

Transcript

Episode 5.25

Book 5, Chapter 25: The Beetle at Bay

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 Twenty-Five: The Beetle at Bay.

Lorrie: The Beetle at Bay. Death Eaters break out of Azkaban. Harry and Cho go on an awkward date. Hermione blackmails Rita Skeeter into writing an article about Harry. JC, how did you feel reading this chapter?

JC: A lot happens in this chapter. After the previous chapter, with everything going on (going back to school and the Occlumency lesson), it was nice to have a normal few weeks pass at Hogwarts. Well, normal in this book, I guess, but interesting stuff. Interesting stuff's going on here.

Lorrie: Yeah, things are happening. It's not all psycho drama.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: It's not all nightmares crashing inside the scar of a fifteen-year-old.

JC: Right. I guess that's it. It feels much more external, and there's other things other than Voldemort drama happening.

Lorrie: Oh, gosh, yeah.

JC: But we do start with this newspaper article that Hermione is reading about the ten Death Eaters who broke out of Azkaban...

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: And it's very interesting to me that these kids are sitting here, reading the story and they're horrified. They look up at the teachers – the teachers are all looking concerned

and whispering -- and they look around the rest of the Great Hall (the school cafeteria) and most of the other kids have no clue (they're not paying attention); Harry has this moment of realizing that most people aren't paying attention to this, and I thought, 'Boy, is that a familiar state of being.'

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. I've been looking at people like, 'How are you not concerned that your Medicaid is going to be cut and that the VA won't see you anymore?'

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: 'How are you not concerned?' They're like, "Yeah, whatever," or "All the politicians are the same." Oh, my God... Or "We're not going to be affected." Yeah, you are.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. The way that the newspaper had each Death Eater listed with the specific crimes that they had committed... That gave me such a strong memory of the January 6th insurrectionists being pardoned, including the ones who had assaulted police. It's known what they did; there's no way they're going to just go into society and assimilate. This is bad.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And then we get one of this chapter's many lessons in media literacy where Fudge makes up an excuse by blaming Sirius for this breakout, including that little lie that Sirius is the first person ever to break out of Azkaban. Fudge knows at this point that no, Barty Crouch Jr. was the first, but it's just the tiniest part of this infuriating lie. Thank goodness Hermione has no illusions about anything and she says, "He can hardly say, 'Sorry everyone. Dumbledore warned me this might happen, the Azkaban guards have joined Lord Voldemort.'" That's nice that, for the story, Hermione states that because that was a prerequisite for these Death Eaters breaking out, but it's not in the plot; she just says that had to have happened. We get to see how Umbridge and the Ministry are separate from Hogwarts and the Death Eaters because she's not happy about this development either. She's concerned with how bad it makes the Ministry look.

JC: I'll be curious to see how we go forward in this book. Umbridge is a representative of the Ministry at Hogwarts and is desperately clinging to power with more and more authoritarian vibes as we go forward, right? It's this sort of desperate clawing of 'No, I am in control here' when things are spiraling out of control all around. I'm really curious

to see that again and to think about it in terms of what's happening in her own world as things spiral out of control.

Lorrie: Yeah, because her playbook is limited.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: There are ways to get into situations where she won't have the right tools.

JC: And the kids at the school, as we'll see in this chapter, are starting to push back.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: The more she layers on the rules, the more the kids start to push back.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: There's only so much of that you can put on before... At least, I hope this is. I want this to be true in the real world, too: There's only so much of this you can do before people start to say, "No, this is not okay." I'm waiting.

Lorrie: Yeah. Meanwhile, there's the secondary news that Hermione digs out of this day's edition of the *Daily Prophet* where Broderick Bode had been improving, and now the Healer, Miriam Strout (who was assigned to him), has been suspended from her job because the potted plant that someone sent him has killed him.

JC: Yeah...

Lorrie: We see the kids starting to make the connections here. We see Ron getting there, saying, "How could the gift giver have missed that this was Devil's Snare?" and Hermione snaps at him and says this was murder; she's not waiting for him to put the pieces together. That is so similar, in my mind, to what I've seen in the U.S. in the first months of the second Trump presidency, where people go from "I'm so confused... Why would politicians vote to destroy their own farm industry and their own state? Don't they realize that?" and then go to "I guess they do realize; they just don't care." It's a long way before they have to admit, "Oh, that was the plan all along. They actively wanted it. They knew exactly what they were doing. Things are more evil than I wanted to believe." We see Hermione yanking Ron to the conclusion, and Harry starts to put more things together. He remembers that he met Bode at the Ministry, and then Ron puts together, "Oh, yeah, he was an Unspeakable," which I still think is the coolest ever job title.

JC: Yeah, really.

Lorrie: So yeah, we're watching them learn, become more worldly. Ugh... I like the touch that he had to be suppressed because he was starting to fight back and he was

starting to get his sanity back. He was sacrificed for this, but he gave a good fight and he was in fact quite potent. Oof.

JC: Do we ever learn more about him -- about what he did, why he was silenced in the first place?

Lorrie: I think it was just that he happened to be nearby and that he was somebody that could be Imperiused, perhaps, to go lift the prophecy for Voldemort.

JC: Okay, but it's not mentioned later on in the books or anything?

Lorrie: It is. It is.

JC: Oh, it is. Okay, okay.

Lorrie: Yeah. It wasn't personal; it was just that he was nearby, and then once he started recovering, then he would be able to explain what had happened to him and that could not be allowed. We see that Hermione has a mystery plan, which we'll see later. We see Hagrid is on probation, which everybody could see coming.

JC: And with fresh cuts on his face. Then there's this little humorous note about having to go rub chili powder on the salamanders... The ridiculousness of this stuff that Hagrid has to do as part of his work to care for the magical creatures is sometimes a nice little bit of humor.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Ooh, we have this ongoing mystery of why Hagrid continually looks like someone is beating him up. Hmm...

Lorrie: Eventually, after some time passes, the other students finally do start discussing the breakout, so it wasn't that much of a time lag before they picked up that something significant has happened. I really love this part where Susan Bones is given as an example of someone else other than Harry in Hogwarts who has personal experience with what it means, how it feels, to have been targeted by the Death Eaters -- she had several relatives get killed by the Death Eaters -- and they "found themselves the unwilling objects of a gruesome sort of reflected fame...." That's the thing that Harry has always hated that Snape accused him of. "You like this." "No, I don't!"

JC: Right, and that little moment where Susan Bones says, "How do you live like this?"

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Harry's like, "Yeah..."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: “What else are you going to do?” But yeah, there's something about the shared misery... We see more shared misery later in this chapter, but it's not all on Harry now. It's starting to spread out a little bit and that means that other people are given the opportunity to reflect on Harry's story, and the other kids are slowly coming around and going, “Maybe Harry and Dumbledore are actually right.”

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: “If Umbridge is trying to suppress Harry and if the government is...” It's starting to be like, “Hmm...” They're starting to put the pieces together, and that's such a relief.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That's a relief to see that misery being spread out a little bit.

Lorrie: Yeah, he's gaining credibility. They're going to owe him a big apology. There's a human reflex, a desire, to be angry at somebody like Harry, who's sounding the alarm. You don't want to believe what he's saying is true, and there's no other evidence. It would be much easier to scapegoat him and be angry at him for making up that kind of lie. “Why would you lie like that?” Then, as it starts happening to you... Mmm, all right. Susan in second year was one of the Hufflepuffs who was gossiping about Harry in the library; they thought that he had attacked Justin Finch-Fletchley or set the snake on him, and for her now to say, “Now I know what it feels like to be you...” Okay, she's never going to do that again. Sometimes, only learning by experience will get you there.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: That's costly. Yeah.

JC: And I hate to say, “Boy, I'm glad more people are suffering,” but it really does feel better as the reader to be like, ‘Okay, it's not just Harry now,’ because when it was just the “Torture Harry Every Day” show, that was really not...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's not fun for any... Not fun for the reader, not fun for Harry, but yeah. I think we see that in our world a little bit.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: When you start to see the misery spread out more, there's some relief. First of all, there's the relief of thinking, ‘Okay, it wasn't just me. It really is happening to more and more people, and surely that's going to make it more real to other people.’ When you feel like you're the only person who sees what's happening, then that's awful, but if other people start to see, then it becomes more of a shared thing where you don't feel so alone. There's that, but also that starts to raise this prospect of people pushing back;

if more people are affected, then there's more people to push back, which starts to happen here.

Lorrie: The fantasy is that enough of this waking up will happen in time to save some people.

JC: Right.

Lorrie: That would be great. Standing by watching people get hurt (because nobody understands your warning), you see the inevitable happen and it maybe could have been prevented if you've been able to get your message across, but it's really hard getting a message across to somebody who doesn't believe you. Oh, you don't want more people to get hurt.

JC: Right. I guess it's a little tiny bit of hope.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: 'Please make the connections fast enough so that we can prevent a little bit more damage.'

JC: We also get the implication that the teachers are unable to speak freely...

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: So they're also whispering in the corridors now.

Lorrie: Yeah, and that sets the tone for this Educational Decree Twenty-Six, which is "Teachers are hereby banned from giving students any information that is not strictly related to the subjects they are paid to teach," which is party time!

JC: Oh, my God! Okay, so here's where I would love to go off on just a brief tangent about the Texas education code, or Texas administrative code, I should say. Texas is just years ahead of the rest of the country in this kind of bullshit, right? A couple of years ago, in the previous legislative session (which happens in odd years in Texas), a law was passed to limit curriculum and it's very related to this particular Educational Decree; it went into effect as of January 2024 and I wanted to just share a little bit of that. What's interesting about it was that this particular bill that passed, the edit of this administrative code, was intended to be and is an anti-DEI provision, but the way that it was worded reminded me of the way that this Educational Decree was worded because it's worded in a way that it's like, 'How could you argue against this?' For example, I'll just read a little bit of this: "A teacher, administrator, etc. of a school may not require or make part of a course inculcation in the concept that one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex; an individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, is inherently racist,

sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously...” and then it goes on from there. It's all couched in terms of individuals. “An individual cannot be held accountable for stuff that their ancestors did.” The way that it's written, you would think, ‘Oh, who would argue with that?’ You can also see, especially if you're a person who teaches social justice stuff, exactly what they're getting at, but then it also opens up a window for getting around it. The way that people have come into this make it pretty clear that we're talking about systems and not individuals. Are the systems made up and influenced by individuals? Yeah, yeah, yeah. We're not talking about any particular individual. There's ways that you look at the words and then you play with the words (which we see Lee Jordan doing later in this chapter), but this is something we've been dealing with in Texas for a while now and that particular code that I'm talking about affects the K-12 level. I don't actually know any Social Studies teachers; I do know that when I have talked to K-12 teachers about how this affected what they did, they would just laugh and they're like, “I can't get my kids to put their phones down.” The teachers are like, “Really?!” so there's an extent to which it's a show -- this is just a show -- but it's also a tool that could be used to go after a teacher.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It has been used in that way, so these educational decrees kind of feel like that to me. They give off this effect of “Okay, we're shutting down all discussion around this. Teachers can only talk about the stuff that falls under the purview of the subject they're teaching.” Okay, who defines that? Um... Then we start pushing out the edges of that. “Sure. Absolutely, this falls under the purview of what I teach.” Those words are very similar to words that are in this code, so it's kind of funny. We're dealing with this in Texas right now and it's about to hit the undergraduate level as well, but it's in the Core Curriculum and also in some certification programs; it affects a lot of what I do, but it's easy to work around it right now.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: The worst thing that I can see happening to me in the future is someone deciding they're going to, for political reasons, come after me, and then it would be really hard for me to fight that.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I'd have to take a lot of stuff out of my course. The odds of that happening feel low, so I feel like I can just keep doing what I'm doing. I've read the code and I know that I'm not doing the things that the code specifically forbids because of the way I frame things, but anyway... yeah. I'm just thinking about the teachers who are looking at this and going, ‘Okay,’ because I'm imagining most of the teachers are like, “Do you think I actually do...?” Anyway...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yeah. What I will say is that the teachers that I know who've gotten in trouble under this particular statute are the ones who, when their kids come into their classrooms and said, "Hey, I'm really scared because of all the ICE raids that are happening" and wanted to talk about it in a math class, the teacher thought, 'Kids are worried about this, this is something we should address' because the kids are genuinely concerned and they're not able to actually concentrate on learning math because they need some place to talk about this, and the teacher provided that space; one parent complained, and then that teacher was written up for it. I know multiple teachers that that happened to, so I'm imagining the Hogwarts teachers in this situation. The kids are freaked out, and the teachers are... This would be a great opportunity to talk about how wizarding society works or whatever, so it's chilling that no, that's not allowed. That exact scenario is happening in Texas right now.

Lorrie: One thing about this decree is that it demotes teachers. They're forbidden to speak about things that they're not paid to teach. "Paid to teach" makes it really... You're not molding humans. You're not showing them how to live; you are contract workers, so yeah, this is rife for malicious compliance. I love the competent writer way that says, "When Harry next saw Lee [Jordan], the back of his hand was bleeding rather badly. Harry recommended essence of murtlap."

JC: Right. The reason that Lee got in trouble is because he pushed back in class in this very teenager-y way of saying, "Oh, you can't tell Fred and George not to do that because it doesn't fall under the purview of what you're paid to teach."

Lorrie: Right.

JC: I love it. I love the way teenagers are looking for the edges of things. I love it. Yeah, he got punished for it, but I think more kids are going to end up with scars on the back of their hands by the end of the novel when they start to push back. But yeah, now it's not just Harry getting the sadistic punishment, which is also a bit of a relief.

Lorrie: It really is, because at the beginning of this term... When he first met the torture quill, it was so unspeakably horrible that he couldn't even tell Hermione and Ron. Knowing that such a thing exists is doing psychic damage to someone; he couldn't, and the gulf between what he was experiencing and the innocent lives of kids who didn't know that's such a thing existed was just too much. The fact that his peers are going to understand more and more what he's been dealing with by himself helps.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: But it does mean that the whole school has lost innocence simultaneously, yeah.

JC: I don't remember if this exactly appears in the book (because I've seen the movie multiple times since I last read the book), but there's a scene in the movie that tries to capture that: it shows a bunch of kids sitting in the Great Hall with Umbridge standing over them, and they're all writing with that quill and it's carving every one of them; it's carving, and they're all just sitting there in horror. There's anger, too, and you see the anger rising in the kids' faces as they realized 'We're being made to do this.' I don't know if that...

Lorrie: It's just in the movie.

JC: It's just in the movie, but I thought it was a really interesting way of capturing that feeling of more and more people are being exposed to this. It makes me wonder, too: at what point will the parents start... Or maybe she's careful about who she punishes this way. I'm sure she is, but anyway...

Lorrie: Yeah. We know that the school year started already with parents having their reactions, like Seamus Finnegan not talking to Harry and Marietta Edgecombe's parents forbidding her to get on the wrong side of Umbridge, so yeah, they're not completely able to shield the parents from weird stuff happening here. I also love the detail that Cho's parents also forbade her, and she just made the young adult decision to not tell them.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. Umbridge's response, which is also super typical, is that this is all pissing her off so much that she's now determined to sack someone, like that's going to make her feel better; the unhappily, very realistic thing we see is that the constant job insecurity makes Trelawney so stressed out that she develops an addiction really severely. Watching government contract employees -- people at USAID or scientists who were happily doing research with government funding -- in the courts, week by week... Are they employed? Aren't they employed? The nastiness of this uncertainty takes such a horrible toll. Aside from the immediate impact on your income, just knowing that somebody else's whims are going to determine your whole life...

JC: Yes.

Lorrie: The crazy-making effect that that has on the affected people... That is design.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: That's the desired effect, and that level of cruelty is an evil that when you're going through it, you have to eventually break down and admit, 'No, that's evil.'

JC: Yeah. I think that the USAID example is really relevant. On a whim, you're just going to let thousands and thousands of people die just to score some points. With who? Oh, God... Yeah, that one really hits close. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Ugh... Yeah. The way that both Hagrid and Trelawney are folding under this incredible pressure of having someone observe every move they make in the classroom...

Lorrie: Gain enjoyment from it.

JC: Yeah, and then getting enjoyment from it. Part of me is also like, 'Okay, this is actually... this can't be possible.' Just thinking from the perspective of the world, they would have overlapping classes, thinking about what their course schedules look like. It's actually impossible that she would be in every single class they teach, but the exaggeration of it just adds to -- It's an impossible situation, but who knows... Maybe she has a Time-Turner, I don't know. She's managing to be in every single one of their classes. That kind of power and abuse of power...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Oh, my God, yeah.

Lorrie: We get our 'resistance is joy' moment when Harry is resentful that Umbridge is depriving him of everything that makes life at Hogwarts worth living. Hagrid is miserable, he can't be in touch with Sirius anymore, Quidditch is dead to him. "He took his revenge the only way he had: redoubling his efforts for the D.A."

JC: Oh, thank God for the D.A.

Lorrie: Yeah. There's your resistance handbook moment of the chapter. Well... Does it make everything better? Well, it makes some things a bit better, yeah.

JC: Yeah. You feel less like a victim or less like you're completely helpless, and there's something you could do to make a difference. I also really love the fact that Neville is just working his ass off. He is one hundred percent focused and determined and working so hard, but he's suddenly the best student.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I love it so much.

Lorrie: I love that it's described as "slightly alarming". Obviously, nothing can stop him.

JC: I'm sure there's a fanfiction that exists, but I want to see this part of the story from Neville's point of view.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I'm sure someone out there wrote it, but it would be so interesting to get Neville's perspective on this and how hard he's working and all the things he's learning and his determination... Oh...

Lorrie: Yeah, and it's him realizing this is his only destiny. He has no other choice; this is his life. If he wants to survive, he can't be held back by criticism from his grandparents or mockery from other students. This is bigger than that, but yes, the coming of age of Neville Longbottom is a flawless trajectory.

JC: It's one of my favorite subplots of the series, Neville's story. Yeah.

Lorrie: I'm really glad that Harry and Neville have connected, that Harry has seen Neville's parents and Neville has access to Harry's D.A. class. They are strengthening each other.

JC: These are two kids who are connected in a way that I guess we don't know at this point in the story.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: Yeah. I really enjoy the way that the connection between Neville and Harry has slowly unfolded as the story goes on. Neville... I love Neville.

Lorrie: Yeah, and that you get two different characters to show the way that this kind of trauma might affect a kid. Tons of stuff happens to Harry, but there are other ways that someone could suffer, too, and this is Neville fighting back, okay. This read of this chapter, I saw something that I have never seen before on my zillion other reads... I kind of feel a little foolish, because once I saw it, it seemed really obvious and glaring to me, but this is actually something quite typical of this series and this author: sometimes, she puts huge keys to her mysteries right there in a casual way out in the open. This is about the Shield Charm. We have seen Shield Charms before. Harry was practicing them for the TriWizard Tournament. But they just passed by without much of a mention. Here, they are defined: "The Shield Charm, a means of deflecting minor jinxes so that they rebounded upon the attacker." That is super interesting for a couple different reasons. One of them is "minor jinxes." That's the definition we see here: we will see Harry getting so good at *Protego* that he can deflect more than minor jinxes and he can more than deflect them. Eventually, he uses one against Snape so hard that it makes Snape lose balance and stagger, and by the very end we see him using it against Voldemort's Killing Curses. The Shield Charm is meant for minor jinxes, but Harry is so powerful and has such good practice at it that he can use it much more intensively. The word that made me realize, 'Oh, it's just been there the whole time and I never saw it until now,' is the word 'rebounded.' That is the usage of a word that is very specifically

used to explain what happened when Lily protected her baby; she did some ancient magic that was so strong that Voldemort's curse rebounded back on him, and that's when $2+2 = 4$ happened in my head and I felt a little foolish. 'Oh, okay, that's what she did.' She used the mechanism of the Shield Charm *Protego*: it's the desire to protect from a minor jinx by deflecting it so it rebounds on the attacker, which means that you don't get hurt by it, but the person who is doing it to you feels in themselves the effect of what they were hoping to do to you. Any fantasy... 'Do you really understand how that makes people feel? I wish you could know.' You see memes now, like, "Whatever you wish would happen for illegal immigrants, I wish that would happen for you." Can you actually be this cruel if you really understand how you're making people feel? And for a small minority of people, the answer is yes. For a lot of people, no; they managed to shut that off in themselves or maybe they've never made that connection. Lily is using that, but she is empowering her protective instinct with the force of her entire life, with her willingness to die for this... That's how much she wants protection for someone else, and that's how she took a Shield Charm and made it that profoundly powerful. Voldemort witnessed that she wanted to protect someone (who was not herself) so much that she would trade her own life, and that's what made it strong enough so that he could feel it and the *Avada Kedavra* rebounded on him. To put the force of your entire life behind that desire to protect others... That's where your Christ analogy comes in. Christ gave his own life to protect others; witnessing her self-sacrifice to block Voldemort's attack is the thing that had the emotional impact on Voldemort, that reached him when nothing else could. This surprised him; it's not how he expected things to go. It's not how things had ever gone in the past. Once I saw that word 'rebounded'... 'Oh, she cast a *Protego*.'

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: That's what it was. It was a specific kind of *Protego* that was about giving up your life because you love somebody so much. It had the same effect as any other *Protego*, just times infinity.

JC: I had forgotten about *Protego*, but then that's something that Harry becomes very good at.

Lorrie: Yeah, and we meet it here at the very basic level. 'It's a means of deflecting minor jinxes so that they rebounded upon the attacker,' just like *Expelliarmus*. They don't teach you *Expelliarmus* as "this is the thing that will kill Albus Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort." This is a thing that will get Lee Jordan's wand out of his hand; anyone can do it, but it's robust. It can take infinite power and the principle will remain sound, and that's why some twenty-one-year-old young mom could protect her baby against this serial killer. It's a humble spell. Yeah.

JC: I think Harry's signature spells are these humble spells that he's made more powerful because of who he is and what's important to him.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I remember later, they say, "Oh, *Expelliarmus* is your signature spell." Yeah. You would have a signature spell and it would be that, yet you do great things with it.

Lorrie: And what Snape would teach Harry about Occlumency (if he could) is if you think about it as what you want to protect from detection because there's somebody you care about, then that simple, pure rationale will stand up to any attack. You can't be counting on super, super fancy complicated stuff when you're under pressure like that; it has to be really basic, and it helps if it's something that Voldemort just would never understand.

JC: Right, or would be beneath his notice. 'It seems so insignificant; why would you bother with that?' Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And that's where your power can come from.

Lorrie: The sad thing is that Lily's self-sacrifice got right at what Voldemort is sad about not understanding. He would have liked that; he would have liked somebody to care about him at all in any way, and he saw right in front of his face, "Well, you didn't get that, so you don't understand it, do you?" Ouch. He doesn't have a defense against it, so yeah. I quite mean it when I say that I've read this series so many times, and I find something new and big every single time I reread it. That was like, 'Okay, it's the year 2025, and I'm putting that together for the first time and it was right there. How do you know? Because it says so in words. Okay, I didn't understand.' Well, I do now.

JC: Speaking of things people don't understand, we are heading into another little paragraph here about the mystery of the Occlumency lessons. Ron is the one who suggests that maybe Snape is making everything worse on purpose, so Harry is starting to think that the Occlumency lessons themselves are the things that are making his connection with Voldemort worse. Ron says, "Well, maybe Snape's doing it on purpose," and then Hermione points out that he's never been correct in any of his suspicions about Snape, and that if they cannot trust Dumbledore now, then basically, what are they even doing here?

Lorrie: And that's it. Yeah. It's quite true: "Harry's sessions with Snape, which had started badly enough, were not improving; on the contrary, Harry felt he was getting worse with every lesson." Yeah, that is true because as the lessons go on, Voldemort is getting more and more happy with how much he can get into Harry's head, so the timeline is correct. This passage: "Nowadays, however, his scar hardly ever stopped

prickling, and he often felt lurches of annoyance or cheerfulness that were unrelated to what was happening at the time, which were always accompanied by a particularly painful twinge from his scar.... He could date this increased sensitivity firmly from his first Occlumency lesson with Snape.” A couple things I get from this: one of them is sometimes, when you fight back to defend yourself, yeah, you do get backlash. It is true that when you defend yourself, you bring down more wrath on yourself; it does, in some ways, make your situation worse. If you don't fight for yourself, the same thing will happen. The other thing is... Oh, I think this is the first time I'm saying this on this podcast: there is going to be a book about Voldemort in the same series as my book on Snape. This book on Voldemort is written by Grace Candido-Beecher and it will be published in April 2026, and it's called *Voldemort: The Definitive Study of Tom Riddle, the Man Who Would Become He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named*. I'm super excited about this because I had the honor of being the developmental editor for this; I got to see Grace's chapters and give my suggestions on flow and some options that I thought she might want to include, some viewpoints. I'm super excited. I remember the first time I ever met her... To think that she went from being a fan who really liked talking and thinking about Voldemort to writing this book is such an exciting journey. I'm really looking forward to people discovering this book. Grace and I have some points of disagreement about Voldemort: I think that whenever Harry's scar prickles (especially in this book), it's because of Voldemort is consciously in Harry's head; not always consciously, but I think it means that Voldemort's in his head. It's not just that it's activated but Voldemort might just be unconscious of it all; no, I think that it indicates the presence of Voldemort, and Grace does not think that's what it means. I think Grace thinks that sometimes, it just might be activated and prickling in general.

JC: Hmm, okay.

Lorrie: So who knows... She is the Voldemort expert. I think it means that Voldemort is tuned into him and is getting better at controlling this and suggesting things to Harry. Speaking of which, “[Harry] was now dreaming about walking down the corridor toward the entrance to the Department of Mysteries almost every night...” Voldemort is definitely doing that on purpose...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And poor Snape has to know this. Snape is the reason why the Order has been guarding this door around the clock since the beginning -- since summer -- because Snape has given them the intelligence that Voldemort has been obsessed with this corridor. He hears it from Voldemort, he knows that the Order is watching this, and now he knows that it's going on in Harry's head as well. Poor Harry, at this point, says, “Lessons with Snape are making it worse.... I just wish the door would open, I'm sick of standing staring at it --” which is, quite rightly, alarming to Hermione. I just have to say...

I hear this sentiment around me: "Burn it all down" is a really dangerous wish. I don't support it. There's a certain relief in recklessness to thinking, 'Oh, God, just let it all happen.' No. That might feel good in the moment to stop feeling responsible for every single detail; you will regret that. That would be wishing for what was easy and not necessarily what's right. No, Harry, don't just wish the door will open. It will not make things better.

JC: You mentioned in the last episode, for example, that there are people who really think that Snape is doing this on purpose and that he really is exposing Harry to this, and this passage might even be evidence to that, that they would use for that. I guess that my read of this -- and again, I've been heavily influenced by you -- is that I thought, 'Oh, it was a coincidence.' Voldemort learned that he really was connected to Harry; then they had this one Occlumency lesson where there was a breakthrough and Snape is very aware in every one of these lessons that this could happen again, so he's being very cautious. But Voldemort is in Harry's head a lot now. Did it start with the Occlumency lesson? Well, a couple of other things happened, too, but the timeline... There's a lot of big coincidences happening here, and that's going to be difficult for Harry (and, I guess, for the readers, too) to tease apart what's really happening.

Lorrie: Yeah, which is all to the credit of the author that it's by design. She created the Snape character so that you could interpret everything he says or does in opposite ways and not know which, and she was really careful to strike that balance. That's where my permanent respect for this author and how she wrote this character developed. Wow, that's not something that most authors even attempt; it's not that often that you get somebody so equally balanced in their ambiguity and it's all hiding underneath his terrible, personal unpleasantness. Sometimes, he's such a jerk. Ugh... why? Yeah. I have been avoiding talking about the next plot point. I am unbothered by serial killers and monsters and torture quills, but when Harry and Cho go on this awkward date, my soul leaves my body.

JC: Oh, my God... It is pretty awkward and awful.

Lorrie: I just completely dissociate. This is the worst thing that happens in this entire book, as far as I'm concerned. I can't even... The way that you, JC, feel about the horrible trope of ever worsening slapstick -- disaster that descends and descends -- or miscommunication tropes that just get more and more and more wasted... The way you just power through them until they're over...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: I find the awkward date unbearable to read.

JC: Oh, my gosh. Okay, should I say some interesting things that I find are interesting here, and maybe we can go from there?

Lorrie: Yeah. I'll go to my happy place. You go ahead.

JC: Okay. The Hogsmeade day has arrived, and Hermione is on a mission and makes Harry agree to meet her. Poor Ron has this all-day Quidditch practice that he's dreading, so Harry's on his own anyway, but I like the fact that Harry and Cho are immediately able to talk about Quidditch.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: They're casting around, they're super awkward. "What are we going to talk about? Oh, Quidditch!" They can talk about professional Quidditch; they can talk about the Quidditch they played against each other and that takes them a long way, so I like that they have that in common. It's really refreshing to have this heterosexual relationship where the sports stuff is the thing that they have in common; that's unusual in teen romance or whatever, so that's really cool. I like that when they get to Hogsmeade, Cho is the one who points out that there aren't even dementors guarding the school or the town.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: "Where are the dementors? Last time, one guy escaped and we were covered with dementors. Now there's none," and Harry hadn't realized that before. I like that Cho is the one who pointed it out to him.

Lorrie: They are compatible. The age gap and experience gap would have doomed this, even without Cedric's death or whatever...

JC: Right.

Lorrie: But in many ways, they are also compatible and they have goodwill generally. But yeah, when she pointed that out, it's sort of like, 'Huh.' When Biden was president, the newspapers were all over the cognitive decline of the elderly president. Where are all those articles right now? Huh... huh.

JC: Yeah. Yeah, exactly. It's that kind of thing. Those are some things that I like. Also, I think it's funny that she finally gives up on him being in charge of the date and just says, "Okay, we're going to go to Madam Puddifoot's. We're going to order coffee." She takes over, and then the rest of it is just awful awkwardness. I also can remember feeling the way Harry feels here: looking around and it seemed like everybody that I knew was dating somebody, and the idea of going into a party and looking around and everyone is making out and just being like, 'What? Are we old enough to be doing this?'

Lorrie: 'They all seem to know what they're doing.'

JC: 'What's happening here?'

Lorrie: 'When did that happen?'

JC: Yeah, and thinking, 'Am I the only person who's not interested in any of this?' or that idea of having a crush but then wanting to keep them completely at arm's length, not knowing how to engage. I remember that feeling of being about the same age and just being like, 'Ugh,' so I really identify with Harry here. He likes the idea of Cho, but the reality of a relationship with Cho is just like, 'I'm not ready for this, I don't think. I think I'm just going to stand over here and just....' So yeah, I really identify with Harry a lot through this. You're right: she's years ahead of him maturity-wise and being ready for a relationship, and he seems like a child in comparison. Ugh, yeah, just the way that it ends... he completely misunderstands everything and it's really awkward and awful.

Lorrie: She could have done better herself.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: The dramatic rushing off... Oh, dear. Oh... ouch.

JC: Yeah, yeah. "Just go and see Hermione, then, and whatever other girls you're going to see after that!" Ugh...

Lorrie: Yeah, Harry the player. Yeah.

JC: Oh, my God, yeah, and it happens in front of an entire restaurant full of his classmates.

Lorrie: Who are on the other side of the dating mystery; they're all competent in whatever ritual this is.

JC: Yep.

Lorrie: Everyone but him...

JC: But I remember feeling that way and feeling, 'Why does everybody else know how to do this or feel comfortable with this?' I felt like I was years away from it and being just baffled by that, so that part of it was very familiar to me.

Lorrie: The way that he knows, 'I'm expected to do a whole lot of things that nobody has ever explained to me...' Ugh.

JC: Just the agony over holding her hand potentially. 'How am I going to do it? How am I going to do it?' Yeah.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Yeah. Okay, did we talk about it enough to get past it?

Lorrie: I don't know. My mind is somewhere completely different right now.

JC: We can move on. It's fine.

Lorrie: I'm on the beach or something.

JC: Yeah, we can move on. It's fine.

Lorrie: However, like Cho, I would enjoy Madam Puddifoot's. Clearly, the author finds that kind of over-perfume-y, sugary pink sweets shop to be too much; I would love it, so anyone who wants to take me on a date to Madam Puddifoot's, I'm going. I'm there.

JC: Oh, wow.

Lorrie: Ugh...

JC: There's a little humorous moment of the slurping sounds coming from the next table over...

Lorrie: Oh, God... Ugh... Yuck.

JC: That over-the-top... Okay, teenagers are making out in this cafe. Oh, boy...

Lorrie: *shudders* Can you imagine being Madam Puddifoot? 'Ugh, Hogsmeade day coming up... Okay.'

JC: 'Oh, and it's on Valentine's Day! I'm going to make a fortune, and I'm going to have to use eye bleach afterwards probably... Unsee what I have seen.'

Lorrie: Oh, God... Harry goes from that nightmare to the pub. We encounter another installment of the Hagrid storyline that I think would have been fine to ax entirely. My soul (having left my body over the bad date) has not re-entered yet, so I'm going to just gloss over Hagrid bleeding in the pub.

JC: Though it is interesting that he's talking about, "Yep, family sure is important, yeah," trying to convince himself. "Family... important." Yeah, so there's that. Another thing that I mentioned about Hagrid that I forgot to mention earlier is that there was this note at the beginning where Hagrid tells them he's on probation (the narrator, through Harry, notes that not many kids are upset about that and Harry feels really bad about it), but we've talked before about the fact that Hagrid really isn't a great teacher. Oh, the awkwardness... What if a teacher that you personally really like (but you know is not a good teacher) gets in trouble, and then the other kids are like, "Well, be glad to see the back of that one." You're like, "Oh, but, but..." Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Oh, that's rough.

Lorrie: And then the chapter does a 180: we see Hermione sitting with Luna and Rita Skeeter.

JC: Which is a really big record scratch. 'What?!'

Lorrie: 'What the heck is happening?'

JC: Luna and Rita Skeeter... Yeah, this is interesting.

Lorrie: And Luna is so unperturbed. She's just a delightful anchor for this.

JC: Singing "Weasley Is Our King..."

Lorrie: Yes! Yeah, singing the most offensive song in a completely inoffensive, clueless manner. Very much in her own world, which is good. It's a good thing. We also know Luna's taste: she likes alliaceous food, like gurdyroots; her drink has a cocktail onion. 'Okay, that's what she likes to eat. She's not a sugar kind of girl. Yeah, store that away for the next time that someone takes Luna on a date.'

JC: Oh, I ship Neville and Luna so much. Oh, my God!

Lorrie: I find it an irresistible pairing.

JC: It's irresistible. Oh, I love it, yeah, that 'weird for weird' kind of stuff. I really like that Hermione and Rita talk about this tension that exists between honest journalism and selling papers.

Lorrie: Yes!

JC: It's such a great little conversation where Hermione is perfectly aware of this, and they're talking about it on a very even level.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Yeah. They're kind of equals there. It's really interesting.

Lorrie: The intro to the Rita Skeeter scene is a little bit rough for me, because we come smack up against the author's transphobia or how it appears to me now.

JC: Ah, yeah.

Lorrie: It's very satisfying we get to see what happened to Rita Skeeter because she was so destructive in the previous volume, and Hermione finding a way to limit her was such a triumph, so it's kind of delicious. 'Okay, well, let's see what happened,' and every descriptor of the triumph is put in terms of how her gender performance is fraying. The evidence that we're given is that her curls are now lank, her nail polish is chipped, and her eyeglasses are missing beads; I get what's being conveyed here, but the fact that that's all in the language of the gender performance of a character who was introduced as looking mannish... I can't not see the current transphobia issue around this author and I might have been uncomfortable about it before, but now that's the only thing I can

see in this description. I'm actually glad that there's so much content that follows in the actual scene that I find it worthwhile, but boy, that's a rough entry to it.

JC: I didn't think about it in terms of the gender performance. I remember, when she was first introduced in this section, I had a moment of being cautious -- 'What's she going to say?' -- and I didn't see anything in those words that made me think about how she was introduced in the previous book. I hadn't thought about it in terms of the gender performance, though. That's interesting. I read that a little bit on eggshells, and then went, 'Okay, we got through that. Okay.'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: 'Okay.'

Lorrie: 'Okay.' So we start the scene, and Rita is completely in her usual tabloid mode. She's portrayed as defaulting to it; it's automatic with her and she says, "How has that made you feel, Harry? Betrayed? Distraught? Misunderstood?" She thinks that's the only mode she knows and she tries to bait him into tabloid comments, and I kind of love that she starts composing an article on the spot. It just pours out of her and she has a rapturous expression, and I'm just such a sucker for people liking what they do and being who they are, even with her. 'Aww, she's happy.' Then she remembers her life and says, "Oh, Little Miss Perfect wouldn't want the whole world to know about the Death Eaters that have just come back," and is absolutely shocked when Little Miss Perfect says, "No, actually, that is exactly what I want." Did not see that coming, and I love the detail that Rita jumps and spills her drink at the mention of Voldemort's name because it's a good reminder she's a journalist; she would be at risk writing about him and exposing the names of these powerful people. That's asking something of her which, if she weren't being blackmailed, she would never do.

JC: You also get the impression that she's desperate for work and that she hasn't gotten any.

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah. Hermione has told her, "If you write for money, I will expose you," so she has not had any income.

JC: It also stands out to me, though... In this environment, does that really hold weight? It's hard for me not to compare that situation to the current one where newspapers are being punished when they write stories about Trump. Even just the other day, I think it was the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times*... One of them was not allowed to get on Air Force One because they wrote something.

Lorrie: It was the *Wall Street Journal*.

JC: *Wall Street Journal*, yeah, just because they wrote something perceptibly unpleasant about Trump.

Lorrie: The *Wall Street Journal* is so right-wing. Yeah.

JC: It's just crazy. It's like not letting Fox News on your plane. Yeah. That's happening, but also we've entered this time where it feels like you commit a crime and you can get away with it. The fact that she's an unregistered Animagus... I'm wondering: how much weight would that really carry in this world where the Ministry is so distracted by everything that's happening?

Lorrie: You have hit on one of those spots where the dystopian world of *Harry Potter* is nicer than the reality we live in right now...

JC: Oh, shit.

Lorrie: Because the Death Eaters have just broken out of Azkaban. Until now, when you commit an Azkaban-worthy crime like she has, there's been no reason to think that maybe regimes have changed and you can get away with it. The one first thing has just happened that morning, so no, she has not had time to think, 'Oh, I'm fine,' because the same people in the same courts are still running things. Have they been compromised yet? It takes a little longer than that for the compromising to filter through. She's not safe yet. There's more law and order in her world than there is in our country at the moment.

JC: Interesting.

Lorrie: It hasn't gotten there. We see that in this scene, she's starting to realize that there's a shift. She has the nerve to pitch a story about Harry being delusional, and Hermione says, "No, we don't need that. We need the truth," and Rita says, very coldly and convincingly, "There's no market for a story like that." She says that with all the conviction of someone who lived in a world where that was the absolute truth; she doesn't realize yet that she's not in that world anymore. Hermione contradicts her flatly: "You mean the *Prophet* won't print it because Fudge won't let them," and then that's a turning point. Rita takes a long, hard look at Hermione, and then she shifts tactics because it's not that Rita didn't know that; then she uses a businesslike tone and says, "All right, Fudge is leaning on the *Prophet*, but it comes to the same thing. They won't print a story that shows Harry in a good light. Nobody wants to read it. It's against the public mood. This last Azkaban breakout has got people quite worried enough. People just don't want to believe You-Know-Who's back." That's conventional wisdom and it's also rationalization. How do you know? Are you sure? It definitely reminded me of COVID denialism. No, there are people who do want to keep knowing the truth. You can say that people don't want it -- some people don't, some people do -- and are you sure that that would go against the public mood? This is self-justification, and she still thinks that she's winning this argument. Hermione just looks at her and says, "So the *Daily*

Prophet exists to tell people what they want to hear?” and she thinks she's winning; she says, “The *Prophet* exists to sell itself, you silly girl,” and as we know from this author, when somebody calls Hermione or Harry ‘silly girl’ or ‘stupid boy’ or whatever, they're about to regret it. She describes what she has always believed about journalism, and that's not true anymore. Her world is changing: if the *Daily Prophet* is left up to itself, then yes, it exists to sell itself, but when a more powerful entity takes it over to exploit it – when an oligarch or the state take over a publication – then it no longer exists to sell itself. We have the *Washington Post*, which is now owned by Jeff Bezos, who has an agenda and it's not served by having the *Washington Post* be a reliable source of news; he is making it illegitimate and deliberately causing it to lose subscribers because people can't trust it anymore. He's just trying to remove that source of power; he's getting it to destroy itself because it's only one of many concerns he has. It does not exist to sell itself because he owns it. Elon Musk buying Twitter and gutting it... He fired everybody that was making it work. What kind of strategy is that if you want it to sell itself, losing all of the advertisers instantly? Well, maybe it's not that he wants it to sell itself. If he bought it because he wanted revolutionaries the world over to lose this channel of communication that's going to help them fight oppression, then he would make sure that it doesn't sell itself; it puts itself out of business. This is the new reality that Rita is not acknowledging when she knows that Fudge is leaning on the *Prophet*, but she thinks that she's still in the other economy where she can make a living by going by the old-fashioned values of tabloid journalism instead of being manipulated by the state. That's where Hermione wins the argument and she introduces this whole new concept of journalism that is within Rita's skill set, even if it's never occurred to her before. ‘Well, Rita, not only does the paper not exist to sell itself anymore; you're not going to make any money writing anything anyway. You do write and you don't have a built-in audience -- not a *paying* one, because you're not going to be getting any money off the *Quibbler*. You're going to have to write for the honor of seeing your name in print (which is funny; that's just putting her in her place).’ She's going to have to think what her voice for this story is going to be. She does have a brand -- Hermione has told her, “After one year, you can start writing again,” so she does have the legitimacy of people saying, “Oh, it is Rita Skeeter, even if it's the *Quibbler*, so I have read her before” -- but it's not to ingratiate herself with the publisher, it's not to raise her fee; what Hermione says outrageously turns out to be true. This is her chance to raise the tone of the *Quibbler* a bit, weirdly enough, and to explore this unexplored concept of writing journalism as a member of the Fourth Estate, trying to hold people accountable; she's never done that, and when Hermione reminds her outright, “I can blackmail you,” then she gives Rita the assignment. “Harry, are you ready to tell the public the truth?” She has just become Rita's editor. “That's going to be your angle. I'm your editor. You will write what I tell you. I know you've never done this before, but you're a big girl.” In a very direct sense, she's teaching Rita a lesson. It is a valid way to write and you see her

not happy about it but accepting it, and by the time Harry starts talking, Rita knows what she's going to do with it. Then we have Hermione saying, "Fire away, then, Rita," and she gets a cherry out of her glass. Oh, my God!

JC: I love how Hermione's just such a bad-ass in this chapter. It's Valentine's Day and Hogsmeade Day; Hermione is just focused on what needs to be done and then gets it done.

Lorrie: Yeah. Death Eaters have just escaped, the dementors aren't at Azkaban anymore...

JC: The kids who are making out at the cafe are the ones who don't know what's going on in the world and don't care, and then over here we have Hermione plotting, making a concrete plan to make a difference in the same way that Harry runs the D.A., which was also Hermione's idea.

Lorrie: Yes! Exactly.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: So yeah, Hermione is activating alternative journalism. As we record this, it has not even been a week since Stephen Colbert got de-platformed for criticizing Trump, and different newspapers that used to be the paper of record for their various cities have been hemorrhaging reporters who will not be able to make the same kind of difference from their own individual Substacks or whatever. It's really not the same as having the support of an institution. It's fracture; it's going to take more work on the part of journalists and readers to get at some truth, but that is the way to go. Hermione's character... in the fandom, there's a lot of debate about the part of her character that's blackmailing Rita and whether that's okay or not; to nobody's surprise, I'm one hundred percent behind Hermione. I think that the ideal of journalism as the Fourth Estate is what keeps societies just. I think it's really important.

JC: This is also all making me think about (because I think I remember where this is headed with the *Quibbler* publishing this story that is the truth)... I think it was during the first Trump administration that BuzzFeed started reporting real news.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: They would report a thing and everyone was like, "But it's BuzzFeed"; then it would churn and then everybody else would carry it, and that started happening. It's making me think about that, too.

Lorrie: Yeah. *Teen Vogue*, *Rolling Stone*... Yeah.

JC: Wow, these are some of the last places where independent journalism exists? Ooh...

Lorrie: Yeah. Who owns you?

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. Yeah. In November, when the *Los Angeles Times* editorial board was going to endorse Kamala Harris and the owner said, “No, you don't,” that was a really depressing moment. ‘Okay, we can't believe in that anymore then, all right,’ and it wasn't the fault of the journalists. Well, that's a down note, but what Hermione has pulled off here is a really magnificent, brilliant move and an inspiring one, I think. Yes, truth matters; that is a fit subject for journalism. It's not true that people don't want to know... Yeah, they do, actually, especially now at this point in the story when they're starting to realize it absolutely is going to affect them. The next chapter is called Seen and Unforeseen.

JC: All right, then.

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