said, I think at this point, even the new reader, you hate Lockhart so much at this point that watching Snape go after Lockhart is like, "Yes!" It's good.

Lorrie: Oh, yeah. Whatever Snape's flaws, he does know what he's doing.

JC: Yeah, exactly. No one disputes that, for sure. Yeah, I had also written down the note about the fact that Dumbledore immediately dismisses the kids. "All right, goodbye."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And then with the feeling that he's going to settle this when the kids are gone. That's really what it felt like to me, too. So in the next scene, Harry, Ron, and Hermione, they go into this classroom to debrief; I had to go back and read it a couple times because Hermione doesn't speak. She's not even referred to in that scene, and I was like, 'Was she there?' I had to go back and read it again and make sure. That felt weird to me, and I'm not sure why Hermione was just invisible in that scene. Normally, when we have a scene with the three of them, you at least get, "Hermione nodded," or something, but no Hermione.

Lorrie: Yeah, her brain's already racing ahead. When Hermione goes quiet, and then the boys don't see her for a while because she's in the library, something's happening in her head and it's not time yet for her to share it with the boys because she's not sure yet. She then has to make her case to try to get them on board with her. They might not want to come on board with her because they might not agree. They can't keep up with her mentally, so they might not believe her or be willing to go as far. The real issue, which continues for Hermione again and again throughout the series, is this comes up when it's a matter of testing if they have the guts to go where they have the privilege to hang back. She's thinking, 'Okay, I'm at risk here. I'm at mortal risk, this is so dangerous. I'm going to have to flout rules. I'm going to have to find my own solution. The people in power don't know what's happening, either. I have a suspicion. They're not going to listen to me. They're going to think that I need protection, but they're not cut out to protect me yet. That much is clear right now. Before I get these boys on my side, I have to do my research. But are they going to say, "I don't know. You're a Muggle-born, but I'm half-blood. I'm pure blood"?' Are they going to give up their privilege for her, and that's always the scary thing for her. So yeah, she's going to go make her case first and she's going to prepare. Before she asks them to get on her side, she's going to make sure that if they say no, she'll still know enough to go on alone and know that she'll have to deal with the feeling of betrayal later. But yeah, Hermione going quiet and then going to the library, and then showing up and taking a deep breath: that's a pattern. I like that Filch's response to how incredibly stressed out and upset he is, this is the place where he tries to give students detention for 'breathing loudly' and 'looking happy'.

JC: Oh, right.

Lorrie: That seems like such a central Filch characterization, but it can be hard to remember, "Where in this whole series do we have that? Okay, it's here. It's when he's afraid his cat is dead or about to die." But this is a really beautiful portrait of what happens in the moment when something is this threatening and divisive. Filch is in this state of mind. Ginny is disturbed; Ginny is scared of herself. She's scaring herself. She doesn't know; she's out of control. She can't talk to anyone. Hermione is galvanized into action. Justin Finch-Fletchley is scared. These are behaviors that happen when people are scared. It's just textbook, how people behave and how much they draw into their defensive modes, which is, of course, perfect setup to then hear about the conflict between the Four Founders. I also like that we get the beautiful bit of world-building when Ron is complaining about doing his homework: that they measure their homework in inches of parchment.

JC: I always pick out little details about what makes the school funny.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's actually an interesting caricature of school.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And that's one of the things that I'm appreciating about this series a lot. It takes the things that are common bad experiences about school and just cranks it up to eleven. That idea of you have to write a certain number of feet of something? Obviously, it's making fun of the minimum word count idea, which is a terrible way to teach writing. I'm not even an ELA teacher and I know that; that's not how you assess writing. You don't give people minimum word counts. It's ridiculous. So with the fact that it's in feet, and people write with either big writing or small writing or whatever.

Lorrie: Big writers! Yes!

C: You mentioned Ginny before, and something that's really interesting -- obviously, it's interesting to read this. Knowing what's going on and looking at Ginny's reactions to things, it's such an interesting depiction of people completely dismissing an 11-year-old girl. She's having these big emotions because she's terrified, because she knows she has something to do with this. She's afraid of herself. She's out of control, she can't tell anybody, all the things you just said, and everyone is just like, "Oh, Ginny's just being... She's 11. Eleven-year-old girls can't do that, right?"

Lorrie: "How big could her problems be?"

JC: "How big could her problems be?" Right. Turns out they're massive.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Serious, world-ending kinds of problems, actually, but no one takes her seriously because she's just a little girl.

Lorrie: And it's easy to ascribe causes to her. Granted, it's Percy doing all of the ascribing, but nobody else is countering that.

JC: Yeah. And I think Ron really seems to enjoy being the big brother here. He doesn't get to do that very much. There's a couple months where he's like, "Yeah, I can tell you all about Hogwarts," which is funny, but also he's Ron.

Lorrie: The last thing about the parchment that I loved: when Ron lets go of it, it springs back into a roll.

JC: Yes. That's a great visual.

Lorrie: And it just makes you think every bit of homework these kids ever do, they're fighting against the paper they're writing on.

JC: That's true. You have to constantly fight against that. And then, how do you transport it around? Rolls will get squished in a backpack. I don't know. They have satchels or something to carry it around, right?

Lorrie: They do. Rucksacks. Yes.

JC: Yeah, so how do they... I don't know. They must be a mess. And they're writing it all with ink, with quills. Oh, my God, they must have ink all over their fingers. Geez.

Lorrie: It blots. Yeah.

JC: It's got to be a mess. Oh, my gosh.

Lorrie: Oh, and then once in a while, Peeves comes and upends their inkwells on their heads.

JC: Oh, gosh.

Lorrie: Okay, I love this.

JC: You started to get into the History of Magic. While I'm thinking about how Hogwarts is a character of education -- obviously, History of Magic is a complete caricature of the most boring, clueless teacher that you can imagine. The guy who's listened to himself talk for so long that he died, and then kept on listening to himself talk.

Lorrie: He doesn't know. Yeah.

JC: He doesn't even know, really, that he's dead. What I love about this scene is that there's the humorous moment of, "Hermione did something Harry had never seen a student do in History of Magic before: she raised her hand."

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Wow. Usually they go in, they fall asleep, they wait till it's over. And then the idea that Hermione asked the question, even Binns is surprised. There's this funny bit that he starts telling the story about the Founders, and then suddenly the kids are sitting up and they're interested and they're asking questions; he's so disturbed by this that he shuts it down. He says, "No, that's not what we're doing here."

Lorrie: "That's not history!"

JC: "You shouldn't be interested in this!" He shuts it down and goes right back to what he did before, and it just made me think of having conversations with teachers who say, "I don't have time to do hands-on activities. I don't have time for the kids to do science in my class and do labs, because I have to cover the content."

Lorrie: "I have to get through the curriculum."

JC: "I have to get through it," and it's always, "I have to get through it." One of the things that we talk about a lot in teacher education is that if *you're* doing the thinking, the *kids* are not.

Lorrie: Ouch.

JC: So if you're the one who is doing the talking and the explaining, the kids are not thinking. They're listening to you, but they're not thinking, so you've got to stop doing the thinking and make them do the thinking. That's the big thing. Binns is the perfect example of the teacher who just, "I'm going to keep talking and then I've covered it, and you're the one who's responsible for figuring out what the hell I said." It's the worst kind of teacher you could imagine, yet it's a universal experience.

Lorrie: And there's a hint of genuine passion under there. The unreliable legend of the Chamber of Secrets makes him angry. He has feelings about this. What they are, we don't know, but he actually does have a philosophy of how to study history in his own private mind.

JC: That's true. Yeah. He loves history and he knows something. He's got some kind of a baseline. I'm not a historian. I don't have any background in that. What I do know is that folks that I know who do social studies education: the big push is about having kids look at documents and learn how historians analyze them, and that's the big push. It's not like, "Here's a lecture; memorize this." It's like, "Let's look at all these original sources and let's piece together what happened, like a detective." That's what you're supposed to be doing in those courses, but Binns is obviously extremely old. He's been dead for who knows how long.

Lorrie: Yeah. Well, we get a hint of how long he's been dead. This is just a tiny detail that stands out to me. It's funny that he can't remember their names, and that he just gets a name that's sort of similar that was probably a student from a really long time ago. Granger, he calls her Miss Grant. Finnegan, Seamus Finnegan, he calls O'Flaherty. He's registered, 'Okay. It's a certain ethnicity.' And then Miss Patil, he calls Miss Pennyfeather. Whenever he died, it was before it had impressed on his mind that there might be non-English surnames or non-Irish surnames in the school.

JC: Oh, that's interesting.

Lorrie: She's the one where that changes.

JC: That's interesting.

Lorrie: As a person of color, as a child of immigrants, that did stand out to me, and Binns is exactly the kind of person...

JC: Yeah, who would never know your name and would call you something else. Right.

Lorrie: "I can't remember a long complicated name like Patil. Pennyfeather, now there's a short, easy name!"

JC: But when he gives his little lecture on the founding of Hogwarts, again, this author does a great job of dropping a lot of backstory in ways that really work with the narrative. It's a great opportunity to give us some of the history of Hogwarts that we didn't have until this point.

Lorrie: I think it's slightly underwritten here when he explains about what was happening with the Four Founders, when he says, "It was an age when magic was feared by common people, and witches and wizards suffered much persecution." Okay, that's actually what's happening in the present day, too, is that there's some sort of reaction to fear, and to who is deserving -- who's worthy of being in Hogwarts -- and who is suspect and has to be purged, but it's kind of buried here. You get thrown by the emphasis on Salazar Slytherin deciding that he wanted to be more "selective" about who gets admitted as a Hogwarts student, and I think intentionally that's kind of misleading. It makes it sound like he was being a snob, and it underplays the element of fear and suspicion that fuels a lot of in-fighting, a lot of in-group/out-group dynamics within a subculture, when people are feeling threatened. Selective, yeah.

JC: It's coded in the same way that, in the state that I live in, other things in history are coded.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: He's being cautious, but in a particular way that is hiding the history and protecting the dominant class of people. "We're not going to talk about how Salazar Slytherin was racist or whatever. We're not going to use those words. We're going to show both sides." It's ironic and very fitting, I guess, that this is happening in history class, because this is playing out in history classes across the United States right now, this idea of, "Oh, no, we're going to literally whitewash our history and pretend that the enslavement of millions of people wasn't such a bad thing, and we're not even going to talk about it."

Lorrie: But there's also the element that it might be that Salazar Slytherin has more to fear than the other Founders, because he's coded as an immigrant with the name 'Salazar'. Knowing that that's a Portuguese name, that Rowling spent time in Portugal; that's where she was living when she had to take her baby and run. The other three are much more British Isles.

JC: I always thought that Helga Hufflepuff was more Scandinavian.

Lorrie: That's true, yeah. But where it's coming from, for him, is fear. If the witches and wizards were being persecuted -- by which we mean 'killed' here -- is he more stressed out than the others? Does he have more reason to be afraid? Because at the same time that we're hearing about this, Hermione is about to go run to the library and wonder what she's going to do about all of this, knowing that others will be scared but they might not feel as immediately endangered. Because the whole question of the Writing on the Wall is "enemies of the heir, beware." That's very much like "The heir? Okay, some of you belong here; some of you are better than others. The rest of you, we're going to decide who's not worth it and you might get killed." It's, to me, a story of what happens to people when your fear is activated, because there are a number of different ways you can go. But this turning suspiciously on your neighbors, that one is so toxic, and that was the division that they're talking about here in this school. Now, the question is, "Well, did he or didn't he build this secret chamber?" "No, it never happened!" Well, something like that's happening now.

JC: It's interesting, too, that Binns says that it never existed, but it was opened; assuming he was a teacher there at the time, he would have known, unless that happened when he was already dead or he just didn't pay attention. I'm wondering why... I don't think he's lying there to the kids. It seemed like he was truly unaware. He wasn't obfuscating. I don't know.

Lorrie: Well, we don't know if, when Myrtle was killed, they realized that it was because the chamber had been opened. What was it? What happened there exactly? They're not sure.

JC: Isn't there a quote? Isn't that what Draco says later, is that the last time the Chamber of Secrets was opened, a Muggle-born died?

Lorrie: Right. But then they went looking...

JC: He may not have said Muggle-born.

Lorrie: Yeah, they went looking. And that's what Binns is saying, is that all the headmasters and headmistresses have searched Hogwarts in every way that they know how, and there's never been the slightest evidence of this chamber or this monster. That's when it gets brought up: "Well, maybe you need Dark Magic to open it," and then Binns says something that I didn't even catch until this reread: he says, "Just because a wizard doesn't use Dark Magic doesn't mean he can't, Miss Pennyfeather. I repeat: if the likes of Dumbledore --" That's a little seed of the notion that Dumbledore could do Dark Magic, or at least knows what it is when he sees it, and

that's a theme that gets started from the very first chapter of the first book: Dumbledore can, he chooses not to, and maybe he's the person. Not Snape, who can't be allowed around Dark Magic too much because he might be seduced by it again. But yeah, that's the possibility. Well, if they can't find it but it probably was opened, then yes, we're dealing with Dark Magic.

JC: That also makes me think about the fact that there's a conversation back when they're in the classroom, where Harry says, "Do you think I should have told them about that voice that I heard?" and Ron's like, "No, hearing voices is not good. Don't do it." So, of course, whenever Harry says, "Do you think I should..." and Ron says, "No," Hermione keeps quiet. It made me think, okay, what would have happened if Harry had gone to Dumbledore and said, "Listen, I'm hearing this voice." Would Dumbledore have understood what that meant at that point, or had been able to put the clues together in the way that Hermione later does? Because at this point, no one knows that Harry is a Parselmouth.

Lorrie: If I were in Dumbledore's position, I think that would have been a good suspicion, because he does know that Harry has the magical scar and he does know that Voldemort was a Parselmouth. If he asked Harry, "What is this voice saying exactly?" Yeah, I think Dumbledore would have had a very good suspicion.

JC: Right. I wondered if it was one of these moments again when if someone had just talked to an adult, maybe things would have turned out differently. But they can't always trust that talking to an adult is going to help because sometimes it makes it worse, which is a very kid experience.

Lorrie: Yeah, the whole experience with the flying Ford Anglia, where they really should have talked to an adult, but it was an adult who charmed the car in the first place.

JC: The adults are unreliable in this world.

Lorrie: Yeah. And they don't know who they're going to get into trouble and they don't trust their judgment, but they have just seen that the adults don't know what's happening here, either. I'm not sure I would have known what to do. Definitely, nobody but Dumbledore would have been safe for them to talk to, but Harry is also not, at this point, confident that he can just pound on Dumbledore's door and say, "Let me in, I've got to talk to you." They did have that couple of conversations in Harry's first year, in front of the mirror and then in the hospital at the end. First of all, he's still very young, but he doesn't feel like he can just walk in there anytime.

JC: Right. He has a different relationship with Dumbledore now than he will later.

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah.

JC: It's actually hard to set that aside and remember that, at this point, this guy is just the incredibly well known, world-famous, ancient headmaster of the school. Super intimidating.

Lorrie: Also, when you're a kid in school, all of the emphasis from all the teachers is on making kids be independent and to take care of things themselves, if only because all the schools are generally understaffed to begin with.

JC: Sure. "Ask three before me."

Lorrie: Yeah. If you go to the grown-ups with all your problems, they just get mad at you.

JC: Yeah. And why would you bother the headmaster with it? Yeah. I can totally see it. It is just interesting that Ron shuts that down.

Lorrie: Yeah. "No!"

JC: "Do not tell anyone you're hearing voices. That's not normal!" Yeah. Oh, there's this little interesting moment where they start thinking about who the heir of Slytherin could be...

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: And Ron says something about, "Wow, if I'd been sorted into Slytherin, I think I would have just gone home," which is a beautiful echo of Draco saying the same thing about Hufflepuff earlier on. Also, that little reveal that Harry has never told his friends that the Hat wanted to put him in Slytherin, which... reading that was a surprise to me. I just thought, whoa, it never came up. But I guess it makes sense. Why would you just tell someone this incredibly dark secret, which I think from Harry's perspective, it's an incredibly dark secret. "The Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin, and I said no." But that's the first moment when Harry starts to go, "Oh shit! People are going to think it's me," and he really just goes, "Ooooooh." It's so interesting.

Lorrie: Yeah, and it's different because he's also afraid. Sometimes people think things about Harry, and it's so not true. He just can't even deal with it, but this time it taps right into his self-doubt. "What if I really am part Slytherin?" He really rejects any suggestion that anything about him might be like Voldemort at all, and this is a major self-image theme for Harry throughout. His fear is great enough so that he can't take in evidence that might comfort him, which is, I find, so realistic and age-appropriate.

JC: I'm not surprised, but also surprised, that they return to the scene of the crime to start looking for clues, because Filch has been staking it out, as we said earlier. The idea that they'd go back there, like, "Let's see what we can figure out." It's such a kid thing and it's so them, also. But then we get the thing about Ron not liking spiders. I had forgotten that we were given the reason why: he said he was utterly traumatized by Fred turning his teddy bear into a spider, and I just thought, that is nightmare fuel. Oh, my God, that's horrible. What a horrible thing to do to your little brother. Turn his comfort object into a horrible monster? Oh, that's so mean. Anyway, I just had to say that about Fred. Fred, you're mean.

Lorrie: Every once in a while, I think, 'I don't know why people have more than one child. Siblings can do stuff to each other that's so terrible.'

JC: Siblings can be cruel, yeah. Exactly. Imagine having siblings -- brothers who want to torture their little brothers, like in this situation, and they have access to magic that they're not supposed to use outside of school, but can anyway because they're in a magical house. What kind of awful shit they can do to each other.

Lorrie: You don't need magic to do awful things to your siblings.

JC: No, you don't, but it could be so much worse at that point. Yeah. But then...

Lorrie: Then... Thank you, TERFpocalypse. We now have the girls' toilet issue again.

JC: That whole scene just reads completely differently, doesn't it?

Lorrie: Yeah. And Myrtle just looking at Ron and Harry, going, "They're not girls. This is a girl's toilet."

JC: Oh, and Ron reaching for the knob, and then pulling back like he'd been burned. It was like, what?!

Lorrie: "Oh, I can't go in there."

JC: Oh, my God. All of that is so interesting, and it's hard not to read it and just feel awful about it, honestly.

Lorrie: To spell it out matter-of-factly, it's a fairly funny commentary on how powerful taboos are in our minds. What keeps people from going into certain rooms? We just have this notion, "You're not the type of person who can go in here. This is gendered. This is a girls' bathroom; boys can't go." Is it a magic spell? No, it's not a magic spell, but he acts like it is. It's that ingrained. Okay, haha, they have found a deserted girls' bathroom. Hermione has the power to let people in because she is a girl, and she says, "No, no, it's safe. Nobody ever comes here. Go ahead, override the taboo." And that's the background: this is something that we can't read the same way. Now that we know that the entire basis for Rowling's argument against trans people having legal protections is that she thinks that this is going to lead to sexual predators who are men pretending to be trans women or women and going into bathrooms that are women-only spaces in order to assault people, that's the hypothetical situation on which she's basing her opposition to all legal rights for trans people. Anyway...

JC: Like men would have to go to those lengths to sexually assault women. Let's be real. I know, it's so ridiculous and it's hard. Going back to something you said at the very beginning of this podcast a long time ago now: you talked about your objections to the idea of the author being dead, and you talked about how one of the things that can empower you as a reader when you're reading source material and there's something in it that doesn't make sense is to go back and to think about, 'Okay, what was going on with the author?' and that the author is human and has a perspective that they're bringing in that doesn't work or is racist or whatever, then it allows you to reinterpret or reject that part of the text. You said it much more eloquently than I just did, but I think that this is a prime example of that. It's really hard not to read this and not be reminded of everything that she has said and done. And then little lines you can pick out and they just go, 'Ugh.' She was writing at... I don't know what perspective she had when she wrote it at the time, but now it just reads very differently. And then Percy coming in. Oh, my God.

Lorrie: Everyone's reacting from their fear, so when there's an overriding and real fear, a real threat... During the time of the Four Founders, there was an overriding real danger, which is that non-magical people were killing witches and wizards. That's what you want to be fighting, but Slytherin took it to in-fighting, had a blow-up with his three partners, took it out against them and decided that he was going to focus on killing Muggle-born students who are in Hogwarts. Is that really going to do anything against the real danger here, or is that the setup you've had in your mind because the real danger is so big and you're so powerless against it? Aside from the fact that Rowling's straw-woman argument is that somehow there's an epidemic of sexual predators who put on dresses to assault women? Okay, just leaving that aside for a moment: statistically, given a choice between focusing on men in dresses allegedly assaulting women in bathrooms versus just going after cis-het men who assault women not disguising anything: statistically, if you are going to focus on prevention efforts for one of those two populations, one of those is not statistically significant; the other is where you would find all of the crime.

JC: Exactly.

Lorrie: Is it too much to be upset about sexual assaults against women committed by cis-het men who are not noticeably different from the cis-het male population at large? Is it just easier to make up a scapegoated population and go after them?

JC: I love the parallel that you've drawn here. It's really stunning, actually.

Lorrie: Slytherin is going to focus on empowering a monster to kill who? To kill magical children who have no guilt? He just is suspicious of them because he's displaced his fear onto them? The other three can't deal with it. They try to talk about this; he won't hear it. They stop talking to each other.

JC: That's a really interesting way of thinking about that conflict and thinking about... Oh, how do I even describe it? The current torrent of anti-trans hatred. But you can go back 10 years and it was queer folks in general, and you can go back 10 years... It's the history of how human beings are, unfortunately.

Lorrie: I have to say I am revolted and just having grief that we have to even talk about this at all. Why are we dehumanizing people that we know and love? Why are we dehumanizing normal... When I think about people in my life who are good people and are being cast into these weird... This is so disgusting. This is so profane. The distance between the mental image of somebody being constructed into this potentially murderous monster that has to be taken down -- the distance between that and how it feels to be that person just waking up in the morning like anyone else and walking to class like anyone else, it's obscene. It feels against nature. The wrongness of it, I cannot really wrap my head around it, but I'm having a physical reaction, like a nausea to it. But yeah, you can understand why these four friends, why the split, was permanent. Because the thing that can be weaponized, but shouldn't be weaponized, in human nature, is that when you have this projection, when you have a terror... Rational or not, when you have a terror and have displaced it onto a certain group of people, that terror is real. It has to be dealt with, but you don't *make policy* from it. You don't then generalize it to an entire huge group of people, none of whom you know, and say that your terror is so great that eradicating all of them without a trial would be more economical. I'm sorry, that's a you problem. That is not a matter of policy.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: And the horrendous element of the girls' bathroom issue, and how J.K. Rowling is using this to advocate for specific policies, is that she's drawing moral authority from her experience and identity as a survivor of sexual assault. Yes, that really happened. Yes, you have real feelings. No, you don't get to make policy from that feeling. One of the reasons we know this is because, as horrendous and unthinkable as it is to survive such a violation as that kind of sexual assault, it's not uncommon. It's distressingly common, in fact.

JC: Exactly.

Lorrie: Just like Voldemort is not the only orphan who was loveless, just like Snape is not the only person who grew up with one of his parents beating the other, that happened to a lot of people. They didn't all go become Nazis.

JC: Yup.

Lorrie: Was the trauma real? Yeah. Did Voldemort deserve to be born into that life? No, he absolutely did not deserve that. Nobody deserves that. Would Voldemort have had an easy time being any better of a person? I'm not sure what options he had. But no, you don't get to then make policy about, in Slytherin's case, killing anyone who falls into a certain demographic just because you're scared.

JC: Right, and unfortunately, human history is full of examples just like that, and somehow, the people who partake in that fear and who are trying to legislate around it never seem to understand that they're doing the same thing that has happened before again and again and again. That blows my mind, and maybe it's because... I don't know. I don't know how you don't see it. You know what I mean? How do you not see the... What's the meme? Are we the baddies?

Lorrie: Oh, my God. Know your terror. Know your terror, know that there are ways to deal with it, and be worried if you think that your terror is going to be mollified by killing a group of people. Suppose we take it to the extreme and go ahead and do that. Guess what? You're not going to actually feel any better after. That's not what the problem is and this is not the solution to it, but you can hurt a great many people permanently this way if you think that's the way to go. But yeah, no, Ron backing away from the spiders and being really terse? He's not exterminating them; he's backing away.

JC: Yes, that's a really good point. He's not saying, "kill them, kill them." He's just saying, "I don't want to be anywhere near that, because I have a trauma associated with that and I'm setting a boundary for myself. I'm pulling myself out of the situation." Yeah, no, it's really a good point.

Lorrie: And also, he can't help it. He cannot logically override his revulsion. It's just a fact; you have to deal with it. But yeah, just know what happens when people are terrified for their own survival this way and the ways that this terror can manifest, and how seriously Dumbledore takes it when that fear is activated and potentially manipulated or exploited. The way that Voldemort, when he set up the whole enemies of the heir situation with the basilisk, he set that up to work from his fear. Just keep a lookout against that, because this kind of terror, it happens.

JC: So, what's going on with Percy here? When Percy comes in, he doesn't yell at Harry. He doesn't yell at Hermione. He only yells at Ron, and he takes off points from Gryffindor because of Ron. What's got Percy so worked up here about the possibility of Ron getting in trouble? Ron says something.

Lorrie: Yeah, and Ron's wrong. What Percy says to Ron is, "You guys can't be back here after being seen by the crowd. Don't you care what this looks like?" He is worried that Ginny, who's already fragile, is going to be endangered even further if Ron keeps bringing suspicion onto the Weasley family this way. Percy, being older and in a position of authority, is more like Dumbledore in that he sees how serious this is, and he's saying, "You, second-year little brother, you're acting like a child," which he is. "You don't get how serious this is. You can't just draw more attention to yourself this way. This is scary. And you might think about how fragile your sister is. This is going to impact her." That's how I read it, and then when Ron says, "Oh, you just don't want to have to risk being Head Boy," that is so unjust. That's so far from Percy's concern. "Oh, no. Well, if you're going to act like a child, then I'm going to take points from you, then." I don't know. I'm with Percy here.

JC: And then we have the hatching of the plot to Polyjuice themselves, because now they're suspicious that Draco is perhaps the heir of Slytherin or maybe knows something. Which, ironically enough, does have something to do with Draco.

Lorrie: Yes, it does.

JC: Draco is completely clueless. Also, I think it's really funny that neither Harry nor Ron have heard of Polyjuice potion, even though Snape apparently has mentioned it in class, and Ron's like, "Don't you think we have better things to do than listen when Snape is talking?" which is kind of funny.

Lorrie: That's a great line, and we can't say that Snape hasn't earned that. Even though he's way more interesting than Binns and actually knows what he's talking about, he is somebody that you wouldn't want to listen to.

JC: That's something that we talk about a lot in teacher education -- and a lot of people don't like to hear this.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: When teachers are struggling and they say, "Well, the kids just don't respect me." You don't just walk into a classroom and get kids' respect automatically. At least not in the United States. Maybe it's different in other places. I can only speak about this context.

Lorrie: No, it's not different ever.

JC: But this idea of... you have to earn the kids' respect. They have to think that you know what you're talking about, that you have something useful to show them, and they have to believe that you care about them learning. And even better: if you care about them on some kind of individual level, in the sense that you care that they are successful and that you're going to do what you can to help them reach that success. If kids don't believe that you think, as the teacher, that they're worth it, they're just going to check out.

Lorrie: They'll know. They'll know.

JC: And so it's interesting that Ron and Harry have that impression of Snape. They'll do the minimum they need to stay out of his line of fire. They don't want to unnecessarily draw his attention, which Harry does anyway. But they're not going to learn from him if they can help it, and that's exactly what kids do when confronted with an adult who's... Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. It's not so much that they've made the decision to ignore what he has to teach them. They're aware of it, but it's a resistance that happens naturally because you have to put up barriers in general against this person, because all the ill will and hostility is going to enter you. This is also one of the instances that I love, where Hermione and Snape are versions of the same character. She always receives Snape's messages. It doesn't matter how nasty he's being; even when he's being nasty to her personally, it doesn't really seem to affect her all that much. She's still on the same frequency as him. This also leads him to have to avoid her, because if he let her in too far, she would see that he was a double agent. But yeah, no. They're the same person, Hermione and Snape. Hermione is Snape if he had had the second chance to come back and make good decisions.

JC: If he had a loving family, you think that would have made a difference?

Lorrie: Yeah. She has a stability that he didn't have. There are times when she's angry or upset, and she does not take it out on the world in a way that's going to be self-destructive. She already came to Hogwarts knowing that some kinds of fighting against your allies is going to just end up hurting you. It's a wish fulfillment, I think, and yeah, just the fact that anytime he's on to something, she follows. Just like the adults in this scene, there's stuff that she's not telling Ron and Harry because her mind is already way ahead. So, I think, even though I said this very, very badly and emotionally a number of times, I just have to say again how outraged and grieved I am to have to think -- in the same thought, in the same universe -- to think of the people I know and love who are trans and any sort of horrendously dehumanizing monster projection of irrelevant fears onto a whole group of people. It's so obscene. But it's happening and it's here, and this is the cultural atmosphere that we're living in, whether or not we want to acknowledge it.

JC: We haven't even gotten to Polyjuice yet. That's a whole other fascinating...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. We'll get there, I'm sure. Though, to end this maybe on a different note: I've talked about how it's funny that Harry and Ron have not heard of Polyjuice, Hermione knows which book it's in, of course, and that it's in the Restricted Section, and then this line about how they need to find a teacher who will give them a note, and Ron says, "Oh, come on. No teacher's going to fall for that. They'd have to be really thick..."

Lorrie: I love it.

JC: That's the end of the chapter. It's like, "I wonder who they're referring to." Yeah.

Lorrie: It's the opposite of a cliffhanger.

JC: Yeah, it's so funny. It's funny. Who do we know who could be that thick? Who could be manipulated?

Lorrie: We don't know anyone. No one could possibly...

JC: Yeah, that's funny.

Lorrie: And yeah, so the next chapter is The Rogue Bludger.

JC: Oh, wow, I forgot about the Bludger. Okay.

Lorrie: Yeah, there's so many things going on behind the scenes, partially explained in this book, and nobody really knows what they're dealing with, but everyone's really anxious. It's hard going, this novel.

JC: Yeah. We had a lot to say about this one little chapter. Amazing.

Lorrie: All right. Well, next time, we'll talk about the Rogue Bludger.

JC: Alrighty!

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