

Transcript

Episode 4.1

Book 4, Chapter 1: The Riddle House

Caroline: You're listening to Harry Potter After 2020, an HP chapter reread 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 Four, Chapter One: The Riddle House.

Lorrie: The Riddle House. Frank Bryce, the old Muggle who has been the gardener at the abandoned Riddle house for fifty years, confronts intruders: a giant snake, a man called Wormtail, and someone described as 'the thing in the chair', who kills Frank in a flash of green light. Haha! Welcome to book four, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

JC: Wow, and it's a lot thicker than the previous books we've read.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Oh. You could say it's the middle book of the series, except word-count wise or page-wise, I think we're far from the middle still.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Ah. This is such an interesting beginning for this book, too, because as I was reading it, I was just thinking this chapter is pure horror, for one thing. Every other book until now has started with Harry at the Dursleys' house, and this sets the stage in a way that makes you think, okay, shit's going to go down in this book. The previous ones were, "Oh, Harry's at the Dursleys', he's having a miserable summer, they were being mean to him, blah blah blah." Now, we have all of this incredible foreshadowing in this chapter about what's going to happen, that Voldemort is really back, finally. Starting this book this way felt like a huge tone shift.

Lorrie: Yes. It's a huge change in so many ways. For one thing, at the most obvious level, not only is it thicker; the print is smaller.

JC: The middle grade readers who started reading have grown up.

Lorrie: Yeah, and that's such a huge indicator to the child reader that you have to reset the focus that you're bringing to it. There is, as usual with a shift in volumes, a change in themes. The last

volume, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, there were themes of trauma and injustice and being outside the law. In this book, there are going to be themes of puberty and patricide.

JC: Wow. That's quite a pairing.

Lorrie: Yeah, which we get signaled immediately because the dedication is to Peter Rowling, the author's father.

JC: Oh, interesting.

Lorrie: After she has dedicated the previous blockbuster novels to other important people in her life -- mostly women -- she finally dedicates something to the father with whom she has, as we know, a rocky relationship, and it's the volume about patricide.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: Where the most despised character shares a first name with her father. Yeah, this chapter starts with a reference to Voldemort's patricide, and then later in the book we'll get Barty Crouch, Jr. killing his father. There was a well-publicized, severe break in the relationship between Rowling and her father when he sold a copy of this book and a few others that were first editions she had autographed to him lovingly as his daughter. He sold those at auction to pay off his debts, and it wasn't the only thing; obviously, things built up that way, but that was an event that triggered what was a years-long break between them, and I don't know if they are reconciled.

JC: That's interesting.

Lorrie: There's a lot of tension there. The shift in tone, the writing... This is an adult chapter.

JC: Oh, for sure.

Lorrie: It's really startling. Until now, they've been children's fairy tales. This reads like a novel. This reads like the kind of novel that kids pick up and go, "Ugh," and they don't know why adults read it because it's dry and depressing. We lose a lot of younger readers here; when children are in grade school and they're excited about reading chapter books, they start on Harry Potter and they read through, and the parents are wondering, 'I wonder when they're going to be old enough for this and that theme. Should I tell them to slow down?' Often, I think, we lose a lot of people; after *Prisoner of Azkaban*, they encounter this chapter and they take a break.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: If you can imagine that you're an eight-year-old who's zipping through these books, and then, 'Oh, my God! Sirius Black! Hippogriffs! Ah! What's next, what's next?!' Then you see this depressing post-war novel about an elderly man who has health problems. 'What is this?!' It doesn't lure you in.

JC: Yeah. I think it also reminded me that when Voldemort comes back, it's no longer about Harry's story. It is about Harry's story, but suddenly it's not just about Harry's problems as a child who's being bullied. This shift is like, 'Okay, Voldemort's really coming back. He's talking about the World Cup, he's talking about all the things he's going to do; he's focused in on Harry, but it's bigger than Harry now.'

Lorrie: It is.

JC: That sets the tone for a lot of things that are going to happen in this book, but this is bigger than Harry going to Magic School.

Lorrie: Well, the tone of the writing -- the way I say it's like a novel -- it's so British. It's very understated; the humor is so wry. "Frank had come back from the war with a very stiff leg and a great dislike of crowds and loud noises...." That is such an understated way to say that he has wicked PTSD. When he's being suspected of having committed the murders, it says: "Then, just when things were looking very serious for Frank...." It's so understated, and he's someone who deeply mistrusts the police because of how they've treated him. You could write this in a way that kids would understand or that would be overblown, but this is really British. His name, Frank Bryce, is so English; he's a guardian spirit. We have Madam Pomfrey, who is a guardian spirit of the hospital wing, or we have Madam Pince, who's the guardian spirit of the books; we have Argus Filch, but Argus Filch is a Greek name. Frank Bryce is a pure Brit name, and it made me think, 'Okay, that pulls back the lens so far for me to set the Harry Potter story within 20th-century British literature. This is a post-war novel; it's a post-World War II series, Harry Potter. The refrain in this chapter is this all happened fifty years ago, during World War II. Rowling's parents were born in 1945. 1945 is when Voldemort began his career, as we see; we knew that from the second book, because the diary that he made into his first horcrux was fifty years earlier, and 1945 is when Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald. This whole atmosphere of post-war Britain being fatherless... The way that it happens after a war with a lot of casualties -- when the men who survived are wounded and there's national trauma and aimlessness and a feeling of being unprotected, uncared for, and all this fear that's ready to be mobilized by whatever doubt comes along -- we have Frank Bryce here who, in the court of common opinion, is being convicted of killing the Riddles without any evidence. This requires so much adult reading to understand what's happening here. It's fascinating, but it's asking a lot of the kid reader.

JC: I don't remember reading it this way before. It's been a long time since I read this book; I may have not read this book since 2004, so let's say it might have been twenty years since I read this book. I was really struck by what a tragic character Frank is here.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: We only know him for a handful of pages, but there was something about him that really drew me in and made me go, 'Oh, my God, this human being,' and thinking about the fact that he's lived his whole life with this PTSD. He's been alone.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Lonely, struggling with his physical health -- with his mental health -- and he stayed in this place where everybody thinks he's a murderer. He didn't go anywhere else; he just stayed there.

Lorrie: No, he had nowhere else to go.

JC: He had nowhere else to go. Oh, my God, what a miserable life. Even at the end, he was defiant.

Lorrie: He's brave.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: He's brave, and it's really touching.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: When he sees something going on, he thinks, 'This is my job,' and he takes the rusty old key that's been hanging there for over fifty years. The fact that it's rusty is really touching. It doesn't matter how much physical pain he's in -- how scary it might be -- he'll go.

JC: And when he realizes that there's a murderer in the room and they're plotting another murder, he doesn't understand everything he's hearing, but he understands that.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: He doesn't flee.

Lorrie: No.

JC: He had multiple chances to run away and get back in his bed with his hot water bottle, and he did not.

Lorrie: Yes! Yeah.

JC: Yeah. It's tragic. Also, the tragedies compounded for me a little bit, because in the movie version, the man they cast as Frank Bryce looks so much like my grandfather. I remember watching that movie and going, 'Holy crap, that looks like Grandpa.' That primed me to really feel for his character this time around, but reading it 20 years older than I was the last time... We've talked so much more about mental health in the last decade than we had twenty years ago. Thinking about what this guy must have experienced and what his life must have been like, I found the choice of telling this part of the story through his eyes really fascinating.

Lorrie: Yeah. Stoic and admirable. The way he assumes that he's going to be tormented and that the boys are going to throw rocks at him or whatever... He just assumes it. Okay, that's what he lives with. The thing that astonished me, because it took me a while to realize this: this is setting up the parallel that Voldemort also has nowhere else to go.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Why is the Dark Lord -- why is the greatest wizard of the 20th century, according to himself -- here in this dusty, pitiable former mansion? He doesn't have anywhere else to go. This is the closest thing he has to a home, because he killed the people who lived here before. He does have some ancestral claim to it; it's so pathetic. He calls it 'reasonably comfortable'. His ancestors, the ones he killed, are buried in the town graveyard. He can't claim anywhere else. Where else is he going to claim? The orphanage? Or the Gaunt shack, which is disgusting? Honestly, I cannot blame him for wanting nothing to do with that place. This is all he has.

JC: Okay, there's a mention of after the Riddles were murdered, the house passed through several owners; now, it's being maintained by a wealthy person who is unnamed, who's just using it for tax purchases. Okay, you can take that at face value; okay, yeah, people do that. Why would you buy an abandoned mansion? But it made me think, 'Okay, who owns the house?' was the question I started. I went through a couple of thoughts. I was like, 'Does Voldemort actually own the house? Is it Tom Riddle's, or is it Lucius Malfoy? Is someone holding it in trust for him?' But Frank Bryce is getting paid, so there's money put away somewhere. 'Someone take care of this.' You said yes when I said, 'Does Voldemort own this house?'

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah.

JC: Yeah, that's interesting.

Lorrie: No. Well, it had been owned.... I'm thinking, 'Well, did it go into some sort of public trust?' There were a couple of interim owners who said 'Yuck' and left; then at some point, it looks to me like Voldemort figured out a way to have enough Muggle money to purchase it and then do whatever it takes, which [is] probably a few spells to make sure that there's somebody who's installed as the guardian spirit. That's his insurance that he has a place in the world.

JC: The idea of Voldemort contacting a real estate agent... I don't know. It's just so crazy.

Lorrie: Or yeah, doing some spell on one.

JC: And he'd have to pay the taxes every year.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Who does his accounting?

Lorrie: Or whatever spell it requires to make sure that all of that keeps going.

JC: Oh, my God. Yeah.

Lorrie: Right. Yeah.

JC: It's humorous to think about the adulting side of it.

Lorrie: The adulting...

JC: Voldemort adulting?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: What?! Oh, my God.

Lorrie: And how filthy it must feel to him, and how degrading.

JC: Oh, my God.

Lorrie: But this was years into my thinking about Harry Potter before I arrived at this question and answer: at the end of the series, when Voldemort dies, what happens to his body?

JC: I have no idea.

Lorrie: Right? You have to think, 'What could they have done?' I've heard theories that go super off the magical deep end, where you do everything possible to ensure that it can never ever be resurrected, and I went the opposite direction. I thought the whole point of defeating Voldemort was to return him from the monstrous immortality that he had pursued and grant him the mercy of returning to mortality and to the humble state that he had put out of his own reach; and that when he finally has returned -- when Harry has given him back the gift of mortality that he had forfeited, and he finally dies as just an old man -- then his body, according to that direction of movement in the story, should also be handled the same way as a mortal body. Then I realized, oh, he's buried in Little Hangleton, next to the family that he killed. His body is just a body. He's not a bug or a snake skin. He's just a man with a circulation system and everything who has

now passed away and has remains. It did not go into corn flakes or whatever, like in the movie. It's just a body; where do we put it? Well, not at Hogwarts where he wanted to go, because that's what I think he wanted. That was his end game, in my opinion: that was the only place that he felt he had a right to that could feel good enough to be his home. Since he could claim ancestry from Slytherin, and since there was this ginormous chamber underneath the castle that was all Slytherin's -- and there was irrefutable evidence that Voldemort was of the blood of Slytherin -- where else does he have? He has the Gaunt shack, he has the Riddle mansion, he has the orphanage, he has Hogwarts, and he has the forest in Albania. Or, according to him, he also has Malfoy Manor. Yeah, no.

JC: It is interesting, though, to bury him in that cemetery next to the other Riddles and just bury him as Tom Riddle, because his dad's name was also Tom Riddle.

Lorrie: Junior.

JC: Tom Riddle Jr., right?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And no one would find his grave and turn it into a shrine, either.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: Yeah. He'd be anonymous. He'd be almost like he died an anonymous Muggle, which is the worst.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah, in some ways for him, the worst thing, and in some ways the best.

Lorrie: But that's the story of his life. That's why he had to go to these extremes to build this towering denial of the difficulty that he was born into as an infant through no fault of his own. Who was he? He was somebody born under really stark circumstances with no love anywhere for him -- not what any infant deserves -- completely abandoned, and that's intolerable. For any human being, that's an intolerable state. And he was born super gifted, so he did what he could to create something to make any of his life tolerable. But he couldn't deny this is where he came from and that's where he goes back, because none of those other places he tried to steal were actually his. Here we have, at this point, not a guy but a *thing* in a chair at this extremely dusty, decrepit, abandoned mansion. That was the final thing that I realized -- in truly gross-out horror, but also with that laughter that horror often brings: oh, this is a reenactment of Hagrid bringing baby Harry to the Dursleys.

JC: Oh.

Lorrie: We have started over. At the beginning of this series, we have this infant and we have Hagrid bringing him and carrying him in his arms; what Voldemort does is reenact tender love that humans are supposed to have in his own way that's so sacrilegious.

JC: I like that sense that's created here that he's so disgusting that Wormtail hates having to touch him.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: But he's completely reliant on Wormtail at this point for everything. Wormtail has to take care of his bodily functions; Wormtail obviously doesn't want to be there, but he's also afraid to leave. There's this one point where Voldemort says, "Are you planning to abandon me, because you know that if you left me here I wouldn't make it. I would only last a few days."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And it made me think, 'Okay, so what's keeping Wormtail from doing that?' because he's obviously also really concerned about Harry; there's that going on, too. He doesn't really want to help Voldemort, but he has to, I guess, out of a sense of fear. If he doesn't do it and someone else does, then Voldemort is going to come for him. It's really interesting to me, the way that Wormtail has been trapped in this situation that he obviously doesn't want to be in.

Lorrie: The entrapment, yeah. There's only one possible person who might protect Wormtail, and that's this disgusting thing in the chair; otherwise, Wormtail is completely doomed. It's not a good bet to bet on being protected by this thing in the chair, but it's his only bet. The disgusting slapstick that reproduces the tenderness of Harry being brought by Hagrid and cared for... It took me a while to understand what bottle they were talking about when Wormtail says, "There is a little more in the bottle, my Lord, if you are still hungry." What did you think this bottle looked like?

JC: On the first read, I'm imagining a potion bottle.

Lorrie: Right? Right?! RIGHT?!?!

JC: And then later, when he says, "You have to find Nagini and milk her," at this point it hit me. 'Oh, we don't know who or what Nagini is.'

Lorrie: What is Nagini?!

JC: What... Milking?! WHAT?!

Lorrie: WHAT?! EW!!!

JC: Yeah. What's happening here?

Lorrie: Bottle?!

JC: Yeah. It's really weird and creepy. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Because Voldemort needs feeding. It's like, oh, boy. Yeah, I hadn't thought of the baby analogy in the same way, but yeah.

Lorrie: I know, because at first I thought it was a dignified bottle, like a potions bottle or a wine bottle.

JC: And it was a potion of some kind, right?

Lorrie: Right. This is the Dark Lord. He's magical; he's in a mansion that is, although falling apart, majestic and huge, and there's a fire. No. No, this is the kind of bottle that has rubber or silicone nipples and they have milliliter markings on the side.

JC: And he can't hold it himself. Now I'm imagining this horrific fan art in which Wormtail is cuddling little Voldemort like a baby and giving him a bottle, and maybe he's got a diaper on.

Lorrie: And they're in the armchair next to the fire, just like classic scenes of nursing your newborn, except it's so disgusting.

JC: Oh, my God.

Lorrie: Yeah, and Wormtail is holding him in his left arm and holding the bottle with his right hand, the right hand that he will soon not have. Yeah, it is completely a violation of the natural order of nurturing that baby Tom Riddle did not get, and it's setting us up to understand why he's so mortally envious of Harry Potter. Why did Harry get this and he doesn't? He has this disgusting, completely inadequate Wormtail person to take him to this disgusting crumbling mansion and look the whole time like he's about to run away, just like his actual birth mother (who did abandon him in his own mind). It's a perversion and it's hilarious; it's so disgustingly funny. This was, I think, one of the first moments when I was thunderstruck by the difference between reading the series at one stage of my life versus another, because the first time I read this chapter I did not have children.

JC: Oh, now that's interesting.

Lorrie: After I was a nursing mother and having a newborn drove me out of my mind, I was desperate to sleep. I had not slept since my water broke. I had not been able to go to the bathroom by myself; anytime that I tried to get up to pee, the baby would scream. Nursing, breastfeeding, has way, way, way more problems than I ever dreamed of in the innocent days before I had to think about it. All of these problems involve sleep deprivation, and some of them involve pain and illness. The fragility of the infant is terrifying. The loss of adult focus and concentration as soon as sleep deprivation hits.... Within one day of sleep deprivation, you can tell that you're a lot less reliable. You're dropping everything. It's so scary. The way that there's a struggle of wills happening between the thing in the chair and reluctant Wormtail is what made me realize, 'Oh, now, I understand what Unforgivables are.' *Crucio*, *Avada Kedavra*, and *Imperio* were invented by infants who desperately need to control the behavior of others to keep them alive, and are terrified and enraged when that is endangered and are filled with a desire to punish. Where does all that anger go in an infant? That's why when you see out-of-control tyrants (people like Voldemort who become adults with power) -- when things don't go their way -- exhibit appalling, punitive behavior, that's why they seem like babies.

JC: Yeah, I wonder who you could be thinking of...

Lorrie: Actually, a lot of people, but that's why, when you see these super-powerful people, you think, 'Grow up,' because that impotent rage is where it comes from: the terrifying utter dependence of the infant who doesn't have any power to enact their will, and they're completely dependent on whether their caregiver will stick around or walk away.

JC: You were talking about the difficulty of having a newborn, and the difference between that and this situation with Wormtail. When you have a baby, you have all these hormones going on that are making you love this little creature so much that you are willing to make all these sacrifices. I pumped for the first four months of my kid's life. Talk about sleep deprivation! So the idea of being milked...

Lorrie: Sleep deprivation.

JC: Yeah, that kind of thing...

Lorrie: Oh, my God. Around-the-clock.

JC: Around-the-clock pumping. Yes.

Lorrie: Yeah, and they need to be fed every two hours.

JC: Right, so when you're done pumping, it's time to feed them again basically.

Lorrie: And you can't create the food that they need unless somebody gets you some food, or you get it yourself, if you can walk.

JC: Right, yeah. There's a lot going on there and you need support, but also you're being driven by this hormonal, biological thing, which is great that it's there. I'm thinking Wormtail has none of that; all he has is fear and terror, and no one is helping him. I never thought of Wormtail as a single parent before, but holy crap.

Lorrie: No, it is. He is the embodiment of how trapped you feel when you have to care for an infant that you don't love, which brings me to Petunia.

JC: Oh.

Lorrie: Who in the world has a one-year-old and thinks, 'You know what I want? I want another one-year-old, except one that I don't love, that I resent. I want double the work with no more motivation and absolutely nobody helping me,' because Petunia was, in daily labor, a single parent. I don't think Vernon was saying, "Here, let me take Harry and rock him to sleep while you feed Dudley." No, that was not happening.

JC: Yeah, that wasn't happening. No.

Lorrie: Also, there are so many stories in this series of caregivers who don't want to be there. It's the hardest, least rewarding work, and it's hard and unrewarding even when you desperately want to do it. Even when this is the most important thing in the world to you, you're still suffering. You're still sleep-deprived, you're still hungry, you're still cranky, and you cry a lot. And if you don't love the dependent, oh. We have not only Wormtail here and not only Petunia, but we have Snape, who has pledged to protect Harry Potter (who not only does he dislike -- not only does he look a whole lot like James -- but also, it's Snape's own damn fault); and we have Dumbledore berating himself for the rest of his very long life for fantasizing about running away with his hot boyfriend instead of taking care of Ariana. All of these things are things that I don't know how well I would have understood if I hadn't gone through what it feels like to have a newborn; all I wanted to do was sleep and that was just not going to happen, even though I had help. When Wormtail begs Voldemort, "Please! If you allowed me to leave for a short while -- I could be back here in as little as two days...." Oh, that was so wickedly funny to me. "Oh, ha ha ha, the baby is never going to let that happen, Wormtail." Every parent who's a primary caregiver for a newborn knows the answer to this question. "No, no, you can't go. No." Oh, what does he say? He says, "How am I to survive without you, when I need feeding every few hours?" This is true. This is absolutely true. And the way that Voldemort verbally abuses Wormtail is shocking. Dude, the hand that feeds you! Dude!

JC: It is a little bit, though, like when the baby cries and won't stop, and is angry and their little face scrunched up.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah, and you're like, 'Why are you so mad? I've done everything.'

Lorrie: And the baby's like, 'AVADA KEDAVRA!' Don't kill me, baby. You will regret it.

JC: Yeah, I was struck by that, too, that Voldemort knows that Wormtail is only there because he's terrified of what Voldemort will do to him. Again, it's this complete mirror of love.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Why do we go to all this trouble to take care of our newborn infants? Because we love them. We're driven on a lot of different biological levels, but at its core, you're taking care of this child because you love this child, even if there are moments where you'd really love to be able to hand the child off. This is the opposite.

Lorrie: It's when you see the humanity of the infant. This is a person. All people came from this. This is a person; it's an individual person. Even when they're newborns, you can sense their individuality. What happens when you don't see the infant as a person? I know that there's an ongoing debate within fandom about whether Voldemort did or didn't use sexuality as one of his weapons to control his followers (Did he dole out affection to Bellatrix, or didn't he?). My take on that has always been: with Voldemort, the answer is never sex and romance, but it's always about the parent-child dynamic because that's his originating conflict, I think. He's just not interested in the rest because this is really the basis: "If you don't have this..." The rest of it all follows from this, but I understand what Voldemort sees when he sees the caregiver with revulsion on their face. That's something that can't really be cured if it's there, and I actually feel like, "Good for him for calling it out." It's the truth. And if you think about Machiavelli saying, 'If you're a leader and you have to have a choice to exert control over your followers -- if you have to choose to be feared or loved, it's better to be feared in terms of getting to your goal.' The thing is, you can go that route, but you'll still need love; you just won't be able to get it here. As we see with Voldemort, he has a hard time getting it from anywhere. If you have your needs taken care of by people who fear you but you don't have people who love you, you're still going to be looking for that. I remember, when I first realized that Wormtail was one of the reluctant caregivers, I wrote an essay called "The Mother Who Lived," because that was the original betrayal that infant Tom Riddle felt, which is not even fair. "Why did my mother abandon me by dying?" Well, that's not really how it was. It's not like she did it to you, but when you're an infant, how can you understand that? You need what you need. Here we have, in this chapter, a division of Voldemort's need for a mother between Nagini.... Well, after 2017, now we know that Nagini had been human and is a Maledictus, and was turned into this super-magical animal. Because he can exert power over her, he can mold her into being his nurturing mother that doesn't have that much volition of her own. Then we have Wormtail as the person he can punish; he can project his desire to punish his dead mom onto Wormtail, who has nowhere to go and no way to resist it. The way that he verbally abuses Wormtail is so startling. Why is he doing this? Doesn't he know he's at risk? Oh, that's the point. Yeah, I really had an emotional response to Voldemort saying, "I revolt you. I see you flinch when you look at me, feel you shudder when you touch me..." Being cared for by somebody who is supposed to love you and doesn't feel monstrous, and that is a really good entry into one of the themes of this series -- and we see it a lot in this novel -- that genuine affection... there's no substitute for that and it's worth something on its own. We're going to see later the house elf, Winky, who has genuine

affection for Barty Crouch, Junior and Senior; she can't shut it off, and it's actually worth something. It's precious, and that's something you can't manufacture.

JC: Another thing that was interesting to me about rereading this was all of the foreshadowing that happens in this chapter about what's to come. I was like, 'Oh, oh,' because I don't think I've reread this chapter since. We get little hints of Voldemort's plan, and once you know what the plan is, it's like, 'Oh, wow. I see that.' We learn that someone called Bertha Jorkins had disappeared.

Lorrie: Bertha!

JC: That she was tortured, that she had a memory charm put on her that Voldemort was able to break, and lots of interesting --

Lorrie: And then he killed her.

JC: And then he killed her.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: There's a lot of interesting details here, and that Wormtail was the one who lured her out for him. There's a lot of little interesting details there. Wormtail is supposed to curse someone, so that's an interesting detail. The part where I actually laughed out loud was: "I will allow you to perform an essential task for me, one that many of my followers would give their right hands to perform..." and I was like, 'That is a fucking dad joke.'

Lorrie: That's not the only time he makes that kind of joke. He cracks himself up. He thinks he's hilarious.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Voldemort humor.

JC: Voldemort humor. Yeah, "It has to involve Harry Potter." "Oh, I can find someone else for you." "No, it has to be Harry." There's all of these interesting little bits of foreshadowing in here that were fun to read the second time around. It was interesting to pick those little details out, amidst all the horror that was happening in this chapter, to see all these little bits of foreshadowing of the plot.

Lorrie: Oh, yeah. There is another fandom debate, and I actually had a whole presentation with my friend Irvin Khaytman about this at CONjuration Con last year. Irvin, who is the author of *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore*, thinks that Bertha Jorkins actually, physically, gave birth to the thing in the chair, and that Wormtail was involved in a pseudo-paternal manner. I think this is not only disgusting but also wrong. I don't think that's what happened.

JC: Well, there's only been a few months, but I guess magic could speed things along.

Lorrie: Magic, yes. Whatever.

JC: Interesting. Okay.

Lorrie: But one of the reasons why I don't think that's where this goes -- aside from it being just disgusting, but whatever; this whole thing is disgusting -- is that in this chapter, they talk about

how her information was useful and how she was killed. That's what they got out of her, not anything else. That's my take on it.

JC: Yeah, I didn't read anything else into that, but I was also thinking, 'Okay, what information?'

Lorrie: Right.

JC: I don't remember who this character is, so my first thought was that Lockhart was the one who put the memory spell on her. But I don't know. I don't remember what information she gave him, who put the memory spell...

Lorrie: I also felt: if there's a person who Voldemort is casting in any maternal role here, it's Nagini, and the word 'milk', which is so disgusting... It's actually a relief when we find out, 'Oh, wait, this is a figure of speech.' They mean fangs; they mean glands that produce venom, but it's so horrific and so funny. Ew! But that's the perfect mother that he's created for himself: somebody that can't go against his will, that can't and won't deny him, and is also grotesque in this awesome, more-than-human way, which suits him.

JC: I don't remember how Nagini became permanently a snake, because I didn't follow that part of the story.

Lorrie: We don't see it happening. Nagini the character, who was human, appears in the movie *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald*, which is the second of what is probably going to always be only a trilogy in the *Fantastic Beasts* movies, and there was an enormous amount of controversy over this. Her backstory is that she's from Indonesia and that she was cursed. She's a Maledictus; she was cursed to become more and more of a snake, gradually. When we meet her, she can transform in between those two states, but she'll lose her humanity. Also, every time she transforms into a snake, that hastens the process, but she has been captured and she's exhibited in a traveling circus, so the circus master is profiting off of her ability. There's a deleted scene -- and I wish it had not been deleted -- where we see her utterly bereft, because she's looking at the progress of the scales on her skin covering more and more of her arm, so she's losing her humanity.

JC: Okay.

Lorrie: As we saw from the previous volume, when you can turn into an animal, your thoughts change a bit in nature. Apparently, she does think less like a human in snake form, and by the time she's permanently in snake form and can never turn back into a human -- which happened quite a while before this point when we see her -- she doesn't think like a human anymore, but she also has the magical powers that a regular snake wouldn't have. She's supernatural.

JC: Okay, yeah. And how did Voldemort connect with her in the first place?

Lorrie: That we never learn.

JC: Ah, okay.

Lorrie: She was, I guess, in her 20s when he was born. My theory (which is based on nothing) is that I imagine that she heard the baby crying in the orphanage in Parseltongue and found him. Her story in *Crimes of Grindelwald* ends really sadly: she has a lover and they are divided because the lover goes to join Grindelwald and she doesn't and won't, and knows that Grindelwald is a kind of evil that's against freaks like her. Yeah, she and her lover escape from

the circus and they have the possibility to live at least for a while on their own before she turns into a snake, and then she loses that lover. And that's the last that the story tells us.

JC: Okay.

Lorrie: The next time we see her, chronologically, is here.

JC: Okay.

Lorrie: So yeah, we have no idea how she and Voldemort teamed up.

JC: Yeah, okay. That probably would have been told if any of those other movies had ever been made, it sounds like you're saying.

Lorrie: I don't know.

JC: Who knows? Who knows at this point, right? Yeah, okay.

Lorrie: I don't know. But yeah, a major part of encountering expanded Potterverse after 2020 is counting up the casualties of the extended universe and its storylines because of the transphobia from J.K. Rowling that had such a major part in killing the franchise. Had that controversy not hit such a pitch... I love the *Fantastic Beasts* movies; I know I am in the minority. I was super invested in the storyline and I would love to see it brought to completion, and I'm really sad that that's not going to happen, even though I know fanfic and the wonders of fanfic. It's not a lot, but there are fanfic writers who are better writers overall than Rowling and have done wonders with this series, but no, there is a difference when you hear about it from the mind of the person that had conceived the whole story arc. When people say, "We don't need the author, we can make up our own stories," there are people I think who can be satisfied with that and there are people like me who still have a different place in their heart for finding out what the intended story arc was supposed to be. I do want to know and I have my theories. Also, Nagini meant a lot to me personally, because the actress chosen to play Nagini, Claudia Kim, was the first appearance of a Korean actor in Potterverse; that was super controversial, partly because people couldn't handle the thought of the racism involved in a subservient, Asian female character -- which I will say is not because it was inaccurate, but maybe because it was too accurate in a story about World War II. In a minor way, there was controversy because the character was supposed to be Indonesian, and the Indonesian actress who originally was cast as Nagini was pregnant and couldn't play the role, so Claudia Kim was brought in. But I love the character in the movie; she's one of my favorites, and I thought Claudia Kim did an incredible job. It was also hilarious to me: the day that I found out that a Korean actress was playing Nagini, I thought, 'Wow, I'm in Potterverse! Whoa!' And then I thought, 'Oh, my God, I ate Snape! Ah!' I lost it. That was the funniest... Oops! The actress, Claudia Kim, when she was announced as Nagini, posted on Instagram a picture of herself watching *Chamber of Secrets* -- the movie was on TV -- and there was a screenshot of Neville and she wrote, "AH, Neville! Oh, no!"

JC: That's cute.

Lorrie: Anyway, Nagini... Yeah.

JC: One more thing that I wanted to bring up (speaking of the modern, current reading of this) was the way that the chapter started with all of the gossip around what had happened with the Riddles -- who had killed them, that it was Frank Bryce -- and the way that we see all the

villagers in this pub very quickly piling onto Frank, even though we as the reader know who killed these people. We know it wasn't Frank, but the people in the village... It was this instant pile-on. We have just seen the author of this series pile onto a person. At the time we record this, the Olympics just finished, and we watched the author contribute to the piling-on of a woman who was a boxer in the Olympics (who a lot of people thought was actually a trans woman, even though she was biologically assigned female at birth). Now the author has apparently gone silent on social media in the wake of all of this, but when confronted with the fact that she was incorrect had doubled down on it. I couldn't not think about the hypocrisy there -- of her participating in piling on a person in a way that was horrible and bullying and mean -- in the same way that these villagers are doing that here. I think that the author's behavior during the Olympics around this particular Olympian is going to color the way that I look at a lot of the things that happen in this book as we go forward.

Lorrie: Yes. Yeah, I'm wondering... As JC and I record this, the Olympics have been over for less than a week, and that boxer won her Olympic gold medal a week ago. I really wonder, by the time this airs, what's going to have happened. J.K. Rowling better be silent on social media about this; she's just been hit with a lawsuit from this boxer for cyberbullying, along with Elon Musk. Now, totally aside from the fact that when you are alongside Elon Musk, you know you're on the bad side of history. Totally aside from that...

JC: Oh, my god. This is you and Voldemort. What the fuck.

Lorrie: Yeah. Totally aside from how this is one of the most direct ways that her transphobia has actively and directly harmed somebody, there's a lot of ways -- more and less direct -- and this is so nakedly, shamelessly one of them.

JC: Yep.

Lorrie: The weirdness that this person isn't even trans -- it doesn't even matter if somebody's trans or not -- that whole mechanism of hate can be mobilized to turn against anybody. The reason that Rowling gave for piling on to this person was because I think Rowling was triggered by the sight of somebody that she thought was masculine-looking beating, physically punching, somebody that she thought was feminine-looking. Take it to your therapist. You don't know these people. You have not looked at their genes.

JC: Oh, my God.

Lorrie: You don't know what testing in the IOC has happened. You don't even know. Oh, my God.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: You don't know anything. Take it to your therapist. This is not a matter of international cyber bullying; this is you being triggered, and when most of us get triggered, we deal with it ourselves. We don't start an international harassment campaign.

JC: Yep. Yep.

Lorrie: Strange. Yeah.

JC: By the time this airs, we may end up coming back and recording a little coda about it. Interesting.

Lorrie: Knowing how long this kind of lawsuit takes, I don't know how much further along we'll be by the time this airs.

JC: Yeah. Well, at some point I'm sure we'll come back to it.

Lorrie: Yeah. Olympic lawsuits take a number of years.

JC: Okay, so by the time we are somewhere in the middle of Book Six...

Lorrie: Oh, my God. Yeah, especially since by nature... Elon Musk and Rowling are billionaires, so by nature, it's really difficult to win lawsuits against them.

JC: Yeah, that's true.

Lorrie: That's going to be interesting. But yeah, I actually was thinking about that case with the boxer, because I was remembering how this is going to change my view of the way Rita Skeeter is portrayed in this volume.

JC: Oh, damn! I hadn't even thought about Rita Skeeter. I was just thinking about the student athletes in the series, but damn, Rita Skeeter, too.

Lorrie: Right, because Rita Skeeter is portrayed as unnaturally mannish.

JC: Holy shit, I forgot about that!

Lorrie: That characterization is one of the examples that has always been brought forth before TERFpocalypse, where people said she hasn't really expounded on this, but she's questionable because there's a lot of assumptions behind there that make her obviously not trustworthy on issues of gender and trans presentation. When TERFpocalypse first started, that was one of the first things people pointed to: "Check out what she said about Rita Skeeter." All of the uneasiness and phobia in that writing... it's all there.

JC: I forgot about Rita Skeeter!

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Oh, shit. Yeah.

Lorrie: I didn't actually pay that much attention to it at the time. I'm too privileged as a cis person for that to have really jarred me the same way that some other things did, but as TERFpocalypse has gone on, that's become more and more of a standout, and now it's going to be inescapable.

JC: Yeah, for sure. We have a lot to look forward to. The right way to say it: we have a lot coming down the line here.

Lorrie: A lot to experience.

JC: As we start over the next... however long it's going to take here to get through these... How many chapters is it?

Lorrie: It's a long book.

JC: Thirty-seven chapters. Yeah, yeah. There's going to be a lot to talk about.

Lorrie: I love, though: one of the many essential parts of this chapter, to me, is that we have the introduction of the theme where Voldemort has to use Harry Potter. Wormtail is completely correct in saying that this could be done without Harry Potter: "We could use any wizard." What this is (the thing that Voldemort wants), and this takes a while to figure out: he can't grow. Voldemort has tried to become physically stronger, but there's a lot of emphasis in this chapter about how he's still weak -- how the traveling has worn him out, how tiny he is. He blames Wormtail, and he says "your clumsy care," but that's not it. There's an element that's preventing Voldemort from thriving, and that is nurturing -- that's love -- and this is completely, scientifically, a mundane fact of life in any human infancy.

JC: Any mammal.

Lorrie: Any mammal, yeah. You can be fed and warm and clean and have all of your physical needs met, but the thing that makes you thrive is the bond between you and caregivers. Love makes you grow. Without love, you *can* grow; it's not the same -- it's not thriving -- and that's why Voldemort can't grow any stronger, and he will spend this entire volume desperately trying to grow stronger and not being able to. He thinks what he needs is Harry Potter's blood, because -- having seen it with his own eyes -- he knows for sure that Harry Potter's blood has nurturing love in it. That's the thing that, no matter how great and brilliant he is, he cannot manufacture on his own, so he is admitting that Harry has something that he wants. And Wormtail is correct: you could get any other nurtured wizard and have the same effect, but no. Voldemort partially wants the guarantee because he knows Harry has it, but also to his eventual undoing, he identifies with Harry. That's why it has to be Harry. "I have my reasons for using the boy..." Then he's insulting Wormtail, saying, "You'll do until my faithful servant rejoins me," and we don't know yet who that is.

JC: Oh, right.

Lorrie: Wormtail, quite justifiably and in a sulky manner, says, "I was the one who found you."

JC: "I'm your faithful servant, too." Yeah.

Lorrie: And Voldemort correctly points out, "Oh, yeah, but that's not because you're faithful." This is true, but I kind of side with Wormtail on this. I think that should count for more, because nobody else has gone looking for you, Voldemort.

JC: True. Wormtail could have just gone and turned into a rat and curled up in some corner somewhere and hid from the wizarding world.

Lorrie: Yeah, he went and found you and it was obviously for his own selfish purposes, but he did and he is doing all this work for you. Geez. Yeah.

JC: Milking a fucking snake, putting the venom in a bottle, feeding... Changing diapers, I'm sure. It's just unpleasant.

Lorrie: He's gone to some apothecary to buy a three-pack of bottles and a sterilizer.

JC: Would you even bother sterilizing them? I don't know. Maybe not.

Lorrie: No. I guess not. *Tergeo*, yeah.

JC: I'm just hung up on the 'changing of the diapers' thing.

Lorrie: Ugh, yeah.

JC: The little baby wipes. The diaper genie.

Lorrie: Oh, my God! Okay. Apologies to listeners who have never had to deal with babies, but you know that what that thing in the chair is excreting is not poop but meconium, because all he's ingesting is snake venom.

JC: Yep.

Lorrie: Oi, yai, yai, yai, yai.

JC: I'm just now imagining Voldemort on the changing table, with Wormtail holding his legs up with the baby wipes.

Lorrie: Right, yeah. And screaming, kicking...

JC: And hoping he doesn't get peed on the process.

Lorrie: Oh, God.

JC: That's assuming Voldemort has a penis, which -- I don't even want to go there.

Lorrie: Right, right.

JC: No.

Lorrie: Yeah. So yeah, here's Voldemort saying, "I am much, much more than a man," which is so profoundly pathetic it hurts. That's his only way of saving it in his own mind, because what he really is is so much less, and it's so painful and sad. The mystery of this chapter that took me so long to figure out: Wormtail turns the chair around, and he doesn't want to, he's so grossed out. Wormtail turns the chair around and Frank Bryce saw what was sitting in it. Not *who*; *what*. For the longest, I'm like, "What? What was sitting in it? What? What?!" Oh, this is so disgusting. Wow. The horror in this whole volume is off the charts. It's great! The horror where Frank Bryce is sitting there and this giant snake goes by him, and then Voldemort says, "There is an old Muggle standing right outside this room, listening to every word we say." Oh, my God, the snake is reporting on him! Then he says, "I have a wife," and Voldemort says, "You have no wife." Terrifying. This is adult terror. [At] The end of the chapter, the line goes: "Two hundred miles away, the boy called Harry Potter woke up with a start." Wow, that's so reassuring! Suddenly, his world of Azkaban and death sentences and whatever seems so warm and welcoming.

JC: For sure.

Lorrie: Oh, let's go back there!

JC: Yeah, and we're reminded that there's a connection that we haven't quite had explained to us yet.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That we won't have explained for many more millions of words or whatever, but that connection is there and we're going to build on it in this book. We're going to learn more about it.

Lorrie: We thought that his life was super stressful in the last volume, with a werewolf and a serial killer. What? What, what?! What?!?!?! And McNair... terrifying. His life wasn't easy, but now... Oh, we're going to take this to depths we can't even imagine. Wow.

JC: Yep. Yep.

Lorrie: Party's over.

JC: Yeah, so here we go.

Lorrie: Yeah. What do you think?

JC: Yeah, I'm excited. I have very little memory of this book, so this is going to be good.

Lorrie: It's difficult, this chapter. I find it difficult.

JC: Yeah. We talked about how it's a difference in tone, and how it's horror and it's setting up all these new themes. This is going to be interesting to see how all those themes start to play out in the next few chapters.

Lorrie: Yeah, there's mysteries in here that are not easy to solve. Voldemort mentions, "We have one more murder left, and then our path to Harry Potter is clear." Who?! Who are they planning to murder? Is it going to work out that way? What? Huh? Yeah, it's very convoluted, very satisfying in that way, and poor Harry is only 14. The next chapter is called The Scar.

JC: The Scar. Ooooh...

Lorrie: Yeah. Here we go.

JC: Here we go. The all-important scar.

Lorrie: I don't know. I don't know if I'm ready. Do you feel ready?

JC: Yeah, I think so. Why not? Let's go!

Lorrie: All right, all right. We have a lot of these characters to take care of, including Voldemort, who honestly has a really, really sad life. Okay, I'll get my courage up to talk to you about it later.

JC: Absolutely!

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