

## Transcript

### Episode 5.33

#### Book 5, Chapter 33: Fight and Flight

**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 Thirty-Three: Fight and Flight.

**Lorrie:** Fight and Flight. Harry learns what happens when you go into the Forbidden Forest without a wand. Hermione leads Umbridge and Harry there under the pretext of finding Dumbledore's secret weapon. The centaurs confront Umbridge and Grawp prevents them from punishing Harry and Hermione. Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Neville rejoin Harry and Hermione, and the six of them head to the Ministry to rescue Sirius. Ha, the title, Fight and Flight! When Dumbledore left his office, it was both; he was fleeing, but he was also flying out via phoenix. When Hagrid ran off with Fang, he was fleeing. In this chapter's case, flight means flying, not fleeing, but at a similar point in Books Six and Seven, we're going to see this dual meaning of flight again. You, of course, noticed in our last recording, "fight and flight" is like what happens to a human when you're cornered.

**JC:** Yeah, for sure.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. We get to see Hermione make things up on the run. Whew!

**JC:** Hermione's plan here... I had forgotten what Hermione's plan was. I thought I remembered -- and this, maybe, is the movie version -- that Hermione's plan was to take them to Grawp. Maybe that happened in the movie, I don't remember. I knew that Hermione took them into the forest and then they ran into the centaurs, but what I had forgotten was that Hermione's plan was for the centaurs to notice them. That seemed to

be her plan, and I thought, 'Holy shit. What?!' She's banking on the fact that the centaurs said they wouldn't hurt foals.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** But it's a huge risk to take.

**Lorrie:** Yes, it is.

**JC:** She is taking Umbridge, and she made sure that the other kids... There were going to be as few people as possible so that not as many people would be at risk, but she knows it's risky. She knows what could happen and she can't communicate this plan to Harry; Harry's just got to figure it out for himself, and she hopes that he will. But yeah, that idea of Hermione.... It's nuclear. It's the nuclear option.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** 'I'm going to lead this person into a death trap or lead this person into life-threatening danger, and that's the only way out of this.'

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

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

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Hermione and Harry have one advantage: they're more familiar with the Forbidden Forest than Umbridge is. That doesn't give them that much of an advantage, but she's been legislating against whoever lives in the forest without ever having been in there, without ever having encountered them.

**JC:** Yeah, that sounds familiar.

**Lorrie:** Doesn't it? Yes.

**JC:** Yeah, yeah. Umbridge is a representative of the worst kind of people in government. It's really interesting.

**Lorrie:** Yep.

**JC:** And she's written to be that way. It's very intentional. 'I'm going to judge a whole group of people without understanding them, and I'm going to legislate them out of existence without understanding them. Hmm....' Right?

**Lorrie:** Yes.

**JC:** Yeah. Ugh.

**Lorrie:** And she does the scapegoating. She pushes the kids ahead of her as human shields.

**JC:** Oh, man... That was a really interesting moment rereading that, because yes, it's awful, right? But I had this realization: when she pushes them in front of her and they're like, "Can we at least have a wand?" and she's like, "No," she basically says, "No, my life is worth more than yours." I had a moment of "Snape would never..."

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** The contrast between her and Snape... I keep going back to this idea that you brought up quite a bit: Snape can care for people, even if he doesn't like them, and Umbridge is not anywhere near that.

**Lorrie:** No.

**JC:** Yeah, there's no caring. If it was Malfoy, maybe it would be different, but the people that she doesn't like... there's no caring. The fact that Snape is able to do that... the contrast is incredible. I wrote, "Snape would never..." in my notes, because I was like, 'Damn.' He would throw himself in front of those kids, one hundred percent.

**Lorrie:** Cursing them the whole while, yeah.

**JC:** Cursing them the whole while and then punishing them after the fact, but he would absolutely put himself between Harry and Hermione and the centaurs. Oh, my God. But not Umbridge.

**Lorrie:** And then Umbridge says this thing that's cold and chilling and also possibly not true: "The Ministry places a rather higher value on my life than yours, I'm afraid." I'm not actually sure that's true, because they may think that Harry is more important than she is, although not as a human but strategically. But in terms of thinking that children are better to sacrifice than she is, oh no, she's completely correct. What it does show is how securely she is, at this point in the chapter, in her world with her rules.

**JC:** Yeah. She's just over the top grotesquely cruel throughout this -- this is like a continuation of what we saw in the previous chapter -- but unafraid to call people... She calls Hagrid a half-breed oaf and gleefully. When we get to the centaurs, she's in that space where she thinks she's so superior that she just knows....

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** She's going to insult them when they're armed and their weapons are aimed at them, and she still is going to insult them to their faces. It's bizarre to me, but it also feels like the kind of person that absolutely exists.

**Lorrie:** Oh, yes. Well... Oh, I'm going to look this up now. This is going to date this podcast so much... This past week (we're recording this in September 2025), there's a controversy because there's a Fox newscaster, Brian Kilmeade, who suggested that if

there are homeless people who reject help, they should just be killed. He suggested it could be done through involuntary lethal injection.

**JC:** Ugh.

**Lorrie:** What?!

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Right?

**JC:** A lot of other things that happened this week in the news, we should say. This is the week that Charlie Kirk was assassinated, so I kind of missed this nugget, but holy shit.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. In a week when newspeople are being fired for pointing out things that Charlie Kirk really said on the record, this person suggested that homeless people who refuse help should be killed and has not been fired. That's exactly what is being portrayed by Umbridge saying, "The Ministry places a rather higher value on my life than yours." Imagine being so sure that people who annoy you should be killed... What makes that different from somebody deciding that this Fox News commentator is annoying and should be taken out through involuntary lethal injection? He is so sure that his life has more value; if that got turned around, that would be a surprise to this guy.

**JC:** Yeah. It's also something I could not have imagined that I would be living in a world like this the first time I read this book twenty years ago, or whenever this came out.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Yeah. Twenty years ago when this book came out, I don't think I could've imagined that I would be living in a world where I saw so many of the things in the book and went, "Oh, yeah, that happened last week." Damn.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Several times in this chapter, it's emphasized to us, the reader, that Harry and Hermione don't have wands. Harry is thinking to himself: "Walking into the forest without wands seemed to him to be more foolhardy than anything they had done so far this evening," in this extraordinarily eventful evening. That's going to be the thing that saves them. Hermione doesn't know. Hermione is banking precariously on whether or not they still count as foals, and she doesn't understand that by the centaurs' political norms, it's whether or not you have arms and are going to unfairly use them against other species. That's the dividing line, so yeah, it's a good thing that they don't have their wands.

**JC:** Yeah, that's true. I hadn't thought of that, but that's absolutely true.

**Lorrie:** I love that moment where Harry says, "Are you sure this is the right way?" and she says, "Oh yes," in a steely voice.

**JC:** Yeah. He's like, "We're being a little loud;" she's like, "Yes, we are."

**Lorrie:** Oh, yeah. As a reader, that's kind of a treat, right? I look forward to finding out what happens to people who have underestimated Hermione. That's, like, 'Oh, boy... Oh, boy, we get to see this.' This is something that this author does in this series: she is very careful to set up female villains so that they're only bested by female characters. She avoids having female villains be killed or beaten by boys or men.

**JC:** Oh, that's interesting. Yeah, you're right.

**Lorrie:** There's Rita Skeeter, Marietta Edgecombe, Umbridge... Also, this was the point at which I realized eventually if Bellatrix Lestrange is ever killed, it's not going to be by a male character. That's just a dynamic that she deliberately won't write into this series.

**JC:** Interesting. Yeah. I hadn't thought about that, but yeah.

**Lorrie:** So yeah, Umbridge gives a little scream. She pushes Harry's body in front of her like a shield; that is, according to this universe's rules, the lowest thing you can do.

**JC:** Yeah, and that was one of the things that stood out to me on this read, especially. Again, Snape would never, but also what that would look like to the centaurs. At the same time, they have met Harry and they know Harry...

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** And they have met Hermione, so they recognize these foals, and they see this evil human who is putting these children in front of her as a shield and then insulting them... Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** It doesn't mean they're not going to turn on Harry and Hermione, but it does work in Harry and Hermione's favor, for sure.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. That kind of behavior is loathsome and unnatural to the centaur code. She encounters the centaurs and she asserts her authority over them because she's the "Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic and Headmistress and High Inquisitor of Hogwarts." That's lovely, how absurd those titles sound in the forest.

**JC:** Oh, yeah, and they're looking at her like, 'What?'

**Lorrie:** 'What?!'

**JC:** "You think you have authority out here? What?" Oh, and she just keeps digging the hole deeper. Oh...

**Lorrie:** Yeah, and she doesn't understand why they don't realize "by the laws laid down by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, any attack by half-breeds such as yourselves on a human --" Hermione is frantic and says, "Don't call him that!" That's Hermione, again, not understanding the centaurs do not mind being called half-breeds or anything that associates them with animals; they mind being compared to humans. "Don't call us humans... Ew!" But you call them animals or mules or whatever, and they're like, "Whatever, sure." The thing, of course, that annoys the centaurs the most is when she says that centaurs have "near-human intelligence." Ew! Flatter yourself, okay.

**JC:** But I do like that's the one when they're like, "Um, no."

**Lorrie:** "Ew. Okay, you've gone too far."

**JC:** "You're wrong about that." Yeah.

**Lorrie:** "That's so embarrassing for you."

**JC:** Oh, and then they attack.

**Lorrie:** Oh, gosh, yeah. The thing they attack about is because this is about land rights for them. They say to her, "Why are you in our forest?" and she says, "*Your* forest? I would remind you that you live here only because the Ministry of Magic permits you certain areas of land --" which is such a backward way of saying that this is the only place where they haven't been hounded out. This is the tiny space that they've been allotted. "Okay, you're going to talk about land rights, lady?" That's the line at which the centaurs do their warning shot, which again is very carefully choreographed. They have their own rules that they're playing by. 'She talks about that? Let's fire a warning shot that catches her hair.' It's really precise, and they know and enjoy that this is going to scare her and say, "Whose forest is it now, human?" Hermione's desperately trying to shush Umbridge -- 'You idiot!' -- but it was too late, because Umbridge stupidly does the Unforgivable thing to centaurs: she uses her wand on them to cast spells. That's the thing: the Ministry has made it illegal for centaurs or any magical beings other than wizards and witches to carry wands to give themselves this artificial advantage in being armed. Using that inequality... That's the thing where the centaurs say, "Okay. Well, now we can defend ourselves." Up until that point, they were negotiating -- they were trying to deal with her -- but nope; you do that, the centaurs will defend themselves. Bane physically lifts Umbridge and her wand falls, and the wand is the issue here. Harry sees it and thinks, 'Oh, if I could try to reach it,' but fortunately for Harry, "a centaur's hoof descended upon the wand and it broke cleanly in half." Okay, that was the only arms present that distinguished these three magical humans from the centaurs, and that was the thing that had to be broken. Then Umbridge gets borne away through the trees by Bane, still screaming non-stop.

**JC:** I do like the image of the screaming getting further and further away as she's dragged off. There's always been... I remember reading some controversy about this idea of what happened to Umbridge after this, because she does reappear in the next book. They didn't kill her.

**Lorrie:** Right.

**JC:** What did they do to her? I just remember reading some interesting implications that maybe there was a sexual assault, or maybe... What did they do to her and then let her go? I don't know. Does that question get answered?

**Lorrie:** That is one of the stickiest questions that I've encountered in *Harry Potter* fandom, because there's more than one answer to that. I know where I come down on it, but what did you think? How did you respond when you read it, just as an individual reading it?

**JC:** I guess the first time, I thought that she was going to die. I thought they were going to take her off and kill her, so I was very surprised when she showed up in the next book and still in the Ministry, and wondered really what happened. Did she escape? Did someone rescue her? Did they let her go? Did they keep her captive for a while? I didn't know what the story was. This time, that moment again brought up those questions for me. Now what? She's being carried away, and at least right now, the kids are afraid to go and do the thing that they think they need to do. Umbridge is out of the castle, and we don't even know who's in charge. Who is in charge of Hogwarts?

**Lorrie:** Yes.

**JC:** Because McGonagall's not there... Oh, my God, it raises some other questions that I don't think I thought about before, but I am curious what Umbridge's story is from here.

**Lorrie:** Did sexual assault cross your mind?

**JC:** Not until I read it in a fan forum. It did not.

**Lorrie:** And then what did you think when you read it?

**JC:** I remember thinking that doesn't sound like the centaurs. I don't think that's something they would do. I'm not getting the vibe from them that they would use sexual assault as a punishment. We have no idea how their society works. It didn't feel like something they would... That's something that would be so beneath them that I didn't think that made any sense to me, but I don't know.

**Lorrie:** And how familiar are you with general Greek mythology?

**JC:** Very little. Very little, yeah.

**Lorrie:** Okay, yeah. The people who are really familiar with Greek mythology have that iconography in their heads: being carried away by centaurs is a way of saying that somebody was raped and often to do with conflicts or war or some sort of border skirmish. The iconography is really powerful. I agree with you that the evidence of these particular centaurs doesn't point in that direction at all, because we're shown that their society has really strict, logical rules. We don't know most of them -- we see evidence of them -- but they know what their code is and they follow it really strictly, and it hasn't gone in that direction at all. But I think, also, that the iconography of centaurs taking away a woman is so strong that I think that was meant as "if that's what you read into this, it's available as a reading." I don't think it's one of those things where the author might have said, "Oh, my God, people read it that way?! I didn't mean that at all." It's more like if you see that there -- this is a children's series -- you can if that's what you see; if you don't see that, that is also supported. I think more of the evidence supports that it wasn't sexual assault, but if the author had wanted to make it absolutely clear that there was no threat of sexual assault, then she could have written it differently.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** I don't see the slightest evidence that it actually was sexual assault -- or that it happened or that it was intended -- except for this history of the iconography of centaurs taking women away. One of the sticking points in the fandom is if sexual assault was intended, then we have the thorny, ethical issue of Hermione delivering another female person for rape, which is so scary people don't know what to do with that. Uh, is that okay? I don't think within the story that that's what Hermione was aiming for, but I also don't think that Hermione had a whole lot of choices at this point; she discovers very soon in this chapter that she had miscalculated gravely, but not in that direction. There was a comment made by someone named Iain Walker on MuggleNet about why Iain Walker does not think that sexual assault was intended here, and part of that is because there's more than one archetype of a centaur. There are centaurs who were war-oriented and did in fact assault people, sexually and otherwise; there are also centaurs who were wise, who were astronomers and healers and doctors, and the way these centaurs talk is a lot more like those -- the way they're like, "Mars is bright tonight" -- and they have all this wisdom that's not particularly relevant to humans because we're kind of too dumb to understand. When they try to teach humans, then they eventually just sigh and say, "Well, you're not going to get it." But more, we have seen them operate by their own code; we know that what they were about to do to Firenze was according to their own laws -- they were going to execute -- and they are offended by Hagrid because he interfered with their legal process. Hagrid's argument was, "But they were going to kill him," and the centaurs' argument is, "We were going to kill him. Yes, that's not in dispute." They want sovereignty. That's their issue: they want to operate as they see fit on land that... Well, this is not their preference. They didn't want to be told

by the Ministry that if they exceed these boundaries, then they're going to be attacked by weapons that are forbidden to them. "But you said we could live here. We're living here. What's your problem?" One of their codes is "We do not attack foals," but Hermione... the clock is running out on whether these two are foals or not -- they're almost grown -- and that's the mistaken fantasy. Hermione was hoping that they could be the last grown-ups around. She wanted them to be the grown-ups for her. "Okay, if you protect foals, we're coming to you as foals. Please protect us." What she doesn't understand about centaur society is that she was going to manage that in a way that's exploitative. She was hoping that they would labor for her, which is something that's so offensive to them that they were going to execute somebody. They're trying to explain to her, "Oh, no, if you're going to assume that we're just your servants and you can just manipulate us..." Then one of them says "They can join the woman," which means not that they're going to rape Harry and Hermione; it means that they're going to try Harry and Hermione as adults. That's the line that they're crossing. They don't have wands, thank goodness; if they had used their wands, then you know for sure they would be joining the woman. But as far as I can tell (based on the textual evidence), what Bane is doing by carrying away Umbridge is I think he's taking her to trial. I think that he's going to be holding her as hostage while they confront the Ministry, saying, "There was a treaty. We did not want to be confined to this land, but this is the land that we are supposed to live in with our sovereign rules, and then this person comes in waving her wand at us." They wouldn't execute her right away, and if Harry and Hermione are going to behave the same way, then they can join the woman. We have the centaurs revolted and yelling: "We are an ancient people who will not stand wizard invasions and insults," and Hermione's like, "What? What did I say?" So yeah, if there's land disputes with cultures that don't understand each other, uh... I think this is such a touchy area that a lot of times in fandom people want to either be for or against Hermione: either champion what she did or roundly reject her. "Oh, well, that was a stupid thing for her to do." Under the circumstances, she didn't have that much choice either. People live in societies. We don't know a lot about each other's societies. This happens.

**JC:** It's not the first time that we've seen Hermione do something like this. She has her own moral code, right?

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** She was making this up as she went along to prevent Umbridge from torturing Harry and quickly think, 'Well, the centaurs... There are no grown-ups left. The centaurs are in some ways stronger than wizards and witches, so maybe they're grown-ups. They protect foals, so in that sense they are grown-ups. I don't know what else to do, but there's a way in which they're stronger than this small, angry woman brandishing a

stick, so all right, we'll go. They have rules. I don't know what those rules are, but there are rules somewhere.' Somebody is still living by rules and being grown-ups.

**JC:** And surely Umbridge will go barrel in and break their rules.

**Lorrie:** Just let nature take its course.

**JC:** Exactly. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** So Hermione's not in that great of a position here.

**JC:** That's true, that's true.

**Lorrie:** And nobody else has any ideas. She's at least opening up some opportunity, and then is horrified to see that Umbridge does even worse in front of these centaurs than she was counting on. Then we get a scarier and far less triumphant version of the Ford Anglia rescue in the second book -- that moment when like, 'Oh, no, we've run out of options' -- and then we get Grawp stumbling through, and it's sad. It's so sad because he's also looking for a grown-up.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** He's just as uncared for as these foals with no teachers, but he's also just as ill-adapted as the centaurs to being confined to this space that's not meant for him. Also, him trying to reach for human language and recognizing that Hermione was somebody that was placed *in loco parentis* for him and saying in human language, "Where Hagger?"

**JC:** And that "Want Hagger" was like, oh....

**Lorrie:** Ouch!

**JC:** That's the first time I felt some sympathy for Grawp, I think. I was like, 'Aaawww.'

**Lorrie:** He doesn't belong here! He wasn't having a good time where he was being beaten up, but this is not even where he lives and he doesn't know anyone here. He knew one person here, but it's a little bit like keeping Harry with the Dursleys.

**JC:** Hmm.

**Lorrie:** "Well, Lily Potter is dead, but Petunia had something to do with her." I don't know what Hagrid thought that Hermione and Harry could do for Grawp, but what they do for him is remind him that Hagrid was there -- there's a connection to Hagrid -- and there's just so little help for any of the people in this scene. No, there are no grown-ups, but the people who are lost do have their own strength. Sometimes that doesn't help; sometimes, it can even harm, but here's Grawp with all this loneliness and all this strength and he knocks over a centaur. It's not even clear if he intended to or not, but

again the centaurs, as soon as you attack, they're like, "Okay, we can defend ourselves," so they attack him with arrows. Grawp has now got all these thorns stuck that I don't know how he ever gets them out. There are no winners in this scene.

**JC:** Yeah. It's really tragic. I think we see Grawp later in the series, but it's just tragic, and then Harry and Hermione just leave. They just run, and Grawp is left battling the centaurs. Oh, how does that story even end? What happens?

**Lorrie:** Yeah. It's not like Harry and Hermine could have done anything for him at that point.

**JC:** True.

**Lorrie:** They should run.

**JC:** But I think the narrative just drops it here, right? We never find out.

**Lorrie:** They have to take care of themselves as best they can. Grawp is going to somehow have to deal with the thorns that are now embedded into him. He's bleeding all over the place...

**JC:** Bleeding all over, yeah, because Harry gets a spray of blood.

**Lorrie:** Ugh... The centaurs are defending themselves against this much, much larger, stronger threat. Meanwhile, Bane is holding their hostage captive and they've just been horrendously insulted. This threat that they've been living with... They've been living with Grawp in the forest like this for all these months; you can see why they would be like, "Hagrid, what? Why are you doing this to us? First, you bring this guy, and then you interfere with our due process. We're really not happy with you, Hagrid. So yeah, good for Harry and Hermione for just leaving as fast as they can. Then Harry -- poor Harry -- finally loses it and has to take it out on Hermione. "Okay, that was a great plan!" Well, nobody else had anything better and that wasn't fair, but you can really see why Harry is at the end of his resources at this point. Fortunately, that's when their friends show up: Ron, Ginny, Neville, and Luna are beaten but triumphant. They look really happy with themselves. They've gotten away using the Defense training that they learned under Harry and Hermione. Ron brings his friends' wands back. Yay! Now that the centaurs are gone, it's safe to reintroduce wands into the scene.

**JC:** I do love the description of how they got away, though. Once they realized the grown-ups were gone, it was like, 'We can overpower,' and they did.

**Lorrie:** Yes! Yeah.

**JC:** I love that, actually. That's great.

**Lorrie:** Didn't see that coming. Yeah, and Neville's skill gets a little special shout-out.

**JC:** Yeah, and Ginny's Bat-Bogey Hex, the infamous Bat-Bogey Hex.

**Lorrie:** Yes. So yeah, there's Draco losing his dignity.

**JC:** Again.

**Lorrie:** Yes.

**JC:** As often happens to Draco.

**Lorrie:** Yes, his purpose in this narrative.

**JC:** And then we have this really interesting sequence where Harry's like, "Well, I have to get to the Ministry," and then they're all like, "Great. What's the plan?" He's like, "What? What do you mean?" "Us. Of course, we're coming with you." Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** I love the loyalty to Harry, and they're looking at Harry as "Harry's our leader, or if Harry says this is important, then we're all going to join this fight." I guess it's Neville who reminds him that "this is what you trained us for."

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** "You trained us for this. We're ready."

**Lorrie:** Yeah. "We were going to use these skills to fight in a crisis." It's like when you give a teenager a credit card to use only for emergencies. "Well, this is an emergency."

**JC:** "Here we are." Yeah.

**Lorrie:** And it's kind of fun to see Harry losing the argument. Ginny has that great argument: "I'm three years older than you were when you fought You-Know-Who." This is true. What are you going to do, wait for things to get worse? Uh, no, I think "Break glass in case of emergency," that moment is here. Neville says -- Oh, this really strikes home. He asks if the D.A. was all just a game or something. Yeah, Harry... Yeah. Harry... This is a mature thing for him to not say: one of his hesitations is that he's not sure that these fighters are going to actually help. Maybe they would get things done better without them, but no. No, it is their fight, too. Is it their fight, too? Yes. Okay. Of course, Luna has to come because she knows how they're going to get them there.

**JC:** Also, I think Harry's very aware of what happened last time he went off to potentially face Voldemort, and he's looking at these people and thinking, 'Which ones of you are going to die?'

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** I think a little bit of it is just protectiveness. No, Voldemort has no hesitation about killing people who are just in the way.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. But Harry has to admit to himself, 'Are they that much safer if they don't come?' There is a point at which there's no safe place anymore. Either you can fight and possibly die or you can hide and possibly die, and here they are ready to fight. Okay... I love that somewhere in there, Harry has realized that thestrals are warm and beautiful.

**JC:** That is such an interesting moment, yeah. Luna points them out and then says that Hagrid taught them that they're very good at finding the place that their rider is looking for.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** And I don't remember reading that, so I thought, 'Is that a time when Harry wasn't paying attention, or did I just forget that detail?'

**Lorrie:** It's tucked in there.

**JC:** Okay, yeah, interesting. But yeah, Luna's the one who points this out. Again, it's a bit of Hagrid's teaching coming to them in the moment when they really need it, which is really, really lovely.

**Lorrie:** Well, narratively, it's like in *Chamber of Secrets* when Dumbledore says, "This is Fawkes, my phoenix. He's very good at carrying really, really heavy loads." It's just like you have to put that in there so that later on...

**JC:** That later on...

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Yeah, so that's interesting. But yeah, that moment when Harry goes to pet one and he wonders how he ever found it ugly... That's really... yeah. These things look like horses of death, right? Well, they kind of are horses of death, but they look terrifying. They look like ghosts in a sense; not everyone can see them and they're terrifying, but actually, they're beautiful. Oh, I really like that.

**Lorrie:** I think the detail that really gets me is how warm they are, because I don't expect that. I expect them to be cold like ghosts. No, they're warm. They know where they're going and they're very powerful.

**JC:** Also, the image of one licking the blood off of Harry...

**Lorrie:** I know!

**JC:** It's adorable. There's something very... Yeah, I find that really cute.

**Lorrie:** Yeah, and the indignity of Luna saying, "You must really smell." Thanks, Luna. Plot moving along here.

**JC:** Yeah. Then all the other thestrals come, and then Harry has no more excuses. It's like, "All right. Well, let's get on. Let's go."

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** But the last bit says he literally had no excuse now. "'All right,' he said angrily, 'pick one and get on, then.'"

**Lorrie:** Yes.

**JC:** And then I turn the page and I'm like, 'What, that's the end of the chapter?'

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** That feels like a weird place to end the chapter, but hey.

**Lorrie:** Hey, we're not paying attention to chapter breaks at this point.

**JC:** Yeah, you're right. This is the point at which the chapter breaks are just... I don't even know why they're there, because you just keep reading at this point.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** They're there to show this author's triumph over chapter breaks. That's something that we can enjoy with her as readers: let this author take care of you. She has built this story -- this volume in particular -- laboriously over hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pages.

**JC:** Right.

**Lorrie:** She's loaded up the stakes. The stakes are higher than they've ever been in this series before; just let her take you where the story is going.

**JC:** Right.

**Lorrie:** As a reader, I feel a lot of trust in this author at this point. I'm not afraid that she's going to let me down. I can't wait to see what she's got next, and I cannot guess. There's only one way to find out: turn the page.

**JC:** Turn the page, yeah.

**Lorrie:** She is a really trustworthy storyteller for me. That's a phenomenon that's been true of this series since it was first published: people were offended that this fantasy pulp children's series was hogging all the bestseller spots that were meant for high-brow

fiction that you have to struggle to force yourself to read. They're so offended -- "Why is this page-turning junk so compelling?" -- but they had to acknowledge the phenomenon that this had readers turning pages.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** At some point, you can't argue with that. You can try; you look stupid in the end.

**JC:** Yeah. I've said this many times: I'm a terrible reader in the sense that I don't want to read things that are hard to read. I do plenty of hard things in my life; reading is something I do for fun. I want it to be fun and I want to be entertaining, so I choose the things I read to do that for me. This series is just such a great example of that. I started reading this at a time in my life when I really didn't have much time, but believed when people said "it will take you to another place, it'll be a great break from whatever's stressing you out, it'll be a fun read, you're going to have a blast." That's what I was looking for, and that still is what I look for when I read. I know that there are plenty of people who love to (online) be very critical of this series and say that it's not good, and I think that our podcast is... Well, we're preaching to the choir. The people who would listen to this podcast are ones who already probably think that this is a very good series, but I think the kind of analysis that you do really contradicts those arguments ("Oh, it's just like pulp, whatever") but this stands up to this analysis. Also, you can read it on the level that's just fun. That's kind of hard to do both of those things at the same time, I think.

**Lorrie:** It really is.

**JC:** That's one of the things I think is remarkable about the whole series and why it became such a phenomenon, because you could read it on so many different levels. Not everybody can write that.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. That's one of the defenses of this series: 'Okay, fine, you write something that compelling, then. What, are you above that? That's not why you can't do it.' You can't do it because most people can't, because this is hard. She's actually good. "In my opinion..."

**JC:** Here's the thing that I think gets lost in some of the discourse. You can say, "Yes, she's a damn good writer and she wrote a damn good series, and at the same time she's a terrible human being."

**Lorrie:** Yes.

**JC:** Those two things can be true at the same time, and I know that people seem not to want that to be true. The fact that she's a terrible human being shouldn't negate her work being good, and that's never been true in the history of people. I don't know why it would be true now, but yeah. I think that's one of the things that is challenging about enjoying this series, at this point, is dealing with that. Even though I really am unhappy with her as a human being and wish she would just stop and go away, the work that she's done in this series is... Yeah, it's excellent.

**Lorrie:** It wouldn't be a problem if she were actually a bad writer.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** If she were actually a bad writer and there hadn't been genuine enjoyment and loyalty to this series, then she would just be a bad person now and there would be no controversy.

**JC:** She wouldn't have nearly as much money to throw at her political causes, but yeah. Plenty of other people have done this in the past, so she's not the only one.

**Lorrie:** Yeah. Also, I know this is just a figure of speech, but when you're saying that it can be true at the same time (that she wrote this good series, and that she's become a really horrible person), it's actually not literally at the same time, and that's a part of the problem, too.

**JC:** Okay, I see what you mean. Yeah. If you think about it in time...

**Lorrie:** It's the same person twenty years later, which scares us because that reminds us of the decay of the world around us and potential for anybody, including ourselves, to betray what's important.

**JC:** That is a really good point. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** That's what's so damn scary. "I trusted her. These words are still the same as the ones I trusted."

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Ugh... I don't know what tomorrow brings, but she's one of the people leading us into a more dangerous world. Ugh... "Pick a thestral and get on." Odd.

**JC:** Do you think that's part of why people go back and try to re-analyze the book and look for so much evidence of her being a bigot? There's a certain group of people who like to say, "Well, it was there all along, if you just knew to look for it." It's that part of the impulse to prove that she was always this way and it's not that she changed, which is worse, I guess, which is worse. Is it worse that she was always like this and just waited for it to emerge into the sunlight, or that she became this person?

**Lorrie:** My guess... My personal take on this is that it's people trying to defend themselves, because I don't see that attempt from people who were adults when they read the books first.

**JC:** Oh, interesting.

**Lorrie:** I see it from people who accepted these books when they were children and didn't have the critical faculties to see, 'Okay, this is a woman of a certain race and background writing these limitations that are her own personal prejudices.' These are things that I saw because I was in my thirties, and anything that says \*gasps\* "She's doing tokenism again!" "Yeah, that's always been there." Well, not if you were eight. I feel like it's adults trying to go back and protect their kid selves, remembering that when they were of an age that first let this story into their minds and let this story shape them; they didn't have defenses against the built-in prejudices that this author was injecting along with everything that was good. They want to go back and say, "What did I let in? What poisons do I wish now I hadn't let in? But what was I supposed to do? I was a child."

**JC:** Ooh, yeah.

**Lorrie:** That's what I see.

**JC:** Yeah. I can identify with that as a Gen X-er who grew up watching all of those teen movies that came out in the 80s that we'd all have such fond feelings about, but when you go back and look at them now, you're like, 'Damn, that's problematic as shit.'

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** If the maker of those had also turned out to be... I don't know. I'm probably stepping in it here, but yeah. I can see why something that you loved as a child, if you went back and took another look at it, you would feel really betrayed by that. I could see that. Yeah.

**Lorrie:** But it's not too late to go back and reread and build up those defenses. That's just what any rereading does. That's what happens when culture ages and you, as the consumer of culture, also age. What I'm finding is that the achievement that this author presented us in this chapter and what she's doing with the thundering end to this volume still stands to me. I think that's separate from the disgusting, very dangerous politics that she's funding now. I don't think that the evil she's doing now changes the words she wrote here. I am really impressed with this book here, and I don't want to say I enjoy it less when I don't, because if I did enjoy it less, then this wouldn't be an issue. The fact that the story still works for me is why this is an issue at all. Ugh.

**JC:** Yeah. I wonder... I compare a little bit to... This is not an accurate comparison at all, but I grew up at a time when Woody Allen was revered amongst filmmakers, right?

**Lorrie:** Yes.

**JC:** We have in my house a collection of all of Woody Allen's films on DVD, and during the pandemic, my partner decided he wanted to re-watch them all and I couldn't watch them.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** I never was a big fan, I guess, of Woody Allen, so it was hard to watch them and not think about Woody Allen.

**Lorrie:** Yeah, yeah.

**JC:** Yeah. I couldn't separate the two. I do understand people who were never particularly huge *Harry Potter* fans, who maybe just saw the movies or whatever... I completely understand when they think, 'Why would I read those books now? All I could think about would be this person.' I get it.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** I do wonder long-term, in fifty years, what is going to be the impact of that? Are people going to look back and recognize, "Oh, that author was blah, blah, blah," or will it not matter anymore? I have no idea. I think Woody Allen's films are always going to be there.

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** Will the taint of him continue to push them out of the public consciousness? Probably not.

**Lorrie:** If you think about books that were written in other centuries that are still revered for how well they capture their time and their era and culture -- and that the author was, while alive, embroiled in some scandal that made them hated -- the scandal eventually becomes something that you have to understand intellectually through footnotes because the moment passes, like Oscar Wilde. At this point, among the people I know, the fact that he was imprisoned and tortured for being gay and writing these really decadent gay plays and stories... That's part of his badassery. That adds to his legend. That is not how he was experienced in his lifetime, and when we see the story now, it's shown as instructive about what the values at his time were. If we see J.K. Rowling now and she has all this fat-shaming, wow... Was the culture more fat-shamey then? Then we find evidence some of it was her individuality, and some of it was yes, the culture was. Yeah, at some point, the footnote for the *Harry Potter* series is going to be, "and then she became one of the leading figures in a bizarre and bloody and awful movement to scapegoat trans people for everything." Why? That was a thing happening at the time. Hopefully not for much longer, because it's godawful.

**JC:** I would like to envision a time when that is in the distant past and seems cruel and weird...

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** And not just the norm of society. I really want to believe that people will be able to look back and go, 'Wow, that's weird. Why did that happen? Ugh, humans are awful.' Yeah. Ugh...

**Lorrie:** But yes, this is an issue that has power because the series reached a lot of readers. She's not the only horrible big-name transphobe out there, but she is in her own category because fiction reaches a different part of your emotions than the news does.

**JC:** It's the question that we keep coming back to, or at least I feel like I keep coming back to, dealing with that. It's so easy to get lost in the reading and then to step back and think, 'Oh, that's right.'

**Lorrie:** Yeah.

**JC:** All these words were written by a human being who has gone off the deep end of hate.

**Lorrie:** Yes, and has removed *Harry Potter* from one of the enjoyments that you can use as escapism from transphobia of the current day...

**JC:** Yes, that's true.

**Lorrie:** Because that sure is something that we need escapism from on a day-to-day basis in 2025.

**JC:** Yeah.

**Lorrie:** Quite appropriately, the next chapter is called The Department of Mysteries.

**JC:** Oooh... and finally, after all these dreams after all these months, Harry is going to see what Voldemort wants him to find. Yep.

**Lorrie:** Why he's been obsessing... Yeah. All right. Well, I'm looking forward to that.

**JC:** All right.

**Caroline:** You've been listening to *Harry Potter After 2020* with hosts Lorrie Kim and JC. You can find show notes for this and all other episodes at [HPAfter2020.com](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.