

## Transcript

### Episode 5.2

#### Book 5, Chapter 2: A Peck of Owls

**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 Five, Chapter Two: A Peck of Owls.

**Lorrie:** A Peck of Owls. Harry learns that the adults in his life have been keeping some secrets from him on Dumbledore's orders. Mrs. Figg is part of a network keeping an eye on him, the Ministry tries to expel Harry from Hogwarts, Petunia knows what dementors are, and why did dementors show up in Little Whinging? Did Voldemort send them? Haha! Welcome to Chapter Two of *Order of the Phoenix*, JC!

**JC:** Yeah. I think that the way that the chapter opens sets the tone for everything that's coming. It's just, "'What?' Harry said blankly," picking up exactly from where we left off. It's like a record scratch. You ever heard that record scratch meme? It's like that because everything that we thought we knew about life in Little Whinging is about to change. Our whole perspective on Little Whinging is this fairy tale kind of place where Harry gets treated like the lowliest Cinderella from that fairy tale or whatever.

**Lorrie:** And it's all a fantasy, and this superbly prosaic town could never tolerate fantasy like Harry's life.

**JC:** Yeah, and it's all about to change. Harry's whole perspective on it, and therefore ours... the cover gets ripped off, and it's like here's the ugly reality of what's been going on this whole time. Wow! Wow. When I read this way back in 2004, I don't remember that hitting me, I think, because I was just speed-running it.

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** "It's the new book, let's go!"

**Lorrie:** Yes, yes.

**JC:** I don't think I thought about that at the time, but that really hit me hard this time. 'Oh, this is different.'

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** At every turn, Harry is surprised by what people knew and didn't tell him or what was really going on behind the scenes. It's like, okay, this is also like growing up, right?

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** It's like the veneer of your childhood is peeled back, and you realize that your parents hated each other the whole time or whatever.

**Lorrie:** Oh, my God, yeah.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** One thing I love is that Mrs. Figg keeps talking like Harry's the one being unreasonable, and she says things like, "Of course I know Dumbledore. Who doesn't know Dumbledore?" Harry's like, "Um, okay." But yeah, the big feeling I got from Harry's point of view is, 'All right, what else have the adults not been telling people the whole time?'

**JC:** Yeah. They've been keeping so many things from him. I want to talk about Mrs. Figg a little bit, because I love the way that she's revealed, and everything she says in this chapter is very... It's a little bit like a fairy-tale kind of feeling in a sense of suddenly, someone is revealed to be part of the magical world that you know about and they just know about all these things. The way she's firing stuff off at him feels very, very tale-y, but it's also really interesting that Dumbledore years ago assigned her to keep an eye on him. That makes me wonder: how did that work? Did she live there before, or did she move there? Was there money involved? What's going on, right?

**Lorrie:** Right, yeah.

**JC:** But also the fact that because she's a Squib, the assumption is that she's basically a Muggle who knows about the Wizarding World, but like Mr. Filch, she can talk to cats, so Squibs must have some magical ability. That stood out to me. I'd forgotten that point.

**Lorrie:** Or I guess it's that she doesn't turn that off, because at the beginning of the series we see Uncle Vernon running into McGonagall as a cat, and he says to himself, "Cats can't read maps. That's not what she's doing." But Mrs. Figg knows, 'oh, yes, they can,' so she's not turning that part of her brain off.

**JC:** So yeah, it's very interesting. I guess if you're a Squib and you grew up in a magical family, you must have... I think that's correct, right? Because if you were a Squib --

**Lorrie:** That's how she's talking.

**JC:** If you were a Squib growing up in a non-magical family, you would just be a Muggle, right? A Squib is a person who comes from magical parents but doesn't have magical ability.

**Lorrie:** Right, and is aware of it.

**JC:** And then is aware of it. Okay, yeah. Mrs. Figg definitely grew up in a magical family, so then yeah, you're right. There's some absorbing of that environment. Again, it goes back to that fairy tale idea that I think a lot of us have as children of this, 'I could talk to cats.' When I was a child, I was a horse girl for a while up to about age eleven when my parents split up; I had horses, and I was so convinced that if I just tried hard enough, I could talk to them and they would understand me and we would communicate. I wanted to be that magical girl who could talk to horses so badly, and I wanted to be able to talk to all animals. That was a thing I just wanted for a long time and I really tried hard to learn how to read cat behavior -- I'm still actually really good at that -- and I kind of became a little bit of a cat whisperer as a child. I grew up in the country where there were feral cats everywhere, because back then, nobody spayed or neutered their pets. I was the one seven-year-old who could go into the wood pile and pull out a little pack of hissing, scratchy kittens and then have them tamed and purring in half an hour. I'd be covered with scratches, but I'd be like, 'Oh, kittens!' I was so determined to be that, so I guess I'm just jealous of Mrs. Figg here, who can "put Mr. Tibbles on the case."

**Lorrie:** Yeah, and he did so well.

**JC:** Because I can't make my cats do anything. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** But then maybe you just don't have half-Kneazles.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Maybe you have to --

**JC:** Right, okay. There's a special kind of cat, then, too, and that actually raises another question that I have, which is if there's some subset of humans that have magical ability, is that true for all animals?

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** Is there just some... We have the example of Kneazles, but is that true for dogs? It's definitely true for owls...

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** Yeah, so that's kind of fun.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Individual personality in any species.

**JC:** Yeah. If you're a wizard and you go to the Humane Society, you look around and it's like, 'Okay, which one?' Ooh...

**Lorrie:** Right. When I look at Mrs. Figg, I love the shift in perspective when, especially as a younger person/kid, there's an older person that you've just written off as insignificant; then suddenly you realize, no, they've got such a history and a perspective, and then they look completely different to you. Then if you talk to them, they say, "Oh, yeah, I always thought there would be a time when you'd ask about that."

**JC:** Oh, my God, that brings back a memory. When I was a child, my parents worked at the same office for a while before they split up. There was an old woman there named Mrs. Rosenthal, who was really sweet and always wanted to invite us to come over for coffee and tea and cake, and it was the kind of thing that as an eight- or nine-year-old child, you're just like, 'Oh, my God, that's so boring, this old lady in her house,' and we just had to sit there and eat the cookie and talk to her. I remember there was a time when my mother said, "Mrs. Rosenthal is very special. I know that when you go to her house, you may think it's not the most interesting thing in the world, but you have to know why she's special and I want you to appreciate and remember it." Mrs. Rosenthal was a Holocaust survivor.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** I did get a chance later to talk to her about her experience. I asked her if it would be okay if I asked her about it, so I got to ask her questions... and I remember none of it, which is sad to me now. I wish I remembered, but I know that I talked to her about it; it was this whole idea of, 'Here's an old person.' First it was like, "This is just another boring old person," and then it was like, 'Oh, oh. Yeah.' Even though my parents were not Jewish, they just had such great respect for this person who had survived this thing, so I think about that, too.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** 'Oh, wow, this person had this whole life experience that you've only heard about.' Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Mrs Figg... Being a Squib, her family went through whatever war and loss and fear was in the Voldemort regime; then when Dumbledore contacted her and said, "The baby, the one that they're going to be after, is going to be nearby. Will you do your part?" "Yeah." She didn't have to have it explained to her why this was important. I really like the double whammy that Harry gets from Mrs. Figg when she says, "I was to keep an eye on you but not to say anything, you were too young." Okay, Harry's realizing

Dumbledore's large-scale deception, the conspiracy that's protective of him and yet is keeping secrets from him. Then on a completely different track, she says, "I'm sorry I gave you such a miserable time, but the Dursleys would never have let you come if they'd thought you enjoyed it," and that's a whole separate skill set there.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** You psych out the sadists, you have to plan ahead knowing that you can count on them to have the most despicable urges, and then she acted. She acted knowing that it was hurtful, and she went against her instinct. She didn't want to be doing this; she could have spoken to Harry in a much more understandable way. No, she picked this persona that she knew was calculated to repel small boys. Oh, my God, giving him stale cake and showing him pictures of cats...

**JC:** Yeah, for hours on end, in her house that smells like cabbage or whatever. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Oh... So now I'm thinking, 'Wow, that was quite an act that she kept up.' She was deliberately creating a lack of connection with this child and deliberately putting him through suffering because that was part of her espionage cover. I don't think it's a direct line to Snape, but he has to do that. We see him doing that, too, getting people to think consistently that he has a certain kind of agenda that he doesn't even have because it's part of his cover. But yeah, how hard would that be? Can you imagine if there's this neglected little boy and you have to be really dull and awful to him on purpose so that you're considered safe and insignificant enough to make sure he's hanging in there?

**JC:** Yeah. What that also says to me is that Dumbledore then knew exactly how the Dursleys were treating Harry.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** I wasn't sure of that until this chapter, like, 'Oh, okay.' Because of course, if Mrs. Figg knows and Mrs. Figg is having to put on this charade just to get Harry over so she could make sure he's okay, then Dumbledore also knows this is how Harry's being treated.

**Lorrie:** Oh, yeah.

**JC:** It's like, oof...

**Lorrie:** Well, she's reporting back. Yeah.

**JC:** But I feel bad for both Mrs. Figg and for Harry for the kind of relationship they could have had under other circumstances.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** She could have baked cookies for him or whatever. It could have been fun.

**Lorrie:** She could have said, "This is Quidditch. When you go to school, if you don't know what Quidditch is, the boys are going to stare at you, so let me teach you. I can't play it with you, but this is what it is." Oh... Since this is a Dursley chapter, we do get the requisite body shaming of Dudley that we have come to know and dread from these chapters.

**JC:** Oh, yeah.

**Lorrie:** Fortunately, there's so much else going on that there just isn't room for too much of that. Not as much as usual, but it's still there.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Mrs. Figg, even though she is kind of batty... That's not entirely an act, but she's definitely not as naive as Harry because she knows that they're going to be in trouble with the Ministry. Harry still is naive and says, "they're going to be more worried what dementors were doing floating around Wisteria Walk, surely?" Mrs. Figg just... "Oh, my dear, I wish it were so, but I'm afraid --" That's kind of reassuring to me as a reader why Harry is going to have to be disillusioned, but no, she is a grown-up.

**JC:** And she's also really concerned that he's done magic and that he's already broken the statute.

**Lorrie:** She knows... Yeah.

**JC:** She knows what's coming. She says that Dumbledore told her and Mundungus Fletcher that they had to keep him from doing magic at all costs.

**Lorrie:** I know, right.

**JC:** Dumbledore knew that this was a possibility, that there would be some kind of conspiracy to goad Harry into using magic that could then be used to expel him from Hogwarts and get him out of the picture.

**Lorrie:** Yup.

**JC:** This is something Dumbledore knew could happen, so there's a moment for me when I'm like, 'Why didn't someone just tell Harry that?'

**Lorrie:** Exactly.

**JC:** Harry's, what, fifteen at this point?

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Why didn't someone just tell him?

**Lorrie:** Because the effect this is going to have is, 'What, is he a pariah now? Is it too dangerous to tell Harry directly?' But this reminded me of some sadness I've had recently. As we record this, we're still in the first month of the Trump Administration, and on a daily basis we are hearing more about their war against trans people. There are friends of mine where, if I'm not hearing from them, should I be saying, "I'm just checking on you, I'm thinking about you," or is it more respectful to leave them alone? I don't know, because I don't want to be intruding and forcing attention on somebody, but maybe it's the kind of silence where it's good if you reach out. All I can conclude is, in all cases, it's best to ask the person. If they don't answer you, then whatever, but you can't ask their roommate. Just ask them. If they say, "Yeah, don't talk to me," okay.

**JC:** Yeah, that tends to be the answer in life, in my experience, to almost every question of 'Should I? Should I?' is ask the person. Sometimes the asking is the hard, really awkward part, but yeah...

**Lorrie:** Right, but in Harry's case here, similarly to the case that I'm just talking about, asking is fraught, too, because sometimes people are under so much stress and in so much danger that you just wonder if that's going to add to the burden. So why didn't they tell Harry this? Is it that they're so frantic trying to run around locking things down preparing that they kind of forgot? Is it that similar warnings to Harry in the past have not always been heeded? Which -- there is that history.

**JC:** There is that. That's true.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. But yeah, this is one of the many, many, many things whirling around in Harry's mind at the moment.

**JC:** Also, my memory is that this is a big theme for this book, too. Harry is that age where he thinks he's ready to handle a lot more than the adults seem to think he is, so there's that tension. There's a lot of times in the book where it's like, 'Why didn't they just tell Harry what was going on or explain to Harry why we're doing this thing?' Maybe that would have made a difference, but then again, maybe it wouldn't.

**Lorrie:** And often we're going to find that there are several different reasons why people wonder if they should tell him or not. It's not only coming from one place. Sometimes, it's that they're terrified and don't know what's the best thing to do. Just from regular parenting, that happens all the time where, if you're looking at a kid and they're terrified... To take a benign example, if you want to give a kid medicine and the medicine tastes incredibly terrible -- you've been teaching them to listen to their bodies while their bodies are telling them that this is a poison and you spit it out -- you're overriding them, saying, "Well, you just have to trust me and take it"; finally, even if they're screaming (or like the times that I had to force a screaming toddler into a car seat and buckle them in -- "No, I'm not going to drive you without buckling you in, no!")

that's when we know when we're on certain ground, but what if it's something where we don't know? "I don't know. Is this going to hurt them or harm? I don't know. I don't know." What if you have to be like Mrs. Figg and pretend to be really unappealing, and you know that you're a softie who can't keep that up? What if you know that you're going to crack? Well, are you safe then? Eh... Anyway, there's a lot of adults not knowing what to do and making what turns out to be the wrong decision, but sometimes there was no right decision. Sometimes, anything would suck. Sometimes, it's just, "I don't know. Everything's happening really quickly. I didn't have time." Anyway, yeah, it's not going to be one consistent story, which is very true to life.

**JC:** Very true to life, for sure. Yeah, but I do like the fact that we're playing with that time and adolescence when kids really are on the verge of shifting into a maturity where you can trust them with things, and fifteen is right on the cusp of that. I think, at least in the United States -- I'm not sure how it is in other countries -- we think of sixteen as being a time when kids are close enough to being adults that we can trust them with a lot of big things. We can trust them to drive cars... There's lots of things like that, so Harry is almost there.

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** But right before that, it's still like, 'Are they ready? Are they not?' Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Well, then if you think about how at the end of the fourth book (which was just a couple weeks ago in this timeline), definitely Harry has forever been yanked out of childhood. He's irreversibly on the other side of that, but you also have to deal with him having to heal from that awfulness while you're scrambling to catch up with this world in which Voldemort is back. I remember when Harry's just come back from that trauma and Sirius runs off; he doesn't even stay the night in the hospital wing with Harry. They're in such an emergency that Sirius runs off immediately, so they're actually scrambling. That's something that, I think, readers who criticize Dumbledore's decisions in this book maybe don't fully appreciate: he didn't have as much room to maneuver as he would have wanted. He's not secure in this book; he's losing. They're losing.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Their safety is not guaranteed.

**JC:** Yeah, that's very familiar.

**Lorrie:** Yeah, isn't it?

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. I'm wondering if people who say things like, "Well, why didn't Dumbledore just do this or that?" if it's starting to dawn on them... 'Oh, sometimes the opposition party has the House and the Senate and the presidency. Oh...'

**JC:** Yeah, yeah, and that's what's happening there. We're literally heading into an era of resistance in this book, which I'm very excited to get to. Before we move on, I want to talk about the fact that Mundungus Fletcher appears here, and he's instantly presented as this character who's up to no good and always got his own agenda and all this stuff. He had Disapparated in the previous chapter and Harry's like, 'I know that was the sound of someone Disapparating like I knew it was,' and it was, it turns out. I can't remember, but my first thought here was, 'Why did he leave?' He says he left to go get cauldrons, but did someone tell him 'Get out of there because this is happening'? He seems to always be presented as this person where you never quite know what side he's on, so I'm getting a little bit of that here, too.

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** Also, he has something that Harry thinks is an invisibility cloak.

**Lorrie:** Yes.

**JC:** I had totally forgotten that detail, which I thought was interesting because I thought invisibility cloaks were very, very rare. I had a moment of, 'Where did Mundungus Fletcher get one?' I don't remember.

**Lorrie:** Well, if you need one and you have enough money, he's definitely somebody you would ask.

**JC:** Oh.

**Lorrie:** 'Have you seen one?' If this is going to help him and his shady business dealings better, then yeah. If I were him, I would keep my hands on that.

**JC:** Interesting.

**Lorrie:** But yeah, he's a very well-drawn character. He's completely useful. You can always count on him to be unreliable, so if you need a character to be unreliable and maddening, he's always good for that.

**JC:** And he's also that amoral kind of character who can acquire things or do the dirty work that the good guys need done but can't necessarily do themselves, so he fits in that category, too. Yeah, he's very interesting. Oh, and there's one more thing I wanted to say about Mrs. Figg before we get to hauling Dudley home to the Dursleys.

**Lorrie:** Oh, boy...

**JC:** I like the little idioms that Mrs. Figg throws in, the 'no good crying over spilt potion' and 'the cat's among the pixies now,' which I thought that gave me a visual. Wow! I just thought that was a really cute bit of world building that Mrs. Figg... Of course, she comes across as this sort of batty old cat lady in the neighborhood she lives in, but a good chunk of that is just that she grew up in a different world, right?

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** I really like that. I think it's a fun detail.

**Lorrie:** When she hits Mundungus Fletcher with her string bag and it has cat food in it, I will say hitting someone with a bag that has cans in it is actually pretty dangerous.

**JC:** Yeah, for sure.

**Lorrie:** It's presented as funny. Don't do that unless you're willing to do a serious injury to somebody.

**JC:** Definitely.

**Lorrie:** So yeah, the feeling of Harry realizing Dumbledore's been having him followed since he was a baby, and whoever Disapparated (who turns out to be Mundungus) didn't say 'hi' to him, leaving Harry to wonder why. Actually, it turns out that there's been this whole network this whole time and none of them had said 'hi' to him. Is he more important as an asset to keep safe than as a person with feelings? A recently traumatized and abused teenager with feelings? This is not going to help Harry's already angry state of mind.

**JC:** Right, right.

**Lorrie:** And then Mrs. Figg keeps doing it and you can see why, but she just says to him, "Get inside and stay there." She doesn't even tell him why; nobody is telling Harry anything.

**JC:** No one tells him, yeah. Oh, and I remember that being a part of his frustration: that no one is telling him anything. They're keeping him in the dark as if he can't be trusted. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** "Wait, wait," and she's gone. Yeah.

**JC:** Oh, I remember that as a teenager, too, that frustration of not knowing, the adults automatically not trusting you despite any evidence you feel you can present to the contrary. All right, you could describe the situation and say, "Just tell me. Tell me what's happening." That sense, that point of adolescence, I think, is starting to rear its head here.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Yep, they're getting Dudley home. Dudley is in shock.

**JC:** Yeah. Harry is hauling him back. Harry saved his life and is carrying him back to get him back to safety and knows that he's going to get blamed for this back at the Dursleys. There's no doubt in Harry's mind that he is going to get all kinds of shit for this, but he still does the right thing. I really like that about Harry, yeah. At this point, there's a lot of things he could have done, but he does the right thing.

**Lorrie:** Yeah, there's nothing else to do. What are you going to do, leave them out there? Are you going to go home without him? You can't do that. 'Dursleys belong in the Dursley house. All right. Let's get this one in.' I love the writing when they show up to Privet Drive and Harry "watched Aunt Petunia's outline grow larger and larger, oddly distorted by the rippling glass in the front door." It's just a moment of perspective that I really enjoyed. I'm reluctant to open that door because the Dursleys are on the other side of it.

**JC:** Yeah, but it's a different conversation in so many ways than Harry has ever had with them before.

**Lorrie:** Oh, boy...

**JC:** Yeah. So many things happen that are different from what he has ever experienced. This whole section in this chapter is shocking for readers who thought they knew how things were going to go at the Dursleys'. You think he's going to get yelled at, he's going to get sent to his room, he's going to get punished...

**Lorrie:** Oh, my goodness.

**JC:** And worse things happen.

**Lorrie:** And suddenly, what? Yeah.

**JC:** But also, the roof is ripped off somehow.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Everything is different. I love how skillfully it's done here. Everything is turned upside down.

**Lorrie:** We get a reminder, though, that Vernon Dursley is always Vernon Dursley. This is so skillful because it's just one detail: when Dudley throws up and Vernon says, "Did Mrs. Polkiss give you something foreign for tea?"

**JC:** Oh, God.

**Lorrie:** That is amazing that a writer can do all of that with just one sentence.

**JC:** He says other things in this chapter that are similar, but yeah.

**Lorrie:** And yeah, Harry thinks that, as usual, they're all fussing around Dudley and he can tip-toe off and be invisible. Uh-uh! No, he can't. He's not invisible anymore. Oh, no! Oh, I love the description where "the scrupulously clean kitchen had an oddly unreal glitter after the darkness outside." Yeah. That's like, 'Which one is reality?' Love that contrast. Here's Harry, unhappily, involuntarily visible to the Dursleys... and then we get owls. Lots and lots of owls.

**JC:** Oh, my gosh. There's also that line where they're trying to figure out what happened to Dudley, and Dudley can barely speak and he's just pointing at Harry, so they're assuming the worst. But the line where, I think, it's Petunia who said, "Was it -- was it you-know-what, darling? Did he use -- his *thing*?"

**Lorrie:** "Did he point at you with his *thing*?" Yeah.

**JC:** Which just brought this "ewww" kind of thing...

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Because we talked about this in the last episode that the dick jokes had come up before, but this is a perversion of that somehow.

**Lorrie:** It's so gross.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** As a reader, you're trying to shove that down because when it's Dudley vomiting, you really don't want to be thinking about dicks, especially at this moment, but no. It's that whole uncomfortable, yucky suspicion that they have of everything. It's going to keep entering the picture.

**JC:** Yeah. And then the owls. With every owl, Uncle Vernon is losing it a little bit more, but that first owl with the letter, the very cold form letter that says "You've been expelled, someone will be coming along to destroy your wand..." That's so not the way that the system works. It's so obvious that, at least on a first read, it's so much like, 'That's not correct. That's not how this should work.' If a child does magic in front of Muggles, you don't expel them from school and from the world.

**Lorrie:** And break their wand.

**JC:** Yeah. This is more like, "You murdered someone," right? Yeah.

**Lorrie:** We've heard about breaking wands, but yes, what kind of unhinged executive order is this?

**JC:** Yeah, exactly. Exactly. It's unhinged.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Yeah, and it has that same feeling of executive orders that have been coming out from the current administration, so yeah.

**Lorrie:** Although doing a Patronus charm against a dementor in front of a Muggle... Yeah, I can see that that would be on a list of really extreme stuff that you shouldn't do. This is assuming that dementors behave the way you expect them to and don't show up in Little Whinging. Another minor character I adore: Mafalda Hopkirk, the Ministry witch who sends these horrible missives and then says, "Hoping you are well, Yours sincerely," which is partly super British and partly... There's a person there doing all these inhumane things, but is there a chance of reaching that person? Yeah, so Harry's now been expelled. He's now a pariah and has nothing to lose, which means, for better or for worse, he has no reason to stop from doing magic now.

**JC:** Yeah, and he's just like, "Well, then, I'm going to leave. I'm running."

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** He doesn't know that they could trace him, even if he did run.

**Lorrie:** Right. Mrs Figg knows, but he doesn't.

**JC:** And I find it a little bit darkly funny that the next message he gets is from Mr. Weasley, saying, "DO NOT LEAVE!" He knew exactly... They knew he got that owl and they knew what his response would be, and they're like, "Don't do it. Don't do it, Harry!" which is funny.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Okay, Harry can trust these people. It's from Mr. Weasley, and he's saying Dumbledore is "trying to sort it all out." Okay, these are people Harry can trust, so he sits, but this is indicating to him, okay, the Ministry is now completely his adversary now, and it's a whole institution grinding gears.

**JC:** And Dumbledore already knows what happened, so I assume that Mrs. Figg contacted him or maybe he has other ways of knowing, but they're all already aware. That's got to bring Harry a little bit of comfort, that Mr. Weasley and Sirius and Dumbledore are a little bit... But then he's mad that they're still not --

**Lorrie:** It's enough to make him sit, but then if Dumbledore knew and was waiting for this to happen and is all prepared, but has been saying things nervously like, "Oh, don't let Harry do magic," he's not confident. The way Mr. Weasley says that Dumbledore's "trying to sort it all out"... Harry's sitting, and he now has to wonder, 'All right, is it still possible to appeal to reason? Can Dumbledore pull this off?' Which, in our current political state, is like wondering, 'Are the courts going to hold?'

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** If there's a flurry of executive orders that's going to ruin people's lives (and, in some cases, actually kill people)... If the courts find them to be illegal, will that hold? Will anything happen with that?

**JC:** Does that actually change anything? Yeah.

**Lorrie:** And what better option do we have than sitting and watching? Is running out going rogue a better option? Eh... For now, Harry has heard something from someone he trusts, so he's going to sit. Meanwhile, the Dursleys have really legitimate questions.

**JC:** Right. There's a lot going on.

**Lorrie:** "What did you do to Dudley?!" That is quite legitimate, and when Harry says, "Well, I did magic," Vernon says, "So you admit it. What did you do?" Harry says, "Nothing. That wasn't me --" Then Dudley goes, "Was..." I thought, 'Well, I guess from Dudley's point of view, that makes sense,' but also Dudley is motivated by guilt, because maybe he is thinking, had he been in Harry's position, he would very much have wanted revenge. He would have loved to have [Harry] go through what Dudley just went through, and we know that Dudley has just heard things in his head. Maybe it was the things that had been on Dudley's mind enough for him to bring them up to Harry. "Oh, you're having nightmares about murder or whatever." Maybe it's the things that Dudley has done and said as a bully, but now with emotional awareness of how these things felt to other people and why, in himself, he had been moved to act that way. Yeah, it's all bound up in Harry, and Harry is the focus of his guilt.

**JC:** It's also true that he didn't see the dementors. Muggles can't see them, correct?

**Lorrie:** Yeah. He saw all the lights going out, and then the terrible feeling started.

**JC:** He just felt it, yeah, so he didn't know. Yeah, he couldn't see. Can Muggles see a Patronus?

**Lorrie:** I don't know.

**JC:** I don't know either. Yeah. I'm just wondering what Dudley actually saw.

**Lorrie:** Although at that point, I think he has his eyes closed. He's not looking at anything.

**JC:** Yeah. Dudley, at this point, thinks... Who knows. I'm not clear on what Dudley actually thinks happened, but I find it interesting that Harry just decides to be completely honest with the Dursleys and not even couch it in terms that he thinks they'll understand. He just starts talking. "This is what's going on."

**Lorrie:** "This is what --" Yeah.

**JC:** Yeah. We have a little moment of Uncle Vernon saying, "Oh, if your kind are in the government... no wonder, blah, blah, blah, blah," which Harry's like, 'Whatever.' But then it turns to Harry being very curious, because I guess it's Mrs. Dursley that asks Dudley, "What was going on in your head, or what did you hear?" and then Harry's like, 'I want to know. What did you hear?' It's a fun little moment. Everything's coming down in Harry's disaster. He's like, 'Yeah, what did you hear when the dementors were --?'

**Lorrie:** 'What's in there?' Rattle, rattle.

**JC:** Yeah, that's funny.

**Lorrie:** And then that moment happens where Petunia forgets herself and reveals that she knows what dementors are.

**JC:** I feel like this is this turning point in the chapter, because it was going in a very familiar direction, and then Petunia says they're the creatures that guard the wizard prison Azkaban...

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** And she says it -- I'm envisioning her almost looking like she's in a trance or something. Her face is blank and the words just come out, and then it's like a record scratch moment again and everyone's like, 'Wait a minute. What?' The fact that Petunia knows what this means...

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Again, for Harry, it's like, 'You knew this this whole time. You knew more about... You pretended none of this existed.'

**Lorrie:** 'You denied it on purpose. You lied to me.' The way that those words come out of her, it's so well done. That's the way you repeat things when those are the exact words you heard a long time ago that stuck in your memory. It's not that she knows what dementors are and this is how she explains it; it's that this is how she first heard about them. Okay, there really is a breach between the magical and Muggle worlds now, apparently... Then the author does one of those things that this author does, and the first time I read this book I did not catch it.

**JC:** I didn't either.

**Lorrie:** I got the reading that we're supposed to assume, and then it was the second time when I thought, 'Oh... oh, that's... okay. That's a good trick.' Petunia says "that awful boy" is the one that she learned it from, and the author has Harry put her on the spot and say, "If you mean my mum and dad, why don't you use their names?" The fact that Petunia doesn't answer that question is one of these things that this author does.

Okay, no, there was some other awful boy... we're going to come back and find out later that it wasn't James Potter.

**JC:** I remember I didn't reread this book after I read... Do we find that out in *Half-Blood Prince*, or do we find that out -- No, we find out in the very end, right?

**Lorrie:** At the end, yeah, in that one chapter.

**JC:** At the very, very end, in that one chapter.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** It didn't click then either, but I remember reading some meta that someone was writing later -- or even just like a comment that someone posted somewhere -- saying, "Oh, when Petunia talked about that awful boy in *Order of the Phoenix*, she meant Snape," and I remember I felt like my brain exploded. I was just like, 'What?! Oh, my God, it was there the whole time?!'

**Lorrie:** Yeah, yeah. What I love, too, is when you think about the phrase "that awful boy" and you picture teenage James Potter... When Petunia met James, he would have been a young man. She wouldn't have met him until they were about to get married. Also, James wouldn't have been an awful boy. He would have been just like a completely normal guy with glasses, but who *was* an awful boy? Then you start to think "awful boy" makes it sound like someone much younger than eighteen-year-old James Potter. The image of what Snape would have been like as a kid... How darn creepy and awful was he as a kid, and how little would he have cared to act nice for Petunia Evans? That's pretty funny. It's very evocative. Yeah, if I had been little Petunia meeting awful little Severus Snape, that would have scarred me too, and the scary, weird shit he's always talking about...

**JC:** Yeah. I also wonder... Petunia's feelings about the magical world are colored by a lot of things -- a lot of it is jealousy over her sister -- but also, one of her first encounters with someone magical was Snape, so that's what her vision of what it would mean to be a magical person is. 'Oh, you're going to turn into that.'

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah, and he's not helping matters.

**JC:** Yeah. I love that Harry is just sitting here and he doesn't really know what to do with the fact that Aunt Petunia is telling Uncle Vernon that dementors are real, and apparently all of this did just happen as Harry described it. Harry's just sitting there, like, 'What the fuck?!'

**Lorrie:** 'What else are the grown-ups not telling me?'

**JC:** Oh, my God...

**Lorrie:** Mrs. Figg? Okay. Mundungus Fletcher? Okay. Petunia Dursley?! What the heck?!?!

**JC:** Right. Then I love that another owl comes in at that moment, and Uncle Vernon says, "Enough -- effing -- *ow/s*..." We've talked about this before, but I love the creative ways that the author works swearing in in really realistic ways, because you can imagine Uncle Vernon saying, "Enough -- fucking -- *ow/s*," but those little hints... It's making this world feel more and more real.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. We hear from Mafalda again, because she's cheerfully announcing that there's a hearing. Okay. Whatever Dumbledore was able to do, he was at least able to get a stay.

**JC:** Yeah. Oh, my God...

**Lorrie:** He didn't fix everything, but nothing terrible's happening tonight.

**JC:** "You have a few weeks until August 12th."

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** But what a roller coaster, and that is what we have been living for the last few weeks. What Harry just felt these last three minutes (or however long that is) or five minutes, that's kind of what life has been like these last few weeks.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** It's like, 'What fresh hell is about to rain down on us? Oh, my God, here are all the consequences.'

**Lorrie:** 'Am I just fantasizing that some judge somewhere is drafting up an order now, or is...?' yeah.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Then Vernon says one of the things that's really shocking to me: where he looks Harry straight in the face and says, "'Do your lot have the death penalty?' he added as a hopeful afterthought." The way you can stare at a teenager and say, "I hope you get killed..." This is not just somebody that you've made up in your mind as part of a group that you hate; this is somebody that you intimately know personally. You're an adult man, and you're looking at this teenager (who's not having a very good time) and say, "I hope they kill you." That's really shocking to me. Sometimes, there's a fantasy where you think, 'Well, if you could just make contact with somebody who's prejudiced and get

them to see the common humanity, then they wouldn't be able to say to somebody's face, "Well, I hope you die." But no, Vernon is fully aware of who Harry Potter is and has said right to his face, "Do your lot have the death penalty?" Ugh... I don't know how redeemable he is. Maybe any human might be in some way redeemable, but right now there's other stuff that's more important for Harry to tend to, and redeeming this particular man is not on the agenda.

**JC:** Right.

**Lorrie:** Getting away from him might be a better use of energy.

**JC:** The other interesting thing that happens then -- I don't know if this happens before or after that moment, but Harry's just telling them what he thinks is happening. He says he thinks that Voldemort sent the dementors, and nobody flinches.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** There's that funny thing where Harry just notices they...

**Lorrie:** They're scared of everything.

**JC:** They don't flinch at the name. They don't even -- Well, they do know who this is, but they don't really know.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Though there is a moment where someone says, "Oh, that's who killed your parents," or something like that. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** That's Vernon.

**JC:** Okay, that's Vernon. Okay, yeah.

**Lorrie:** That's where he says, "Wait, Voldemort... that's the one who --" and Harry says, "Murdered my parents, yes." "'But he's gone,' without the slightest sign that the murder of Harry's parents might be a painful topic to anybody."

**JC:** Yeah, or acknowledgment that they've been lying to Harry about how his parents died all this time. No, they knew. They knew the whole time.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. This whole "round up the illegals and send them to Guantanamo..." Do you not realize what that's like if they leave their kids behind? Adults taunting children, "Oh, I hope your parents get deported..." You're so removed that you can just say that? Or the bargaining chip of whether or not trans people should have rights in order to suck up to the right-wing, and if you throw these people under the bus, maybe they'll stop short of killing everybody... You can just say that, like you don't know the fundamental and all-consuming terror that that creates for some people? Okay. Yeah. This frame of

reference, how different it is, is really...Yeah. "The one who murdered my parents, yes. Yeah. Yeah, that one." Yeah. Harry, when he gets that fourth owl, he's convinced it has to be from Dumbledore explaining everything to him, because what's going on for Harry? How can anything be this terrible? What is happening? This is so awful. Surely, the universe is going to serve up an explanation from Dumbledore... No, it's not. It's from Sirius, saying "Don't leave the house. You're in a lot more danger from the Ministry than you thought." Then Harry, very relatably, just thinks, "Wasn't anybody going to say "well done" for fighting off two dementors single-handedly?"

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** He has a point there. Why isn't anybody saying that? They're too scared. Should they have? They're trying to save everybody's lives right now, and they're not winning on this.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** And they are trying to give Harry some hints that no, actually the danger's now just exponentially gotten worse. Whatever frame of reference you had from before, it doesn't apply anymore; it's exploding as we speak, and he is getting these little hints, but no, nobody can catch up that quickly. It's good that Sirius is saying, "Don't leave the house." Ugh... Meanwhile, there's the most excellent question underneath the whole thing: "What were dementoids doing in Little Whinging?" What were they doing there?

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Hmm... And the usual explanation, "Oh, it must have been Voldemort..." What if it's worse than that?

**JC:** Yeah. What if it's worse than that? Exactly. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Ugh. And then we get the turn from Uncle Vernon that unfortunately is very (I find) reminiscent of some very real real-life things, where Vernon puts it all together and he looks at Harry and says, "It's you. It's got something to do with you, boy, I know it." This reminds me so strongly of situations that I have known of teens or young adults being kicked out for being queer. If there's homophobia and gay bashing against that queer kid and a straight kid gets caught up in it somehow, that's just like the family blaming Harry for Dudley getting attacked by dementors. We do have the phenomenon where a gay kid could even feel guilty. "Oh, if it weren't for me, then my straight cousin wouldn't have been gaybashed." It's not your fault.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** But turning on the person who's perceived as the lightning rod for the danger and saying, "Okay, that's it. We don't even like you. We don't love you, we don't like you,

we didn't want to be harboring you, and now you are putting us in danger," as if the homophobes have no choice other than to gaybash.

**JC:** Right, right.

**Lorrie:** This was one of the moments where I could most clearly see the shock in the Harry Potter fandom when the gay/queer reading of the series turned out to be not on the author's mind at all...

**JC:** Yeah, for sure.

**Lorrie:** Because the parallel here takes no effort. So yeah, Vernon is wrongly thinking that Harry's on the run from the law; Harry is thinking (also wrongly), 'No, it was Voldemort who sent the dementors.' Vernon thinking that the guy who murdered Harry's parents is not a painful topic is like some people thinking, 'Well, anti-trans legislation doesn't bother me. It's not affecting me.' Meanwhile, something's happening in Aunt Petunia because there is only so long you can pretend that a child you have abused and suppressed for years has nothing wrong with them. You did create that. You can't hide from that anymore. Or, in 'leopards eating faces' terms, there's only so long before the leopards come for your face, too. That's happening to Petunia, and that is a big part of what this is reminding me of from real life, from kids getting kicked out or disowned for being queer. It creates a conflict within the relationship of the adults in the house. Are they united in pushing a kid out to fend for themselves, or is one of them not able to do that? What does that mean for their relationship, especially if, as I think often does happen, the adult who says "No, no. I hate this child too, but we can't just let him out there"? That person is the one with less power. You know darn well that the house is not in Petunia's name. Vernon earns the money; Petunia does not. It's his house, and if she says, "No, we're letting him stay and that's that..." If Vernon decides that he's going to overrule her, what's going to stop him from turning her out, too? This is a kind of conflict that this kind of oppression and this kind of question brings up in real life that I'm super familiar with, and to see it happening between the Dursleys, this is a happier ending than I have sometimes seen...

**JC:** Oh, for sure. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Because I have not always seen the person in Vernon's position capitulating.

**JC:** Absolutely. I was looking for it.

**Lorrie:** And especially what seems really familiar and realistic to me is that in all of this tension between Petunia and Vernon, there's no question of either of them having the slightest affection for Harry. Yeah, even if she wants to save his life and say, "No, he's staying," she's not going to feel any less cold toward him.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Also, she may, in fact, have even more resentment against him for that reason.

**JC:** And this is the point at which the Howler comes. What does Dumbledore know about what is happening in this house? How does Dumbledore know that that's the moment to not only send a message, but to send a Howler? Because that's extreme. That's an extreme kind of messaging, right? Wow.

**Lorrie:** I'm not sure he knows. I think it's just his knowledge of human nature. When harboring an oppressed minority puts your whole house and family in danger, then this kind of conflict is certain to arise between the members of the not-oppressed class. That whole question, 'When they come for people, will you hide them in your house?' Well, who lives in the house? What changes will that make to your life? Will that put a target on you forever also? That's just something that happens. Meanwhile, Petunia's whispering, "Back? He's back?" Harry looks at her, and he sees her make the connection, admit the connection that she had known his mother, and Harry does this thing that never happens: he talks directly to Aunt Petunia and he says, "Yes, him. He's back. I saw him. I saw him come back." There's no way that Petunia can deny that this little squirt just went through seeing the return of the guy that killed Lily and James. Can you really pretend that he has not had a hard time and you've been treating him like shit? She's looking at him, knowing... Remember, it cannot have been an easy time to be the Evans family and deal with Lily and her new husband being dead. Petunia had a one-year-old at the time dealing with this upheaval, and she's looking at this teenager and it's coming, and he's brought the danger directly into their house, as all these owls keep reminding them. Vernon says these impressively honest things: "... you're not endangering my wife and son, you're not bringing trouble down on us..." When Harry's been told not to leave, he yells, "You were all keen to leave half an hour ago! I'm right behind you! Get out and never darken our doorstep again!" I've got to say, I can understand Vernon's feelings here. 'We don't even like each other. You thought that living here was so terrible? Well, we don't want you here either.' Then Harry's personality asserts itself again in the middle of all this; when he sees that Petunia's gotten a Howler, he automatically becomes supportive and gives her some good advice.

**JC:** Yeah, that's true. It's also interesting to me that there's this moment where Harry realizes, 'Oh, you're part of the world.' There's a sense in which he never knew until now that Aunt Petunia knows a lot about the Wizarding World, and he's treating her accordingly now. He's like, "Go ahead and just get it over with." It's so interesting to see her... She shifts. Also --

**Lorrie:** Admitting, yeah.

**JC:** Vernon and Petunia were more of a unit in my head, and now this whole scene makes me look at them and go, 'Oh, they're suddenly not like the fairy tale stepparents. They are two human beings in a very different way.'

**Lorrie:** It's a novel.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** It's not a fairy tale; it's a novel. They have a marriage, it has conflict, they have different motivations. She's risking her marriage. She's risking losing her normal well-to-do husband who adores her because she is undeniably related to freaks. It's about to do to her life what she's always tried to prevent. This is Harry realizing for the first time, having the first inkling of, 'This is why Dumbledore wanted me to live with the Dursleys, even though they are horrible abusers.' This moment is integrating Harry's wildly, almost insanely incompatible worlds to the point that people could make a super compelling case that there is no Harry Potter who's a wizard that lives with Muggles; that it's just some kid who's really lost it and has made up this unreal fantasy. What does it take to integrate these worlds? It's happening right now, and it's mind-breaking; it's super tense. You could almost prefer to lie to yourself and pretend that you don't have to hold all these truths in your head at the same time. It was easier before, but this does give Harry a real connection between everyday life and the loss of his parents that he knows is real. No matter how much people don't tell him about Lily and James, the size of the yearning he has in his heart for them is real and must have come from somewhere, and this is confirming, 'Yeah, it did. Yes, it did, and they've been lying to you -- they've been withholding from you -- but yes, it was real and they do know it. You're not crazy. This, however, sucks.' Oh, God, Petunia is usually this dead zone for magic. Petunia is where magic comes to die, and suddenly she's not.

**JC:** Yeah. I love the image of the Howler coming in and Harry thinking, 'Oh, God, what now?' and then it skips over him and goes to her.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** He's like --

**Lorrie:** 'What a dream come true!'

**JC:** Exactly.

**Lorrie:** Oh, my God!

**JC:** But also, that's the moment when it's like, 'Oh, she's part of this world, too,' because the owl delivered it to her.

**Lorrie:** And she doesn't know how to handle it! "Here, let me tell you, quickly! Here's how you..." Yeah.

**JC:** So I like that. That's the moment that it is undeniable that she is part of this. Mr. Dursley has never gotten an owl, but Petunia got one and she can't deny it, even to her husband.

**Lorrie:** Owls know how to find her.

**JC:** Yeah. She can't deny it.

**Lorrie:** She is somebody to an owl.

**JC:** Yeah. Right.

**Lorrie:** Well, that's the dream, the fantasy, come true. What if you could deliver some sort of message that would actually reach one of these people who is so oppressive that you're pretty sure they would be happy to see you get killed and they would do nothing about it? What if you could reach their emotions? You know they're human; those emotions are in there somewhere. Well, here's an owl bringing this burning piece of paper that's the voice of her conscience.

**JC:** And Petunia never got a Hogwarts letter, right?

**Lorrie:** No, she did not.

**JC:** But she's about to get a Howler from Dumbledore. It's like the opposite of getting a Hogwarts letter.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. There's some truth that got through to her. This is the desperate wish to believe in divine justice. Is there somebody who can make somebody admit to themselves the truth? Well, that dream has just come true, and she says, "The boy will have to stay, Vernon." Yeah, this is another Snape parallel. Petunia is demonstrating the Snape quality 'protectiveness without affection'. Honestly, as we live through the current administration, protectiveness without affection is a quality that we could use a lot of right now. It doesn't have to be personal. It just has to hold.

**JC:** Yeah. I get the feeling reading this that this is the first time -- or maybe the second time -- that Petunia has ever put her foot down to Vernon and Vernon accepts it.

**Lorrie:** He doesn't even know what to do.

**JC:** Yeah, he doesn't. They don't get into a fight about it. She's like, "Nope, that's it. He's staying."

**Lorrie:** They don't usually have a lot to disagree about. Some of it is that she has fear of reprisals from a greater power, but a little bit of it is that she recognizes how much danger Harry is in. Then, of course, as anybody would after being this vulnerable and this much in the wrong, she's super cold to Harry and says, "Don't ask questions." He's dying with questions -- nobody cares -- and he's saying, "Are you in touch with wizards?" Yeah, no luck, Harry. As much as he ever has been in his life, he currently has, in this house, no access to his own story. 'Oh, not now, not tonight.'

**JC:** 'After being given some wildly tantalizing bits of information, you're not getting anything else.' It feels like we've broken the seal. The first two chapters of this book establish that things are different. This is no longer a fairy tale.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. The next chapter is called The Advance Guard.

**JC:** I don't even remember what happens next. I have no clue. I have no idea. I don't remember.

**Lorrie:** Well, get used to that feeling, because it comes down thick in this book.

**JC:** Wow!

**Lorrie:** Twist after twist, and there's just so much danger.

**JC:** Very interesting.

**Caroline:** You've been listening to Harry Potter After 2020 with hosts Lorrie Kim and JC. You can find show notes for this and all other episodes at [HPAfter2020.com](http://HPAfter2020.com). There, you will also find ways to support the show, contact the hosts and more. If you like what you heard, consider giving us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. Harry Potter After 2020 is produced and edited by Lorrie Kim and Caroline Rinaldy. Original music was composed by C.L. Smith. Thank you for listening.