

Transcript

Episode 6.10

Book 6, Chapter 10: The House of Gaunt

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 Six, Chapter Ten: The House of Gaunt.

Lorrie: The House of Gaunt. For Harry's first private lesson with Dumbledore, Dumbledore shows him where Voldemort's parents came from. This might be the heaviest chapter so far. I didn't realize I was going to think that until I read it, and then I realized just how many really heavy major themes are dealt with in this chapter and turned into fiction, but the underlying themes are among the heaviest, I think, that the human race grapples with in existence. Oof.

JC: They really are. I remember reading this the first time -- again, I was plowing through the book because it was, 'Got to read it!' -- and I was just as curious as Harry and everyone else about 'what is Dumbledore going to teach in these private lessons?' I left this chapter just as confused as Harry about what the point of it was, but reading it this time and reading it all these years later (and reading it in this particular moment), it really was like being knocked off my feet. It's very dark, and I see exactly what Dumbledore's doing in a way I could not have seen the first read (that I might not even have been able to see at that time). Even if I had reread it at the time, I don't know if I would have had the experience that I had this time. It

was really interesting, and then the number of ways in which this story made me think about things that have happened in this country the last decade also shocked me. Yeah.

Lorrie: We are now on Book Six of a seven-book series. When we started this podcast, you were very much not a re-reader.

JC: True.

Lorrie: And now you're talking about not only a reread but multiple rereads, and you just made reference to a difference in your understanding from the second reread to a future reread, so there's been a change in you.

JC: Oh, definitely. Yeah, character development has occurred, for sure. I'm not a person who returns to media; I enjoy it as it was the first time, with exceptions. I've talked to you before about how my favorite movie of all time is *Ocean's Eleven* and I can watch it over and over and over, and every time I see something new. I've never really thought that way about a book before (and I know many people feel that way about this series), but I'm not a rereader. I love to read it, and then move on to thinking about other things; I don't return to it, so it's been very interesting to see the value in that here. Yeah. Definitely, I'm getting a lot out of it and I'm learning a lot about the value of reading it again and looking for things later. I think the time gap here, between my first read and now, is what's really interesting to me.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I'm realizing how differently I'm reading it than I did before, than I would have done if I had reread it. If I'd have reread it five times in 2005, it wouldn't have felt the same as this reread does, so that's interesting, too. It's making me think about other works of art to go back to. Here's an example: when we were in New York a few weeks back (when we went to see *Cursed Child*), I went to see *Chess* one afternoon (the revival of *Chess*), which is a musical that I loved all my childhood. I vaguely knew the story and I've seen it on stage before. This is a revival, and they redid some of the story to emphasize different elements...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: But parts of that story hit me differently now, and I think that even when I saw it in the 2000s, I wasn't thinking about the Cold War and the way that fascist

regimes with dictators will manipulate people for their own end and do so very explicitly to their face. That felt like a storybook villain kind of a thing back in the eighties; even though I knew it was real, it felt like a fairy tale, and it seems much more real to me now.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Watching the way that the people in the story were being manipulated by their respective governments was... Wow. I had a different reaction to it than I would have had twenty years ago, and it's all because of the world I live in now and the experiences that I've had since, the age I am and everything. That's an experience that this reread has brought me: the value of going back to a piece of art and looking at it from a new perspective. You've walked around; now, you're looking at it from this angle (and maybe from this height or whatever, wherever you are) and you're just going to see different things. That's been really interesting to do with this series. I've really enjoyed it.

Lorrie: The thing that I think about when you say "from this angle": Time-Turners and/or going into the Pensieve to go back to something that you perceived in your own past... You get a perspective on yourself and who you were then, as well as...

JC: Oh, that's true.

Lorrie: 'Wow, is that how I looked from the back? Okay?'

JC: 'Look how young I looked then.' Yeah, exactly.

Lorrie: Oh, yeah.

JC: 'I thought I was fat then? Look at me!' Right. All of those kinds of feelings, but yeah, it is a Pensieve in a way. You're going back to a thing and (you've said this before) the text has not changed, but we have. Thinking of the books as a Pensieve in a way and being able to go back, you can identify the moments that you had feelings about, but you experience that and you experience your own memory of that differently.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That's really interesting, too.

Lorrie: Yeah, and the way that the text can change genres without a single word changing -- that it can go from fairy tale or heavy allegory to being pretty much a documentary -- what has changed? Not the book.

JC: Not the book. It is the same book it was, yeah.

Lorrie: Yes, it is.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: All right. Here you are, many years later in a different political climate, rereading this extremely dark history that Dumbledore is beginning to reveal to Harry. We start out this chapter with the update that, as Harry has used the Half-Blood Prince's instructions a few times more and more, Slughorn has cemented this false notion "that he had rarely taught anyone so talented" at Potions as Harry. Super, super imposter syndrome, right?

JC: Oh, my gosh.

Lorrie: Yeah. This has happened enough times so that Harry knows he's onto something good, and the Half-Blood Prince is a much better teacher to Harry than Snape ever was. The Half-Blood Prince is a better teacher for Harry than Libatius Borage is and better than Snape ever was, and he's also a better teacher for Harry than he is for Ron, who can't read his writing; we don't know about Hermione because she's got a chip on her shoulder about this.

JC: And is determined to make the original book work, which I also respect.

Lorrie: I understand.

JC: I understand that. 'No, this is how it's supposed to go. It's supposed to work. It must be me. If I just do it this way...' I keep going back to cooking with Potions because it's like, 'This is what the recipe says. What's happened? Why?' If you ignore the comments of the readers, do so at your peril. I get it, Hermione.

Lorrie: Also, that cheating on principle is suspect.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: She has been cheated off of so many times (including in this chapter where Ron and Harry keep trying to copy off of her work), and she knows that that whole

concept is really yucky. Generally, it's not a bad policy to steer clear, but here her feelings are being complicated by how incredibly unable she is to deal with not winning. How painful... She's ignoring this book, she has poor results consistently, and she becomes increasingly bad-tempered, which maybe wouldn't be as funny if I didn't recognize it so much.

JC: For sure, for sure. Another thing that this whole bit made me think about was AI and the fact that there are plenty of people (let's say students, in particular) who have no problem having AI do the work for them. Then there are students who very rightly will say, "What are you... This isn't you. This isn't your work. You're not doing the thinking; the AI is doing the thinking. You're not the one being creative and synthesizing all this stuff yourself," but then they're over here struggling on their own. They're putting in all this work, and maybe if the person's not getting caught with less effort, they're getting a reward, right?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That's kind of what's happening here. Harry is getting a reward for this. It doesn't mean that he's not doing the work and it doesn't mean that he's not learning because this is not AI; it's like Spark Notes or something for Potions.

Lorrie: Well, it is the opposite of AI, and it's the opposite of Spark Notes in that it was never intended to be marketed to somebody for the purpose of a shortcut. What it turns out to be -- but Hermione is right in believing that, "Well, this hasn't been tested yet"; Harry is in the process of testing it -- is somebody's genuine research and rigorously tested results that were not made public, but you don't know that at the outset.

JC: That's true.

Lorrie: Right? As Hermione will be correct in noting later, there are reasons still to be cautious...

JC: That is true.

Lorrie: And when you're discovering what somebody has tested out for themselves, you yourself should also test it out and not take it on faith that because this person was right all these other times... You can't trust that every single thing

will be right. That's going to turn out to be very regrettable for Harry in the near future.

JC: That is true. It's also a little bit less like AI and more like if you bought used textbooks in college and other people had written notes in the margins (and you couldn't not read them as you're going through the book), but you had to decide: 'was this person an idiot? Was this person better than me at this?' You had to decide that as you went along. 'Am I going to ignore it?'

Lorrie: Yeah. 'What time is this paper due, and how much does this matter in my grade? If it's due tomorrow and this is the difference between flunking or passing, maybe I'll just try.'

JC: 'Yeah, just take some of these ideas.' Yeah.

Lorrie: 'Got to turn in something!' Hermione's in the maddening position of competing with somebody who she can't see and in some way doesn't even exist, but is unmistakably present (is unmistakably a separate persona) from whatever interpretation Harry is giving and is consistently beating her. This is maddening. She is so unhappy this year. I love this sentence: "Harry wondered vaguely who the Half-Blood Prince had been." There isn't that much point in trying to figure out more than that, but it's taking shape in his mind, and this is what makes it so welcome to me. This is the opposite of 'death of the author.' It is not just the reader and the text making meaning; there is an author behind it, and that author is a person -- is a mentality -- that can take shape and does come from a person or a group of authors. The author's individuality emerges recognizably, and bits of that writer's biography and worldview come through invariably; Harry is recognizing it, and poor Hermione is going nuts.

JC: I know. It's so interesting. We talked about this in a previous episode: when the book was first introduced, I think I said when the reveal came later that it was Snape's book, I was gobsmacked. I had no idea; it completely caught me off guard. Then I thought about it a bit later, and thought, 'Why hadn't I noticed that earlier? Why would it have been in the dungeon? If someone put that much work into it, they would have kept it. Why did it land there and stay there all these years? Who would have put it there?'

Lorrie: Right.

JC: It doesn't even make -- Of course it's Snape! It's so interesting that I never thought that hard about it, but anyway...

Lorrie: Well, if you think about the experience of going into this as a first-time reader, this is a magic series. There are a lot of times when she throws stuff at the reader that we didn't see coming in, and that's part of the experience that you signed on for, right? You can't always guess, and if you could always guess, then it would be disappointing and you might want your money back.

JC: True, true. Yeah.

Lorrie: Oh, gosh. "There was barely a page on which the Prince had not made additional notes, not all of them concerned with potion-making."

See, Harry? This is why you should be careful. "Here and there were directions for what looked like spells that the Prince had made up himself."

Then I get a little flush of pride in my guy. This person is an inventor. This person is creative and original. That's the nature of this thinker, and that also gets me thinking about the difference between teen Snape and Hermione. Hermione is more of a researcher; she's not so much of an inventor. She does invent -- she can invent, she can be creative -- but her superpower is in research. She's not so much making up new solutions like the Prince obviously did for his own entertainment; this is just the way his brain worked. Harry's talking about the Prince and what he's made of himself: "'Or herself,' said Hermione irritably. 'It might have been a girl. I think the handwriting looks more like a girl's than a boy's.'" She's irritated as heck, she is seeing herself in the text, she's super competitive and she's super insecure, and this opens up the gender issue of this author again...

JC: Yes.

Lorrie: Partly because, as Racheline Maltese has pointed out, potions and poisons and simmering cauldrons are associated more with witches than wizards. This is the point at which I bring up the incredible article, *The Shockingly Convincing Argument that Severus Snape is Transgender*: all of these issues, like his gender identity, is an active part of the central mystery in this plot, so why does it matter? How can you tell? What would it mean? Handwriting... Does handwriting have a gendered look? It doesn't not. Obviously, Snape's handwriting has changed a bit

since his teens because they get all of his handwriting in red ink all over their pathetic little parchments all the time, and yet... It's not that Harry can't recognize handwriting, because he recognizes Dumbledore's all the time, so what has changed? Can people change? If your handwriting has changed since your teens, what else has changed? Ugh... Anyway, this is fascinating, right?

JC: Yeah, yeah.

Lorrie: Harry is arguing back, "The Half-Blood *Prince*, he was called. How many girls have been princes?" Which is a supremely weak argument.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Aside from all of the weaknesses in the gender argument, in the most major way to me, it points to how quickly patriarchy erases the name of the mother. It takes one generation; if you're under a patronymic system -- and Rowling's Wizarding World in England is very extremely patronymic, and you have almost no cases of married witches keeping their birth surnames -- the mother's name is lost in one generation to the point where it can be the solution to a mystery. This volume is heavily, heavily pointing to the missing story of the mother and to the importance of the mother's name, which we'll see over and over in different and really heavy ways throughout Book Six. It should be noted that in *Cursed Child*, Hermione's children have the surname Granger-Weasley...

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Which is, I think, the only instance in this fictional universe of children not taking their father's last name only.

JC: There's Justin Finch-Fletchley... There's people like that, but I don't know how that naming works.

Lorrie: Right.

JC: I don't know if that's a combination of a mother's name and a father's name, or that is something else. I don't know.

Lorrie: Yeah, like two noble lines.

JC: Two noble lines have merged, and we're going to claim both of them? I don't even know how that works, but yeah. Yeah. Also, the interesting thing, too, is that

at the time these books were written -- this book is early 2000s -- we were coming out of the 80s and 90s, and the author is, what, sixty?

Lorrie: Almost, yeah. 59, I think?

JC: So she's on that border between very late Boomer, very early Gen X. Something like that, right? She's a little bit older than we are, and that was a thing. When I was a teenager, when I was a young adult, the idea of that is important. Your name is important; you should keep it.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Your children could hyphenate their names, or when you marry someone, the two of you can hyphenate your names or combine your names. I know people who did that; they combined their last names into one new name or even hyphenated. I remember at the time that I got married, it was a hard choice. I had to decide what to do and I wasn't sure. I felt weird about all the options and they were all those expectations of other people, and I remember that being a really difficult decision to make at that time.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's interesting seeing Hermione do that, because I think that my impression is that young people today are more likely just to not change their name than try to create something hyphenated or something new, and then we'll just see how it goes. I bet Hermione is definitely of the generation, Hermione being very much a millennial, that would have hyphenated. It feels almost like it's really a relic of its time.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: That's something that for Hermione, at that age, would have been important to her.

Lorrie: Yeah. Another side note that I notice, "How many girls have been princes?" This is just a little AU plot bunny, but Diana Prince (Wonder Woman) comes from a tribe of Amazons (women-only Themyscira), and because the character of Snape is so not patriarchal... If anybody wants to write this, I would be eternally grateful. I really love imagining that his mother was from that family from that island and had this baby boy, and instead of sending the baby boy out to

be fostered (as the Amazons did), recognize that he had so much magic that she would go live as a Muggle and not be separated from him and raise him herself.

JC: Ooh, that would be cool.

Lorrie: Yeah, because Snape is so not patriarchal. He very much draws his magical power from the matrilineal heritage and, as I've noted, he's kind to mothers. He's an asshole, but not to mothers.

JC: Uh-huh.

Lorrie: Yeah, we never see him putting down the magical powers of women or mothers.

JC: The fact that even in his most private soul, he took his mother's name, because that's kind of what this Potions book feels like. This is almost like a diary.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Ginny, in the previous chapter or a couple chapters back, compared it to Tom Riddle's diary. In a way, this is a diary and he's recording things, so who is he? He's his mother's son. We haven't really gotten into the problematic shit of his father, but that's really nice. I don't know. In my heart, I'm kind of happy that maybe Snape is a momma's boy.

Lorrie: Oh, he totally is.

JC: I like that. I like that about him. That's great.

Lorrie: He is that, he recognizes the power of that in other people, and all of his imagination and the things that keep his brain alive and happy he associates with knowledge from his maternal side. That's his identity. Yeah, I think of this more like a journal, not so much like a diary. It's not so much a day-to-day history as where he's putting his thoughts and his development as a person, as a thinker. Then there's the Half-Blood portion of this name, because the important characters in this series are all half-bloods. There's Dumbledore, Voldemort, Harry, and Snape; these are people who face more choices about who to be in the world, how to construct a self in this world, and those choices define them and they define human history like the people who are in that half-and-half position. He's clearly identifying himself as somebody who's choosing the mother's side of his

inheritance. Anyway, that's Harry and his very, very suspect textbook (that Hermione is unhappy to live with) that maddeningly keeps getting him this total imposter syndrome reputation. Yeah, I don't blame him. We get a cute little comedy transition here where impaired Trelawney is unable to read the fortunes that her own cards are telling her; she stops right in front of where Harry is hidden and gets a card that says that Harry doesn't like her. She says, "Well, that can't be right," and she rejects it.

JC: Yeah, that was very interesting. I had to spend a moment. I think I blazed over that in the past when I read this, but I was, like, 'Ooh, okay. Two of Spades: conflict. Seven of Spades: an ill omen. Ten of Spades: violence. Knave of Spades: a dark young man, possibly troubled, one who dislikes the questioner --" That also talks about what we're about to see in the Pensieve, so that's interesting.

Lorrie: Yeah. Wow, four spades in a row. Oof! Harry makes it past Trelawney into Dumbledore's office, and he notices that Dumbledore has not even cleared any space for dueling practice. He says that he's going to be telling Harry some things, but that from this point they're going to be leaving fact and "journeying together through the murky marshes of memory into thickets of wildest guesswork." I love this so much. This is such good characterization and lesson for readers where Dumbledore says he may be wrong. It'll turn out, as he knows, that he's mostly right -- mostly very, very right -- but occasionally wrong, and of course, when he's wrong, people will be taken more by surprise because when he's right, he's very right. This is the point where you and I, JC, get the name of our hypothetical wizard rock band, "Correspondingly Huger." Dumbledore says naturally, he thinks he's right, but "I make mistakes like the next man. In fact, being -- forgive me -- rather cleverer than those men, my mistakes tend to be correspondingly huger." That is the burden of genius.

JC: And of leadership and of power.

Hosts: Yeah, yeah.

JC: The more power you have, the more responsibility you have, and the more bad things can happen if you make a mistake. Yeah.

Lorrie: And yet you can't turn down the responsibility, because if you can see it coming and if your insights can help relieve suffering, don't you have a duty? If

you don't do anything and you witness enough suffering that you could have possibly helped, eventually that builds up on your conscience. Look, your destiny is your destiny, okay? But it's lonely. It's lonely, it's high risk... Oof.

JC: And now it's interesting that Dumbledore is inviting Harry into this. I had the feeling it doesn't quite map onto the situation, but when students move from being students where they're just learning as much as they can to doing their own research that transition into, "Okay, now I have the background as a graduate student, and now I'm going to go out and I'm going to create new things. I'm going to come up with new ideas..." That's what it feels like here: Harry is the graduate research assistant and Dumbledore is like, "Okay, now it's time for you to see how the sausage is made." I had a little bit of that feeling, too, reading this.

Lorrie: Yeah. "Well, now that you're allowed into the Restricted Section, here we go." Harry, correctly naive and confused, asks if this is to do with the prophecy and will it help him survive. This is to me a piece of evidence where Dumbledore says calmly, "It has a very great deal to do with the prophecy, and I certainly hope that it will help you to survive." I am beating this drum. I know that there are readings where people think, 'Oh, Dumbledore always intended to sacrifice Harry,' and I don't think he did. I think he always wanted Harry to survive. That was always his plan and what he was working toward. No, he does not want Harry to die. This is the tortuous way he figured out how to best and most easily get there.

JC: But also, that moment when Harry basically's like, "Is this going to help me not die at Voldemort's hand?" and Dumbledore's like, "I hope so."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It's like, "Welcome into being an adult, Harry, where we don't..." Dumbledore does not have all the answers. I find that so interesting that that's where we're going in this book: Dumbledore is really wise and he knows a lot and he's really powerful, but he doesn't have all the answers, so Harry is going to have to deal with the fact that there are grown-ups, but they can't fix this.

Lorrie: There's nothing better than this.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: "Look, you could come to me and listen to me, or nothing, actually."

JC: Yeah, that's very interesting.

Lorrie: "And don't rely on a single damn thing I'm about to tell you."

JC: That's very interesting.

Lorrie: "Or use your judgment. What do you think, Harry?" "Why are you asking me?!" Right? Dumbledore tracked down (in the past) Bob Ogden for this memory, and Harry, of course, is like, "Who's Bob Ogden?" so he'll learn. Again, the author teases and has Harry say, "What happened to your hand?" and Dumbledore's like, "Not now, not now." Wow, whatever happened had better be worth all this buildup. Then we get to look into the Pensieve and meet Bob Ogden and what on Earth this memory is about.

JC: I love that he, when Dumbledore brings out the Pensieve, says, "This time, you enter the Pensieve with me... and, even more unusually, with permission." That little tongue-in-cheek poking at Harry's... Yeah. All of the times that Harry has done things that maybe he shouldn't have done that Dumbledore knows, but it's all in the past, right? Also, he's poking him a little bit. I like that.

Lorrie: Yeah. "I do know you, child."

JC: Yes. "I know you." Yeah.

Lorrie: "I know that you already got detention with Snape. I already know."

JC: This whole concept blew my mind on this read. I don't know if I would have recognized it on a first read or even a second, but now, at this point in my life, this idea that you could preserve the memories of people past their death and store them for study... I'm not a historian, but it just made me think, 'Wouldn't that be incredible to have this kind of evidence?'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Because it's different from a video, right?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: We've talked about in the past that this actually records what happened and the person who remembered it is just a character in it; you can walk around and you can look at things that they wouldn't have noticed necessarily. However that magic

works, I'm just imagining what that would do to the field of history, not to mention the world that we live in right now.

Lorrie: Propaganda.

JC: As of the time we're recording this (which is January 10th, 2026), just a few days ago in Minneapolis, a woman was shot in her car by an ICE officer (as far as anyone can tell) completely unprovoked. This is not how proper policing or law enforcement works at all -- there's no reason for it -- but there were many people on the scene with cell phones, so there are many videos floating around. There's been this big effort in the media to analyze the video from every possible angle and try to understand what happened in that moment, which I think is frustrating to a lot of folks, because at the very end of this, someone got shot and died for no good reason.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: The people are wanting to understand what happened, and for me, that is what the Pensieve gives you in this magical world. It gives you a fairly objective 'video' (for lack of a better word) that you can then go in and experience and look at from a lot of different angles. It's interesting to me that with all of our cell phones and all of our propensity to pull them out and video whenever we want to know what's happening so we could go back and look at it later, we're trying to recreate that magic somehow.

Lorrie: So we have Bob Ogden, who is from the Ministry, and he is one of those wizards that's dressed in comical Muggle attire; we're following his approach to a hovel that has a dead snake nailed to the door. What the heck?!

JC: The description of this hovel is so interesting to me... Before we get to that, they're walking down the road and we see a manor house on a hill and a graveyard.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And on this read, I was, like, 'Oh!'

Lorrie: 'We know that.'

JC: 'I know where we are.'

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: 'We've seen that before.' Harry's seen that before, just in a different time.

Lorrie: 'Harry's been here.'

JC: Yeah. This description of this shack in the woods that doesn't seem fit for human habitation, and yet people live there... All of this (the poverty that they live in) is making me think about... I grew up in western North Carolina, and there was this real idea of hillbillies or people that lived in extreme poverty and they were very much the way that the Gaunts are described in this chapter. That's how these people were perceived: inbred, talking funny, uneducated, all of these things and living in the dirt like pigs. There's stories in my family of people, young women, falling in love with a man who comes from that and then saying, "Well, I can't have a relationship with that guy until he makes something of himself, because otherwise he's going to take me back up on that mountain to the shack, and I ain't living there." That feeling that these are people who [are] so low that we all feel sorry for them or we all have an opinion about that. I was like, 'Oh, wow.' It read as very Appalachian to me in that way. I really identified with that, and I don't think I got that on the first read; it was very much a fairy tale (ooh, very fairy tale-ish to me the way that I read it the first time). This time, these people are real people to me on this read...

Lorrie: Yeah, they very much are.

JC: In a way that they were not on the first read, so I was immediately mapping them onto my own world.

Lorrie: Well, I guess this is the time to bring it up. Have you read *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

JC: Yes, and it was a very long time ago.

Lorrie: Because you're recognizing a very culturally and geographically specific portrait of American white Southerners. It is, in fact, a deliberate tribute to the Ewell family in *To Kill a Mockingbird*...

JC: Oh, wow.

Lorrie: Which we know for a number of different reasons, one of which is in 2006, Rowling released a list of the top ten books that she thought young readers should read, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* was one of them. Also, because the names in this

chapter are tributes to the names of those characters (Tom Riddle and Tom Robinson are analogs, and Merope has the same initial as Mayella Ewell) and the situations they're in are similar, there are realities of suffering that we know about (that Mayella Ewell went through) that this book meant for somewhat younger readers elides a bit (makes more of a vague reference to). But it does open up the same kind of relationship between the reader and this character (Mayella Ewell and the reader in *To Kill A Mockingbird*) had, which is very much like, 'Okay, this family is viewed a certain way by the town.' He said everybody had an opinion about them and looked down on them and was worried about them, but also was worried about the vulnerable young woman in particular and that there were maybe/maybe not specific worries about what she might be going through, and yet an avoidance of judgment of that whole family. Yeah, there's a lot of really abject poverty surrounding the whole thing, so there is a reason why this is such a geographically and culturally recognizable setting for this family. That's who they're based on.

JC: Interesting. Okay, cool.

Lorrie: Yeah. The dead snake nailed to the door is your outward symbol. 'Okay, this family lives by their own rules and they're not friendly.' That poor snake...

JC: Yeah. The snakes... Ugh. Yes.

Lorrie: So we get confronted with that right away. I love this. This is more half-blood or half-and-half kind of identity where at first Harry doesn't know in the memory why Bob Ogden doesn't understand this guy telling him, "*You're not welcome*," and Dumbledore has to point out to him, "You understand what he's saying, but almost nobody else does." Then Harry goes, "Oooohhhh." He didn't realize how multicultural he was and why this should be confusing to other people, and once Dumbledore points it out, then there's a change in Harry's cognition where he can simultaneously understand what is being said in Parseltongue *and* how it sounds to someone who doesn't understand Parseltongue. I love that bilingual, bicultural moment there and that you're not always aware of it when you're in it, but Dumbledore has just made Harry more aware. That's good. That's powerful.

JC: Okay, question here: does Dumbledore understand Parseltongue?

Lorrie: We don't know.

JC: We don't know. So all of these conversations that are happening here... I don't know. It was unclear to me (if Dumbledore had been in this memory before) if he knew what it contained, and if one of the reasons for showing this to Harry is so that Harry can tell him what actually happened (what the conversations were about). I think a lot of it you can get from context, but there's some specific stuff later that if you don't understand what they're saying, you wouldn't have gotten. Anyway, that was just a question that was in my head through some of this. Does Dumbledore know what they're saying, and is that one of the reasons why Harry is there (because Harry does know or can hear it)?

Lorrie: Well, we don't see Dumbledore asking him.

JC: True.

Lorrie: As Harry himself notes, it's not a mystery what the general meaning is.

JC: True, true. Another thing that I find fascinating about this scene, though... And this did not strike me this way the first time I read it. The first time I read it (them speaking Parseltongue), I read that -- this is going to sound awful coming out of my mouth. It felt like it was intentionally hostile, and it was. You would only speak that to be scary or whatever, but this read felt like a heritage language...

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: And there's a sense in which this is kind of Harry's heritage through the connection with Voldemort.

Lorrie: Yes, it is.

JC: Wow. That actually flipped my thinking about this scene, just understanding that they're speaking a heritage language.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: What the hell?!

Lorrie: Yep, yep, yep.

JC: It's not just evil snake language.

Lorrie: Nope.

JC: That puts a whole different spin on a lot of things that happen around Parseltongue for me.

Lorrie: And it's dying out. It's very rare -- it was very rare -- and the reason it's dying out is partly their own damn fault.

JC: True. Okay, Morfin jumps out of the tree; he scares him a bit. Then, Mr. Gaunt comes out, and one of the first things he asks Bob Ogden is if he's a pureblood.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: Ogden says, "That's neither here nor there," and never really answers that question, but he responds in a way that's like, "Why do you care about that?" What that made me think was at the time that these books came out (when I would have read it back then), there are questions that people might ask about someone's sexuality and gender identity that would not have had the same hostility behind the question. Maybe not those two, but let's just say about race or whatever; the reaction of a government official at that time would have been, "That's not important in this situation," or a teacher or something like that. If you ask the same question now, it's a very different feeling, and I felt that and Harry's recognizing, "Oh, wow." That parallel between what Harry recognizes... That's a challenging question to ask.

Lorrie: This is loaded. Yeah.

JC: It's loaded, it's political, and at the time that it was asked, it wasn't. In the memory, it wasn't that political in the way that it is in Harry's experience, and I was just like, 'Mind blown. Mind blown.' Whoa. 🤪

Lorrie: Well, I read it as political at the time because I read it as Bob Ogden knowing why Mr. Gaunt was asking him that and basically saying, "It is illegal to discriminate on the basis of..."

JC: Oh, yeah, no. He's representing the government, I guess is what I'm thinking.

Lorrie: Yes, yes. The government, at that time, is trying to prevent discrimination on his background.

JC: Exactly, and Gaunt is clearly the low dregs of society. Gaunt is depicted as someone that you would think would be a Klan member or something, and those are the people who now have much louder voices in our world.

Lorrie: Yeah. They have now been elevated to the Secretary of the such-and-such Department, enacting policy as we speak.

JC: That contrast or that comparison to our world really also stood out to me.

Lorrie: Marvolo bringing that up squarely centers the issue of blood purity and how the logical end of supremacism like this is isolationism and major genetic disorders that nobody would want that they're all clearly suffering from. That's loaded, because on the one hand, that's part of a stereotype of certain groups that are looked down on and it's assumed that there's incest happening in those communities, and yet how far do you get in isolationism and supremacy before you actually end up... Who are you supposed to marry and have children with, then? Uh, it happens quite quickly, actually.

JC: Yeah. There are stereotypes about people like that being much more likely to sexually abuse their children, and that is a feeling that we get here. There's a lot of implications here, just from the cultural context, that Merope might be being sexually abused by (probably) her brother, maybe her father.

Lorrie: One, the other, or both, yeah.

JC: Or both. It feels like that. The way she's treated in the house really seems like, "What are you good for? Well, here's one thing."

Lorrie: Well, she's clearly terrified.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: She's more afraid of the dad than of the brother.

JC: Uh-huh, so there's all that. Before we get to that, though, there's one more thing that stood out to me. I would not have thought of this before, but when Marvolo is pushing Ogden about his blood status and he's looking at Ogden, he says, "Now I come to think about it, I've seen noses like yours down in the village," and Ogden says, "I don't doubt it, if your son's been let loose on them."

Lorrie: Right.

JC: I like how that works on multiple levels.

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: There's the fact that he's had a hex placed on his nose.

Lorrie: Right. "Your son does do this to noses, yes?"

JC: Just does this to people, right? But then there's also the level of, "What else has your son been doing in the village?" Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. On the one hand, there's the stereotype which feels like something we shouldn't be doing as readers to groups of people to stereotype. "This kind of person is more likely to come from a background that includes sexual abuse of children." Then yet, on the other hand, what is setting that up here is that white supremacy (or any other kind of isolationism) is about policing the sexuality of young women and girls and controlling what kind of sex they have, who they have it with, and what kind of children they have. It's a lot of extremely unwholesome, controlling focus on that, and whose decision does that get to be and why? Here comes something that blew my mind. It was definitely not on the first, second, or even third reread that I picked up on how the author did this, because you're saying yes, there is heavy implication that whether or not Merope is being sexually abused, we're meant to worry about it. It's meant to be a constant dreadful possibility. How did she heavily layer that in without saying so explicitly? It's actually not even that much more explicit in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but she removed a layer of that here so that we have, like with the Half-Blood Prince's textbook, a lot of the primary evidence removed, and yet the uneasy feelings and unanswered questions are all around, right? Here's the thing that blew my mind: "The house seemed to contain three tiny rooms. Two doors led off the main room, which served as kitchen and living room combined." Just like with Spinner's End, there's a blueprint that we're given of a house that tells us a whole lot. If the house contained three tiny rooms and one of them was the kitchen and living room, where did Merope sleep? When I realized that the author accomplished that just by saying how many rooms were in this house, I was very, very impressed.

JC: I remember you mentioned this. It's been several years ago that you mentioned this to me for the first time, and I also had a moment of, 'Oh, my God,' so when we got to this chapter and I read that 'three rooms' thing, I thought of that again. Then I

had this image (and this is maybe the most hopeful image I have) of Merope curled up, sleeping by the stove in the kitchen like Cinderella on the floor with a blanket. 'I hope that's where she sleeps.'

Lorrie: That's the best possible answer.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: There's a better answer (which doesn't seem possible), which is that the dad and the brother gave her one of those two rooms to herself. That seems unlikely.

JC: That somehow doesn't seem likely, yeah.

Lorrie: Right?

JC: Right, yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. Is it the same corner in the kitchen, or is it just like wherever she can... Anyway, there aren't a lot of happy answers, but there is one giant unhappy question which the author does not pose directly and does not put in front of the reader. It's there if you're going to read it, if you're going to look into it. If you are a younger child reading this, you might not... Unless you're a young child whose life is painful and difficult enough so that you have reason to wonder what that means, which is an incredibly masterful example of the way that this author writes at several levels so that if you are innocent, you can read this on one level. If you're a child going through some hell, you can feel this story speaking to you and not speaking down to you. Suppose you are a young child reader who has reason to know what it might mean that there are only three rooms... and yeah, suppose that you are reading it from that perspective; this narration does not make light of the effect that it would have on Merope. What we see of the human being that Merope is would be consistent and would ring true to a young reader reading it from that perspective. That is, to me, a very powerful example of why this series and this writer are successful and why, no matter how much dismissal there is (both of her skill as a writer, which I think came a lot from the envy of her astonishing commercial success, and then now because transphobia just makes everything so ugly)... Despite all of that, this is something that is an achievement. Not every writer can do this; in fact, most can't, but I'm impressed. Wherever Merope sleeps,

I hope... You can't even say, "I hope she's okay." She's not okay. We see Merope's "ragged gray dress was the exact color of the dirty stone wall behind her." This is a wallflower to the nth literal degree. "She looked a little cleaner than the two men, but Harry thought he had never seen a more defeated-looking person," which is also a shout-out to Mayella Ewell in *To Kill a Mockingbird* because she was the one who made an effort. She was the one who had geraniums planted in these chipped pots, trying to make it not so horrible. As people have noted, there are a few different Merope characters in Greek mythology, and one of them is the sister of the Pleiades who married a mortal man and was, out of shame, dimmed. That's the star that doesn't show up in that constellation.

JC: Okay.

Lorrie: Something that has been a bit of a problem, I think, in reader analysis of the way the author presented this: there have been readers complaining, with some reason, that this author is setting up Merope for mother-blaming, that Merope made choices that resulted in the terrible life that Tom Riddle Jr. had. I think what she was trying to get at... If I had been her beta, the note that I would have given her is, "This point, 'Harry thought he had never seen a more defeated-looking person,' I would say put in another couple lines emphasizing that Merope had been depleted to the point that she didn't have what a human being needs to make any decisions." This is what happens when you deplete and oppress a person so thoroughly that this is all that there is left.

JC: Now, that's interesting. I'm not aware of any of that discourse around Merope, but I thought that that did get said here because Merope's father is yelling at her and he's basically calling her a Squib and that she has no ability. At the end of the chapter, Dumbledore says, "No, she was a witch, and once her father and brother are out of the picture, she was no longer living in this fight or flight mode (like abused people are) and she could actually do magic."

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: I really felt it was like once they were gone, she could actually be herself, and she could use magic and she could find a way. Then she went off and she used a love potion on Tom Riddle, but I don't know. I feel like that was there. Maybe it could have been.

Lorrie: I think it was. I was a little surprised at how much there was this backlash. "Oh, no, this is mother-blaming." Yeah, maybe in retrospect, I would have said, "Just make sure that that gets in there." What we expect people to be able to do when making decisions in life is based on not being as destroyed as this young woman is. So yeah, he's calling her a Squib while she's doing -- not well, but she is doing magic. This is the extreme version of what happens to kids when Snape mocks them in the classroom, which made me realize -- I'm not defending this -- that may actually be part of why I'm not as appalled when Snape does it to kids because I've been exposed to more of what Marvolo does to Merope. Not that it makes what Snape does good; just that my baseline is not surprised by what Marvolo is doing, and by the effect that it has on this girl with nowhere to hide. Yeah. In that sense, Snape growing up in Spinner's End... In a number of ways, Snape had it better growing up than Merope did, but one of them is that Spinner's End (the house) has places to hide. In this one, she's just... All she can do is try to look like the wall.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Oof.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: So she breaks the pot because her dad is yelling at her and she fumbles it, and then she's too shaken to be able to fix it with magic. Bob Ogden steps in very firmly and reprovngly and fixes it for her, which just made my tension go up. Intervening like that gets the victim in further trouble. Should you intervene? Should you not? I suppose it doesn't, in the end, make any difference, but this is another example of that fantasy when you live in an abusive household such as Harry did with the Dursleys: the fantasy of the authorities coming to save you. Harry was rescued by Hagrid coming in and taking him. Merope's too far gone. The authority's here.

JC: So I have a question. Did Merope go to Hogwarts, and Morfin? Were they kept at home by Marvolo, who did not approve of non-purebloods attending Hogwarts? Where did they learn their magic? I guess I'm wondering: how isolated have they been?

Lorrie: Well, my answer there... It seems if we're following *To Kill a Mockingbird*, those kids occasionally went to school. The Ewell children went to school enough so that they would be marked present for the school year, so they would go in September and then they just wouldn't go. Yeah. Partly, it's the "you're simultaneously above and below us" kind of thing. Certainly, if Lucius Malfoy isn't sure that Hogwarts is good enough for Draco because it lets in Mudbloods and filth or whatever, you can easily see that the Gaunts might feel the same but worse because then Marvolo throws this huge fit and says, "You think we're scum, do you?" and then he shows the ring with what he calls the Peverell coat of arms on it. Then, in a very heavy, inescapable bit of symbolism, he drags Merope by the chain, nearly strangling her, to show Slytherin's locket. Yeah.

JC: It's interesting that those two pieces are part of Voldemort's inheritance.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It is very interesting, and I think seeing the ring... First of all, it's kind of funny because at first, Harry thinks that Marvolo is actually flipping off Ogden, but no, he's just showing what's described as an "ugly, black-stoned ring" that he's wearing on his middle finger. He's wearing it on his middle finger, which is not normally where I guess people wear... I don't wear rings, I don't know. That seems like an odd place to wear a ring, but if it's a little bit too big or doesn't quite fit your ring finger, that's where you would put it, right? It's got this feeling of something that's been handed down and wasn't made for him. There's that feeling there. It's so interesting that they have these two things that are really quite valuable, and they're clinging to them as "This is our heritage."

Lorrie: "This is our identity." Yeah.

JC: "This is our identity," and he even says, "Do you know how much I could get for this? I won't give it up." Yeah, which also, as a parent, I think about that, too.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: You have something valuable that is really important to your identity (your family's identity, whatever) versus feeding your children.

Lorrie: Yeah. Yes!

JC: Or your children getting a decent education. What's the decision that you make there? It's not necessarily an easy answer. You can't say, "Of course, you would feed your children." Well, there are arguments made the other way, too.

Lorrie: As Timothy Snyder said in his *Harry Potter* address, "The notion that who you are is determined by what you were born is evil," and that's the only meaning that these children have to Marvolo Gaunt at this point.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: And as he points out, they are the last living descendants of Salazar Slytherin. Well, if they would let people reproduce more naturally, then maybe they wouldn't have so much infertility. This contrasts with the scene earlier in this volume where Draco is saying, to Narcissa, something about the smell of Mudbloods. This whole looking down on other people because they're somehow dirty is such a contradiction, because here we see the end result of this blood supremacy and nobody really wants to live like this.

JC: Right. Yeah. It's such an interesting picture that it paints. 'This is what Salazar Slytherin's bloodline has come to.'

Lorrie: If you believe in it, yeah.

JC: Yeah. If you believe that's important, right? God, that idea that bloodlines are important is kind of bizarre to me because you don't have to go back very far before the number of ancestors that you have is a really big number. It's exponential.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: You don't have to go back very far. Salazar Slytherin lived, what, a thousand years ago? There's probably not a single magical person in Britain who doesn't have an ancestry line to Slytherin at this point.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: That's how it works, so it's just wild that the Gaunts have totally constructed this idea that they are the most direct line. It's like, 'No, you're no more direct... Maybe you're slightly more direct because of the inbreeding.'

Lorrie: Yes, yes.

JC: It's not even enough of a factor to mathematically matter. It's just wild to me that people cling to things like that, but this also goes back... We talked about this before. I know there was a technical term for it, but I can't remember what it is. Seventy, eighty years ago -- a hundred years ago in this country -- if you had a single black ancestor, you were considered black, regardless of cultural experiences or whatever else. This idea that blood...

Lorrie: Blood supremacy, yeah.

JC: It's that blood supremacy thing, which is so... Ugh.

Lorrie: Yeah. They are the last people in a line that can trace the control of fertile female descendants.

JC: Oooh... Now, that's a really good way to put it.

Lorrie: That always confounded me, the notion of old families, because as a kid, I thought all families are equally old.

JC: Every family's equally old. If you're alive today, you have the same number of ancestors as anyone else. What?!

Lorrie: Well, that's because I'm not going by that constructed definition of what a family is, which is defined by who controls it and by what values. By the Slytherin-inspired pureblood values, they are the last living descendants.

JC: That is so weird.

Lorrie: Yes, it is, and evil.

JC: Oh, yeah, it's just evil. Anyway, I'm just imagining... Draw the family tree.

Lorrie: Yep.

JC: What does it mean to be a direct descendant of someone? Many people are direct -- Oh, jeez. I think I read somewhere once that when you start doing -- although there was the craze in the last decade of people doing all the genetic testing and they're looking who they're related to. Then a shocking number of people were related to someone well-known, and it's like yeah, because if you go back enough generations, we all are because that's just how it works.

Lorrie: This is, once again, JC and math on one side, clinging to each other and looking bewildered.

JC: 'Why are we doing this? What's wrong?' Yeah.

Lorrie: 'This is just math!'

JC: 'It's just math. It's not that...' Yeah, anyway, so fun.

Lorrie: No, right. Right. No, human values, constructed values.

JC: Yeah, but it's all fake. Obviously, it's all fake, but I love the way this chapter highlights how fake it is.

Lorrie: Exactly. Exactly, and this is Draco and Narcissa throwing robes on the floor at Madame Malkin's. If you're going to go around saying that the room smells because of mudbloods, this is what you're... Yeah.

JC: So the whole reason that Ogden is here in the first place is because Morfin did a thing to a Muggle, right?

Lorrie: Yes.

JC: Cast a hex or something on a Muggle. It's a little unclear.

Lorrie: He attacked a Muggle using magic.

JC: And we find out which Muggle it was shortly.

Lorrie: Yes, we do, and why.

JC: There's this line that hit me really differently than it did the first. Marvolo is arguing with Ogden. "Oh, he didn't do anything, the Muggle deserved it, da-da-da-da-da," and then he says, "'He taught a filthy Muggle a lesson, that's illegal now, is it?' 'Yes,' said Ogden. 'I'm afraid it is.'"

Lorrie: Ouch.

JC: Holy shit! That line... I had to stop and set the book down for a moment, because I was like, 'Oh, my God.' Do I even have to spell it out how that is playing out in our current world? Holy shit.

Lorrie: I guess, for the sake of completeness, I will say: Harry Potter After 2020, we U.S. readers are living in a world where it has now become legal again to do.

This book was written at a time when it was obvious that just attacking somebody like that is, of course, illegal. We're now living in the world that Marvolo would have created if he'd been in power.

JC: Right. It harkens back, too... I don't know when this is said exactly, but I'm assuming it's set in the 1920s, somewhere in there...

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Going back to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, at that time, there were really awful consequences for Black Americans who got looked at the wrong way by a white person who decided they were guilty of something, so it feels very much like that time to me, speaking of lynching. Is it illegal to teach someone a lesson when they've done something wrong? Yeah. Yeah, it is. Of course, that was awful and terrible, but the fact that we're looping back around to that is really scary.

Lorrie: Yeah. This really shows who it is who wants to have that kind of regime and morality be the law of land. Here we have a horse-drawn carriage that interrupts this scenario. Having laid out the background -- the backdrop -- of the Gaunt family and what they believe in and Bob Ogden there trying to enforce the law -- trying desperately to do something normal and sane when faced with these people -- then we have the horse-drawn carriage enter the scene. Marvolo freezes, and all sorts of things happen then: "Morfin hissed and turned his face toward the sounds, his expression hungry." Oh, that word 'hungry' is doing so much amazing work, because we know from what he does (that he's hungry to go be violent) that he has the sadistic streak in him, and that it's connected to when Wormtail sees that James and Sirius are about to bully Snape. Wormtail has that hungry expression, but it's also a desire for connection. But it's so confused at this point: 'Do I want to be friends with that person, or do I want to kill them?' Draco has this problem. "Hi, Harry Potter, shake my hand." The isolation of the confusion... Underneath that desire to pass on the kind of violence that's been visited upon you, there is a bizarre hunger for connection, which again is a tribute to the Mayella Ewell/Tom Robinson conflict in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. All of this started because Mayella was forbidden contact with people, and then there was somebody where, underneath her ability and desire to destroy, was some request for connection. Yeah. If you want to project all of your own misery onto some people, it's probably not morally

right to do so, but maybe sometimes you can't be stopped, so that's happening. Tom and Cecilia, the Muggles in question, don't sound like very nice people, either.

JC: None of these people, right. I feel sorry for Bob Ogden. I feel a little sorry for Merope. Yeah. It's just like, 'Oh, my God.'

Lorrie: Yeah. Tom and Cecilia being horrible, but then you also eventually realize, 'Oh, Tom Riddle, Sr...' He's been by this way before and been attacked before, but his memory keeps getting wiped, so he just keeps coming back.

JC: Right, yeah. Also, I don't know. I have this vision in my head. I know I said this feels like it's set in the twenties, but here's where it turns into a Regency... We're going down the road and we're having this delightful conversation. "Oh, look at that little shack. I can't believe you haven't knocked it down." Oh, my God, yeah, which is kind of funny, the contrast, and that the Muggles that the Gaunts look down on are the lord in the manor.

Lorrie: Yeah, and that they are revolted by this hovel with a dead snake nailed to the door. I do love that this author puts in reader sympathy for the poor, innocent snakes that never did anything to deserve this.

JC: Yeah, that's true. Why is there a snake nailed to the door? What did that snake do to piss off Morfin?

Lorrie: Well, yeah. I don't know.

JC: Because he can talk to it, so what did it say?

Lorrie: Yeah, he's threatening it. Yeah.

JC: Morfin's like, 'Nope.' Oh, man.

Lorrie: Yeah. Yep. So yeah, the Muggles are superior and hateful and smug, and Morfin sells out his sister. We watch this happen where Merope is frantically looking at him like, 'No, no, don't do it,' and Morfin knowingly and gloatingly does this to her, where he says to their dad, "*She likes looking at that Muggle,*" a vicious expression on his face as he stared at his sister, who now looked terrified." It's a sexual transgression on her part, and Morfin is calling in their values to punish it and to make sure that that punishment gets enforced. Marvolo responds exactly as everybody knows he would: "*Hanging out of the window to look at a Muggle?*"

This is the transgression that threatens this kind of blood supremacy: the young woman's desire. That can't be allowed; that has to be policed and punished, and that is what brings the ruin of this particular nuclear family.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: The attack on that Muggle from the night before was Morfin punishing this transgressive desire from his sister. It seems that Marvolo frequently chokes Merope.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: He chokes her for this, and it's not the first time. Bob Ogden is the only one who's shocked, and he intervenes.

JC: It's interesting that Harry also, even though he forgets he's in a memory, is wanting to act. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. For those who haven't read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the backstory there is that Mayella Ewell is a young woman who we find out is being sexually abused by her racist white father. She comes on to a Black neighbor who is kind to her, and she wants the kindness and she looks down on him at the same time. When things go wrong for her, when she comes on to this man, he freezes because he has no good options, which is, of course, a rejection. As rejections do, when you have less power and you reject somebody who's more powerful, they can trigger retaliation, and if that person who's more powerful than you has virtually no other power in the world and you're the only person that they can take it out on, there's no solution. No good solution. That's the story that Rowling is making reference to here when father and brother are punishing Merope for having had desire for a Muggle, and there's no indication of who she was supposed to be having these pureblood babies with.

JC: That's the other thing, too: I'm not sure how old she is here.

Lorrie: Eighteen.

JC: Oh, she's eighteen. Okay, yeah. She's 18 (at that time, a very marriageable age), and there's no indication that her life is going to be anything other than being the cook and whatever other services she's expected to provide for her father and her brother. There's no indication that her life would ever be anything other than

that, so yeah, that is a good question. How are they supposed to continue this family line?

Hosts: Yeah.

Lorrie: Dumbledore explains to a horror-stricken Harry that Bob Ogden, after he flees and physically runs into Tom and Cecilia (who are horrible and laugh at him), did eventually return fifteen minutes later with reinforcements and that Morfin got three years for attacking a Muggle and Marvolo got six months, and that was the first time that Harry hears the name of the dad. "Marvolo?"

JC: He's like, "Wait, hang on..."

Lorrie: That's when he realizes who he's been watching, and that's when Dumbledore explains yes, these are "the last of the Gaunts, a very ancient Wizarding family" who have this history of marrying their cousins. That's when Dumbledore makes his guesses and he says, "These are just guesses. How do you think it might have happened that a few months after this, once Morfin and Marvolo are in Azkaban, Merope and Tom Riddle Sr. ran off and got married?" Harry's like, "They got married? What?!" Dumbledore says, "What kind of coercion do you think would have been magically possible?" Yeah, the whole concept of Merope's magic being more powerful once these guys are in prison... It's so sad to think we've seen the echoes of this in Neville and Harry and Ron doing better on their O.W.L.s when Snape isn't teaching them and Ron being a better Quidditch player when Fred and George aren't making fun of him. That's the everyday misery of it, and this? I guess it's a little closer how Neville isn't allowed his own wand. She does have a wand... Harry's thinking, 'Okay, could she have Imperiused him? Could she have given him a love potion?' and Dumbledore says he's guessing love potion. The reader is, I think, meant to take that as the best guess. Probably yeah.

JC: And love potions are a thing that pop up frequently in this book.

Lorrie: Right. Then Dumbledore describes a scenario of drink tampering, such as young college women today are warned against.

JC: For sure, for sure.

Lorrie: So she puts something in his drink and a baby results, which is, of course, a thing that we encounter in real life.

JC: But it's interesting, though, that I think the implication is that she... One interpretation of this, which Dumbledore clears up very quickly, is that she gave him a love potion, they had some kind of a tryst, she got pregnant, da-da-da-da-da, but no. Actually, they ran away together and they got married, and the implication is that it was actually a long time before she actually got pregnant.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: It wasn't just immediately.

Lorrie: Right. It was not 'woman traps man into marriage by pregnancy.' It's a longer-term mind control, and this is one of the areas in which this author deals with sexual assault and coercion by reversing the genders that are more commonly known in our culture, and I respect that decision and I support it. Thinking of the more common scenario in which a man controls a woman, it's so sensationalized and so connected to feelings of alarm and narratives that I already have so much fear around. I find it easier to see the point she's making when she reverses the genders.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: So yeah, here we have a case of outright sexual assault in this series, and it's a woman assaulting a man.

JC: I think that another thing that you get from this reversal is that very often, we live in a society that punishes women's sexuality left and right, and then the discourse around "But what if she was raped and she got pregnant?" and the awful people who say, "Well, then, it was God's will and she should have that baby." It could have been Merope's story if it was the other way around (that Merope was sexually assaulted and got pregnant from that and then was forced to carry this child), but Merope loved Tom Riddle and entrapped him. Voldemort was a child that was born out of his mother loving his father, even if the reverse wasn't true; it wasn't that she was sexually assaulted by someone who meant to take advantage of her. You were just saying the same thing, but I like the fact that even though she does something terrible, at least she has a little bit of empowerment there that

women don't normally have in this kind of story. In a twisted way, I found that very satisfying.

Lorrie: It's her ticket out.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: The dream of having an actual relationship where she's valued for herself is not something she believed was in her reach (and she may have been right), so she coerced somebody into role-playing it with her, taking away their will and their life doing that to them. As many readers have pointed out, what she felt for him... Can it be called love if she's going to take away his volition and force him to enact in her psychodrama? Her removing the enchantment from him so that he comes to his own mind is more of an act of love. She couldn't do that to him. Good. She shouldn't have in the first place, but there was some sort of change of heart; as soon as he came back into possession of his senses, he of course fled and returned talking of being hoodwinked and then he made this choice: he never tried to find out what happened after she got pregnant. Of course, there was an actual human being that we're talking about that he chose. How much judgment does a person have about the kind of fantastical trauma that he's been through and wanting to have nothing to do with it, possibly not being able to force himself to, and how dangerous it would have been to go re-engage?

JC: Also, if he doesn't know what happened to him... I don't know. Did he know she was a witch? We don't know what he knew, and we won't know, so there's a version of the story in which he wakes up one day and goes, 'What the hell?' and leaves, but he also probably remembers feeling love for her, and that would be really confusing.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: 'What happened to me?' Yeah.

Lorrie: 'Why did I think that?' Yeah.

JC: I don't know if he knew that she had given him a potion or if he just woke up one day and was like, "Ugh... Don't know what I was thinking, but I'm leaving now." Yeah.

Lorrie: Well, we will see later in this volume that there is a moment of choice when somebody whose love potion is wearing off has understanding of what happened to them.

JC: Oh, okay, but then they also know the existence of love potions, and that's my question. Does he know that love potions exist? I wonder.

Lorrie: According to Dumbledore's guess, he's imagining that Merope was dosing Tom Riddle Sr. constantly and then making the choice to stop, perhaps hoping that he would elect to stay with her voluntarily. That assumes a short window in which she lifts the enchantment and gives him the choice back and then is rejected, so there would have to be some attempt to communicate.

JC: I wonder, yeah. I don't know if it ever becomes clarified.

Lorrie: No, no.

JC: Anyway...

Lorrie: As the author and Dumbledore keep saying, this is murky.

JC: Yeah. We don't have all the details, yeah.

Lorrie: Right, and there are real-life situations about families where you don't and you never will. The dark thing here that the author is very deliberately shying away from but is definitely present: the whole narrative about what it means to say that Tom Riddle/Voldemort didn't have love because he was conceived while under a love potion. There's some criticism about how flat that argument is, and I thought 'I think she's getting at something that was too dark to put in a children's book,' which is that it is a war tactic to try to destroy a people by deliberately assaulting and impregnating an entire culture's women just to traumatize and break people, to create children who were human products of this kind of overt violence, have the children be born to people who have been assaulted, if they survive, have had the ability to nurture and love severely damaged (deliberately) to intentionally destroy the ability to transmit love and culture and nurturing to their offspring, and certainly not a question of being loved and claimed by the assaulter to create people who are determined before conception to have this extremely broken identity. Now, it doesn't mean that you can't do something with the life that you

have once you're born, but the burden that it places on you before you're born is evil.

JC: And if you're also talking about a society that really values this idea of bloodlines, then you've broken that. What is the value of this human being to the society that they're being raised in when they are representing the breaking of something?

Lorrie: And what do you have to hate in yourself to decide that how you're going to handle that internal discomfort is to project it this violently on people who had nothing to do with you? That is what I think the author is getting at by the burden that Voldemort (Tom Riddle Jr.) was born into through no fault of his own, and the emotional depletion that created the conditions for anyone to do this to another person. How do you take that narrative (which the author, as someone who worked with Amnesty International, was perfectly well aware of as a dynamic that is fairly frequent in human history) and allegorize it into the heart of evil at a children's story? I think she did pretty well, but it wasn't entirely successful because you do have readers saying that this is mother-blaming. "Oh, yeah, he can't feel love because he was under a love potion. How do you say that?" Well, this does happen. It is based on something that is not uncommon, and the baby, Tom Riddle Jr./Voldemort, is born as a human with all the same needs as any baby who's born to get the love that humans need and deserve, so that happens.

JC: I think we're going to learn more about Tom Riddle's childhood and the circumstances under which he was born. We're going to learn more about that later in the book, correct?

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Okay.

Lorrie: Yeah, this is only the first lesson.

JC: It's only the first one, yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah. Harry got out of detention with Snape for this.

JC: Ah, yes. I do think it's interesting, though, that with our first glance of Voldemort's mother, Harry's like, "That was Voldemort's mother?!"

Lorrie: Oh, my God!

JC: This Cinderella figure being shouted at by her father and doing all this. There's this one detail in the chapter that stood out to me, because twice, while Marvolo is talking to Ogden, he spits on the floor to make a point, and all I could think was, 'Who's cleaning that up? Who's cleaning that up? We know who's cleaning that up.' The idea that you would spit on your own floor, but you would only do that if you knew that you weren't going to have to clean it up, right? I don't know. There's something about that detail that really got me.

Lorrie: Well, yeah. Who did Draco and Narcissa think was going to pick up the robes that they threw on the floor?

JC: Right, right.

Lorrie: You may be low in the world, but as long as there's someone lower...

JC: Someone lower, yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Lorrie: Yeah. She shouldn't have ruined a person's life -- she shouldn't have brought baby Voldemort into the world this way -- but you can see why Merope wanted to get out.

JC: Yeah, yeah. I'm also imagining her brother and her father are gone. The Aurors come, they take her brother, and then they just leave her there?

Lorrie: Yeah. Yeah.

JC: And then I'm just imagining she's sitting in this little shack by herself and looking around and going, "Okay, now what?"

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: And no one offered... Social Services did not come and check on her and see. "Are you okay? Can we help you find.... Here are some resources to help you get back on your feet." Nothing, because it's the 1920s or whatever. Oh, my God... Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Because again, she doesn't matter.

Lorrie: But on the other hand, it's like, 'My prayers have been answered!'

JC: True, true.

Lorrie: Wow.

JC: Yeah. It's like if Cinderella woke up one day and her stepmother and her stepsisters were just gone, and she's in the house by herself.

Lorrie: And her dad gets what he deserves.

JC: Yeah, exactly, and then what does Cinderella do? Well...

Lorrie: 'Well, if dad and my brother are in prison, maybe that means I get to have that boyfriend.'

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Well, yeah, no. You shouldn't have done that.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: Oh, my... So yeah, this is what humans can do to each other for actually no good reason. None of this has to happen.

JC: If Merope had just decided to travel or something, how different... None of this would have happened, right? Yeah.

Lorrie: Well, realistically speaking, she was so damaged that bad things would've started happening right away.

JC: But without her deciding that she was going to entrap Tom Riddle.

Hosts: Yeah.

JC: I'm just thinking, 'Yeah, she made choices, for sure,' but I don't think she actually had any choices, to be honest. What is she going to do?

Lorrie: Well, right, because resources -- If you've been kept that ignorant and that abused... We see this with the house-elves. They've been so indoctrinated to punish themselves and limit themselves that when they try to even exhale a little bit, they have all this inner conflict. She's... Yeah. You can really destroy a person.

JC: Yeah, exactly, and this is why I think I ultimately feel sorry for her. I know I'm supposed to feel sorry for Tom Riddle Sr., but I kind of don't care about him.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Sorry, Tom Riddle Sr. stans out there, I don't. I care about Merope here.

Lorrie: Yeah. If he had lived the life that he was meant to live, he would have been just the same kind of jerk that his family always was.

JC: And the thing is that he spends those few years with her, and then he goes back and he lives that life anyway because he has that kind of privilege.

Lorrie: Yeah.

JC: Yes, he was traumatized. Yes, bad shit happened to him. Sorry, Tom Riddle Sr., but he got to leave it and go back and have his life back, right? That's not what Merope... Merope was never going to have that. It's complicated. I like it. I like how complicated it is.

Lorrie: Well, yeah. The extremely depressing thing about every single thing in this chapter is that it's still better than what happens in real life all the time to real people.

JC: Yeah. I guess that's true.

Lorrie: Yuck!

JC: But there's also this whole gendered thing here of 'Tom could walk away.' He could just walk away. He could wake up one morning and go, "Yeah, I don't want any of this," and he could leave. Merope doesn't have that option.

Lorrie: Right, right. It's also a gendered thing that he doesn't walk away with the baby.

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: With his mind whirling, Harry checks with Dumbledore, "Is it okay if I can tell Ron and Hermione this?" Dumbledore, very carefully and deliberately, says, "Yes, tell them. Don't tell anyone else because it would not be a good idea if word got around how much I know, or suspect, about Lord Voldemort's secrets," and that is super important. That is why Dumbledore doesn't tell Harry a lot of things that

the entire fandom agrees would have been better for him to tell Harry. That's also why he doesn't tell Snape what Horcruxes are or that no, he's not actually trying to send Harry to his death, because if Voldemort found out what Dumbledore knows about his secret, that little bit of convoluted hope that they have for getting Harry out of this alive would be gone. Then we get the ring.

JC: Yeah. Harry recognizes the ring, and we get this interesting story, too, where Harry goes, "Oh, you were wearing that," or Harry knows that he was wearing it.

Lorrie: Yeah!

JC: And Dumbledore reveals that he had only had it for a few days by the time he came to fetch Harry (so whatever happened that Harry doesn't know about with the ring), and Harry realizes the ring has something to do with the injury. We get the sense that we're circling closer to it, and then Dumbledore's not going to tell us. Also, the fact that all three of the Deathly Hallows are, at that moment, in that room is very interesting to me, too.

Lorrie: Ouch! Yeah.

JC: Yeah, yeah, and there have been multiple moments along the way, of course.

Lorrie: Yeah, yeah.

JC: Dumbledore shows up with the ring on his hand. All the Deathly Hallows are together and the only person who knows that is Dumbledore, and how interesting that must be for him, considering. Yeah.

Lorrie: Yeah, and him saying, "Harry, bring your cloak."

JC: Yeah.

Lorrie: "Meanwhile, I'm going to show you some things and tell you some things," and that the ring now has "a large, cracked, black stone" in it. This is the confirmation that the entire meeting in the summer, where Dumbledore took Harry to meet Slughorn, that the staging was just to show the ring to Slughorn. Dumbledore then staged it for Harry to see the ring here at this moment, so all this talk of Slughorn liking to collect people (or whatever Dumbledore has in mind for hiring Slughorn) is more than no, he is alerting Slughorn. 'That thing is real. It's happening, and I know you can't say it out loud, so I won't say it out loud, but

here,' and it ends with another promise that the story about the hand injury is coming when we all have suffered enough and are desperate for it. In possibly a slight allusion to that, the next chapter is called Hermione's Helping Hand.

JC: Hmmmm...

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.